

THE TEACHING OF EFL IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT: ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is meant to present some of the main innovations that have influenced the teaching of foreign languages in the Italian school system and at higher education level, as well as to describe the societal conditions that have determined most recent curricular choices. The initial foreign language curriculum at middle school level in the 70s, the subsequent experimental curricular changes at high school level in the 90s, the introduction of foreign language teaching at primary and kindergarten level and the most recent innovations such as the *Progetto Lingue 2000*, the impact of the Common European Framework, the role of information technologies in language teaching and the teaching of two foreign languages are described and their main implications discussed.

The last part of the paper is devoted to the role of in-service training in the professional development of foreign language teachers and to the recent introduction of preservice teacher education. Some of the results of the major national research and evaluation projects will be presented and analysed within a European perspective.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo pretende ofrecer algunas de las más importantes innovaciones que han influido en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en el sistema educativo escolar y universitario en Italia, y al tiempo trata de describir las condiciones sociales que han determinado los cambios curriculares más recientes. Se describen aquí, y se discuten sus principales implicaciones, el primer currículum de lenguas extranjeras para el sistema escolar de mediados de los

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años 70, los cambios curriculares que siguieron en la década de los 90, la introducción de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en la escuela infantil y en la educación primaria, así como innovaciones aún más reciente como es el caso del *Proyecto Lingua 2000*, el impacto del Marco de Referencia Europeo, el papel que desempeñan las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación, y la problemática de la enseñanza de dos lenguas extranjeras.

La última parte del trabajo la dedico al papel que juega la formación permanente del profesorado en el desarrollo profesional de los profesores de lenguas extranjeras y a la reciente introducción de la formación inicial específica para estos especialistas. Por otra parte, se presentan los resultados de los principales proyectos de investigación y de evaluación llevados a cabo a escala nacional y en el ámbito de una perspectiva europea.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se propose de présenter les innovations qui ont récemment influencé l'enseignement des langues étrangères dans les systèmes scolaire et universitaire en Italie; ainsi que de décrire les changements sociaux qui ont déterminé les choix curriculaires au cours des dernières années.

Ainsi, seront ici décrits et commentés le premier curriculum de langue étrangère au collège dans les années 70, les changements successifs du curriculum dans le secondaire deuxième degré, sur base expérimentale dans les années 90, l'introduction de l'enseignement de la langue étrangère à l'école élémentaire et maternelle. Seront aussi analysés les résultats d'innovations récentes telles que le *Progetto Lingue 2000*, l'impact du Cadre Européen Commun de Référence pour les langues vivantes du Conseil de l'Europe, le rôle des technologies de l'information dans l'enseignement des langues et l'enseignement-apprentissage de deux langues étrangères.

La dernière partie de l'article se concentre sur le rôle de la formation continue dans le développement professionnel des enseignants de langues étrangères et sur l'introduction d'un nouveau système de formation initiale. Les résultats d'importantes recherches nationales et de projets d'évaluation seront ici présentés et analysés dans une perspective européenne.

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching in Italy has always been characterized by innovations introduced by the Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR, Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca) either at national level or through several local experimental projects that have subsequently led to major curriculum renewals. In order to fully understand the overall development of the foreign language curricula, it is there-

fore necessary to take into consideration a wide variety of factors and societal conditions such as the recent history of Italian as a national language, the role and the influence of dialects on first and second language learning, the different historic and socio-economic conditions of the Northern and of the Southern Italian regions, the latest large immigration flow, the role of the new media, the widespread diffusion of information technology, the demands of the work market in terms of foreign language competencies, the teacher recruitment system, the teacher status and consideration in the Italian society and the role of professional associations as well as that of Foreign Cultural Institutions.

The languages most commonly taught in Italian schools are English that is now compulsory at all levels, French, German and Spanish. German is widely spoken in some areas, eg in tourist areas or in the northern bilingual region of Trentino Alto-Adige. Arabic is being taught in some areas of the South of Italy (Sicily) where there is a large number of immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries. Bilingual education is carried out in the two bilingual regions of Trentino Alto Adige (German, Ladino, Italian) and Valle d'Aosta (French, Italian) and encouraged in Friuli Venezia Giulia (Slovenian, Italian).

