



## **ICT resources, immigrant students and the teaching of Italian as a Second Language (L2): a survey**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses around the teaching of Italian as second language (L2) and, in particular, it also deals with the actual use of ICT resources made by Italian school at this end.*

*We tackle this issue starting from a survey conducted within a number of Italian primary and lower secondary schools. Although new technologies have an increasingly important role in education, there is still an evident gap between the number and the variety of available ICT tools and their actual employment in schools; this is true also and especially as far as the teaching of Italian as a second language (L2) to immigrant students. Nevertheless, all European countries face the challenge of providing immigrant students with adequate education and ICT tools are widely considered as very "promising" tools to foster language learning and help immigrant students acquiring the language of the receiving country, which becomes the "language of instruction".*

*The research reported in this paper was aimed at understanding whether and how software products are currently used in Italian compulsory schools with the intended purpose. A further objective was to understand which specific products are actually used and which are the teachers' feelings about their use: potential, effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses...*

*The survey was carried out by means of a specific questionnaire, which is illustrated in detail in this paper. As a matter of fact, it explores different issues linked to the teaching of the Italian language to immigrant students. It is divided into three main sections: 1) general information about the specific school context (location, school level, number of Italian and foreign pupils, etc.); 2) educational methods adopted to teach Italian to immigrant students; 3) type of educational resources employed (specific focus on ICT-based tools).*

### **Introduction**

Italy, like many other countries, faces the challenge of providing immigrant students with adequate education; the acquiring of Italian, which becomes the "language of instruction", is the first step to achieve this goal [1].

The teaching of Italian as a second language to immigrant students is a new challenge, especially as far as those students who attend compulsory schools are concerned.

The teaching approach of the second language is necessarily different from that used for the teaching of other languages (e.g. mother language and foreign language). As a matter of fact, this is an educational area with a high level of specificity because of the variety of different features, languages and needs of students; it requires, therefore, that different educational methods and tools are employed to suit the different needs [2].



The variety of available teaching approaches, resources and tools makes the issue even more challenging. The Italian law in force and the Circulars of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research have provided general guidelines, indications and recommendations to support the acquisition of the Italian language by immigrant students; nevertheless, in this panorama each single school has a specific autonomy and is therefore free to choose the specific actions to be enacted.

Moreover, specific teaching resources for Italian (L2) are still lacking, even though, in the last decade the production of specific educational material and tools has greatly increased [3]. In this framework, ICT tools are widely considered very “promising” to foster language acquisition from both the cognitive (interactive and multimedia aspects, possibility of individualized teaching, etc.) and the motivational standpoint [4, 5, 6]. It seems, nevertheless, that, for many different reasons, they are still under-employed in Italian schools.

In this direction then, it was decided to carry out a specific research study to better understand the present situation as to the use of ICT tools in the field of Italian as L2 teaching.

### **A research study focusing on the use of ICT**

In this paper we deal with a research study (still in-progress) carried out by the author with the aim of understanding whether and how ICT tools are currently used in Italian compulsory schools with the intended purpose of supporting the acquisition of Italian L2. The first step of this study was the carrying out of a survey aimed at investigating and defining the present situation. In the following, after briefly mentioning the context in which the research project was developed, the rationale behind the survey and the overall methodology adopted for the study are explained.

### **The context of the study**

The above mentioned research study is one of the actions of the research lines of the “Migration Project” carried on by the Identity Cultural Department of CNR (DIC-CNR). This specific line concerns the use of ICT to foster the learning of Italian L2, in particular to enhance the reading and writing abilities of immigrant students. Our work, grounded on the belief that ICT should be considered a valuable resource in this field, encompasses different phases and started, as said above, with the carrying out of a specific survey (conducted by means of a structured questionnaire) mainly aimed at getting a better understanding of the actual use of ICT for the intended purpose in Italian schools.

