

Unveiling oral and writing skills of low-literate learners of L2 Italian: from research to teaching practice

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ABSTRACT

This contribution is meant to give an insight into the topic of L2 acquisition and teaching in the case of low-literate adult learners. To the aim, two applied researches will be presented, both focusing on L2 Italian: one investigates the oral skills of Senegalese learners with different educational backgrounds in the country of origin; the other concerns the assessment of L2 writing skills in a multilingual group of refugees and asylum seekers. The results of both studies contribute to look at this peculiar target of learners from an unusual perspective, unveiling skills that can often be “invisible” to L2 literacy teachers.

KEYWORDS

L2 Italian; low-literate learners; oral skills; writing skills; L2 teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to UNESCO most recent data (2017), worldwide there are still about 750 million people aged over 15 (women in 63% of cases) who didn't acquire reading and writing abilities in their first language or any additional language. Despite the great effort made by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics to obtain global data, the computation of this number is complicated by the absence of international standard tools to elicit data and to assess literacy levels and by the ambiguity of the definition of (il)literacy itself (Nitti, 2020)¹.

The lowest adult literacy rates (below 50% of the population) are observed in several countries of Southern Asia (49%) and sub-Saharan Africa (27%): Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone etc. The highest rates (around 100%) are reported in the other regions of Asia, Europe and Northern America (UNESCO, 2017).

Data from the last census in Italy (Istat, 2020) confirm that illiterates represent 0.6% of the population (339.585 individuals), while 4% (about 2 million) is composed of literates without history of formal education and 16% (almost 9 million) is represented by people who only attended primary school. In order to obtain an overall picture of the illiteracy phenomenon in Italy, these data should be accompanied by those regarding non-native, migrant population, coming also from the most "illiterate countries", especially in recent years. Unfortunately, official data on levels of literacy, education and languages of migrants in Italy are still lacking (D'Agostino, 2017; Mocciaro, 2019) and some information can be only derived from reports of the SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees). In 2018, 12% of 41.113 guests of reception centres in Italy are described as illiterates, 63% as having a brief educational history (corresponding to Italian primary and lower secondary schools), while 19% attended high school (or equivalent) and only 6% university (Cittalia, Fondazione Anci, Ministero dell'Interno, 2019). In 2019, 15% of 21.108 migrants learning Italian language in the SPRAR centres were taking pre-literacy classes while 38.5% were attending a basic course (Cittalia, Fondazione Anci, Ministero dell'Interno, 2020).

Despite the presence of low-literate and illiterate learners is not a new phenomenon for teachers in L2 Italian classes (Minuz, 2005), it has gained importance with the recent migrations towards Italy and other European countries. People from rural areas of the world, often affected by violent con-

¹ In this contribution the UNESCO definition of (functional) literacy will be adopted: «A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community's development» (UNESCO, 2005, p. 22).

flicts, are entering societies in which every kind of communication is based on the written medium and they are therefore experiencing a semiotic shock (Adami, 2009). For those, learning to read and write in the second language is an arduous task but it's obviously essential to be able to interact with the literate community and to conduct an autonomous life.

Literacy acquisition and literacy teaching in a second language have recently become subjects of interest in the academic European context, as demonstrated by the introduction of the Pre-A1 Level descriptors in the *Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2020), as well as in Italy (Borri et al., 2014)².

2. ILLITERATE OR LOW-LITERATE ADULT LEARNERS OF A SECOND LANGUAGE

L2 literacy classes for adults are usually very heterogeneous in terms of learners' profiles, with a great amount of variables of different nature. Minuz (2005) and Borri et al. (2014) proposed the following distinction in:

- pre-literate: learners whose first language doesn't have a written codification or it is not used as language of education in their country of origin;
- illiterate: learners who didn't develop reading and writing skills in any language;
- low-literate (or semi-literate): learners who have a brief history of formal education (usually less than five years). They are technically able to read and write in at least one language but they can't use literacy skills in daily communicative situations (they are not functionally literate).

