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TEACHING ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN MULTI-ETHNIC CLASSROOMS IN ITALY

Abstract. The paper explores the necessity of introducing a new linguistics approach to teaching Italian as a second language. Since the number of migrants and foreign students has greatly increased over the past decades, there is an urge to achieve mutual understanding and tolerance in a classroom. The author singles out that teachers working in multi-ethnic classrooms are to help the students reach a good level of Intercultural Communicative Competence. The paper sets the example how teachers can plan the lesson regarding the targets. Furthermore, the author outlines the grammar difficulties that foreigners especially Russian students might face when learning Italian. Both theoretical and practical knowledge can be employed in any multi-ethnic classrooms.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence, Italian language, second language, migrants, multi-ethnic classrooms

Introduction

Over the past few decades, Italy has been developing as a multi-ethnic country. It is currently one of the main countries of immigration in Europe with 5,014,000 officially registered foreign residents at the end of 2014. The incidence of migration flows on the Italian population (8.1%) is higher than the European average. The majority of foreign citizens residing in Italy are European citizens or come from EU countries. The largest foreign communities include Romanians (1,131,839), Albanians (490,483), Moroccans (449,058), the Chinese (265,820) and Ukrainians (226,060) [1].

In this multi-ethnic national picture, the increase in second generation residents in migrant communities is very real phenomenon. The number of children born in Italy in 2014 from both foreign-born non-Italian parents remained almost completely stable (75,067, i.e. 14.9% of the total). Out of about 1.1 million foreign minors, 814,187 were enrolled in the 2014/2015 school year, that is 11,343 more than in 2013

(the highest increase regarded minors born in Italy: +8.4%), whilst the number of Italian students enrolled continued to decrease (8,886,076, -0.6%) [1].

To quote Michael Byram, "Since the state of the world is such that societies and individuals have no alternative but proximity, interaction and relationship as the conditions of existence [2, p.2]", the need to define basic principles of Intercultural Communicative Education (I.C.E.) as new guidelines for language teaching methodology is an urgent issue.

Nowadays, the increasing presence of foreign students in Italian schools has altered priorities in the field of teaching Italian as second language (L2) [1]. It now appears not only right and appropriate, but also necessary to introduce a new linguistic approach combined with intercultural pedagogy, so as to satisfy "the students' communicative, affective and relational needs, in order to set up a realistic and respectful teaching method" [6, p.185]. All those present in a classroom should interact with each other in order to achieve mutual understanding and tolerance.

In the first part of this work, we briefly introduce some theoretical principles, which outline the new trends in teaching L2 for migrant people. In the second part, we propose some new possible approaches of teaching Italian in a multi-ethnic classroom on the basis of teaching projects developed in two Italian centres for Intercultural Education, *Laboratorio Mondo* situated in Forlì (Emilia Romagna) and *Arcobaleno* in Florence (Tuscany). In their mixed classrooms, Italian is taught as L2 in free courses for adult migrants from different countries and cultures (Hispanic, Chinese, Slavic, Arab, Nigerian and Indian). In the third part, we outline some of the

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[1] The first conference on the teaching of Italian as second language in Italy and abroad was held in Rome in 1982 by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education with the intention of proposing new linguistic models to people learning Italian in Italy or abroad. Since this first event, Italian specialists have developed new projects and materials for language acquisition in order to satisfy different learning targets: foreign tourists, workers or students studying in Italian universities (especially in those of Perugia and Siena). See the first pioneering work on the subject by M. Vedovelli [3]. In the Nineties, the rapid increase in migration flows has included first generation migrants in these groups, too. More recently, the growth in second-generation migrants has triggered a more in-depth analysis of linguistic and methodological models [4, 5, 6, 7].

specific difficulties Russian-speaking students have when learning Italian, in order to facilitate those Italian teachers who will work with these groups of students.

I.C.E.: a new challenge in language teaching

Nowadays, many specialists [2, 4, 5, 7] consider Intercultural Communicative Education (I.C.E.) to be the new frontier of language teaching methodology, where intercultural pedagogy meets the most innovative trends in language teaching for migrants.

The notion of Communicative Competence (C.C.) was a key concept in sociolinguistics in the second half of 1970. D. Hymes, moving away from N. Chomsky's notion of *linguistic competence*, defined it as "the competence as to when to speak, when not and as to what to talk about with whom, when, in what manner (...), the knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate" [8, p.233]. C.C. is the sum of different linguistic, extra-linguistic, socio-cultural and pragmatic components, but it normally refers to the use of a single language in a given cultural context or situation. In a multi-ethnic world, this model seems to be inadequate, because students normally show different needs and identities [6], and teachers are used to working in a multi-ethnic classroom, where diversity prevails. If we intend Intercultural Competence as a "combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills" [9, p.16], these are the main factors in Intercultural Communication [2, p.34]. Reaching a good level of *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (I.C.C.) means accepting and understanding each other's behaviour, facilitating mental openness*,* showing empathy towards others and reducing communicative insecurity.

