LEARNING AND TEACHING ITALIAN IN A PLURILINGUISTIC APPROACH

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APRENDER E ENSINAR ITALIANO EM UMA ABORDAGEM PLURILINGUÍSTICA

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Abstract

In this article I want to demonstrate how students of Italian as a Foreign Language, if speakers of Portuguese or other Romance languages, have a good opportunity to expand their knowledge by consciously transferring their abilities and speeding up their learning process. The Italian teachers, both native and non native speakers, are challenged to adopt a plurilinguistic approach. Plurilinguism is not a simple juxtaposition of different languages competences, but a rather complex capacity and critical knowledge that involves metalingual awareness, active learning and autonomy of the students. Teachers's role is to facilitate, create and plan classroom activities which aim at the development of learning strategies, starting from critical contact points, lexicon and phonology, in an active research approach.

Resumo

Neste artigo, quero demonstrar como os estudantes de italiano como língua estrangeira, se falantes de língua portuguesa, ou de outra línguas românicas, têm uma boa oportunidade de ampliar seus conhecimentos ao transferir conscientemente suas habilidades e acelerar o seu processo de aprendizagem. Os professores italianos, falantes nativos e não nativos, são desafiados a adotar uma abordagem plurilinguística. Plurilinguismo não é uma simples justaposição de competências linguísticas, mas uma capacidade bastante complexa e conhecimento crítico que envolve a consciência metalingüística, a aprendizagem ativa e autonomia dos alunos. O papel do professor é o de facilitar, criar e planejar as atividades de sala de aula, que visam o desenvolvimento de estratégias de aprendizagem, a partir de pontos de contato críticos, léxico e fonologia, em uma abordagem de pesquisa ativa.

Texto integral

Introduction

In this work I want to demonstrate that students of Italian as a Foreign Language, if their mother tongue is a Romance language, like Portuguese speakers, have a great opportunity to speed up their learning process by consciously expanding, transferring and applying their previous linguistic knowledge and abilities to the target language. The teachers, both native and non-native speakers, are challenged to adopt a plurilinguistic syllabus, which includes emphasis on important contact points between languages upon which they are expected to reflect and analyze in order to activate metalingual awareness. Plurilinguistic competence, in fact, is not a simple juxtaposition of different languages competences, but a rather complex capacity and critical knowledge of the continuum that has a surplus value also in cognitive terms. In such a new teaching context, teachers as facilitators of the learning process are called to create and plan classroom activities which aim at the development of appropriate transfer strategies in a constant effort of action-research methodology.

The state of art

Teaching Italian language in Portugal is certainly an exciting experience that suggests how positively Portuguese students react to the approach and how much they appreciate a culture they feel familiar and friendly. A recent research of the Department of General and Romance Linguistics (DLGR) at the Faculty of Humanities, Lisbon University, has revealed a surprising increased number of students of Italian as a foreign language in these last three years. This trend is not only confirmed at Lisbon University, that receives the greatest number of all, but also in the other Universities and schools in the country. Particularly significant is the growth of intermediate level students, B1and B2 according to the standard descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference. Another striking feature is the cultural and professional motivations declared by students that trigger this positive trend in Italian Studies, as it is reported in a quite detailed way by Susana Rocha da Silva (2011). The approximate 480 students that attend Italian courses at Lisbon University, from the quite crowded initial levels up to the well balanced groups of B1 and B2, have already studied English, Spanish and/or French at secondary schools. In this way Italian comes to be more often their third or fourth foreign language.

Starting from these considerations, compared with the previous experiences I had in different countries and Universities throughout many years, I can surely affirm that these conditions are the right ones for implementing a high quality teaching approach as it is strongly wished in the Common European Framework of Reference for Modern Languages for teaching and learning in a plurilinguistic perspective and scientifically supported by the neuro-psycholinguistic theories.   North-American scholars, J. Cummins (2000), or Italian scholars like R. Titone (1987), P. Balboni (2006), all agree to claim that plurilingual users are more efficient in problem solving activities, more apt to extend their knowledge to other languages, and more flexible in moving to and through from global, holistic modality of thinking to analytical.

Portuguese speakers can greatly benefit from the competence in their mother tongue along with other languages' and transfer their knowledge of how certain mechanisms intervene in generating meaning and structures into Italian. If adequately oriented towards awareness and autonomous thinking they will be able to expand efficiently their cultural horizons and booster the management of the learning process. Language awareness can be developed by comparing and contrasting the linguistic systems involved, reflecting on possible structural and semantic interferences, deriving from mother tongue or other known foreign languages, analyzing and eventually correcting bad practices, even the frequent mistakes that usually occur during the *interlanguage* stage.

According to the contrastive theory, which was popular especially during the Sixties with the works of scholars such as R. Lado (1957) and C.C. Fries (1962), the main cause of typical errors produced by learners in their language learning process are attributed to the gap between the systems involved, L1 and Foreign Language, which usually affects a correct performance in the target language. In contrast to that conviction following trends and studies have greatly reduced this influence and have enlarged the range of possible causes intervening at various levels.