Italian as a national language reached the highest percentage of the population during the 60s because of the broadcasting of television programs all over the country that helped people overcome the exclusive use of dialects in favour of Italian while maintaining a sort of bilingualism in some regions. The use of dialect within the family context has played and still plays an important role in the acquisition of Italian as L1, as well as in the learning of a foreign language at school. In a different, yet very similar way, the increasing presence of immigrants' children with so many diverse language and cultural backgrounds¹ has posed new and challenging problems in terms of the foreign language syllabus design, while enriching the sociocultural stimuli within the classroom. One of the most interesting consequences of the immigra-

¹ Immigration from countries outside the European Union started in Italy more than twenty years ago with different flows of immigrants initially coming from Ethiopia, Eritrea, South American countries, Northern Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt) and Poland, later on from the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Albania, Romania, the former Soviet Union, Kurdistan, China and Central Africa (Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan). In spite of recent controversial measures in terms of immigration entrance permits there are several initiatives undertaken by central and local authorities in order to sustain the integration of immigrants' children in the Italian schools as well as special Italian as a Second Language courses offered for adults all over the country.

tion phenomenon has been the growth of studies and of methodological research about the teaching of Italian as a Second Language that has provided new perspectives to the teachers of Italian as a core subject at school and new teacher education programs of Italian as a Second Language at all school levels.

In the last decade the majority of average Italian families has become more and more familiar with new information technologies; there is one computer almost in each house and more than sixteen and a half million people, 29.6% of the Italian population, have used a PC in the last year (2001). While this has inevitably affected people's habits and improved people's familiarity with international communications, it should be born in mind that the majority of those users live in the North of Italy and less than 20%, of them live in the Southern regions and in the islands, areas where economic inequality has always determined different educational perspectives also in terms of foreign language competencies.

Media and films have played only a minor role in the diffusion of foreign languages in the Italian society. This is mainly due to the total lack of films in the original language with subtitles and the release of dubbed only films. The recent availability on the market of films in DVD has, however, contributed to the diffusion of foreign languages as have the use of satellite channels that connect more and more families to international networks.

School teaching has never been regarded as a prestigious job in Italy; in particular there has always been, on the part of the public, a tendency to disregard the role of foreign language teachers. There has traditionally been the diffused common perception that foreign languages could only be learnt abroad or in the many private language schools spread all over Italy but certainly not in the school system where Italian native speakers teach. *"Italians can't speak foreign languages"*, *"Results of Italian students in foreign languages are very poor"*, *"Italian foreign language teachers can't teach foreign languages because they themselves can't speak them well"*, these are but some of the most frequently expressed statements one could find in the media. These statements in part truly represent the situation and the many different reasons which are unknown to the general public. If there are reasons for poor results in the past, they can be found, for example, in the absence of pre-service training up to 1999, as the University preparation mainly focussed (only) on the study of foreign literature rather than language and language teaching methodology, the previously mentioned lack of TV

or films in the original language, the few opportunities for teachers' language improvement due to the high costs of study periods abroad, and the lack of careful monitoring of results.

Can we now talk of a shift in tendency, of a new successful trend in foreign language education in Italy? We can't yet speak of successful results because there has been very little research work done in this field and it is very easy too for everybody to overgeneralize about foreign languages, something which is much more difficult to do for other subjects. But there are positive signs of successful changes in the field: in the last few years, for example, because of the increased number of school exchanges and of Italian university students participating in Erasmus programs all over Europe, these types of events have led to a renewed interest on the part of the students' parents in their children's required competencies in a foreign language. School and Erasmus exchanges have helped Italian students, teachers and families overcome cultural borders and they have offered the opportunity to learn more about the educational systems of other countries as well as to appreciate their own. People have become more and more aware of the importance of knowing at least one foreign language (English) if not a second one. The proof of this is the (recent) recent number of summer study programs in the UK or in the USA for which parents are ready to spend a lot of money on for their children, or the growing number of private language schools offering courses leading to international certifications. The recent introduction of pre-service teacher training courses has further helped start a shift also in the way people perceive the teaching profession.

2. MAIN CURRICULAR INNOVATIONS

Successful or innovative practices that have affected foreign language education policies in Italy have been closely connected to and influenced by a variety of factors such as curriculum organisation renewal, methodologies undertaken, diffusion and use of technologies, types of assessment procedures agreed upon, research on foreign language education with policy implications, forms of teacher recruitment and retention and the overall philosophy underlying teacher education at pre- and in-service level.

