

## **Teaching and learning of the Italian language for the newly arrived foreign minor in Italy. An intercultural approach**

### **La didattica della seconda lingua per il minore straniero neo arrivato in Italia. Un approccio interculturale**

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#### **Abstract**

This article aims to offer some didactic and intercultural communication criteria, immediately usable in school practice, useful to effectively relate to the newly arrived foreign minor who learns Italian as a second language, allowing him to reach good levels of learning and full integration within and outside the classroom, and not just the simple ability to understand and be understood.

This work underlines the didactic validity of a complex approach for the teaching of the second language that enhances the original one and that points, in addition to the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, to allow the young learner to benefit from opportunities and useful solicitations for inclusion in the new social reality. The contribution emphasizes the importance of combining traditional educational methods with specific educational experiences, of laboratorial and recreational-expressive nature, that are linked to daily life and that give the person in learning situation a leading role, also favoring emergence and narration of personal stories, experiences, emotions, expectations and needs linked with entering the new socio-cultural reality.

**Keywords:** communicative competence; laboratory teaching; educational relationship.

#### **Sommario**

Il contributo intende offrire alcuni criteri di didattica e di comunicazione interculturale, immediatamente spendibili nella pratica scolastica, utili per rapportarsi efficacemente al minore straniero neo-arrivato che apprende l'italiano come seconda lingua, consentendogli di raggiungere buoni livelli di apprendimento e una piena integrazione dentro e fuori la classe, e non soltanto la semplice capacità di intendere e farsi intendere. Questo lavoro sottolinea la validità didattica di un approccio complesso per l'insegnamento della lingua seconda che valorizzi quella d'origine e che punti, oltre che

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all'acquisizione di conoscenze linguistiche, a consentire al giovane discente di fruire di occasioni e di sollecitazioni utili per l'inserimento nella nuova realtà sociale. Nel contributo viene evidenziata l'importanza di affiancare, alle metodologie didattiche tradizionali, specifiche esperienze educative, di taglio laboratoriale e ludico-espressivo, che risultino legate alla vita quotidiana e che conferiscano protagonismo alla persona in situazione di apprendimento, favorendo anche la emersione e la narrazione di storie personali, vissuti, emozioni, attese e bisogni legate all'ingresso nella nuova realtà socio-culturale.

**Parole chiave:** competenza comunicativa; didattica laboratoriale; relazione educativa.

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### **Entry into the new scholastic reality**

The migration of young people, not yet of age, who undertake the journey alone, manifested in the Italian landscape during the Nineties, together with the intensification of global migratory movements. These children, in the plurality of the definitions that identify them and the social and legal connotations of the term, due to their double status (of minors who must be protected and migrants who must be controlled) question the politics of child protection and European immigration policy (Quiroga, Chagas e Palacin, 2018), as well as pedagogical reflection and related educational practice. Newly arrived foreign minors in Italy are often unaccompanied, mostly preadolescents and adolescents. They are living in a particularly vulnerable situation: separation from the family, linguistic difficulties, a scarce or abruptly interrupted education, the need to escape conflicts, economic difficulties, the treats, an uncertain migration project, a complex process of building personal identity (Ricucci, 2010), sometimes the presence of traumatic experiences and psychological disorders related to their particular condition (Taurino et al., 2012). Even the minors who arrive in Italy according to regular migration paths do not enjoy, at least at the didactic level, a better situation. According to the National Observatory for the integration of foreign students and for the Interculture, even today, a significant part of the newly arrived is living in the classroom in a situation of «invisibility», which is described in an effective manner through the expression «swim or sink» (literally «swim or drown»): they are placed in the conditions of having to orientate themselves in the new school, acquire the second language, learn the contents of the common curriculum alone, without dedicated help or personalized support, relying only on own resources.

When, within the class, a foreign child or adolescent appears at his first entrance, not only in the new Italian school reality, but also in a new social and cultural context, the recurring doubts of teachers and parents (if present), from the linguistic point of view, they concern above all the new configuration of the relationship between the young

student and the language of origin (sometimes understood as a resource, others as an obstacle) and the opportunity or not to use bilingualism.

Learning a second language means going to live in a «second home» (Bolognesi, 2015). The scientific research in the field has shown that the good learning of the second language does not imply the need to abandon the native language, indeed it depends on the latter within an approach that sees among them a necessary continuum aimed at the development of what we could call «multilingual competence».