In the I.C.C. model, a teacher's main task is to stimulate the students' curiosity and critical awareness to different languages and cultures, instead of imposing a single linguistic and cultural model. The main difference between teaching a foreign or L2 language is the real and urgent context in which the teacher operates. Learning Italian as L2 is a primary need for migrant people living in Italy, wishing to integrate themselves to find better jobs and living conditions.

People of different ages (children, students, adults) meet each other at different school or university levels during day or evening classes and therefore show different learning needs and abilities. The development of language acquisition theory can help teachers solve the problem of the different categories of learners which arises in any language course. In the last few decades, the field of language acquisition analysis has achieved some excellent results[2].

Intercultural communication presumes an active cooperation process in relation to an individual communicative situation, in which communicative competence comes before linguistic competence. Focusing on I.C.E., some Italian linguists [15] have developed new teaching models "to find strategies to allow subjects of different cultural origins to learn to communicate in spite of different languages, cultures and beliefs "[16, p.7]. The presence of foreign students in a classroom sometimes requires a complete change of strategy. The teacher's attention should focus mainly on a single student and his/her social communication requirements, rather than the linguistic content of the lesson. In order to achieve a good level of "participative competence", these models promote the involvement of all members of a classroom, regardless of age, social or cultural origin or religious beliefs.

The concept of "participating competence" deserves particular attention. One of the main goals is to build a positive atmosphere in the classroom, one of mutual adaptation to and participation in the specific situation. One of the teacher's most important goals should be to facilitate socialisation amongst students, stimulate their positive curiosity and encourage tolerance of others. In such an atmosphere, it will not be difficult to explore and negotiate different cultural norms and attitudes, regulating common life [16, p.7].

M. Byram formulates the most popular model of I.C.C. applied to teaching languages. He tries to shift from *description* models to *performance* models in order to design a process of *competence building,* where various skills are integrated into real-time interaction*,* as indicated in the table below [2, p.57-64]:

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[2] Due to the limited word count of this article, we are unable to analyse the subject in more depth, so have only mentioned a few of the most important works [10; 11; 12; 13; 14].

Attitudes	Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own
Knowledge	of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutors' country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction
Skills of interpreting and relating	Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own
Skills of discovery and interaction	Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction
Critical cultural awareness/ political education	Ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries

The final aim of this complete model is to form the competence of an "intercultural speaker" rather than simply a native speaker as is typical in the traditional methods of teaching a foreign language. As Byram affirms, "the interaction between two individuals can only be fully understood when the relationship of the 'host' to the 'visitor' is included. […] It will be evident from this, that we cannot describe such an interaction as if there were two native speakers of the language involved, one of whom is a true native and the other attempting to be so" [2, p.32].

The intercultural speaker does not only speak a language fluently and properly, but also takes part in communication and is involved in exchanging views about the interlocutors' cultural background, in order to interact with them at their same level.

Teaching units in *Progetto Arcobaleno* and *Laboratorio Mondo*

Our research was carried out[3] in two centres for Intercultural Education, which offer foreign people living in Italy a range of educational and recreational services. In these associations, most of the teachers are volunteers and their work focusses on developing I.C.C. in order to achieve the social promotion and integration of ethnic diversity through Italian language teaching.

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[3] Special thanks go to my former students Simona Polito and Laura Gori who worked in these centres as specialised Italian teachers and wrote their theses about this experience.

The *Progetto Arcobaleno* school[4] in Florence was founded in 1987 by a non-profit association in order to provide consulting and social aid for migrants, the homeless and unmarried or unemployed mothers. The school is open from Monday to Friday, and about 40 teachers work in 10 classes of different age groups and levels.

The *Laboratorio Mondo* association[5], founded in Forlì in 2009 promotes intercultural dialogue and offers professional qualifications to migrants through a range of courses, which include not only language but also art and handicrafts, mosaics, sewing and woodcarving.

In the experience of both *Laboratorio Mondo* and *Progetto Arcobaleno* teachers adopt an inductive method to teaching Italian. The main point is to focus on their students' needs and linguistic abilities rather than simply language structures and grammar. Adaptation to the language and culture should be mutual: not only must the migrant (or foreign) student adapt to the dominant language and culture, but any Italian students and teachers involved must also reassess their values and beliefs.

Here follows an example of the main steps and tasks of a teaching unit in a *Laboratorio Mondo* intermediate class:

1. First, the teacher reads the text and analyses the main concepts and key words (main task: understanding concepts and situations);
2. Then students compare concepts in different cultures (main task: exploring stereotypes and prejudices, finding common attitudes);
3. Only after this analytical exploration do students read the text and answer key questions about the content of the story/text;
4. At this point of the unit, the teacher focuses on grammar, explains any difficult structures and has students do grammar exercises about different structures;
5. All groups of students sharing common linguistic difficulties (due to several language groups) work on specific structures. Students discuss the topic and

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[4] http://www.progettoarcobaleno.it/scuola.html

[5] http://www.laboratoriomondo.it/.

situation (main task: participating in the dialogue, and expressing their personal positions and perspectives).

