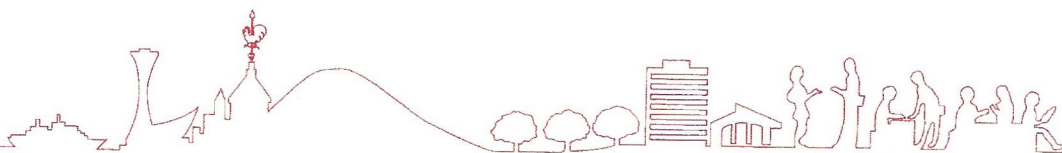


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Teaching Practices and Learning Outcomes: Voices from the Field

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1. Needs Analysis

On March 7, 2017 the Italian national daily *La Repubblica* published the umpteenth lamentation about the despicable level of English competence among our countrymen up to the highest spheres of political representatives in the government and in the European Parliament. On the wake of the 2017 survey by EF, the multinational of language courses and travelling abroad, placing Italy last but one in Europe just before the French, journalist Raffaele Oriani (2017) lamented the fact that we Italians invest effort and energies in English instruction like no one else in Europe, but “speak worse than anyone else”. He also quoted Eurostat data, according to which 97.6% of Italian kids in the primary school study English, whereas in Holland or Denmark only 50% or so. On the other hand, Italian families are “the best customers of language schools in both Great Britain and Malta”.

The 2018 world survey conducted by EF EPI, with the aim of assessing the general competence in English among adults, awarded Italy barely a “medium” and placed it in 34th position out of 88 States, just before France among EU countries but after States like Bulgaria and Argentina, which are evaluated “good”, or Nigeria and South Korea, which have a “medium” level but with a higher score (EF EPI, 2018). Moreover, if one believes EF EPI data interpretation the greatest loss for Italians is supposed to be not so much on the level of communication but in the fields of innovation, economic growth and even longevity.

One might expect that the younger portion of the population would mark a radical improvement, but this is only partially true. First of all, statistics are only very

recently available, since Italy did not take part in SurveyLang (conducted in 2011) for second language competences in 2011-12 assessing up to 8th grade (European Commission, 2012). The national evaluation under the authority of INVALSI (Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione) included a test of the English language at the 5th and 8th grades only in 2018. Things are going faster though. In 2019 the national test of English has been introduced for the 13th grade, the last year of the upper secondary school, for the first time. Incidentally, only the reading and listening abilities are assessed by the INVALSI tests.

An official Report of 2018 INVALSI testing was issued in July, taking into account five geographical macro-areas in the country: North-West, North-East, Centre, South, South and islands (INVALSI, 2018). The students' results in English must be measured against the expected levels to be achieved as in the *Indicazioni Nazionali* for the upper secondary school issued in 2010 and those for the pre-primary, primary and lower secondary school issued in 2012, which suggest level A1 at the end of the 5th grade, level A2 at the end of the 8th grade, level B1 at the end of the 10th grade and level B2 at the end of the 13th grade.¹ In extreme synthesis the conclusions show that the majority of students in the 5th grade all over Italy reach level A1 in both abilities although remarkable percentage differences are already apparent at this elementary level among the macro-areas of Italy.

Similarly, level A2 in the reading ability is achieved by most Italian students at the 8th grade, but again with significant differences among the different regions. However, only most Northern and Central regions reach level A2 in the listening ability with the South and the islands scoring very poorly in comparison with the national average. The Report comments on these data by proposing further research into the causes of such unequal performances, which in comparison with Italian language and Mathematics show an even more fragmented patchwork of schools and classes, and by expressing the provisional hypothesis that socio-economic factors have an impact, family investment on second language education being

¹ Actually, a B1.2 at the exit of the entire school training would be sufficient to build a level B2/C1 at higher education for all the graduates and a C2 for the university students specialising in English as a second language. This would make the whole level distribution rational and coherent since a level C1 is required from non-linguistic-subject schoolteachers in case they were engaged in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodological training and practice.

obviously more frequent in the wealthier regions of Italy.

While waiting for the new INVALSI Report 2019, which was unavailable at the time of this writing, another survey conducted by EF EPI in 2017 and involving school students in 26 countries reveals more relevant to our need analysis (EF EPI-s, 2017). EF EPI-s 2017 survey ascertains students at age 15 and 20, again only in the ‘receptive’ abilities, thus providing exactly the still missing data from the Italian panorama and the ones involving the school grades our research is more interested in. Between 15 and 20 years of age most countries show improvement in their levels of competence, although only few move into level B2 at the stage of Higher Education for both abilities.²

Italy figures as a case study (p. 13): not only are the huge geographical differences confirmed, with a particularly negative score on the side of Sardinia, but on average, Italian students do improve between 15 and 20 years of age, yet remaining inside level A2. As if in the five years of upper secondary school plus a couple more years of tertiary education they stopped receiving English instruction at all! This survey confirms both impressions derived from the experience of individual teachers of English at university level and more systematic, albeit scanty, statistics collected by the University Language Centres: placement testing at university access still reveals relevant percentages of A1 and a majority of A2 with an ever-growing percentage of B1 in the past three years, although not in all geographic situations, and only a limited minority of B2 and C1.³

However, beside and beyond the still disappointing achievements in language competence on the side of Italian students, personal teaching experience over years witnesses to a generally scarce metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness of the learning process even in cases of relatively good proficiency in the language. This issue has already been object of research in the frame of the Erasmus+ Project

² According to this survey the general trend all over the world shows in fact an opposite direction to the one attested by INVALSI in as much as it ascertains greater proficiency in the listening ability than in the reading ability (even in Italy). This might be explained either with the specific kind of test elaborated by EF or with the observation that students in their adolescence and post-adolescence have many more chances to be exposed to oral sources of informal education than to English written textuality in the frame of formal education.