Foreign language education in Italy has undergone several important changes in the last few years because of its close connection with

the major innovations occurring in education. Up to the mid-90s, foreign language education in Italian state schools was, if compared to other subjects, a privileged area of special intervention because it was the only subject area with a specific in-service program (*Progetto Speciale Lingue Straniere*, 1978-1994), because of the innovative foreign language curriculum guidelines of the middle school reform in 1979 and the experimental ones partly implemented at high school level between 1991 and 1993 (*Programmi Brocca*) and also because of the extension of foreign language teaching in the school curriculum carried out at primary level in 1991.

The introduction of pre-service teacher education post graduate courses (*SSIS, Scuole di Specializzazione all'Insegnamento Secondario*, 1999), the development of an 'evaluation culture' missing so far in the Italian school system, and the new graduate course for primary school teachers (*Corsi di laurea in Scienza della formazione primaria*, 1998) have introduced new policies and offered different and more challenging perspectives in foreign language education. As a consequence, foreign languages are being given more attention by the Ministry of Education, the business world, parents and media.

The need to adjust the Italian school system to the European standards in education and to the levels of foreign language competence as described by the Council of Europe (*Common European Framework*, 1996, 1998), the development of the autonomy of the state schools (Law 440, 1997), the planned new school system reform (*Riforma dei cicli*), still to be fully implemented², the reform of the exit exam at high school level (*Riforma dell'esame di stato*) implemented in 1998, the emphasis on continuity of methodology and approach all through the school levels (Ministry of Education, CM 339, 16.11.1992), all led to new financial investments in education and to some innovative projects such as the experimental introduction of foreign language teaching at kindergarten level in 1997, the *Progetto LISCOM*, a 2nd optional foreign language in middle school in 1998, and the *Progetto Lingue 2000* in 1999.

² The proposed school reform foresaw primary and middle school as a unique 7-year cycle and shortened the education cycle of one year. The approval of the reform of the school cycles (DDL 4216, 2.2.2000) proposed by the previous government, has been the object of controversial debates by the current Italian government that has stopped the implementation, reshaped the reform and recently proposed some experimental projects.

Progetto Lingue 2000, the most recent and important innovation within the development of autonomy of schools (Ministry of Education, CM 197, 1999) and on the lines of the Italian foreign language curriculum renewal, foresees the optional introduction of the study of a second, in some cases first, European foreign language outside the national curriculum at all school levels: from kindergarten to high school. The project responds to the new emerging language needs of the students and to one of the distinctive features of the Italian context: the role of foreign language learning in terms of plurilingual language education. The project also responds to the autonomous organisation of individual schools that are in this way offered a way to widen and enrich their school curriculum.

The recruitment of teachers for the project is done either through the use of state school teachers specifically hired for this job with a separate contract, or through the hiring of freelance teachers who are qualified for the job. Specific ad hoc inservice training courses for the teachers involved in the project which focussed upon the major methodological implications underlying the project, were started in 1999 and are still taking place now. The two most important aspects of the project in terms of innovation are its approach and its monitoring system. The methodology suggested by the project guidelines focuses upon a few but extremely significant factors that are here listed and explained.

2.1. Modular organisation of teaching

The courses are organised into short (approximately 30 hours) learning paths, defined '*modules*'. A modular organization of the curriculum allows teachers to work within a flexible structure where objectives are established in terms of competencies to be achieved on the basis of those previously acquired. A modular system allows students to monitor their own process of learning and acquisition, to become more aware of their individual learning styles and to start planning their own learning paths. Modules are short and meaningful learning paths whereby students' competencies can be assessed and certified. The difference between a 'unit'- by- 'unit' syllabus and a modular one lies in the multidimensional framework of the latter. Modules are composed of a set of different learning segments that can interact at several stages of the module and in different ways. Modules should mirror the way our brain organizes its learning and at the same time provide the possibility for

both students and teachers to number and sum the amount of competencies acquired and taught.

Modules are an attempt to provide a different way of organising knowledge and competencies around self-contained segments of learning where topics, language functions and language structures interact. At the beginning of each module students are told what they will learn, both in terms of language and of competencies; at the end they will be asked to check whether they did learn or not, and this is a way of measuring their progress.