J. Cummins, in this regard, introduces the theory of linguistic interdependence (also known as «the iceberg theory»): cognitive skills and profound knowledge of the speaker can be represented as the basis of an iceberg whose emerged part is consisting of superficial language skills; a person who knows several languages, according to this theory, has more bits of the iceberg, all connected to a single underlying base. In other words, the iceberg represents the faculty of language, the mastery of the processes that govern understanding and linguistic production, while what emerges (its points) is the effective knowledge of a given language. At a deep level, therefore in the submerged part of the iceberg, the two or more different linguistic codes merge and operate through a sort of single engine that allows to develop a positive transference from one language to another (Cummins, 1992). In short, beyond metaphor, it happens that, by continuing to learn and use the mother tongue, the foundations are laid for the learning of the new linguistic code. Another acquisition about learning the new language is that it is influenced (positively or negatively) by the fact that the newly arrived foreign student finds himself in a situation of additive bilingualism or subtractive bilingualism. In additive bilingualism, the language of origin of the child is socially valued in the new reality of belonging and this situation allows the child to engage positively within social and scholastic life and to use both languages simultaneously. In conditions of subtractive bilingualism, on the other hand, the mother tongue is not held in the right social consideration so that the student finds himself almost «forced» to learn, in school, the second language. In this last case, the use and consolidation of the language of origin is almost «blocked», inhibited, and replaced by the learning of the second language. The ideal situation, on the other hand, consists in helping the student to identify areas of use for both languages so as not to discriminate one from the other, but by being able to use the mother tongue in certain contexts and the language of adoption in others.

During the reception phase of the foreign minor in the new school, it is important that the teacher devotes himself to reconstruct his scholastic biography in detail through interviews with parents or other relatives and, at the same time, he also deals with developing his own linguistic biography with respect to knowledge of the original language or languages. Thus it is understood if the young learner uses a national dialect, if he has an oral and/or written knowledge of the mother tongue and of the second language, if he is already in school, which national language or dialect speaks in family or with friends during his daily linguistic practices, which language parents use and, for

example, if the linguistic register changes according to the type of content transmitted.

We must reiterate the need to rethink the most appropriate teaching methods and tools to make the reception phase more effective. As stated by Biagioli (2016) on the basis of a vast survey conducted in the schools of the Tuscan territory of Italy, in fact, the didactic and methodological assessments based on models of verification of the starting and arrival levels experienced so far often produce only a deficient and unreliable vision of the cognitive and learning potential of these adolescents. It is evident that a boy's overall maturity does not derive from his literacy, nor from his skills in a foreign language for him. To design the reception phase effectively, a special reception protocol can be set up to bring together the set of interventions and strategies of which institutions decide to equip themselves: the procedures implemented at the time of registration; the criteria for the assignment student to the class; other devices such as, for example, the tools offered by intercultural documentation centers or the allocation of appropriate professional resources (Catarci, 2004, p. 26).

The Italian ministerial indications have established that the learning of Italian as a second language must take place through an integrated approach that respects the following conditions:

- the full inclusion of the newly arrived student in the ordinary class to which he belongs;
- the possibility of using the second language (L2) through laboratory activities for at least 6-8 hours per week, managed by teachers with ad hoc training;
- a personalized support for the study in extra-curricular hours;
- specific forms of tutoring that lasted over time, also in collaboration with local bodies and structures (MIUR, 2015).

Competence in the language of schooling represents the primary condition for scholastic success, as it is clearly shown in the European document n. 5/2014 of the Committee of Ministers, entitled «Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)5 to member States on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success». Learning the language of the study requires important cognitive achievements that go hand in hand with the acquisition of the new code, no longer exclusively restricted to communication that takes place in the classroom. It also requires that all teachers act as learning facilitators.

Learning Italian as the language of the study involves successive interlinguistic passages:

- from informal to formal;
- from contextualized and concrete messages to abstraction and de-contextualisation;
- from the immediate language of the «here and now» to the microlanguages of the different disciplinary areas.

All teachers must be aware of the fact that, when they transmit content, they also spread the microlanguage of their subject, therefore they act both as disciplinary experts and as teachers of the language of the study, combining the teaching of Italian L2 to the teaching of disciplinary teaching.