³ Unfortunately, not all University Language Centres seem to collect statistics about the language testing at access stage.

Guerrilla Literacy Learners (2014-16) and discussed in Graziano and Romagnuolo (2016). In the same research context similar limitations in metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness emerged also on the side of the Italian teachers of English involved in the experimentation (Graziano, 2016). Such observations seem to confirm the generalized need expressed by the recent *Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages* (European Commission, 2018), which insists on language-awareness as a measure to be strengthened in school:

This proposal addresses a) the need to invest in language learning by focussing on learning outcomes and b) options to improve language learning in compulsory education by increasing language-awareness in school education (p. 3).⁴

What is here proposed agrees with the recently issued *Companion Volume with new descriptors* to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2018), which reinterprets the Framework in view of plurilingualism, pluricultural repertoires and cross-linguistic mediation and explicitly includes the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions as theoretical-practical communicative competences to be acquired.

2. Italian school framework and research hypothesis

Before presenting the hypothesis on which this research is based, some references to school legislation and pedagogical orientations of contemporary teaching practice in Italy are needed.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Italian school legislation introduced the so-called 'school autonomy' (L. 59 - 1997/03/15, Art. 21) granting each school institution the powers and responsibility to plan, organize and manage the education action in order to improve and adapt the curriculum to local contexts, albeit in agreement with the objectives of the national education system. This new status, therefore, required a radical change in the instructional model to promote personal development and educational success: from traditional teaching of a disciplinary

⁴ See the classical James & Garrett (1992, rep. 2013), and more recently the *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society*, 15(1), edited by Cinganotto & Lodding Cunningham (2019), entirely dedicated to a reappraisal of language awareness in the context of language diversity in the 21st century.

content imposed by a centralized authority to programming learning objectives by adopting the curricular approach. Between 2004 and 2012 the ‘ministerial programs’ were in fact replaced by *National Indications* for all school orders and types specifying the skills and competences to be obtained at the end of each school cycle through curriculum planning adopted by the individual school. The achievement of these objectives is monitored by the institute’s RAV (Self-assessment Report) and periodically tested by INVALSI.

However, the Italian government policy in the last twenty years has not always created the best conditions for a broad and factual implementation of school autonomy, which, finally, seems to be the greatest merit of the recent L.107/2015 known as *La buona scuola*. On the other hand, educational research starting from the ‘70s of the previous century has produced significant contributions to student-centred pedagogies based on active learning processes and supplied school practice with many different versions of curricular programming: from the curriculum for teaching objectives, to the *curriculum for learning objectives*, to the current *curriculum for competences*.

To date, curricular programming and the planning of UDA (Teaching Units for Learning) represent a consolidated approach in all school orders and types. Particularly, the current competence-based approach requires from teachers that they, consciously and deliberately, practice teaching planning following a logical and functional sequence of actions: *analysis of the starting conditions, identification of educational objectives, design and development of learning situations/environments, monitoring and evaluation of teaching actions effectiveness, assessment of learning and assessment/self-assessment of processes, practices and outcomes*. For this reason, since the beginning of this millennium Italian school policies have provided for teachers to acquire and develop the necessary skills for planning and managing teaching activities and organization through pre-service and in-service training courses and through the supervising/monitoring activities of national agencies (like INVALSI and INDIRE – Istituto di Documentazione Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa).

Tuscia University can boast a long-standing experience of secondary pre-service teacher training courses (among which foreign languages), having participated with

course design, coordination and teaching staff to all the formulas introduced by the Italian governments since the beginning of this millennium to grant academic status to this fundamental part of tertiary education (SSIS, TFA, PAS). More recently, it has also been very active in primary and secondary in-service teacher training through a dedicated University agency called LabForm-UniTus, in whose framework specialised English language and methodological courses for CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) teachers have been offered (Graziano, Ciambella & Cuccurullo, 2018). All these training experiences have highlighted two critical issues as to secondary teachers' pedagogies in the framework of the 'competence' approach:

1. Upper secondary school teachers show difficulty in implementing and practicing conscious general teaching styles/approaches in order to orient and assess their own teaching activities. However, they are very skilful at identifying and applying specific strategies/techniques for equally specific learning objectives.
2. Fully trained teachers manage to plan and organize teaching/learning activities according to models that require integrated action planning, like for example the ADDIE model including analysis, design, development, implementation, evaluation (Bonaiuti, Calvani & Ranieri, 2016), with specific reference to the competence approach. However, in their daily teaching practice the functional sequence of *pre-assessment, implementation of learning environments, scaffolding and evaluation of performance* is rarely applied in order to improve specific skills or competences.