2.2. Learning groups

The organisation of homogeneous learning groups of 15 students grouped according to their level, and not to their age or class, allows teachers to more closely monitor their students' progress and encourage individual performances as well as pair and group oral interaction; this way students better grasp their achievement and develop self-assessment skills.

2.3. New technologies for language learning

The emphasis laid upon the use of new technologies in education by the Italian Ministry of Education has been the content of several introductory courses for teachers of all subjects at all school levels. The value of new information technologies and multimedia products for language learning has been further emphasized in the guidelines for the implementation of the project. Teachers have been specifically trained in the use and in the development of language learning software materials, CDROMs, hypertexts; in the exploitation of foreign language teaching websites; in the regular use of language labs, and they have also been encouraged to develop specific syllabi based upon the use of information technologies.

2.4. Teaching materials

Besides the emphasis laid upon the use of specific language software, the project encourages the teachers to use and exploit authentic materials rather than published textbooks or teaching materials. The main reason behind this approach is the need to adjust to the specific individual needs of each learning group.

2.5. *Assessment and evaluation*

The competencies developed by each student are constantly assessed by the teachers and self-assessed by the students. The results are transformed into credits to be inserted in the students' portfolios and certified according to the European Framework levels and descriptors either at school level or by one of the International Certification bodies which have been officially acknowledged and who have signed an agreement protocol with the Italian Ministry of Education.

2.6. *Teacher Resource Centres*

With the financial support of the actions undertaken by the Ministry of Education several teacher resource centres were set up all throughout the national territory. Each centre is equipped with at least one language lab, a specific multimedia and self-access room, and its resources are available both to the individual teacher and locally set up.

The implementation of the project has constantly been monitored and the results of the monitoring are now available on the Ministry of Education website. During the 1999-2000 school year, for example, more than 450,000 students, from kindergarten to high school, were involved in the project and studied another foreign language besides the foreign language studied in the curriculum. More than 300,000 chose to study English, almost 81,000 chose French, more than 34,000 chose Spanish and about 40,000 chose German. In that school year only, more than 50,000 international certificates were issued by the official international certification bodies to Italian students who had taken part in the *Progetto Lingue 2000* courses and had taken and passed the certification exams (MIUR, *Progetto Lingue 2000*, 2000).

Another important innovation that is slowly beginning to affect the foreign language curriculum and the language policies in the Italian school system is the use of the foreign language as the medium of instruction (i.e., content-based instruction of a non-foreign language subject). There is a new trend towards the diffusion of Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in several schools all over Italy, but particularly in those regions where bilingualism is encouraged, as it is in Bolzano where German is used for CLIL. There are several high schools where this type of instruction is being implemented because the new law for school autonomy allows schools to try out experimental projects in this respect (Marsh, Langé, 1999).

3. THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

The Common European Framework of Modern Languages (1996, 1998) was first formally introduced in Italy via the *Progetto Lingue 2000* and it is at the moment having a major impact on foreign language teaching in Italy. More and more foreign language teachers are now familiar at least with the descriptors of the levels of competence of the Framework through inservice training courses or through the new pre-service courses run at university level or simply through the use of textbooks and materials that have been developed according to the guidelines of the Council of Europe.

At the beginning it was not easy for the many teachers who were not used to working for the development of language competencies to adjust to a system based upon 'can do' statements. It was and it still is difficult to grasp the concept of competencies and implement a teaching path with such a detailed description of the students' progress and skills. Slowly, but gradually, Italian teachers are becoming familiar with the overall approach underlying the Framework and they are beginning to see the advantages provided by the document of the Council of Europe for the development of a different way of organising the syllabus in their context.

One of the main issues raised by the use of the Framework is the concept of working towards the achievement of specific and already stated levels of competence. In an educational system like the Italian one where there has so far been a very limited understanding and use of standards, where the foreign language syllabus has for quite a long time been described only in terms of language contents rather than competences to be achieved, and where an evaluation culture has only recently begun to be diffused, the impact of the Framework will be slow and a long-term one.

The increasing success and diffusion of the Council of Europe guidelines has to be ascribed to the innovations launched or sustained by the Ministry of Education that have so far led to major changes in language education, including the *Progetto Lingue 2000*, the introduction of a second foreign language in the curriculum of lower high school, the availability of international certifications, the constant reference to the Common European Framework in all the official ministerial documents, the formal introduction in several educational contexts all over Italy of the European Portfolio of Foreign Languages as students' evidence of results in foreign languages, the renewal of school curricula

with a strong emphasis on multilingual and multicultural education, the need for school self-evaluation plans as one of the by-products of school autonomy and independence, and the growing request for national evaluation surveys of the results in foreign languages. Teachers are now working bearing in mind as exit levels the levels of the Framework as indicated by the Ministry of Education.

4. FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT PRIMARY LEVEL

Foreign languages at primary level were first introduced in Italy in 1991 (Ministry of Education, DM 10/09/91) as a direct implementation of the 1985 primary school reform (Ministry of Education, DPR 104, 1985). The foreign language –English, French, German or Spanish– can be chosen by the children's parents provided that the language chosen is actually offered in that school.

The teachers are Italian primary teachers who have been specifically trained in foreign language teaching unless they have a specific foreign language university degree. The foreign language teachers have so far been of two types: one type could teach English and another subject area, e.g. maths, in two classes; the other type could only teach English in approximately 6 or 7 classes. Up to the current school year (2001-2002) children have generally started studying a foreign language or languages at the age of 8 (3rd year of primary school) for an average of three hours per week, but foreign languages could be experimentally introduced earlier (1st or 2nd year) and in many kindergarten classes there have been different sorts of foreign language experimental teaching. There has been a recent initiative by the current Minister of Education to anticipate both the primary school starting age and the introduction of foreign languages at primary level.

The foreseen exit level of competence should be the A1 level of the Council of Europe, but, in many cases the children may reach the level A2 for the aural and oral communication skills. As for the methodological approach, the emphasis is mainly laid upon theme or topic based modular syllabus and communicative games; aural-oral skills are privileged and interdisciplinary links are highlighted while specific textbooks and materials are regularly used. There has recently been a widespread diffusion of multimedia products and of the use of computers for the children's language learning projects. Primary school teachers have been offered specific training in the use of multimedia resources

because access to the Internet and to e-mail can offer more opportunities for exposure to the foreign language and thereby helping them to gain more self-confidence in what they are doing.

Among the most controversial issues of the introduction of foreign languages at primary level (there) has been the level of foreign language competence of primary teachers who had never specifically studied foreign languages before. Most inservice courses offered by the Ministry of Education since 1991 have devoted a sizeable component of the course to language improvement thus creating the opportunity for further improvement and enhancing teachers' self-confidence.

Foreign languages have been introduced at kindergarten level, too, through several experimental projects launched at national level, as in the case of the FORMAT approach (Taeschner, 1993), and the Hocus & Lotus project carried out in 114 schools between 1994 and 1997, the experimental project carried out in 36 schools all over Italy (Ministry of Education, DL 297, 1994) and the initiatives undertaken with *Progetto Lingue 2000* since 1999.

One of the drawbacks of all these initiatives at an early stage could be the lack, in the subsequent years, of sustained work on continuity aimed at overcoming the risk on the part of the learner of reaching a plateau level and a general dissatisfaction with foreign language learning. But this is hopefully not yet the case! The training courses activated within the *Progetto Lingue 2000* in many cases so far have been organised on the basis of the participation of teachers from all school levels, thus allowing opportunities to overcome barriers and through the sharing of each others' experiences. In many cases middle and high school teachers as well as primary teachers have had the unique opportunity to learn from each other and start building common paths in terms of foreign language curriculum continuity.

5. THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM: MIDDLE, HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY

One of the first official educational reforms was that of middle school in 1979. Its curriculum renewal emphasised language education across the curriculum and set up the conditions for continuing the educational process at high school level. School leaving age at fourteen, the end of middle school, was compulsory until three years ago when, together with the main guidelines for the new school reform, the proposal of raising the school leaving age to eighteen was made. The for-

eign language curriculum developed for the 1979 reform was extremely innovative as it was based upon the functional-notional approach and it stressed the importance of communicative skills. It had a major influence on the textbooks, the majority of which were written by Italian textbook writers, and on the high school curriculum that was later on renewed with the experimental syllabus called *Programmi Brocca* (Lopriore, 1985).

Most recent innovations, particularly at primary and high school level, have in a way left middle school aside and at the moment it is the school level that most needs a curriculum renewal. The only challenging innovation at middle school is the most recent official introduction of the study of a second foreign language besides English thus following the Council of Europe guidelines. The exit level for middle school is the A2 level for all language skills, particularly for the written production and interaction.

