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Literacy and language teaching: tools, implementation and impact

Abstract: Course planning and language assessment tools for Italian L2 have recently been developed. *Italiano L2 in contesti migratori: Sillabo e descrittori* (IL2S) is based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001). Focusing on illiterate and semi-literate adults, IL2 sets standards and recommends criteria for teaching both literacy and L2. This paper discusses the results of the validation procedure of IL2S, which aimed to verify its accuracy in terms of descriptive power, its validity for course design and language assessment, and its impact on teaching.

Résumé : Des outils ont récemment été développés pour planifier les cours d'italien en L2 et évaluer le niveau de langue. « Italiano L2 in contesti migratori. Sillabo e descrittori » s'appuie sur le *Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues* (CECR, Conseil de l'Europe 2001). Destiné aux adultes illettrés et « semi-alphabétisés », IL2 définit des normes et recommande des critères pour les cours de littératie et de L2. L'article passe en revue les résultats de la procédure de validation IL2S, en vue de contrôler son adéquation en termes de capacité à décrire, sa validité pour la conception des cours et l'évaluation du niveau de langue, et son impact sur l'enseignement.

1 Syllabus and descriptors for illiterate, semi-literate and literate users: from illiteracy to A1 level

The need to identify descriptors of language proficiency for first levels in migration contexts – specifically, for levels that are lower than those of the CEFR, has become more and more apparent in many member states of the Council of Europe. As a side effect of the legal requirements established in many European countries, the significant presence of illiterates, semi-literates and persons with

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learning difficulties has become visible to both the public and to educational authorities.

To address this group of language learners, specific language and literacy programmes have been set up and CEFR integration for some national languages have been issued, such as Beacco et al. (2005) for French.

Italiano Lingua Seconda in contesti migratori (IL2S; Borri et al. 2014) is a tool to plan courses, create teaching materials and prepare tests at levels preceding the level A1 of the CEFR, to which it is explicitly related. It consists of two parts. The syllabus defines the domains – private, public, professional, educational – and six thematic areas; and the descriptors present the levels of language competence and literacy in terms of “can do” – that is, the actions that learners should be able to perform in each domain and the language content they should know in order to carry out those actions (Spinelli and Parizzi 2010). The third section presents the literacy objectives, divided into technical skills (the ability to draw letters and combine graphics and phonetics) and study skills. As we consider literacy a part of communicative language competence, the literacy objectives are strongly linked to the preceding sections. A word list defines the lexical objectives. IL2S sets out four stages, in relation to different learning profiles:

- Pre-Alpha A1, for pre-literates: non-educated adults, whose mother tongue is not written or is not the medium of schooling in the country of origin.
- Alpha A1, for illiterates: adults who cannot read and write in their mother tongue and have never been educated.
- Pre-A1, for semi-literates: adults who received a low level of education in their mother tongue or partially lost their literacy skills because they do not read and write.
- A1, corresponding to the CEFR level, for literates.

2 Assessment of IL2S

2.1 Scope and objectives

A validation procedure was set up for IL2S to assess its *accuracy* (descriptive power), its *validity* (its appropriateness in determining teaching objectives and testing criteria), and its *impact* on the quality of language teaching and testing. The trial focused on the development of writing ability, starting from instrumental and functional literacy.

2.2 Steps and methodology

- *Sampling of the participants.* We selected the educational agencies participating in the assessment taking into account their diversity (five state adult education centres, four voluntary associations, one private vocational training centre) and regional distribution (ten towns, across Italy). 19 teachers participated on a voluntary basis, after a brief period of training.
- *Overview of the teaching situations.* Using two questionnaires, we established the research participants' profiles (educational background and teaching experience), the composition of the classes (students' countries of origin, L1s, L2s, levels of literacy), and the learners' profiles (linguistic repertoires, literacy and schooling, contacts with Italian speakers).
- *Collection and analysis of samples of learners' written productions.* In order to assess the accuracy and validity of the tool, we tested the descriptors on 800 samples of writing produced by students at different stages of the Pre-Alpha, Alpha A1, Pre-A1 courses.
- *Feedback from the research participants.* The research participants piloted IL2S by integrating it into their everyday practice. At the end of the trial, we asked for feedback through structured interviews to assess the impact of IL2S.

2.3 Results

2.3.1 Teaching setting, classes, and teachers

The research participants used IL2S to plan and implement 14 courses, lasting 60 hours on average (ranging from 30 to 100 hours). 167 students attended the courses, from 18 countries, and with 19 mother tongues. 48 of them spoke at least one L2 (11 L2s other than Italian).

The research confirmed well-known problems. All classes were highly diverse in terms of the language competence, literacy, and linguistic backgrounds of the students, in some cases ranging from illiterates without any knowledge of Italian to A2 educated students. Moreover, individual students rarely presented homogeneous profiles: some students who were pre-A1 in writing skills could speak Italian up to B1. Thus, teachers – all of them with relevant experience or education – claimed to use differentiated teaching techniques, mostly based on cooperative learning approaches.

Course attendance was irregular, even when learners were motivated to learn. Most teachers commented that the class ambiance was pleasant, coopera-

tive and motivating. However, illiterates could show “distress”, “discouragement”, “confusion”.