Our research hypothesis, derived from the former needs analysis and the experiential richness accumulated in these years, amounts to the following question: *Is a correlation between secondary school teacher 'awareness' of the adopted language teaching style and student learning outcomes possible?* The critical aspects mentioned above suggest some areas worth inquiring:

- *teachers' awareness* about the educational intentions and learning objectives of their teaching actions;
- *the reflective practice* by which teachers constantly know what they are

doing and can question themselves about the methods and effects of their interventions at any time;

- *the teaching approach/style* adopted by the teacher to implement a specific learning environment.

3. Methodology

In order to investigate into the teaching styles really adopted by English teachers and into their capacity to recognize them and to describe their own everyday practices, the means of an anonymous questionnaire to be circulated through Google forms was agreed. From the very beginning we wanted to avoid provoking the idea that teachers were being somehow malevolently assessed. So, the scope of the initiative was clearly illustrated in a page of presentation and our interest in elaborating mainly a diagnostic tool clearly stated.

The novelty of the enterprise was also claimed since nothing of the sort has been done in Italy for a long time and the participants motivated to actively cooperate in improving the tool with their feedback. The event of the 2nd International Conference on Bilingualism 2019 (Malta, 25-27 March 2019) and the specific panel on “Language Policy, Innovations and Practices: A Tale of Two Countries (Italy and Japan)” were also mentioned as the context where an interpretation of the survey results would be presented.

The first ideational criterium for the questionnaire moved from the obvious need not to be too direct in asking about the favourite approach so as not to collect biased replies. At the same time, we excluded the possibility of presenting a multiple choice among detailed teaching techniques since we rather intended to measure the reflective capacity on more general behaviours. Thus, the following criteria have been chosen to create the questionnaire:

- identifying ten crucial issues of language teaching: oral comprehension, oral interaction, use of written texts, ability integration, linguistic awareness, improvement of vocabulary and of pronunciation, motivation, formal/informal learning, and only lastly, general teaching style;
- expressing them in the form of pedagogical problem-solving, i.e. “How

would you support/facilitate...?”

- formulating the options according to the five main language teaching approaches in the history of the discipline:
 - the traditional grammar-translation;
 - the direct-mechanistic methods;
 - the communicative approach;
 - the humanistic-affective approach;
 - the constructivist approach.
- In order to avoid easy and mechanical replies, the five approaches are presented in random order for nine issues whereas the tenth respects their chronological appearance.

For six of the abovementioned language abilities or micro-teaching problems each language teaching approach is represented by a logical sequence of consistent teaching actions (like in a flow diagram):

1. the first question concerns the ‘most effective’ style and is closed (only one out of 5 options)
2. the open question ‘Why?’ follows;
3. the indication of the ‘most frequently adopted’ sequence with the relative reason is required next.

In four cases, the language approach is exemplified by a statement regarding a prevalent behaviour, and the blended sequence of three open/closed questions is slightly differently formulated:

1. the first closed question is about the ‘most frequently adopted’ behaviour;
2. the open question ‘Why?’ follows;
3. the indication of an ‘alternative, favourite’ teaching practice is required next.

The first question mode aims at:

- a) forcing the teacher to choose the model considered most effective among those indicated;

- b) leaving the teacher free to describe the sequence of actions s/he performs most frequently.

The second question mode aims at:

- a) forcing the teacher to recognize the model s/he uses most frequently among those indicated;
- b) leaving the teacher free to describe the sequence of actions s/he considers the most effective.

These two different patterns are intended to highlight whether the teacher shows the same level of ‘awareness’ if:

- a) s/he is asked to motivate the effectiveness of a practice s/he regularly adopts;
- b) s/he is asked to highlight the effectiveness of a practice indicated as the best one, even if s/he does not adopt it.

In all ten cases particular care has been paid to formulating the application of each language teaching approach with the highest possible impartiality (even for the grammar/translation method!) and the greatest adequacy to an upper secondary school level. The questionnaire has been compiled in Italian to encourage teachers’ participation the most: extremely specialised terminology has been avoided in line with suggesting a good variety of practical solutions but, for example, no extremely innovative learning technologies. Fig. 1 and 2 reproduce all the questions around the issues of oral comprehension and oral interaction translated into English for the general readership; they also exemplify the two question patterns.


| | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. What strategies should be adopted to facilitate students' understanding of oral English?</p> | |
| <p>a) Identify the sequence of educational actions that you consider most effective among the models proposed below (1 choice only):</p> |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☉ I work on literary texts > I use audio-books > I provide the Italian translation to be sure of comprehension > I assess through prepared or <i>ex impromptu</i> translation. ☉ I use the dialogues in the coursebook > I provide while-listening activities > I propose other graduated oral texts > I assess through multiple choice, YES/NO questions or information gap filling tests. ☉ I require using English in class all the time > I constantly use audio-oral aids > we read every written text aloud > I assess comprehension through oral questions/answers or summaries. ☉ I propose musical inputs (from Nursery Rhymes to rap) > I invite listening to professional storytellers > I facilitate global comprehension > I assess through contents transcoding (from oral to visual, from poetry to narration or drama, etc.). ☉ I select the oral text in view of a significant task > I foster autonomous research on the internet > I scaffold linguistic understanding with content information > I assess through a final output (e.g. production of students' radio news, of a knowledge clip, etc.). | |
| | <p>b) Why is the sequence of actions you have indicated the most effective?</p> <p>c) Describe in the same way the sequences of actions that you adopt most frequently in your teaching practice (maximum 2 sequences) and indicate the reasons. What do you do and what do you ask students to do to increase their oral comprehension skills? Why?</p> |