A distinctive feature of the philosophy underlying the foreign language curriculum in the Italian schools has always been the importance given to the role of language education (*Educazione Linguistica*) across the curriculum. Teaching and learning a foreign language is done through the language and with the language by activating processes of language awareness.

The teaching of general English (or French, or German or Spanish) is carried out at middle school level and in the first two years of the high school. The first two years of the high school should lead the students to a partial B1 level, while the subsequent three years should lead to the level B2 at the exit high school exam. Unfortunately, either because of the emphasis laid upon the development of English for Specific Purposes which is taught in vocational and technical schools, or because of the lower competence of many of the students attending vocational schools, it is very difficult for these students to even reach the B1 level when they leave school. A completely different situation is that of the classical or scientific lycées and of some technical high schools. Whether because of a better starting level of the students or because of the economic conditions of their families that accounts for the possibility for many students to attend language courses abroad, the average level reached at the end of the high school is a B2 for some of the skills, particularly for written comprehension and production. The recent introduction of international certifications has further improved the levels of competence of the students in almost all types of schools.

One of the current debates at international level has been the type of English to be taught both because of the emerging role of English as an international language (Crystal, 1997) for communication and

technology and because of the acknowledged existence of several Englishes that need to be at least taken into consideration particularly when developing or using listening materials or when developing lexical recognition. The majority of Italian teachers refer to British English but also use examples from American English while exposure to Australian English is often provided by textbook materials, particularly those of international publishers. There is little or almost no use of non-native English in teaching materials, particularly of the English spoken by Nigerians or Indians who are among the nationalities of the recent immigration flow into Italy, even if the debate about the important role of international English and of the non-native teacher (Medgyes, 1997) has been at least mentioned in many teacher training courses.

Italian universities have recently undergone a major change in adjusting to the European requirements by reducing the length of many degree courses from four to three years, and they have acknowledged the Common European Framework of Modern Languages as a reference point for both the entry and exit levels for English and for Italian as a Second Language for the foreign or Erasmus students. The level required for English is usually the B1 level and universities accept the levels of international certifications because of a special agreement signed by the Ministry of Education and by the international certification boards. Many universities, particularly those offering degrees in science, engineering, law or economics, either require or offer courses for the PET certification for English and, in some cases, also offer a second foreign language. The degrees with majors in foreign languages, organised in the past only on the basis of four-year courses in foreign literature, offer courses in three foreign languages –usually to be chosen from among English, French, German and Spanish³– aim at developing literary and translation skills.

6. TEACHER EDUCATION: PRE AND INSERVICE ISSUES

As already mentioned in the introduction, foreign language learning and teaching have suffered from the lack of pre-service courses. The

³ While English is almost considered as compulsory there has been a shift in the choice of the second and third language there is a growing request of, for example, Spanish that in many cases is the second major language, and in those degrees majoring in East Asian languages, Chinese and Japanese are mostly requested.

only source of professional development for foreign language teachers was the unique in-service teacher training program started in 1978, the *Progetto Speciale Lingue Straniere* (Lopriore, 1998), a landmark for foreign language teachers at middle and high school level for almost twenty years. The *Progetto Speciale Lingue Straniere* was launched on the basis of the Italian students' acknowledged lack of competence in foreign languages that emerged in the international IEA survey in 1978. There were at that time two solutions to the problem: either the immediate launch of pre service training or the organisation of a sound in-service teacher training program. The latter choice was made and the courses for all foreign language teachers were set up with the important contributions of the Foreign Cultural Offices of the embassies of France, Germany, Spain and the United States. Specific six-week training courses for trainers were organised in the foreign countries and the trainers began running courses of one hundred hours all over Italy. At the beginning, the courses were based upon fundamental concepts in language teaching and learning, but later on they became more focussed on specific language issues such as technology in education, assessment and evaluation, etc. that were addressed in shorter fifty-hour courses.

In the early nineties, the introduction of foreign language teaching in primary schools was accompanied by a nation wide in-service training of primary teachers (Pavan De Gregorio, 1999), that was regularly delivered until the recent innovation of *Progetto Lingue 2000*. Even in this case the Foreign Cultural Offices of the British, French, German, and Spanish embassies played an important role in providing support and expertise.