Personal experience in the field and a thorough examination of the existing literature suggested a number of key points to be investigated since they can be considered crucial to allow a full understanding of what’s presently going on in Italian schools.

### **Key points addressed by the survey**

It’s quite obvious that the type of educational approach adopted and the kind of intervention actually carried out has a great impact on both school integration and academic achievement; nevertheless, as said before, different schools’ approaches differently affect the teaching of Italian L2; as a consequence a variety of different situations may occur depending on:

#### ***WHO is in charge of sustaining the acquisition of Italian L2***

As a matter of fact there are schools where Italian L2 is taught by teachers with specific training, but not all schools have such professionals so the language training is carried out by classroom teachers, sometimes without any experience in teaching a foreign language.

***WHERE and WHEN educational actions take place predominantly***

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between:

- interventions directed to newly arrived students (i.e. students at their first entry in our school system, requiring first-literacy);
- interventions for foreign students who have already attended the Italian school in previous years (this "status" encompasses, nevertheless, a further wide variety of different situations).

For example, some schools offer Italian L2 lab activities throughout the school year, some others only in the reception phase, while in other schools (and this happens more frequently) the new-immigrant students are "immersed" in the Italian language without specific intervention or help .

Interventions directed to the newly arrived students are, of course, mainly aimed at leading them up to the skill level called by J. Cummins (1979) BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) [7] also indicated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) as Level A (A1 and A2). The time needed to acquire such basic communication skills varies from student to student, but usually, this level is achieved quite soon (from few months to one/ two years). The activities carried out by teachers for these students have usually the main objective of fostering the development of listening, speaking and comprehension skills (so that the student may communicate and face situations in real life) and the acquiring of basic reading and writing skills [3].

In this first phase, the assistance of teachers with specific expertise, who carry out well structured Italian L2 learning activities, may play an important role mainly as to the choice of the most effective educational resources (including ICT tools) is concerned [8].

In the following phase, the teachers face the dual challenge of strengthening the language acquisition process and fostering the development of another specific skill that Cummins defines CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) [7]; it refers to the ability to master the language "to study", that is fundamental to allow the following of the mainstream curriculum. In this direction, the student has not only to learn a specific lexicon for each discipline but also to learn how to formulate and verbalize concepts, contextualize, explain, and so on.

In order to acquire these skills, certainly, a considerable amount of time is required as well as suitable and well directed efforts. The students need to exercise their reading comprehension of different types of texts, to practice writing and speaking on specific subjects, etc.

At this level, not only one teacher but all the classroom teachers need to be involved (because the student is learning Italian while studying all the different subjects) and all of them have to find adequate resources to support both curricular and linguistic acquisitions.

***WHICH tools are employed in the teaching of Italian L2***

Many different resources have been made available by relevant publishers and universities in recent decades.

In particular, teachers can find a variety of multimedia starter courses, grammar texts, training aids and they can also employ self-produced materials (this is normally due to the lack of suitable resources for students of a specific age or for a specific mother language).

Besides, Graziella Favaro (2009) emphasizes the benefits of promoting activities able to stimulate writing abilities and reading comprehension and highlights the effectiveness of the use of tools such as multilingual glossaries (of course for the different subjects) and of simplified texts [2].

### ***WHETHER and WHICH kind of ICT tools are used in the teaching of Italian L2***

For a wide variety of reasons (first of all the lack of computer labs and or of adequate hardware) ICT resources are not always employed in Italian schools (especially compulsory schools) for L2 teaching. This happens despite the fact that, if compared with other school subjects, the teaching of languages has always made great use of technology to foster learning (audio, video recordings, etc.). Computers have been used in language classes since the '60s, but it is from the '80s, with the diffusion of the personal computer, that programs and courses have been widely developed. Other the last 30 years, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) software has had an evolution from the first "drill and practice" programs to the most recent integrative approaches based on technological development of the last decade, multimedia technology and the Internet [9]. Such a variety of tools exists also for Italian as a second language, so it is important to understand exactly which kinds of products are actually employed in the teaching of Italian L2, and which are the principal learning objectives teachers try to pursue by means of ICT tools (writing, reading and listening comprehension or whatever else...).