Figure 1. The first question pattern


| | |
|--|---|
| <p>2. How would you help students interact orally with confidence?</p> | |
| <p>a) Indicate the practice you use most frequently with your students (1 choice only)</p> |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☉ I stimulate students' expressive freedom and linguistic creativity through games. ☉ I increase their vocabulary of English idioms and formulas. ☉ I strengthen and update their knowledge of grammar rules. ☉ I present them with a practical problem to be solved collaboratively. ☉ I expose them to as many communicative situations as possible. | |
| | <p>b) Why do you frequently adopt the indicated practice?</p> <p>c) Can you indicate an alternative practice that you prefer? What do you do and what do you ask students to do to improve oral interaction? Why?</p> |

Figure 2. The second question pattern

After piloting an earlier version thanks to a dozen critical friends' support, the questionnaire has targeted all orders of upper secondary schools. Teachers have been reached individually, through principals, through Communities of Practice, through LabForm-UniTus mailing lists. Since filling in the so configured questionnaire implied availability of time to carry out some research-action and a lot of self-reflection, several in-service training hours have been awarded when required.

4. The Survey Results

The questionnaire remained open between mid-January and mid-March 2019. The final numbers are as follows:

- 190 participants have been invited;
- 101 replies have been received;
- Regions involved: Lazio (48); Sicily (16); Piedmont (14); Campania (8); Lombardy (5); Umbria (4); Calabria, Emilia, Friuli, Trentino, Sardinia (1 each);
- schools involved: Technical Institutes (28); Lyceums (27); Vocational schools (8); others.

Some special attention is due to a comparison between the age of the participants and the declared years of school employment with steady positions. Even without elaborating precise statistics it is confirmed that the Italian teachers' average age is 54 with an insignificant number of under 30s. On the other hand, the number of teachers who have reached a steady teaching job in the past five years is about one third of the whole sample. If we connect the two data, it means that teachers in Italy are quite advanced in age before they ever enter the school with a stable position. It also means that most Italian teachers in service in these years derive their educational background from the old university system before the reforms due to the Bologna process and have never experienced pre-service training entrusted to universities at the beginning of this millennium.

Since the scope of the survey was to investigate into the teachers' methodological awareness and the consistency of their everyday practices, we have chosen

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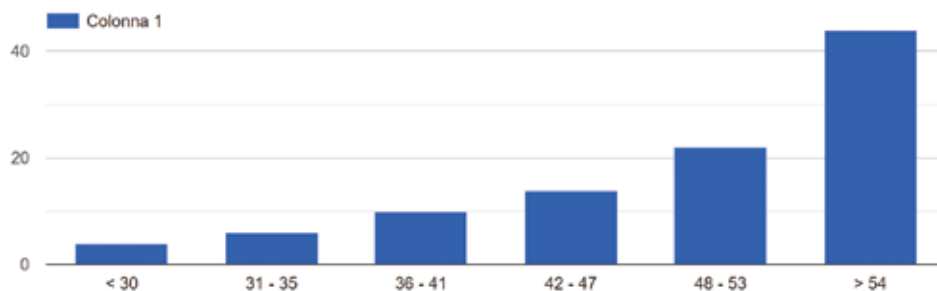


Figure 3. Teachers' ages

Anni di insegnamento in ruolo ...

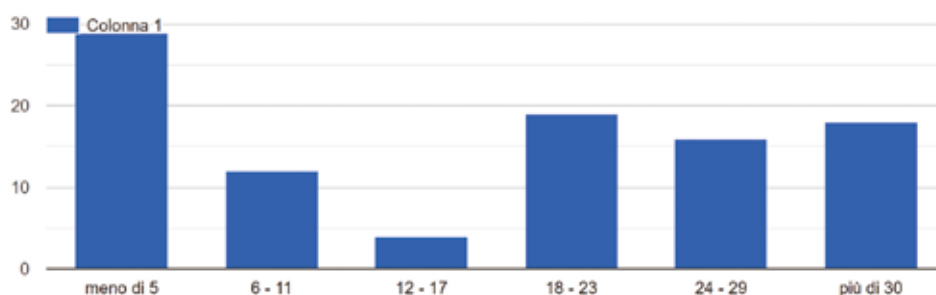


Figure 4. Teachers' years of permanent school employment

coherence among the closed and the open replies as the privileged indicator for a first data analysis. In detail: the closed answer on the ‘most effective’ procedure, with relative motivation, and the indication of the ‘most frequently adopted’ procedure, with relative motivation, have been judged to show explicit consistency when:

- the choices are adequately motivated by methodological-pedagogical principles and/or linguistic reasons;
- the choices indicate similar practices and/or refer to compatible methodological frameworks.

Conversely, they have been judged to show explicit inconsistency when:

- the choices are not motivated, or motivated by reasons of practical opportunity / students' preferences / speed in carrying out activities, etc.;
- the choices indicate very different practices, referring to antithetical methodological frameworks.

As to the qualitative evaluation of the questionnaire results, a detailed analysis has been carried out on the six issues formulated according to the first question pattern whereas the other four have offered for the moment only a kind of control group with the record of the main quantitative data. Indeed, a comparison of the overall answers related to the individual issues does not seem to provide significantly different results in terms of 'teacher awareness' when considering the two different question patterns. However, to confirm/disprove this assumption a longitudinal comparative analysis of all the answers provided by each single teacher is required. We have postponed this data processing to a later stage.

