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Improving Textual Competence in a Second Language Initial Literacy Classroom

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Abstract. The paper aims to illustrate some textual learning activities developed for an L2 Italian initial-literacy classroom, and, in particular, for illiterate plurilinguals (mostly unaccompanied foreign minors). The activities in question belong to an experimental proposal that consists of a specific textual teaching module integrated with a second-language initial literacy course employing the communicative/affective-humanistic teaching approach. Textual activities are normally proposed to intermediate and advanced level literacy learners in second-language classrooms, in order to fully develop reading and writing abilities (i.e. functional literacy). However, based on the importance of learners' plurilingualism, oral ability, and everyday needs, the specific textual activities proposed in the initial literacy classroom have produced significant results, also with important effects on learners' motivation.

Keywords: Illiteracy, Textual Competence, Second language learning.

1 Introduction: Learning Literacy in a Second-language Classroom and Textual Activities

1.1 Illiteracy, L2 Learning, and Integration in a Migration Context

Italy is very often the first country reached by a number of migrants fleeing from African and Asian countries via a grueling journey, in order to start a new life in Europe. With reference to migration, the problem of illiteracy is nowadays increasing and it needs to be challenged by societies. Most of these people, both adults and minors, are in fact low or very low-educated, that means functionally illiterate, or even completely illiterate.[1] The problem is particularly evident in reference to the category of the so-called "unaccompanied foreign minors" (henceforth UFM), that are minors without any Italian citizen or adult who is legally responsible for them. These minors have a peculiar sociolinguistic profile, since their mostly very low, or zero, education level goes together with a sometimes striking plurilingual competence, the two fea-

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[1] For a classification of illiterates it is possible to refer to Minuz [1], whose classification is in line with the Canadian document *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners* concerning illiterate or poorly educated learners of L2 English.

tures not necessary being linked to each other (see [2]; for more details about UFMs, see, among others, [3]).

The main instrument for social integration is a certain competence in the language of the host country. Unfortunately, the linguistic competence of illiterates, which also includes their L1, is basically limited to orality. The lack of familiarity with written texts has strong repercussions on the lack of meta-textual and meta-linguistic reflection. This has in turn negative consequences on the second-language acquisition process (see [4]-[5]). Low-educated and illiterate learners have in fact a slower pace in learning a second language and a greater risk of fossilization. From this perspective, illiteracy represents a factor of exclusion (see [6]): in fact, the complexity of the present-day society, with its so-called urban linguistic landscape (see [7]), continuously requires decoding activity. On the contrary, learning to read and write changes the way the learner looks at the world around him and gives him a tool to actively participate in the social life of the community in which he is located, changing somehow the whole society as well [8]. However, learning literacy in a second language is a hard and complex objective, because the learner must not only learn another language, but also learn to read and write for the first time and to transform his knowledge into useful and expendable skills. Similarly, teaching literacy in a second language classroom is twofold, since it consists in teaching not just how to read and write, but also how to use these tools independently, therefore guiding learners to build a more solid relationship with the host country. As is well known, learners' needs and expectations are crucial factors for the success or failure of a teaching-learning pathway, as well as learners' motivation. In particular, the development of motivation in illiterate foreign learners strongly depends on the awareness that the effort required in the classroom has an actual usefulness in everyday situations.

1.2   A Model of Integration for Illiterate Italian L2 Learners

The University of Palermo has developed models of integration of all of the so-called "fragile" users (i.e. UFMs, asylum seekers, women) in its own classes of L2 Italian, mixing them together with other learners who have an ordinary or high level of education (often university students from other countries) and with tutors alongside who can serve as a reinforcement for them along the way. Such language courses mostly follow the communicative teaching approach, joined by the affective-humanistic perspective, looking therefore at the learner and his specific communication needs, as well as emotional and psychological aspects linked to learning.

As regards to foreign learners who are illiterates, instead, they start by following a dedicated literacy pathway, to then be included in the ordinary classes at the end of this pathway. This literacy pathway is articulated in three levels, i.e. initial, intermediate, advanced, and the illiterates are assigned to the respective classes based on their level of mastery of reading-writing. In the multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual microcosm of these mixed classes, language learning and social integration not only coexist simultaneously, but also favor each other. Furthermore, in this environment, plurilingualism and oral ability in the target language of fragile learners constitute crucial elements as precious resources for both the learning and the integration path-