Suggestions coming from the didactic communicative approach, particularly effective for the teaching of the second language (Brumfit, 1984), suggest to confer, to the subject who learns the second language an active role in the didactic setting as well as the primary objective of language teaching it is not formal accuracy but the development of communicative competence, which includes linguistic competence but goes beyond, also involving the sociolinguistic, extralinguistic and pragmatic sphere. In this way the student is given the opportunity to express his own ideas, even if not in a grammatically unexceptionable form, and to be fully involved in the life of the class in situations of real communicative exchange and using techniques that amplify the expressive capacities, such as simulation and dramatization. The teacher plays a rather multifaceted role within this teaching method: he is a disciplinary expert, a tutor and a sort of cultural mediator. He introduces the student not only to the new language but also to the culture, civilization and social rules of the host country. The student plays an active and leading role in the teaching process, it becomes the center of attention and care of the teacher, so much so that the curriculum is defined to a large extent on the basis of his knowledge needs. It is important that the student is introduced to and participate in the culture of the host country, in order to prevent forms of marginalization and discomfort that could arise in interpersonal exchange and in dialogue between different people.

### **Teaching, intercultural communication and educational relationship**

If attention is shifted to the school, which should be a permanent laboratory of inclusion and active citizenship, a recent research shows the continuing lack of promotion of participatory, inclusive and intercultural skills among young people: as an example of implementation of intercultural educational principles, often we only consider the presence of «linguistic mediation» and Italian language courses L2 (Portera e Milani, 2019). This is no longer admissible. We need to work on the quality level of a school that really wants to define itself as intercultural (Santerini, 2010). It seems appropriate to reverse the route by using the most recent principles, resources, tools and methods of intercultural pedagogy to generate opportunities for profitable integration and calm in schools and societies coexistence between different cultural identities. In relating to cultural diversity, «miserable» and «utilitarian», paternalistic, assimilationist and asymmetric visions must be overcome to take on a co-education perspective open to the direct presence of migrant cultures through shared paths of equality, reciprocity and

responsibility (Fiorucci, 2017).

It is all too evident that, for the newly arrived foreign minor, learning Italian is a vital requirement to enter the school and social life of the new country of belonging. The motivation to learn comes essentially from the constant and intense exposure to the new language, especially at school and thanks to interaction with peers in extra-curricular time. The pace of learning, therefore, is rather rapid, made up of continuous references to reality. In dealing with foreign minors, knowing the information about the culture of origin is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Unfortunately, the mere knowledge of teaching techniques alone is not enough.

The attitude of the teacher in facilitating the entry and integration of the foreign minor into the bundle of relationships that characterize the life of the class and, in general, the scholastic reality is of fundamental importance. It is necessary to prefer student-centered teaching approaches, lessons that are as interactive and dialogue as possible, where grammar and syntax are derived from the «real speech», typical of everyday life. In this way the foreign student is more easily led to talk about himself and his experience and verbal fluency is favoured over linguistic accuracy.

Teaching in the presence of other cultures, according to D. Demetrio, asks the teacher for a double commitment: on the one hand, to think about how and what to reconsider with respect to the knowledge prescribed by the curricula to arouse, in class, the attention with respect to the various cultures from; on the other, to strive to ensure that Italian and non-Italian students discover the pleasure of exchanging stories and typical sensations of their different cultures (Demetrio e Favaro, 2002; Nigris, 2015). Particular care of the teacher should be addressed to create a special communication channel with the foreign child/adolescent who knows how to go beyond the disciplinary contents to be transmitted and which is marked by acceptance and empathy (Reggio e Santerini, 2014).

The opportunity of writing and reading in the language of origin advantageously prepares the acquisition of the ability to understand Italian as the mother tongue remains, at every latitude, a very powerful tool for understanding the world. In the style of the Italian language teacher, but also in other colleagues, it is important that the advantage dimension prevails, in terms of intercultural education, referable to the presence of the foreign minor as an enrichment experience for the whole class (Perucca, 2017). For this reason, ample space must be given in teaching to language laboratories, aimed at the daily encounter between children and young people of different cultures through their involvement in projects, group work, etc. The ideal would be to set up laboratory activities so that the new language is enhanced while maintaining a relationship with the mother tongue through some curricular subject. Alongside the laboratories, it is possible to advantageously place moments of social integration through sports, artistic-cultural activities, etc., seminars, lectures and testimonies by representatives (adults) of other cultures, aimed at building an integrating background for other activities in class that have, as protagonists, all the boys and, finally,

educational trips on the territory, to facilitate their knowledge (even geographical) and the acquisition of familiarity with the new context.

