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# New challenges for learning, teaching and assessment with low-educated and illiterate immigrants: the case of L2 Italian<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Through the project “Rete e Cittadinanza 2014–2015” (“Network and Citizenship 2014–2015”), supported by the European Integration Fund of Third-Country Nationals (EIF), the University for Foreigners of Siena has been engaged in the implementation of continuing training courses addressed to Italian language teachers who work with illiterate or semiliterate migrant learners. This paper reports the results of a survey of teachers’ needs.

**Résumé :** Le projet « Rete e Cittadinanza 2014–2015 » (Réseau et citoyenneté 2014–2015) est financé par le Fonds européen d’intégration des ressortissants de pays tiers. Il a permis à l’université pour étrangers de Sienne de mettre en place des cours de formation continue pour les professeurs d’italien qui enseignent à des apprenants migrants illettrés ou « semi-alphabétisés ». L’article présente les résultats d’une enquête sur les besoins des enseignants.

## 1 Introduction

One of the main missions of the University for Foreigners of Siena is teaching Italian as a second language, especially through innovative methodologies and in sensitive contexts. Through the project “Rete e Cittadinanza 2014–2015” (“Network and Citizenship 2014–2015”), supported by the European Integration Fund of Third-Country Nationals (EIF), the university has been engaged in the implementation of continuing training courses addressed to Italian language teachers who work with illiterate or semiliterate migrant learners, and that is the principal focus of this paper.

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## 2 The teachers' training needs: a survey in Tuscany

### 2.1 Objectives

The research reported here set out to investigate the training needs of those who teach L2 Italian to learners who are illiterate or low-educated in L1 and/or L2. The main objectives were: to investigate the perceptions and experiences of teachers in respect of such learners; to understand the issues related to this context of teaching/learning; and to identify strategies and best practices to respond to the particular communication and training needs of learners.

The decision to focus the research objectives on the teachers' training needs was dictated by a growing demand from teachers for specific training on these issues. During the different projects carried out by the University for Foreigners of Siena in the field of teaching Italian to adult immigrants teachers have frequently referred to the difficulty of managing a growing number of illiterate or semi-literate learners, for whom, unlike what happens in other countries of the European Union such as Germany (Feldmeier 2008) or Austria (Plutzer and Ritter 2008), there is no *ad hoc* course of study. As a result, they are often mistakenly put in A1 level classes, which causes a series of didactic problems. It is often difficult for teachers to manage learners with different levels of prior schooling within the same class, even when – as occasionally happens – there is the possibility of establishing a pre-A1 level class *ad hoc*.

The lack of official information about the management of learners with a level below A1, a dearth of published materials in L2 Italian for illiterate learners, and a steady increase in the number of such learners, mainly in the Centres for Adult Education (as noted in the previous paragraph), prompts teachers to develop new skills in this direction. In this sense, the present survey, carried out with a sample of teachers working in Tuscany, is offered as a case study that is representative of the Italian situation.

### 2.2 The structure of the questionnaire and the profile of the informants

The survey was conducted by administering a questionnaire which is divided into two main sections.

The first part of the questionnaire aimed at eliciting the following information: the type of institutions where the teachers/informants work and L2 Italian

courses they provide (from pre-A1 to C1 level); the level of demand for courses below A1; the sociolinguistic characteristics of those who request such courses (gender, origin, age); how the institutions surveyed respond to such demand; and the types of illiterate learners the teachers teach or who attend courses. The second part of the questionnaire, whose results will be given in detail in the next section, focuses on identifying the areas in which the teachers/informants are experiencing or have experienced major problems.

Before presenting a quantitative analysis of the results from the questionnaires, it seems appropriate to focus on the types of illiteracy which, starting from the studies of Minuz (2012) and Borri et al. (2014), have been considered, with some modifications, in our research:

- pre-literate learners whose L1 has no writing system;
- totally illiterate learners whose L1 has a writing system that they have not acquired for lack of schooling or some other reason;
- weakly literate learners in L1, with up to three years of schooling;
- literate learners, but in a non-alphabetic writing system so they are unfamiliar with alphabetic writing;
- literate in a non-Latin alphabet;
- weakly literate in L2, independently of the L1 writing system or the first language in which they acquired literacy.

The questionnaire was administered in 2015 to 36 teachers from Centres for Adult Education (33), where there is more demand for courses with a level below A1; voluntary organizations (7) and universities (1). The training offer of the institutions where the informants teach involves, to varying degrees, all language levels (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Number of L2 Italian courses required for illiterate and low-educated learners

A1	33
A1	34
A2	35
B1	22
B2	17
C1	14
C2	14

Of the 36 interviewed teachers, 35 stated that there is a demand for courses below A1 at their schools. The extent of this demand is medium (15) and high (5) and the institutions respond by organizing classes *ad hoc* for illiterate or low-educated learners (17), or inserts such learners at A1 level classes trying, however, to create differentiated learning paths, or by adopting different solutions based on the available resources (4). Finally, the types of illiterate learners are quite varied (Table 2):

**Table 2:** Types of illiterate learner in L2 Italian classes

weakly literate in L1	23 %
totally illiterate	19 %
literate in a non-Latin alphabet	19 %
pre-literate	15 %
weakly literate in L2	14 %
literate in non-alphabetic writing	14 %

From a first analysis, therefore, the informants' profile corresponds to what teachers say who have experience in teaching different types of illiterate learners. The demand for language courses is increasing in an education system that does not always succeed in responding to the real needs of these learners by creating classes designed especially for them.

