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Using tablets for L2 learning with illiterate adult migrants: results from experiments in Piedmont and Emilia Romagna

Abstract: In this article, we describe the origin of the Tabula initiative concerning the use of tablets with illiterate and low-educated Italian L2 adult learners, and the collaboration that grew out of this innovative experience among teachers in two Italian regions. Then we summarize the Tabula approach's main features with respect to didactics and the use of digital technology. Finally, we briefly discuss the main impacts observed on the learners and make some suggestions about future steps.

Résumé : Nous revenons sur la genèse de l'initiative Tabula, dans le cadre de laquelle des tablettes ont été utilisées dans les cours d'italien L2 destinés aux apprenants adultes illettrés ou ayant un faible niveau d'instruction, et sur la collaboration instaurée par les enseignants de deux régions italiennes à partir de cette expérience innovante. Nous proposons ensuite une synthèse des principaux éléments de l'approche Tabula du point de vue de la didactique et de l'utilisation des technologies numériques. Enfin, nous examinons brièvement les principaux effets observés sur les apprenants et formulons quelques suggestions pour les étapes suivantes.

1 A short history of the Tabula experience

The Tabula experience started in 2012 when a teacher in the adult education centre CTP Parini in Turin¹ decided to explore the use of his iPad with illiterate foreign students who had repeatedly shown an interest in the device. He spent the first months searching for and testing different applications (henceforth apps) among those designed to teach children to read and write, and identifying useful functions in them. A few school colleagues joined these early informal trials,

¹ Adult education centres/schools in Italy used to be called CTP and have recently been reorganised and are now called CPIA (*Centri provinciali per l'istruzione degli adulti*).

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which raised much enthusiasm among both students and teachers. *Formazione 80*, an adult education specialist association in Turin, was asked to prepare a project to explore systematically on a larger scale the use of tablets with Italian L2 adult learners and to submit the project to a national call of the European Integration Fund.

The *Tabula* project was approved with a budget of €130,000 for the school year 2013–2014. Besides *Formazione 80*, the coordinator, the partners involved were five CTPs in Turin and nearby Moncalieri and the ASAI–Terremondo associations, working with migrant families, refugees and disadvantaged youth. *Videocommunity*, a team of activist video-makers, also joined to produce visual documentation of the project's development and contribute to some of its activities.

Pre-A1/A1 Italian L2 courses run by CPIAs usually last about 200 hours. In the *Tabula* project, these were split into two modules: October–January and February–May. Tablets were used during 20 sessions lasting 2.5 hours each in one of the two modules of each course run by the partner schools. The 50 hours of tablet use thus correspond to about half of the classroom time of one module and a quarter of the duration of the full course.

In total, 138 students registered for the *Tabula* courses and 133 completed them; such very high attendance confirmed the validity of the *Tabula* approach. Participants' features: 68% were women (mostly 30–50 years old) from Northern Africa (51% from Morocco) and other regions; 22 were young men aged 16–19; 68% had never been to school (the majority) or had up to five years of school experience. About one third were newcomers who had been in Italy for less than one year. Almost 40% had been living in Italy longer than three years and were often quite fluent in oral Italian.

The project staff was composed of 12 experienced Italian L2 teachers, four tablet facilitators (who helped teachers design tablet-based learning activities, engaged in classroom work, and took care of the ten iPads available in each school), and five multimedia experts, who video-documented the project and ran specific *Tabula* labs, especially with young people.

While the *Tabula* project was running in spring 2014 staff from *Ervet*, the Emilia Romagna regional development agency, undertook a study visit to Turin. This resulted in a case study report² and two dissemination workshops organised for teachers in Bologna and Modena (June 2014) to illustrate the *Tabula*

² *Tablets and video-conferencing in L2 Italian courses: two case studies from Turin and Forno Taro*. http://www.ervet.it/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2015/04/Pig3_ICT_Case-studies_ENG.pdf (accessed 4 May 2016)

project's method and results. Building on this input, CPIA Modena I designed its own *E tablet sia!* ('Let there be tablets') project to adapt and replicate the Tabula approach.³ Staff from Torino held a two-day teacher training session in Modena in January 2015 and collaboration between the two groups then continued through online exchanges and occasional visits.

After the end of the Tabula project, a composite action-research group named *Ricerca Azione Tabula Torino* gradually took shape. It is now made up of teachers from CPIAs, educators from NGOs, trainees, university students and researchers, volunteers, video-makers and other artists, evaluators and software developers. With support from the Piedmont regional government and the European Integration Fund during the 2014–2015 school year, this group continued the experimentation with tablets and extended the Tabula activities to other CPIAs in Cuneo, Biella, Alessandria – Novi. A total of 22 courses and 260 adult learners had experienced the Tabula approach by mid-2015.

These experiences showed the need for an entry-level app to learn simple words through syllables in the Italian language. Available apps are mostly in English or other foreign languages, and have features designed for young children that are often not appropriate for adults. To address these shortcomings, in spring 2015, Ervet funded and coordinated a joint effort with the *Tabula Torino* group and the Modena teachers, which developed the app *Fare Parole* ('Making words'). This web app is available free at <http://www.fareparole.it> and it can be used online (with the Chrome browser) or downloaded to a tablet, PC or smartphone. It contains 150 pages of learn-and-play exercises, with 140 words (selected according to CEFR pre-A1 and A1 levels) and related images and 700 recorded sounds.