In the following figures (Figures 5-10) the main analytical results are collected, including for each issue:

- the general distribution of the percentages among the five different approaches;
- the indication of which approach/methodology scores the highest percentage for each issue;
- a comparison between the coherent and the prevalent answers within the majority group;
- two examples of open replies among the most (C.A.) and the least (I.A.) consistent ones with the chosen procedure (translated into English).

Each figure is followed by indication of the most diffused methodological problems observed in the open replies of the majority group.

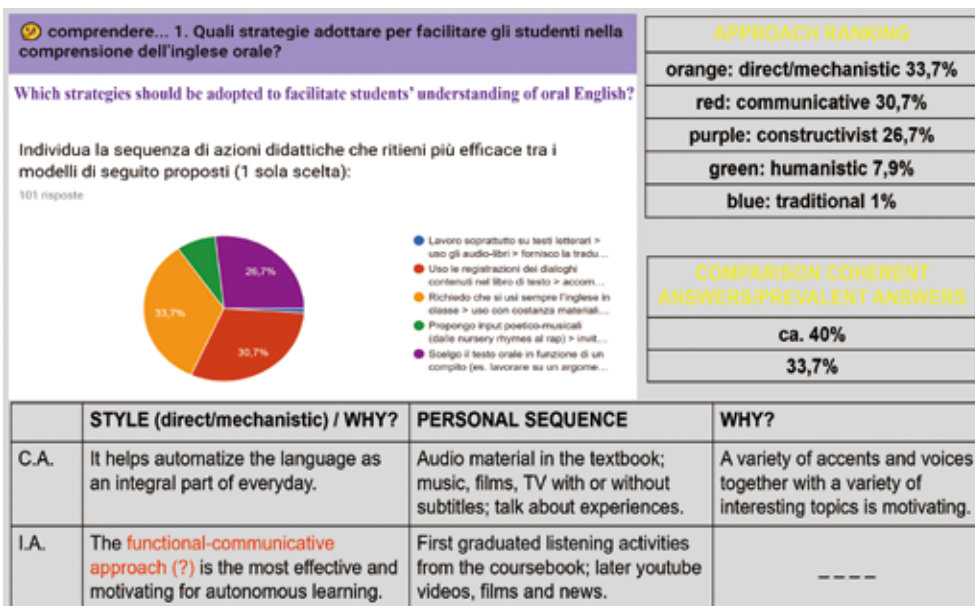


Figure 5. Question on oral comprehension

Among the most prevalent problems observed there is a certain confusion between oral and written texts, since reading aloud is often considered a good practice to improve oral comprehension, and, in case more communicative activities are chosen, this is mainly justified by their adoption in course books (Figure 5).

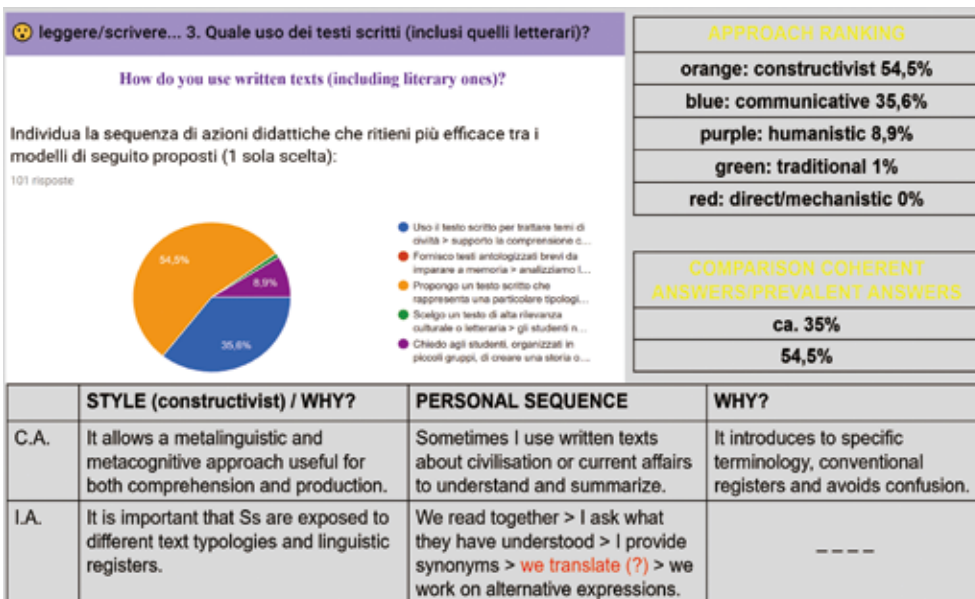


Figure 6. Question on use of written texts

Textual analysis is often confused with linguistic analysis, but even stranger for teachers who have chosen a constructivist approach is the tendency to justify its effectiveness by emphasizing the ideas of model and imitation rather than of task and function, both suggested in the input procedures (see Figure 6).