It was with *Progetto Lingue 2000* that the in-service scenario was modified: specific trainer-training and teacher training courses at all school levels were organised, run and monitored for the four foreign languages through different specific actions. Between 1998 and 1999 a specific task force of 320 trainers, 260 for English, 200 for French, 40 for German and 20 for Spanish, for middle and high school, was prepared with the aim of introducing the Italian teachers to the fundamental concepts underlying *Progetto Lingue 2000*. In June 2000, 115 new trainers were formed for the kindergarten and the primary school and another group of 58 trainers for middle and high school were added to the previous 320. The in-service courses –of an average 30 hour length– have been running constantly since 1999 for all school levels. At the moment the task of the project has been accomplished and the

initiative of continuing this form of training is now left in the hands of individual headteachers and their school staff.

Pre-service training was started in 1999 with the implementation of a 1991 Law (341) that assigned the Italian universities with the task of organising teacher pre-service education. The SSIS (*Scuole di Specializzazione all'Insegnamento Secondario*) are organised on a regional basis, last two years, have a closed enrolment, are based upon a pedagogical, a subject-specific component and a practicum. As for the foreign language SSIS courses, the majority of the mentors and of some of the university professors have so far been composed of former *PSIS* and *Progetto Lingue 2000* teacher trainers.

The SSIS approach should have made possible a close collaboration between university professors and schools through the action of the school mentors, school teachers selected on the basis of their expertise who work part time and are in charge of the practicum component of the course. As has been the case in many contexts, however the collaboration has not always worked. University professors did not really understand the types of competencies future teachers had to develop and in many cases tensions and conflicts with mentors did not help the teachers-to-be. The first SSIS courses were based upon the general guidelines set up by a group of university experts but were designed differently according to regional contexts⁴. At the moment there is a move towards the transformation of the SSIS into university courses which will be followed by a year of practicum run by the schools. This type of shift would once more perpetuate the replication of the long-standing gap between school and universities.

7. EVALUATION PROJECTS

There has not been in Italy a so-called '*culture for evaluation*': few checks on results and quality of teaching have been paid until most recent years. Teachers have lacked for years basic skills in assessment and evaluation, and, particularly since the introduction of the concept

⁴ In 1999, immediately before the actual beginning of the SSIS courses, thanks to an initiative promoted by the author of this article and the Department of Mathematics of the University of Rome, a special one month mentor training course for all the mentors of the Lazio regional SSIS was run by Donald Freeman, School of International Training, Brattleboro, VT.

of competence development and the diffusion of task based methodologies, teachers have felt the need for more specific training in this specific field. Foreign language assessment is part of the school assessment in exit examination such as the middle school (14 years old) final examination that is administered at local level, and the high school final examination (18 years) that was up to 2001⁵ administered partly at national level and partly at local level and has from this year been administered only by the individual school staff. As for vocational schools there are no special regional or province examinations, but there are special vocational course examinations with specific foreign language tests at the regional level.

There have been a few national evaluation projects in the field of foreign languages, the first one being the 1978 IEA survey that subsequently led to the launch of the PLS courses. In 1997 the Ministry of Education asked the Department of Education of the University of Rome "La Sapienza" to organise a national evaluation project of the results of the introduction of foreign languages at primary level. The project consisted of a set of tests of listening and reading comprehension and of lexical competence in French and English, a set of tests on metalinguistic competence in Italian and two parallel questionnaires for the primary teachers and for the students, that were administered –on the basis of a national sample– to almost two thousand five hundred students of English and four hundred students of French at the end of their last year of the primary school in June 1999. The results were extremely positive and confirmed the validity of the type of approach undertaken by the Ministry of Education at primary level while acknowledging striking differences in results at geographical level (Benvenuto, Lopriore, 1999; Lopriore, 1997; Lopriore, 2001).

In the year 2000 a national evaluation project of seventeen year olds' competencies in French and English was undertaken by the CEDE (Centro Europeo dell'Educazione) and a set of written and oral comprehension tests were delivered as a pilot study in some of the major Italian major cities⁶.

⁵ The final exam at 18 foresees the foreign language written test as a multi-disciplinary test where the foreign language plays an important role, and an oral multidisciplinary interview partly carried out in the foreign language. Multidisciplinary tests are developed by the local school teachers on the basis of the syllabus.

⁶ Due to some major changes occurred in the overall structure of CEDE, the project was never completed.