Responsible, conscious and autonomous learning is the final objective of any form of education that ensures and empowers the learners, in full respect of their personality and cultural background, with strategies and notions meant to enable them continuing their long-life learning process.

The assumption that a better use of already existing learning abilities and language knowledge in a context of well trained intellectual minds, as university students certainly are, is at the basis of a tailor-made syllabus and curriculum plan which better reflects and respects the learners, whose needs are at the centre of any teaching action. How can teachers contribute to all that?

Italian, a friendly language

Teaching a foreign language is a great responsibility. Language teachers not only have to master perfectly a language system and its cultural aspects, they are also expected to be professionally competent – familiar with a reasonable amount of theoretical approaches and methodologies to put adequately into practice - endowed with empathy with students, responsive to their cultural and educational needs. Our Portuguese students make things easier thanks to their good motivation and high curiosity towards *Italianity*, everything that expresses the best sides of Italian cultural life, including Italian language of course. They are attracted by the human values, fascinated by the Latin lifestyle, the huge cultural, artistic, historical legacy, that can be extensively considered a commonly possessed background. To better appreciate all that, it goes without saying, it is paramount to know the language that has produced and housed these universal masterpieces.

Motivation is the key word that allows the access to a world of wonders. Paraphrasing the words of R. Titone (1987) who declares his conviction that learners as individuals with their own intellectual, emotive and cultural styles should be constantly put at the centre of attention as active subjects, acquisition only occurs when affective factors of individuals intervene to create conscious or unconscious interest, keep minds active and so root the new input into long term memory. Motivation activates that *genetic-dynamic process* (Titone, 1987:48) which leads to a durable and efficient learning. J.H. Schumann (1997) explains how neurobiology can describe language acquisition, but promptly claims that no cognitive process takes place without emotional involvement. From a neurobiological view pleasant emotions highly contribute to activate cognitive processes. Our mind perceives new input, *stimulus*, operating a sort of evaluation, an *appraisal*, that filters the information we get and fixes it into memory, as in Krashen' s natural Approach and theory of affective filter had already consolidated language pedagogical practices. P. Balboni (1994) contributes to the discourse with a pattern of analysis that includes three types of factors affecting motivation: duty, need, pleasure. Pleasure is definitely the strongest one to play an important role for long term and deeply rooted language acquisition take place. Pallotti (1998) brings attention on social and psychological reasons in motivation studies, he classifies motivation as intrinsic, self-motivated vs. extrinsic, hetero-directed, externally motivated; and the kind of motivation instrumental to a specific project or profession to

be undertaken vs. integrative, or originated from cultural needs of personal development.

Languages in contact

The similarity of Portuguese and Italian, both derived from Latin, makes the learners feel more comfortable and self-confident when shifting from one system to the other. Especially at the beginner stage, they soon realize they can understand a good amount of written vocabulary in reading texts, remark consistent structural correspondences at structural level. At least in comparison to more distant languages they may expect less drawback and fewer difficulties. Of course it does not mean at all that they will automatically master the new language simply applying an expectancy grammar or transferring/adapting similar vocabulary from L1. On one hand undoubtedly it implies advantages, on the other it involves risks of mistakes, hyper-generalizations, false friends misuse, negative interferences from L1, that hinder efficient communication and accurate use of the language. A short list of high frequency false friends may give an idea of how two etymologically similar terms in the languages convey different meanings.

Here are some that appear quite often at some other point in learning Italian:

Italian	Portuguese
Salire	*Subir*, not *sair*
Squisito	*Delicioso*, not *esquisito*
Aula	*Sala*, not *aula*
Guardare	*Olhar,* not *guardar* or *aguardar*
Caldo	*Quente*, not *caldo*
Giorno feriale	*Dia útil*, not *feriado*
Pasta	*Massa,* not *pasta*

Italian is a friendly language for Portuguese speakers that is for sure but watch out for false friends. It is a good practice since the beginning to warn students there are some tricky structural or semantic similarities that may cause misunderstandings.

Another frequent cause of weak performance is spelling, particularly geminated consonants. Actually it is one of the most debated pedagogical issue also in Italian schools for native speakers. So we may consider it a rather peculiar aspect of the language that creates difficulties both to native and non native speakers. Apparently there are no fixed norms that regulate the usage of geminated consonants. What we can do with foreign students is to highlight some correspondences even though they do not cover the whole range of occurrences. At the end a good dose of patient care and a good dictionary will solve the dramatic points. At some extent until recently, before the New Spelling Reform, a valid help came from the old orthographical writing habits. Anyway it is still possible to recover some evidence from orthographical correspondences. I will show here only a short example.