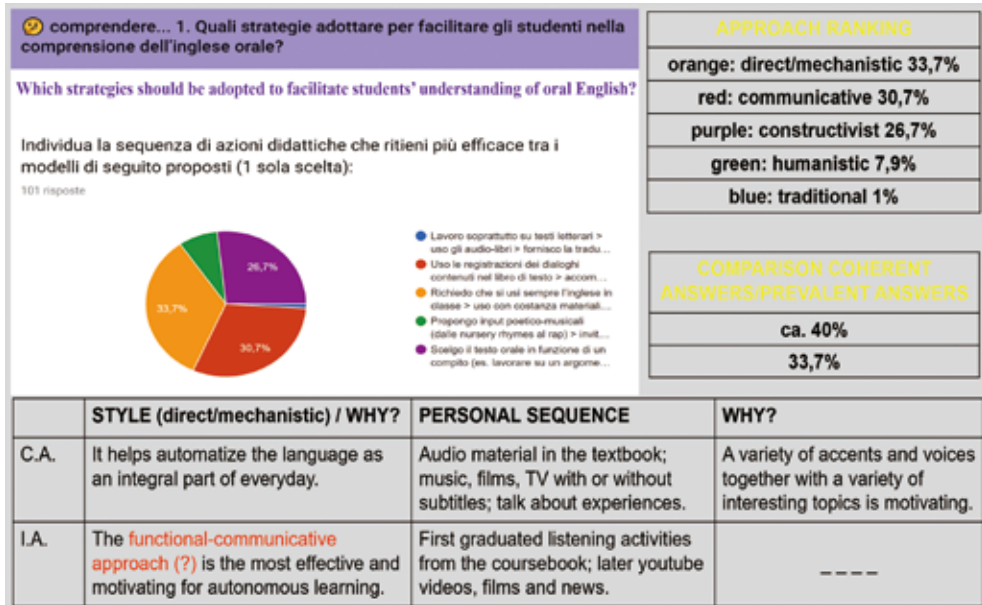


Figure 7. Question on linguistic awareness

In this case (Figure 7), the overwhelming majority pro communicative approach would speak in favour of a disappearance of the traditional grammar/translation method; yet, there is a frequent emphasis on the ‘safety’ of grammar while at times communicative functions are mixed up with grammar notions.

One of the most frequent reasons for the choice of a communicative sequence to enlarge vocabulary is to facilitate memorization (not, for example, the acquisition of contextual nuances of meaning, as suggested in the first example), and memorization is in turn practiced mainly through mechanic exercises focusing on nuclear lexicon (see Figure 8).