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In the year 2000 a joint project of the Ministry of Education and the main foreign language professional associations (MIUR-Professional Associations 2000-2002) was launched and it is still in progress. The project has the overall aims of investigating the students' results at all school levels and for all foreign languages, of identifying the most common teaching practices used in the Italian classes, and of defining and aligning the descriptors of the competencies at each exit levels to the results emerging from the national research. The project has so far used three main research tools: a set of tests for all language skills developed by the group of language teacher trainers selected by the professional associations, a number of teacher training courses based upon the Action Research approach and run all over Italy for each language and at each level, and a set of classroom research tools (questionnaires, observation grids, diaries, etc.) used during the teacher training courses and administered –together with the tests– by the teachers attending the courses in their own classes.

The report on the results of the research, that has so far involved thousands of students, is going to be published by the Ministry of Education by the end of the current year. The partial results emerging from this important project and research study already show a great interest on the part of the teachers in their classroom practices and in the action research approach as well as in the Search for new forms of assessment for evaluating the results of their own students⁷.

8. THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

A significant role in the professional development of the Italian foreign language teachers has been played by some of the professional associations of teachers who through the years have organised local or national conventions, run seminars or teacher training courses, diffused journals and publications, published books and materials and sustained teachers in various ways. There are five main associations: AISPI, the association of teachers of Spanish, ADILT, the association of the teachers of German, ANILS and LEND two associations of teachers of all foreign languages, and TESOL Italy, the association of teachers of English. With

⁷ The use of the European Language Portfolios has enhanced a more focussed attention on forms of alternative or authentic assessment that is raising interest in assessment and evaluation of students' competencies as never before.

the exception of two of the associations, AISPI and ADILT, the other associations have been active in Italy for more than twenty years.

The associations have in many cases provided the type of sustained development teachers needed and have often led the debate about foreign language teaching and learning in their journals and in their national conventions, organised local symposia (ANILS, LEND, TESOL) or, as in the case of LEND, specialised in specific publications.

Three of these associations (ANILS, LEND, TESOL) have set up local groups all over Italy thus providing local teachers with the opportunity to attend courses in the area where they live and work, or to start self-sustained groups. The members of the national boards of the associations are professionals who are well-known in the field and are acknowledged both locally and at national level as reliable teacher trainers and valid textbook writers.

National conventions, in particular those organised for all language teachers every two years by LEND, or for the teachers of English both the annual convention organised by TESOL Italy and the one run by the British Council, are for many Italian teachers the only opportunity to be brought up to date on the latest professional issues, meet colleagues from all over Italy, listen to international speakers, learn about local initiatives and know about recent publications and multimedia products. Major publishers have special exhibit spaces where teachers can visit them and meet textbook writers.

Two years ago all the professional associations were officially acknowledged by the Italian Ministry of Education as authorized teacher training bodies, that is, the courses run by the associations could be recognised as official training courses by the educational authorities. This official acknowledgement subsequently led in the year 2000 to the joint collaboration between the associations and the Ministry of Education in the national research project that is currently been carried out. All professional associations were as well officially invited to run, together with the INDIRE (the Italian Institute for Pedagogical Research and Documentation), distance training modules for new teachers that were based upon special on-line forum debates on issues of interest for new teachers.

Some of the initiatives of the associations have been sustained through the years by the Cultural Offices of the Foreign Embassies of France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain and the United States of America. The Foreign Cultural Offices have always collaborated with the Italian Ministry of Education in the organisation of teacher training courses in the

country where the foreign languages are spoken, of conventions in Italy and of national projects and, in addition, they have offered grants and scholarships.

CONCLUSIONS

The Italian scenario in the field of foreign language teaching is complex and difficult to grasp mainly because of the wide variety of factors that have interacted in the last thirty years in terms of educational reform, curriculum renewal and societal conditions. The main innovations, the peculiarity of in-service training, the numerous initiatives undertaken by the professional associations, by the Foreign Cultural Offices active in the country and sustained by the Ministry of Education, and the role of the publishers, have made the Italian context quite unique and have provided several interesting ideas and projects with many points in common with other European countries, particularly since the publication of the Council of Europe Framework. There is a lot more to add to the scenario that is not reported in this brief article but the richness that emerges from the enthusiastic attitude that most Italian teachers have always had in facing innovations and undertaking is certainly the most rewarding aspect of the Italian context.

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