The teaching unit, proposed by one of the teachers at Progetto Arcobaleno in upper-intermediate classes, focuses on the following steps, which are very similar to those of the previously described unit:

1. Motivational introduction of the topic: the teacher shows some scenes of the Italian film *Benvenuti al Sud* (Welcome to the South), proposing a brain-storming session on stereotypes of Italian culture;

2. Global exploration of the text: the teacher reads a dialogue from the film, introducing some phonological and grammatical elements. Main task: to answer some true or false questions about the text. Students are asked to comment on some lexical expressions;

3. Focus on grammar: analytical study of the lexical units, use of verb tenses and modes e.g. the subjunctive. Students compare structures with their own native languages and do grammar exercises.

4. Focus on expressing opinions (agree/disagree, role-play situations): the students discuss the main stereotypes presented in the film and compare them with their own cultural stereotypes.

5. Focus on writing a letter to a friend expressing opinions about Italy and the Italians.

As we can see, in both schools teaching a language means first motivating students to develop mutual understanding and discussing the diversity of opinions and attitudes. Linguistic competence is only developed after critical analysis of the teaching materials and by means of the contrastive analysis of structures and of the students' difficulties. Classwork is mostly communicative and interactive group work.

Main difficulties Russian-speakers have when learning Italian

The experience of teaching Italian in multi-ethnic classes showed that some kinds of grammar difficulties are common to many students, even at the most advanced levels. Italian pronunciation can be a problem for Spanish-speaking learners too, especially concerning the fricatives [ß/ ɣ/ ð], despite the common origin

of our Romance languages. At a phonological level, the use of geminates is the most problematic issue, at a morphological one it is the use of articles (Arab and Chinese only have one kind of article, while Russian does not have any) and prepositions, be they simple or articulated. Below there are some examples of article omission (-) by Russian-speaking learners, who were the most numerous group in the *Laboratorio Mondo* classes. The correct form is given in italics in brackets:

1. Ho molta nostalgia per - *(la)* mia famiglia
2. Durante - *(la)* mia giornata preparo - *(il)* pranzo e - *(la)* cena per - *(la)* famiglia

The problem of auxiliary verbs is common in Spanish and Albanian learners as they only use the auxiliary *to have*, but in Russian omission of the copula verb (-) in expressions in the present tense [17] is a frequent error. Italian has an obligatory overt copula in the present tense, while Russian does not. In Russian the copula is only used for past and future tenses:

3. Mi piace imparare l'italiano, ma - molto difficile (ma *è* molto difficile)
4. Dopo pranzo - ora di riposare (*è* ora di riposare)
5. Non mi piace che - *(la)* lingua - *(è)* difficile e -*(la)* mia famiglia - lontano

The same error is frequent in the use of the present perfect:

6. Ma io - andato con pullman (*sono* andato)
7. Ha detto che lui - andato in Francia (*è* andato)
8. Ieri – stata una giornata molto bella (*è* stata)

Sometimes Russian-speaking learners use the locative form *ci sono* instead of the correct plural form of the verb "to be" *sono*:

9. Le famiglie dove lavoro *ci sono* brave (*sono* brave).

As already mentioned, another difficult category for Russian-speaking learners is that of prepositions. Speakers confuse some prepositions with others: "lei - *da città" (lei *è di* città); "come *nel Francia" (*in* Francia).

As for noun gender, problems arise with the use of masculine nouns ending in -*a*, such as *tema*, *programma*, *problema*, which are frequently considered feminine (in

Russian -*a* is one of the most common endings of feminine nouns) and combined with feminine adjectives: *una buona programma (un buon programma).

Learners also have great difficulty with verb morphology. Chinese students use the Italian verbs at the infinitive form, because their language system has no verb inflection. On the contrary, Russian and Italian verb morphology share similar verb inflections but are very different regards tense use and aspect.

This brief presentation of difficulties shows that it may be very useful for teachers to be aware of and compare the critical areas of the so-called "interlanguage" [18, p. 221] of the student, the dynamic system developed by a L2 learner, in advance. A more analytical grammar presentation, in which learners can compare Italian structures with their own native languages, could help them improve their language skills.

Conclusions

The teaching units proposed in the multi-ethnic classrooms at *Progetto Arcobaleno* and *Laboratorio Mondo* demonstrate examples of new ICE modules in which teaching Italian as second language for foreign migrants does not only include linguistic competence, but a wider range of objectives, known as I.C.C., too.

To achieve this aim, an inductive method and some common strategies are adopted which focus on the students' needs, on interactive learning and on participating competence.

The dominant language is not the main focus of attention but rather proposed through analysis and comparison with other students' languages.

Critical analysis of different cultural positions and beliefs should play an important role in language teaching in order to allow foreign students to be accepted with their own identities. In this approach, cultural relativism prevails so that each individual interacts with others based on mutual understanding and tolerance.

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