At the time of writing, a pre-A1/A1 course curriculum had been developed for use with tablets, with eight didactic units addressing: personal identity; origin and nationality; body and appearance; health; the five senses; clothes; the house; work. The Tabula approach had become a regular feature in courses for illiterate and low-educated adult learners in some CPIAs in Piedmont and continued in Modena with the *E tablet sia!* project. The *Tabula Torino* group was exploring the use of tablets in new directions, e.g. active citizenship education. Other teachers around Italy were testing *Fareparole* and Ervet was exploring how to develop it further.

³ We want to thank Rosalia Italia of CPIA Modena I for her contribution to this article.

2 Didactics in the Tabula approach

Tabula envisages an accurate integration of tablets' use in the curriculum. This is done by detailed planning of teaching goals (in terms of communication functions, lexicon, grammar and instrumental skills to be developed) and related learning activities, and by identifying which apps can best enable and support them, and when and how the apps should be used. A specific planning grid was designed and tested to support this process.

Tabula considers it essential to undertake initial teacher training and follow-up activities, along with continuous didactic coordination through monthly meetings. These are needed to motivate and support teachers in their innovation effort: learning to use the planning grid, tablets and apps; discussing problems and solutions; sharing information about teaching methods and apps usage; suggesting new apps and functions to use. Tabula's mantra is "Never leave the teacher alone!"

Especially at the beginning, most teachers also need the support of a multimedia/tablet facilitator in planning and running classroom activities. At first, facilitators help to improve the students' digital skills, which tend to be low among illiterate adult users. As students' digital proficiency grows over time, the pace and diversity of individual activities in the classroom increase and facilitators help the teacher to respond to the challenge of effectively orchestrating group learning.

Finally, the Tabula approach encourages teachers to systematically document classroom activities and students' products with photos and videos, to keep a diary with descriptions and reflections, and to share these items within the didactic coordination process, by using free, easy-to-use online services such as Dropbox.

3 Technology in the Tabula approach

From a technological point of view, the Tabula approach envisages the flexible and complementary use of tablets – possibly one per student, although some activities may involve two students using the same tablet – and traditional tools and materials such as blackboard, exercise book, pen, pencil, eraser and paper clips. Each tool performs different practical and often symbolic functions. For instance, students like tablets because it is easy to correct or delete mistakes, and this makes them braver at trying things out. On the other hand, when a word or a sentence is eventually written correctly, it is usually copied into the exercise

book. This is perceived as a more reliable back-up support and it can be taken home, whereas tablets must be left at school. Symbolically, paper is where “real writing” occurs. Interestingly, students also started using smartphones to take photos of their activities’ output or to install apps that they enjoyed using on the tablets for re-use elsewhere.

Tabula adopted different types of apps, usually free and used selectively depending on planned activities. Some are apps already installed on the iPad (Pages and Fotocamera); others are from well-known internet services (Google Search, Google maps and YouTube); some provide tools for creative tasks (Little Story Creator, Pic Collage, Sand Artist and Strip Design); only a few are specifically designed for literacy purposes (Abc Easy Writer, Alphabet Tablet, Blackboard). Over time, additional useful apps were added to this list and the *Fare Parole* app was even developed specifically for illiterate Italian L2 adult learners.

Finally, the Tabula approach identified three roles for video projectors, Apple TV and interactive whiteboards. Teachers and facilitators relied on them to visualize explanations about how to use new devices, apps and functions, to facilitate collective reading with dynamic visualization (e.g. highlighting, isolating or magnifying letters and syllables) and to show and share the results of individual and group learning activities.

4 Impact and final considerations

The main visible impacts of using tablets following the Tabula approach have been a much higher than usual course attendance, stronger student engagement in learning, and greater social interaction in the classroom. Tabula teachers and evaluators have also identified a range of enhanced cognitive abilities, language/communication and alphabetical skills, along with improved learner self-esteem and motivation. These effects have not yet been measured and analysed in detail, but they seem to stem from a number of factors. For instance, students enjoy very much the opportunities for personalized learning and creative expression (through free drawing, easy choice and change of colours, fonts, patterns etc.), and the playful but also authentic aspects of shooting photos and videos, during simulations, dialogues and other activities at school and out of school (e.g. a visit to an open-air market). Mothers also seem to gain an enhanced status in their family and beyond, from being seen to be capable of using a symbol of modern technology such as the iPad and other tablets. More generally, there seems to be a strong empowerment effect on illiterate or low-educated adults as they become literate, learn a second language and gain digital competence, all at

the same time. Learning to use new digital devices and online services is increasingly perceived as a key to full citizenship in our society.

Given these first positive results, more effort should go into scaling up the current small-scale and often isolated experiences and establishing networks at national and European levels of researchers, teachers and other practitioners. Promising new research and trials could focus on how to exploit mobile devices (tablets and smart phones) to support adult literacy and L2 learning as a continuous process inside and outside of school.