At the same time, doing linguistic intercultural education can be an opportunity, even for Italian children and teenagers, to take advantage of new learning opportunities by «exploring» the language and culture of foreign comrades through language games, tongue twisters, etc.

It is time to help generate spaces and times for sharing paths training and growth in which children find opportunities for self-fulfillment and a chance for success. Through a welcoming approach, one can build one everyday life in which to share and learn with each other and on the other hand in which the presence of foreign minors becomes a challenge and, at the time a resource itself, so that everyone has the same access and choice, discouraging ethnocentrism and stereotyped visions (Biagioli, 2016).

### **Laboratory teaching**

The intercultural project in which teachers and educators are called to commit themselves must be an educational project shared by the whole school community and must not chase after the emergency. It does not only concern the immigrants, but addresses everyone, asking for an effort of analysis and understanding but also, and above all, of communication and transformation (Fiorucci, 2015). Alongside the indispensable theoretical knowledge, it is necessary to equip teachers, both in initial and in-service training, with new methods, techniques and teaching tools to interact with students of different cultural backgrounds. The traditional teaching methods, one for all the frontal lesson, although indispensable in some training segments, with respect to foreign minors sometimes risk not having the desired learning outcomes.

In traditional teaching the subject of minority culture could clash, more immediately, with its limits (cognitive, linguistic, socio-cultural, etc.), therefore it is preferable to favor alternative didactic methods, or to place the latter alongside traditional ones.

Laboratory teaching is an activity with a marked experiential connotation and capable of allowing educational gains in terms of knowledge, know-how and knowing how to be. The laboratory, in intercultural education, is a space of knowledge, action and relationship, which aims at the development of training opportunities functional to the growth of those in cognitive (knowledge), metacognitive (awareness of the training path in which they are involved), functional (acquisition of criteria and methods of action) and relational (development of the ability to do together with others) through educational activities with a strong experiential connotation.

Along the workshop itineraries, action and reflection are intertwined, operational knowledge, skills and personal resources are developed through a series of educational experiences able to promote learning and cooperation. In the laboratory, doing, operating, take on a relational and cooperative character. The workshop activities appear particularly indicated to favor dialogue, discussion, comparison, negotiation of

points of view and therefore require, as access prerequisites for those who approach it, a certain desire to get involved and the willingness to work of group, with all that the latter entails (presence of heterogeneous interests, plurality of learning styles, relational modalities, etc.) in view of achieving the final result, in the awareness of the important educational objectives that are disseminated along the way. Participating in a workshop path means committing to sharing of its founding objectives and its implementation logics. The value of common action is not given only by obtaining the final result but involves participation, involvement in the operational project, communicative reciprocity. The frontal lesson, as far as it can be conducted with multimedia supports and in terms of maximum comparison with practice, still remains an activity with a predominantly theoretical dimension; the laboratory activity, on the other hand, has a more operational characterization in the sense that in the laboratory it is aimed at the realization of artifacts or the testing of procedures or the testing of protocols or even research activities declined as innovation processes to refer to the situational context of reference (Paparella, 2012).

### **The playful-expressive laboratories**

The newly arrived minor finds himself immersed in informal linguistic environments (play, television, exchanges between people) and formal (school) linguistic environments where they approach the language of the welcoming country. At this stage the educational attention should enhance the path he is making and make it meaningful in the eyes of the group. The intercultural dimension of the class is practiced every day in the way to enhance the participation of each child, to tune in to his knowledge and relationship modalities, to offer building spaces for sharing knowledge, in the preparation of spaces for dialogue and game (Nichisolo, 2016). Within the wide range of socio-educational experiences, possible interventions and opportunities to get in touch with the new host socio-cultural reality, it is worth mentioning the importance of the recreational-expressive workshops in the path of integration of migrant children.