Actually, many multimedia software products requiring different language-related competences (reading, listening, writing etc...) are available. Also isolated programs exist helping students to improve single aspects of the language (grammar, lexicon, etc). In addition, authoring programs allow teachers to build up specific training aids. There is, besides, software developed with other aims that may be very useful when teachers use them in language learning activities (like word processors, encyclopaedias, corpora, educational software for other subjects).

The Internet also provides ample scope for learning: web sites specific to language teaching or which can foster language acquisition (newspapers sites, sites related to other curricular subjects), virtual worlds (like Second Life), tools for collaborative learning (webquests, wikis, etc.) and instruments for written communication like social networks, forums and blogs. These tools can be used in language labs, in regular classroom activities or during students' individual work.

Another kind of more complex ICT resource are those called Learning Management System platforms, where teachers can, for example, upload textual materials, level tests, multimedia materials (like MP3 files, videos), can manage complete on-line-courses and create collaborative environments. These resources are more widespread to teach Italian as a second language in high schools and universities because they put the students in a kind of virtual class (Rivoltella and Ardizzone [10] defined it "the third classroom"), allowing students to work also at distance.

### **The methodology of the research study**

As said above, the first step of the study encompassed a survey aimed at shedding light on the actual use of ICT resources in the Italian compulsory school. Such a survey involved the target population of compulsory schools and was carried out by means of a structured questionnaire.

### **Target Population**

Three sample Italian regions (Liguria, Marches, Sardinia) were included. Two of these regions (Liguria and Marches) have a high percentage of non-Italian students in schools and are located in the north and the centre of the country. Sardinia, conversely, has one of the lowest percentages [11] and is an island. We selected a casual sample of schools that would take part in the survey, taking into account the immigrant students' distribution in local schools. The questionnaire was directed to the headmasters and they could complete the questionnaire on-line.



## The Questionnaire

As said before, the questionnaire was primarily aimed at exploring the above mentioned different key points linked to the teaching of the Italian language to immigrant students. It encompasses 28 questions, most of which are multiple choice questions containing also blank spaces for comments and explanations.

It is divided into three main sections:

### **A. General information on the specific school context (nine questions).**

In this section we asked about regional area, school level, dimensions of the school (total school population, teachers, etc), number of immigrant students (first generation). We also asked if there is one (or more) computer lab and if it's usually used.

### **B. Investigations around the educational approach/method adopted to teach Italian L2 to immigrant students (seven questions).**

Some further information is required as to the actual role of teachers, the types of intervention that are usually carried out to sustain the inclusion of new-immigrant students, the type of language teaching programs adopted (basic literacy, enhancement courses, L2 courses aimed at supporting the study of curricular subjects, etc.) and the type of resources employed with newly arrived students and other foreign students.

### **C. Specific educational resources employed with specific focus on ICT-based tools (twelve questions)**

First of all, whether the school has a platform for e-learning is explored, if the platform encompasses materials for teaching Italian L2 and if the teachers usually develop personalized ICT resources for students. Which kind of other resources are used is also investigated: software, internet resources, multimedia courses etc....

Some other questions are on the principal learning objectives pursued by means of ICT tools (reading or listening comprehension, writing, speaking). In the end, specific questions are devoted to the resources employed to sustain written language learning, which represents our main area of interest.

## Conclusions

The research project we are carrying out is still in progress. This paper was meant to underline the basic principles underpinning our research study and to highlight the key points to be considered while tackling the issue of the use of ICT resources to support the teaching of Italian as L2 in Italian compulsory schools. We have only aimed at discussing and providing evidence for the research method adopted. Further, in-depth research investigations are needed to support the adoption of solid and effective ICT enhanced teaching procedures in the field.

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