Portuguese spelling	Italian spelling
-eit- *Leite, feito, peito*	*-att-* *Latte, fatto, petto*
-(c)t- *De facto, objectivo, arquitecto*	*-tt-* *Infatti, oggettivo, architetto*
While we have *: -d-* *Entrada, vida, fado*	*-t-* *Entrata, vita, fato*
With some exceptions*:* *Todo, visita*	 *Tutto, visita*

We can also find graphic and phonetic correspondences:

Portuguese spelling/pronunciation	Italian spelling/pronunciation
-lh- Folha, alho, melhor, muralha, palha But: familia	-gli- Foglio/a, aglio, filho, migliore, muraglia, paglia Famiglia
-nh- Sardenha, desenho, sonho, senhora	-gn- Sardegna, disegno, sogno, signora
-ção Atenção, decoração ção, informação, but: coração	-zione Attenzione, decorazione, informazione Cuore
-são, zão Compreensão, expressão, visão, razão	-sione, -gione Comprensione, espressione, visione, ragione
-ão Limão, cão, pão, Milão But: não, são	-one/ane/ano Limone, cane, pane, Milano But: no, sono

Some other spelling correspondences are easily detected in words that contain the consonant group –st/cr: instituto – istituto, inscrever – iscrivere with the loss of 'n'; or initial 'esp/c/t/: especial – special, escola – scuola, estudante – student with the loss of initial vowel 'e'. I would like to add a final remark about some feminine words in Portuguese that become masculine in Italian, namely those with –gem ending, like *passagem – passaggio, personagem – personaggio*; or *a ponte* (f) – *il ponte* (m), *a arvore* (f) – *l'albero* (m).

From good trends to good practices

Teachers have a good starting point when they consider the fact that students are speakers of a variety of romance languages. How can they use this favorable situation to grant a quality approach to Italian? We must find a way to bend students' good attitudes and motivation into successful learning/teaching practices. Teachers of Italian, with no more tedious discrimination between native or non native speakers, but simply professionally competent and proficient users of the target language, have a unique chance to become quality teachers. This is not about the kind of language they are to propose as a pattern of proficiency, because we are all well aware that standard Italian is only used in very formal contexts while neo-standard, with strong regional accent sometimes is the common language we are probably to hear in Italy. It is a question of the application of teaching/learning approaches adequately aimed at the fulfilling of specific pedagogical needs and conditions. Language matters but language users matter most. We are conscious that learners should constantly be at the centre of any activity and the realistic objective is to develop their learning abilities. It is always helpful to describe, analyze and reflect on structural and semantic uses in common or in contrast to L1 items. Transferring knowledge and strategies from L1 to Italian as a FL helps immensely to optimize their linguistic progress, along with their self-confidence and emotional reactions to the gratifying task of learning.

The Italian syllabus in a plurilingual/pluricultural perspective

The pre-existing linguistic and cultural competence every students owns is fundamental for the learning/acquisition development. In contemporary global society we are immersed in a multilingual reality. People from different countries, migrants or temporary residents, share the same geographical are for a long or a short period of time, they get in contact but not necessarily succeed in communicating to each other, because they are often limited to the use of their own mother tongue. Lisbon, especially the city centre, downtown 'baixa' is a multicultural example, like many other big cities in the world. What makes a community really intercultural is the ability of its members to use different languages according to the people involved in the communicative exchange. The feeling of sharing common values with a common language in a

sympathetic and cooperative way makes people get closer and more familiar. The otherness is experienced from an inner viewpoint. While simple multilinguism shows the simultaneous presence of different languages spoken by people in the same spot, plurilinguism is actual interaction of speakers using different languages to get in contact with others, to pursue their specific, social or cultural purposes. An appropriate example that comes to my mind is the everyday life of Erasmus and local students at the University of Lisbon, where each individual uses either their mother tongue or any vehicular or foreign language at their disposal. This is plurilinguistic experience in a genuine manifestation. Plurilinguistic competence is not a mere juxtaposition of single language into separate cognitive compartments. It is an area where knowledges and abilities overlap, combine and blend emerging in a new more complex entity. It has a surplus value deriving from the contact with different systems and cultures.

Plurilinguism is a revolutionary approach in language teaching and learning, it opens up a completely new perspective, with new objectives and practices. It is an authentic learner-centered approach because it gets started exactly from what the learners already know and master in order to push forward their learning process, transferring pre-existing abilities to new cultural contexts. It is also a democratic method that aims at the full development of personalities, respecting them as cultural individuals. What is the teacher's task? As facilitators of individuals' development they do their best to create the right learning conditions and promote language acquisition through well planned activities which engage the participants in active roles as real protagonists of the process. They encourage the use of autonomous and learning-to-learn strategies to make students conscious and responsible agents. In the preparation and selection of materials teachers will highlight the contact point between L1, or other known FL, and Italian. They also will try to activate the expectancy grammar, through the explicit requests of hypothesis about the linguistic mechanism involved. I say it is a revolutionary approach in so far as the previous methods where in a sense rather static, encouraged both students and teachers to be passive and repetitive rather than active creators and contributing to the learning progress. Teachers are deeply engaged in dynamic planning, exploration and implementation of techniques, systematically applied and assessed, sometimes re-planned in case of dissatisfactory results. Teachers are required to carry out a research of better ways to facilitate language learning. They

too are not any longer passive performers of fixed roles, with routine tasks, they are not any longer in their old position of authoritarian dispenser of knowledge. They do create learning conditions, they try to find and experiment new methods and techniques. That sounds quite challenging and puts them, and all of us, in a position of eternal learners and active researchers.

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