It is a good training opportunity to relate to one another and to oneself. Through an active strategy (doing and doing together), foreign minors experience their own abilities while they come into contact with others, developing a sense of belonging and cooperation between equals. In the workshop activities the children are the protagonists of the course and the final product becomes the result of a common commitment and result of their way of working together as a small learning community, negotiating phases, activities, roles to be filled. In the workshop pathways a dialogue between cultures is produced and there is ample scope for relationships between different. Through the comparison and sharing, the different points of view are emerging and recognized, while the offer of playful and participatory ways of discussing them is guaranteed.

The expressive laboratory is structured mainly through play. The use of the playful



device, not only in traditional training contexts but also in those that involve the co-presence of subjects belonging to different cultures, constitutes an added value able to increase the opportunities to enter into different roles and experiment, to learn, to know and know each other, to grow and adapt to change. Through the mechanisms of projection and identification (in a role, in an ethnic group, in a culture, in a situation, etc.), typical of the symbolic game, it is easier to emerge, in the subjects of minority culture, the verbalization of experiences, the expressive capacity and the desire to talk about oneself, the identification of the difficulties encountered (for example, in entering a role or a condition) and the presence of any latent prejudices while proceeding towards the acquisition of a whole series of solicitations that can support the action oriented to favor communication and intercultural dialogue.

Through the activity that accompanies the expressive laboratory, foreign students are encouraged to express their emotions through a multiplicity of codes and expressive languages (video, audio, tactile, graphic-pictorial experiences, dramatization, etc.) knowing that negative emotions must be recognized, managed and expressed without shame. The workshop paths offer self-assessment itineraries based on a linguistic interaction with others which, starting from the meeting, becomes an understanding, dialogue, mutual recognition and enhancement of one's own identity. The workshop gives prominence to those who participate through the opportunity to tell about themselves. It allows foreign children to tell stories, related to the culture of origin, and to narrate themselves by acquiring a greater awareness of their own identity and of the necessary change that the new condition of life urges. At the same time, the subjects of majority culture benefit from an opportunity for cultural and relational strengthening. The play-expressive workshops can be offered during school hours and outside school hours. In the first case, they are particularly useful for enriching the educational offer of the school and, specifically, the programming of the single class. In this sense, the workshop activity should not be understood as a stand-alone event, but as an effective opportunity for growth for the whole class group in coherence with the didactic programming. In the second case, instead, the strong point is the placement of these laboratory experiences in the wide panorama of the contexts of socialization and relationality to be offered to the newly arrived minor within centers and associations and, in general, in the broad scenario of non-formal education. In the extracurricular play-expressive laboratory, children are given the opportunity to confront themselves in situations that are less structured than the class, favoring the development of informal learning, more spontaneous and linked to everyday life, capable of touching even complex and rather delicate issues by means of a playful approach. Moreover, the presence of laboratories in non-school hours, possibly free and with free access, represents a precious resource for the foreign child to counter social isolation and prevent the risk of marginalization and deviance.

The role played in teaching and intercultural education deserves a separate discussion (Landis, Bennett e Bennett, 2004). Almost always, in such formative moments, an

experiential teaching methodology is used, in presence and online (Fowler e Blohm, 2004), proposing discussions, case studies, dramatizations to induce changes in attitudes, beliefs and manifestations behavioral. Like simulation games, role-playing games are often used for training in the principles of intercultural communication and can help trainees to acquire language skills, methodological criteria, specific attitudes in an experiential learning environment, activating reflexive and decision-making processes in the situations offered. Needless to say, a role play is not enough to induce the modification of some attitudes (Mendenhall et al., 2004). This is because, as psychometric studies also support (Bennett, 1993), the development of an intercultural mind is a complex and laborious process, to be carried out in the long term and structured in several phases.

For this reason, in the practice of role play, in some laboratory segments of intercultural education, learning the language is to be seen not as a contingent objective to reach (i.e. making a concrete dialogue, in a given context and for a certain period of time with more individuals belonging to different cultures) but as a preparatory moment, as an opportunity for training, as an opportunity to consolidate some behavioral patterns in terms of multicultural coexistence. Beyond the role play, it is useful to work with the foreign minor, preferring effective teaching methods already consolidated in the work with adolescents: for example, cooperative learning, peer education and, in general, all those approaches that succeed in helping these boys allowing them to use every expressive and communicative channel to express their emotions, anxieties, fears, expectations, needs and rights.

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