### 3 Analysis and discussion of results

As mentioned before, the survey aimed to elicit teachers' perceptions and experiences in teaching illiterate or low-educated learners. Specifically, we paid attention to educational issues encountered in this teaching/learning context. In addition to quantitative data, we collected qualitative data in order to identify teachers' impressions regarding the difficulties found in teaching illiterate and low-educated learners. We asked the teachers the following question:

*When do you face major problems in teaching illiterate and low-educated learners?*

Informants responded to this question by selecting from a number of options; they were also able to add comments and suggestions (Table 3).

The first choice of informants was: *designing diversified didactic paths according to different illiteracy typologies*. Without a syllabus for L2 Italian specifically designed for illiterate learners, it is difficult to implement diversified didac-

**Table 3:** Some examples of problems found by teachers for each activity and strategies proposed to resolve them

1	Designing diversified didactic paths according to different illiteracy types	More homogeneous groups of learners (3)*	Flexible didactic paths. Focused learning units respecting learning time of illiterate students (3)
2	Identifying different illiteracy types	Improving teacher training (5)	Administering specific tests (5)
3	Sourcing <i>ad hoc</i> didactic materials	It is often necessary to create <i>ad hoc</i> tools or to adapt what is already shared on the web (but not enough time to do it)	Schools should make sure appropriate didactic materials are available (2)
4	Time management in respect of short-term goals (learning unit) and long-term goals (didactic planning)	Different learner profiles in the same classroom do not make it possible to meet their communicative needs (5)	Need for more teaching hours (2)
5	Carrying out didactic activities in classroom	It is difficult to promote interaction among illiterate learners and to keep their motivation constantly high	Teaching based on ludic activities (2)
6	Induction (registration, collecting personal and socio-linguistic data)	The registration form usually used for foreign students is not sufficient for illiterate learners because it is necessary to collect more data in order to identify their illiteracy profile (16)	Providing for a simplified registration form (personal data), translating it into migrant languages Providing for a registration form (home country, L1, years of education, etc.) with short writing/reading tasks (2)
7	Identifying proficiency levels (placement and achievement tests)	Training opportunities for teachers	Designing and using reliable and valid tests capable of verifying levels <A1 (6)

\* Figures in brackets indicate the number of teachers who identified the problem or strategy

tic paths in the same classroom according to different illiteracy profiles. In response to the issues raised, informants proposed more homogeneous groups of learners, flexible didactic paths, and focused learning units respecting learning time of illiterate learners.

The second choice concerned the *identification of different types of illiteracy*: institutions do not share information, so it is difficult to recognize the type of illiteracy and, in some cases, illiterate learners as well. For these reasons, teachers proposed: administering specific tests and expanding the induction phase for

learners. Everything must be integrated with more teacher training opportunities on issues related to language assessment and illiteracy.

The third answer highlights the difficulty in *sourcing ad hoc didactic materials*: it is difficult to find adequate books and to create *ad hoc* tools or to adapt what is already shared on the web. Moreover, according to the informants, schools should ensure the availability of teaching materials and should encourage greater collaboration among teachers in order to share tools and experiences.

The last choice concerns the *identification of proficiency levels (placement and achievement tests)*: levels below A1 are not institutionally acknowledged and there is a lack of tools available to teachers for the management of this particular type of learner, so informants were aware that they need training in the design and administration of reliable and valid tests to verify proficiency levels below A1.

In order to sum up, the presence of illiterate or low-educated learners within the Italian L2 classes suggests the need for:

- a framework with descriptors that capture illiterate learner profiles (totally illiterate, weakly literate etc.);
- tests to assess levels below A1 in order to create homogenous classes;
- a reference syllabus to support the development of adequate didactic materials and activities;
- more teaching hours to reach level A2 starting from levels below A1 according to learning goals;
- teacher training and research about the learning paths followed by illiterate and low-educated learners and the learning time they require.

## 4 Conclusion

To conclude, the promotion, dissemination and implementation of projects like those described here can constitute an example of fruitful cooperation between university, research and society in order to support concrete actions for social inclusion.

It should also be emphasized that social inclusion and language acquisition have to be understood as two dimensions of a bi-directional process: language learning and teaching (and the teachers are important in this regard) should not be treated as the pre-requisite for social inclusion: social inclusion is reinforced and facilitated through language learning. This is the main reason why, in this case, we are talking about language as a key factor in fighting against and reducing inequality.

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