way. A core issue and starting point of the literacy pathway is the oral competence of the learner's L2. In fact, if the learner has a good oral competence in the target language, it will be easier and faster to set up a read-write pathway starting from words or phrases to be analyzed on an alphabetical level. However, this does not always happen, in this case making it a priority to focus on the development of orality, of oral communicative competence, in terms of both reception and production, as reference to which the illiterate learner can cling to. In order to be able to propose an alphabetical analysis with ease, the word (or sentence) must indeed have a meaning and therefore there must always be a recognizable context to keep in mind, which acts as a frame of reference, as a linguistic container, for the learner. In this sense, keeping classroom activities always linked to the context of external reality is a fundamental step. In addition, the process of learning basic oral skills is much shorter than that concerning the primary skills of reading-writing. Therefore, it is right to provide the learner with a basic oral knowledge, together with the pathway of reading-writing in order to allow him to navigate himself in the real world by dealing with the communicative tasks of his daily life, and starting to have and use the first means for social inclusion and promotion. As for a syllabus for illiterates, since the CEFR does not take into account this category of users (and, in general, of the levels prior to the A1), the only points of reference are the syllabus of Borri et al. [9], a guide to a course from literacy to A1 level, as well as the aforementioned Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: ESL for Literacy Learners.

Going further into the matter, the proposed literacy pathway is divided into two interconnected phases, i.e. the phase of orality and the literacy phase. The first phase is in turn divided into three sub-phases, i.e. presentation, manipulation, and production. In the first sub-phase, the teacher starts using objects or images to elicit, or possibly present, the most suitable word to describe the object or situation shown, that is contextualized with reference to the learners' everyday reality. In the second, the teacher proposes activities that lead the learner to become familiar with the alphabetical sequence of the word linked to the image or object (e.g. placing the images in the correct reference context): this brings the learner to master the lexical area relating to the words already learnt and to deepen their semantic understanding. In the third, the learner is called to use the words just learned within free or controlled communication routines, so reusing the vocabulary learned in a precise communicative context (e.g. doing a role play inside or a task outside the classroom, in the real context). Since the consolidation of a well-placed basic vocabulary within a recognizable context facilitates the reading-writing pathway, given the particular users, at least at the level of initial literacy it is often necessary to dedicate a considerable part of the lesson to orality. After this first phase of orality, the teacher moves on to the literacy phase, in which the learner is gradually put in contact with the written word, and the teacher guides him through an analysis pathway starting from a basic form. The method adopted depends on the basic form chosen (i.e. grapheme, syllable, word, sentence, text). The synthetic methods, which start from the smallest element (the letter) to reach the largest one (the sentence or the text), are no longer in use. The global method, which starts from the sentence and manages to identify the word, is in itself very valid, but requires that the learner possesses a high oral competence in the target lan-

guage. The method adopted in the present case is analytical-synthetic, which starts from the word, analyzed semantically, then moves on to the analysis of the syllable, chosen as the base form, and finally returns again to the word, now also structurally analyzed.

1.3   Textual competence and illiterate learners

Focus on initial literacy classes, mostly composed of UFMs, they basically revolve around the word as a starting point for a first semantic approach and, only then, as a support for a more analytical reflection. Taking into account the difficulty of abstraction and categorization which characterizes the illiterates, the teacher will prudently try to guide learners towards the awareness that words are made up of smaller elements bearing meaning, without using abstract categories.

In some ways, the word may therefore seem to be the horizon within which this first level is defined. If this is true for the literacy phase, the same cannot be said about the phase of orality: in the third sub-phase (i.e. production), the learner begins to become familiar, albeit to a minimum extent and not in an analytical and fully aware manner, with the upper levels of the sentence and the text. In the perspective of Textual Linguistics, the textual competence, or the ability to know how to identify the information conveyed by the text, as well as the way in which it is conveyed, is part of the more general communicative competence. Textual competence concerns, therefore, the awareness of logical and formal organization of the text, thus implying the ability to make inferences and to grasp the elements of cohesion and coherence. In a learning pathway it is important to work on textual competence because through it cognitive mechanisms are developed. This has important implications both on the learning of a second language, and on the reinforcement of instrumental reading and writing skills. The texts also serve to always propose new contexts for use, which stimulate and motivate the learner if drawn from everyday experience. Moreover, outside the classroom, the urban context offers (when it does not impose) continuous textual stimuli. Within the literacy pathway described so far, working on texts is normally destined to the intermediate literacy level and, even more, to the advanced literacy level, whose main objective is the full functional literacy. However, textual activities have also tested in the initial literacy class, as an integrated module, despite the fact the main objective of this course is essentially limited to instrumental literacy. The aim was to immediately accustom the learner to some types of text. These texts were chosen because they were suitable for his profile and his needs, as well as perfectly integrated with the contexts and vocabulary proposed in the classroom. Given the minimum level, the texts were mostly discontinuous. The main textual activities proposed in the classroom are illustrated below (see next Section) in order to give an idea of the positivity of the result.