The need for a quick response to the sudden and irregular presence of refugees and asylum seekers in a given area has affected the size of classes (up to 40 students), the duration of courses (30 hours in some cases), and teaching activities.

2.3.2 Accuracy and validity of IL2S

The research results broadly confirmed the accuracy of IL2S as a descriptive and assessment tool and its validity in representing the development of communicative language skills and literacy.

We tested the descriptors on samples of writing produced by the students, as in the following example (Figure 1). It was produced as a response to the task “Write a shopping list”, which the class had practised several times; the student wrote the words without assistance.

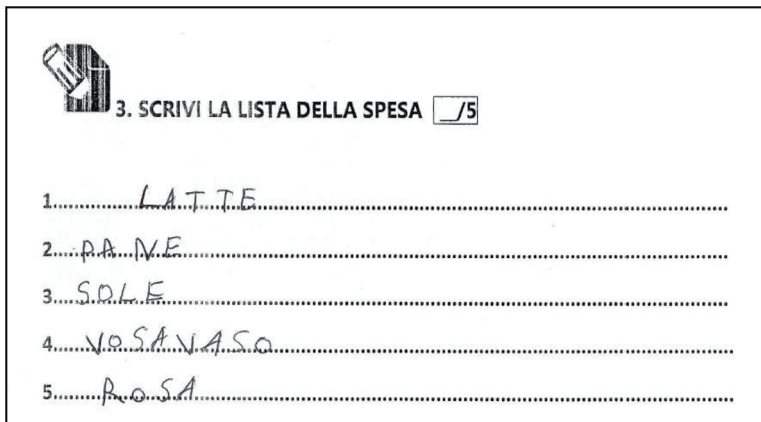


Figure 1: Sample of writing

The sample corresponds to Alpha A1 descriptors such as: *He/she understands the relation between the spoken and written language; He/she can write single words, which are of personal interest or familiar (capital script)*. The student has understood the alphabetic principle (correspondence between phonemes and graphemes), although with some uncertainty in combining sounds and letters (*vosavaso – vaso*). However, she produces a list made up of individual words

(*milk, bread, sun, vase, rose*), confirming that the ability to write a simple text as a shopping list pertains to the level Pre-A1.

The student appears to focus on showing her ability to write the words that she has practised in the literacy exercises (bi-syllables, paroxytone words). However, the ability to implement reality-oriented tasks requires that learners understand the aims, formats, and conventions of the learning activities. This understanding is a result of schooling and is stated as a literacy objective in IL2S at the level Alpha A1: *He/she starts to recognize the types of exercises and teaching activities.*

All research participants remarked that IL2S was valuable in outlining the profiles of students, thus in better designing tailor-made courses. They appreciated the stress on different forms of illiteracy, expressed in the continuum from illiterates to strong literates, and heterogeneous individual profiles, which led them to question the notion of levels *per se*.

The relation between the development of oral ability and literacy has emerged as a critical issue. The classroom experience that illiterates most likely need more time to learn oral language than semi-literate or literate learners seems to be confirmed by research, although still at an early stage (Tarone and Bigelow 2005). According to this assumption, IL2S defines sequences of language content that proceed in parallel for written and oral skills. This has prompted some participants to balance the teaching of literacy and oral skills.

2.4 Impact

All research participants reported a positive impact of IL2S on their teaching, with obvious differences due to experience and competence. They said one positive feature was its coherence with the CEFR, which all of them used, and the relation between literacy programmes and CEFR. More specifically, they appreciated the articulation between primary literacy and language teaching in the communicative perspective. This approach, already adopted by some of them, encourages the view that literacy acquisition involves more than mastery of technical skills.

Other positive impacts of the tool were that it helped teachers create a more systematic organization of learning objectives, more accurately plan courses, and more realistically pace the presentation of content.

One issue with the tool that the experimentation has brought to light is the twofold function of the stages identified before A1. On the one hand, they are designed in relation to specific groups of learners: Alpha A1 descriptors refer to the probable performance of illiterates after 150 hours of instruction. In this sense,

the stages do not prefigure a progression for all students, who enter the stage appropriate to their profile. However, the two literacy stages Pre-Alpha and Alpha A1 (and to a lesser extent Pre-A1), can represent levels, in the sense of steps toward the acquisition of literacy. Further classroom research is needed.

3 Conclusions

The results of the validation procedure show that IL2S has a positive impact on the quality of teaching. It helps the teachers better understand the educational needs of learners. It provides them with practical suggestions about the content of teaching and its progression according to the learners' needs, the aim of the course, and the teaching setting.

Although IL2S focuses on the Italian language, we propose it as a contribution to a European L2 and literacy syllabus. Migration has both local and international dimensions, as the constantly changing routes and forms of people's movements show. We are convinced that ongoing revision of the CEFR to make it more suitable to language learning and teaching in migration contexts is a European endeavour, to which experiences from each country can contribute.

This syllabus must be able to give an account of the diversity of learning profiles, and of the specificity of literacy in L2. The language and literacy learning paths are strongly connected and interlinked, but they do not overlap. Instead of "progression", "progressions" are to be described. The syllabus must also consider the vast array of communicative situations and language needs that migrants meet across a multilingual Europe, including individual as well as social and educational conditions.

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