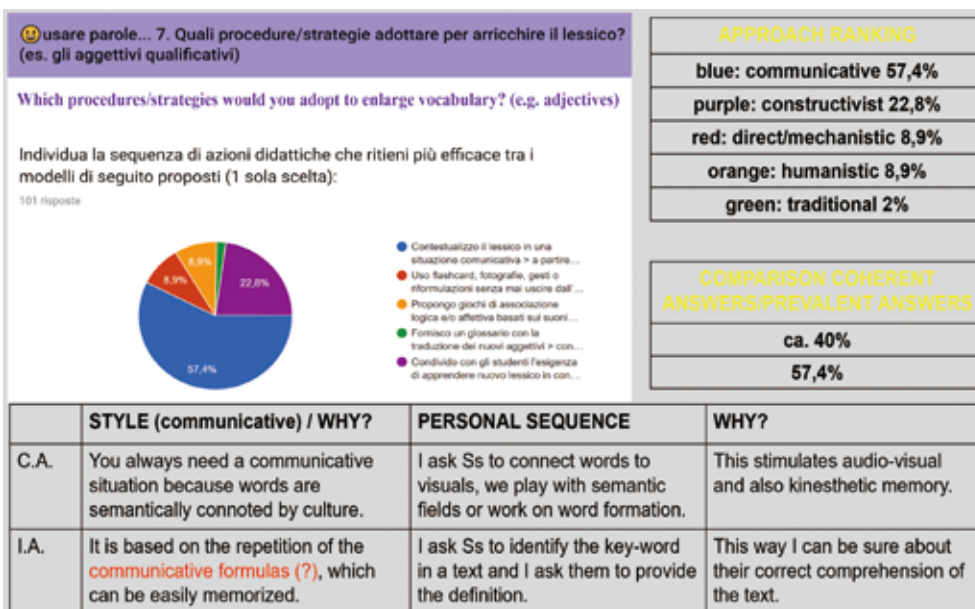


Figure 8. Question on vocabulary improvement

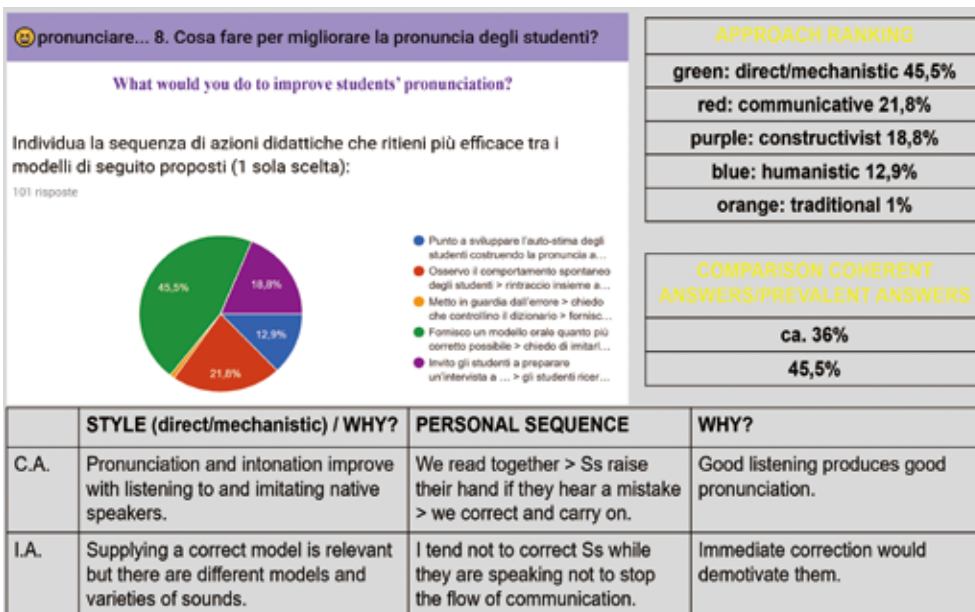


Figure 9. Question on pronunciation improvement

In this issue the old trust in standard and native-speakerism resurfaces together with the idea that reading aloud can be an effective way to face the hellish—for Italians—problem of English phonology, although almost no mention is ever done

to real difficulties, such as intonation and connected speech. The second example is presented to show how some of the teachers' choices are really incoherent, since their open replies criticise quite drastically the model sequence opted for (and in this case with good reason!).

As is easily observable, the sample shows the adoption of a great variety of approaches on these first five issues, with an interesting convergence of direct-mechanistic procedures on the two questions concerning oral comprehension and pronunciation, whose treatment is often solved with the exercise of reading written texts aloud in both cases. Whenever more communicative activities are proposed as alternative practices, they are normally justified by their presence in coursebooks (which is also true for many of the open replies given by the teachers who have chosen the communicative approach in question 1, making it second best).

The constructivist approach is chosen by a good majority in the question concerning how to use written texts, but it is also significantly the least coherently justified: in fact a careful reading of the open replies reveals that it is very often confused with a more 'normal' communicative method both as to the reason why it should be adopted and as to the alternative practices proposed. The communicative approach is overwhelmingly chosen in the two issues regarding language awareness and vocabulary increase, possibly due to the presence of the keyword in the procedure suggested ('communicative function/situation'). However, the doubt arises that in both areas the communicative approach is often bent to reinforcing traditional grammar notions or at worst to practising memorization and mechanical drills. Finally, it is remarkable that in no case is the number of open replies deemed consistent with the favourite approach greater than the inconsistent ones.

The final question (n. 10) containing a more direct description of each of the five language teaching approaches, always expressed with a flow diagram, bestows the highest score to the communicative approach although not with such heavy percentages as in questions 5 and 7. All in all, communicative procedures are preferred in four areas out of ten, including the one on oral interaction, where again the keyword was present in the option. The second more voted style in the general description is the humanistic one, which is surprising since procedures traceable to this approach are chosen only for two issues all along the questionnaire and none of

the two specifically about English language teaching but of a more general pedagogical character (motivation and integration of formal and informal learning).

Also, quite unexpected are two more data: the almost total disappearance of the direct-mechanistic methods considering the high marks it has achieved in at least two issues and, on the other hand, the 14,9% representation of the traditional sequence of actions referable to a grammar-translation approach, which has never scored more than 5,9% in single issues.

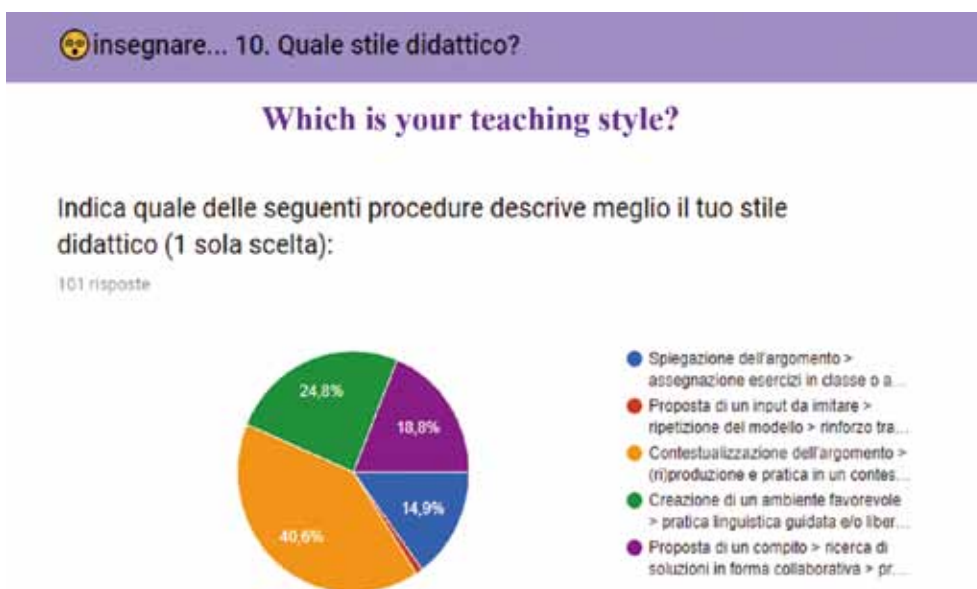


Figure 10. Question on the general teaching style

5. Conclusions

Our conclusions will focus on the two aspects which were the main objectives of such a survey: on the one hand the attempt at somehow figuring out prevalent trends in the teaching practices of Italian teachers of English and their level of awareness, on the other hand the adequacy of the questionnaire as conceived by us as a diagnostic tool.