2   Experimental Textual Activities in the Initial Literacy Classroom

To ensure that the textual activity is useful, it is almost always proposed around the end of the orality phase, together with the production sub-phase, when the teacher proposes some production activities, which would help the practice within communicative routines. It is usually a role play activity. The teacher mimics a situation and invites the learners to elicit some simple communicative strings, which can be hypothesized starting from the teacher's actions. Once they have reached a series of acceptable strings, the teacher has them fixed to the learners, who will then try to recreate the scene in pairs. Precisely within this activity, the teacher inserts the textual element, very often introducing authentic or adapted materials that arouse the curiosity and interest of the class. Examples are the receipt and the label of a shirt. These are two discontinuous texts, classifiable as descriptive/regulatory, very common in everyday life. The two texts are proposed respectively in two different role plays, one set in the supermarket and the other in a clothing store. The two guided oral productions, related to both role plays, are linked to the vocabulary of food and clothing, and, at the same time, the communicative strings suggested by the mimed situation are also based on the textual element, thanks to the presence in the classroom of the real object. The focus on the textual element is almost always presented just before moving on to the role play, or contextually to it, during the string elicitation phase. Starting from the real object, and with the support of the blackboard and/or a worksheet, the teacher proposes to focus the learners' attention on salient textual elements in relation to the type of text and its function. On the receipt (see Figure 1), for example, it will be highlighted the importance of the date, the indication of the price and the change, while, on the shirt label, the indication of size, color, price, and washing instructions. This type of activity arouses the interest and motivation of the learner, since it is clearly coherent with the real context, with frequent and plausible communicative situations and with his communication needs.

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        DOCUMENTO  COMMERCIALE
         di vendita o prestazione

DESCRIZIONE              IVA       Prezzo(€)
1 X CAFFE CALDO         10,00%          0,90
1 X 1/2 ACQUA           10,00%          1,00

TOTALE COMPLESSIVO                      1,90
di cui IVA                              0,17

Pagamento contante                      1,90
Pagamento elettronico                   0,00
Non riscosso                            0,00
Resto                                   0,00
Importo pagato                          1,90
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Fig.1. Example of receipt.

In other cases, the textual activity is disconnected from a communicative situation like the one suggested by the role play, but this does mean that it is disconnected from the real and daily context of the learners' needs. This is the case with the coffee machine, which presents a number of textual elements. The activity takes place outside the classroom. After having proposed the vocabulary of food and drink in the previous lessons, the teacher guides the students to the use of the coffee machine, drawing their attention to the text (also in this case discontinuous and descriptive/regulatory), and, in particular, to the correspondence between number and product, between button and function.

A further example of a textual proposal, in some respects different than the examples just illustrated, is the daily agenda. Activity on the agenda is particularly interesting, because it can go beyond the planned textual objectives and the general expectations of the teachers. Such activity takes place at the end of the lesson. The basic idea is to accustom the learners to compiling an empty handmade notebook, as if it is a daily diary, on which to write down, with the help of the teacher, the words learned under the formula "Oggi ho imparato..." ("Today I learned"). Before completing the agenda, the teacher manages a brief moment of elicitation in plenum, which is then followed by the transcription of each one individually. This activity has the textual function of making the learner approach a blank page, which he himself - in a guided

manner - would fill with various elements: the date at the top, the lines on which to write within the margins, and finally the words. It represents also a daily opportunity to train writing, with particular attention to isolating words, identifying their boundaries. Furthermore, day after day, the empty notebook takes the form of a real agenda, which, in the absence of a textbook, is configured as the object that most resembles it. This activity is very useful because it develops a series of indispensable elements for the success of a learning pathway. First of all, it helps to develop the learners' autonomy: over time, in fact, it is the students who decided to write what they want, including words learned elsewhere. In addition, through this activity the teacher educates them to care for the book and, in general, for the school equipment. The students also initiate an identification mechanism, since, at the suggestion of the teacher, each of them could personalize the cover with a drawing or a name. A further important aspect is the motivation that arises in the learner when focusing and putting down in writing what he has learned in class, taking note of a progressive advancement in his own knowledge and skill. Finally, always placed at the end of each lesson, the time to complete the agenda gradually becomes, over time, an essential moment of relaxation: this has a very positive emotional impact, because it creates a comforting routine, an indispensable element for this type of learner who is not used to being in a school environment.

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