The first results are obviously quantitatively limited, since 100 participants can hardly be considered a statistically relevant sample. They are also partial since at the moment the analysis has concerned six questions out of ten and even then, the whole bulk of open replies still needs to be fully read, meditated and interpreted in

detail. The open answers analysed have been collected issue by issue and choice by choice and thus the individual questionnaire has been disaggregated, but of course in order to measure coherence in each single teacher's choices it will be very interesting to analyse each personal set of questionnaire answers. What can be affirmed with certainty is that this tool has provided us with some general ideas—even in absence of replies—thus demonstrating its efficiency. Moreover, as to the second objective the questionnaire required a feedback from the participants in four steps (“1. What do you think of the questionnaire just compiled? 2. Have you acquired any new knowledge? 3. Why? 4. How would you improve it?”), which has helped at the same time developing/reinforcing an overview of the teachers' attitudes and suggesting some improvements.

As to the first objective, on **average**, a series of observations can be considered established:

1. The traditional grammar-translation method disappears from the single micro-teaching issues but returns in the description of the general teaching behaviour, although in a limited percentage;
2. The communicative approach prevails—if just because it is adopted by all the coursebooks in Italy—but it is often confused with the direct-mechanistic methods particularly when it comes to one of the most challenging abilities, i.e. oral comprehension;
3. Great importance is given to international certification, which has apparently had a major impact on the evolution of teaching methods;
4. The humanistic-affective approach, however, is almost unknown as an effective language teaching methodology;
5. Most open answers cannot be considered coherent with the choice of the approach expressed by the closed response;
6. The reasons provided are in general connected to practical opportunity (time constraint, students' liking, certification exams, etc.) or they are tautological;
7. Open answers reveal that teachers are not at ease in organizing teaching interventions following a systematic sequence of actions: not more than half a dozen participants use the flow diagram in their replies albeit explicitly required and a relevant number express their preference for

- syncretism;
8. A general poverty in the specific metalanguage of Language Teaching/Learning does not facilitate synthetic and yet thorough and clear communication of the adopted procedures;
 9. Somewhat deeper awareness and consistency are manifested by the replies in the groups of the constructivist and humanistic choices;
 10. Although the questionnaire does not aim at assessing any specific role of learning technologies in language teaching, you would be disappointed in the expectation to find some examples of the many innovative extant ICTs beyond the few mentioned in the questions.

The feedback expressed on the questionnaire by the participants is vastly positive: it is considered interesting, analytical, complex and thorough. The idea of using it as a tool of reflection on everyday teaching procedures has been caught by practically all the participants. There is even a majority (51%) who think they have learnt something new in terms of new techniques or teaching behaviours and that there are suggestions in the questionnaire to improve their own teaching. However, the fact that not more than 53% of the people invited accepted to respond has to be caught as an implied criticism.

If we add to this the very frequent criticism that the questionnaire is ‘too long’ and that there are too many open questions or the suggestions that the questions should be ‘smarter and quicker’ or that a bar indicating the progress in the compilation should be introduced, it is clear that not even the promise of awarding ten hours training is considered enough to give oneself the trouble to stop the day-to-day grind of the teaching routine and reflect on what one is doing. Surely not the best way to build up reflective processes and critical awareness! Nevertheless, although the general framework of the questionnaire will not be changed, since it is exactly in the comparison between closed and open questions that we have found the most interesting results, the formulation of some of the flow diagram activities can be improved so as to make them more clear-cut and differentiating the approaches and at the same time less explicit by avoiding biasing keywords. The suggestion to try and find more restricted language teaching problems, presenting them as if they were circumstantial study cases, can be accepted and implemented, too.

On a different plane is the suggestion coming from part of the teachers to separate between language teaching in the first two years and in the last three years of upper secondary school as well as the request to differentiate between school orders and curricula (i.e. between lyceums and technical or vocational schools). This is again an indication of the fact that language teaching/learning is not guided by the *a priori* choice of one privileged approach/methodology, which is then to be adjusted to different needs, contents and environments in terms of strategies and techniques. On the contrary, it is felt as subject to contingent factors like the ‘quality’ of the students, the alleged contents to be taught as if they were compulsory (literature vs. ‘simple’ or professional language), the amount of time in each curriculum, etc. In fact, the selection of issues in the questionnaire and even the suggested procedures which actualize each approach are so wide that they can be adapted to all teaching context and collaboration from the participants was required exactly to indicate their own alternative, more frequent, solutions according to their specific situations.

Finally, another series of remarks envisages the possibility either to choose more than one approach or to provide a wider range of options increasing the number of practical and detailed techniques in order to reflect individual teacher’s practices more faithfully. We take this reaction as the strongest evidence to the correctness of our original assumptions about Italian teachers’ teaching competences and preferences.

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Abstract

Although OCSE data and INVALSI testing results indicate some positive general trends in language learning, despite much economic effort and innovative policies, English proficiency remains quite disappointing in Italy. This paper will report on teachers’ everyday practices in order to evaluate if any connection can be established between poor results and variables such as English language teaching competence, adherence to an approach/methodology, consistency in facilitating strategies, awareness and reflective practice.

Keywords: English language teaching (ELT) approaches/methods, competence teaching, language awareness.