Other linguistic variables that must be taken into account in an educational context are the kind of writing system of the learners' mother tongue (Latin, non-Latin, alphabetic, logographic) and the typological distance between L1 and L2, which can both have an impact on the perception of familiarity with the new language and particularly with the new written code to be learned. As we will observe in the following paragraph, also the didactic approach to which learners have been exposed in the few years of schooling could give important information to L2 literacy teachers.

Moreover there could be a high variability also in terms of oral abilities already acquired in the second language (null, initial, basic or intermediate).

Finally, personal variables (such as age, motivation, presence of disabilities or experience of trauma) and contextual factors in the country of arrival

² Previous researches mainly focused on L2 English and Dutch have been carried out especially by members of the international association LESLLA (Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults) founded in 2005.

(nature and frequency of contacts with the L2, domains of use of the second language) can obviously influence the L2 acquisition process.

Pre-literate, illiterate and low-literate learners of a second language are usually described in literature as complex and difficult learners. Some of their features are:

- the slowness in the process of second language acquisition, with frequent failures in achieving high levels of L2 competence and obtaining official language certifications, so important for them in order to regularize their situation in the host country (Kurvers & Stockmann, 2009);
- the lack of metalinguistic skills both in L1 and L2 and the difficulty in focusing on linguistic forms instead of on their meanings (see, among the others, the studies on grammatical judgment by Van de Craats, Kurvers & Young-Scholten, 2006);
- the scarcity of abstraction ability, due to a concrete, pragmatic way of thinking, closely connected to objects and experiences that can be directly observed (on this topic, see the study on syllogism by Kurvers, 2002);
- the frequent lack of logical and numeracy skills;
- peculiar educational needs, also regarding the developing of motor and spatial orientation skills and, of course, of competencies related to formal classroom expectations and to studying techniques and learning strategies (Ardila, Roselli & Rosas, 1989; Minuz, 2005);
- an uncertain motivation to second language learning, both instrumental and integrative, that in some cases can be easily undermined by a sense of frustration and insecurity due to a previous unsuccessful history of formal education.

According to the European guidelines (Council of Europe, 2017) L2 teaching approach in the case of this specific target must necessarily be learner-centred³. Taking into account the characteristics and the communicative needs of learners, L2 literacy teachers must propose educational paths strongly linked to the concreteness of learners' lives outside the classroom context (Peyton, Moore, Young 2010; Brichese, 2018). Adults must be made aware of the objectives of the language acquisition process, in which learning to read and write in the L2 means also to develop linguistic autonomy, self-confidence and self-esteem. Valorising learners' past experiences and (also poor) linguistic abilities previously developed in formal or informal contexts of education and in any language become therefore necessary and essential.

In this respect, two studies conducted at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and focusing on L2 Italian low-literate learners will be presented and discussed in the following paragraphs.

³ For a recent in-depth look at the topic of L2 Italian literacy teaching, see Caon & Brichese, 2019.

3. UNVEILING ORAL SKILLS: THE CASE OF SENEGALESE LEARNERS OF L2 ITALIAN

The first is a study conducted by Maffia & De Meo (2015) aiming at investigating the oral skills of low-literate Senegalese learners of L2 Italian.

Senegalese immigrants in Italy represent a small community: in 2020 they were 106.198 (2.1% of all foreign population – Istat, 2020), mostly resident in Northern regions of the country and represented by adult and not married men. Nevertheless, they have always been and still are a very visible minority group, especially for their common occupation as local street vendors and for their strong ability to create community based support structures and link with other ethnic groups (de Filippo, 2003).

Senegalese usually present a rich sociolinguistic repertoire, as it is often observed in people from countries with a history of colonization. In Senegal, French, in the two varieties of Standard and Non-standard, is the linguistic legacy of the colonial period, with the former usually associated with high education and prestige, the latter usually spoken in market places and other informal situations (Ngom, 1999). French is until today the official language of the country although it is spoken only by 10% of the population. The most widely spoken language is Wolof instead, which is the first of several national languages (Pulaar, Mandinka, Noon, Serer, Soninke, Arabic etc.). All these languages present a high vitality in oral communication but they have received a standardised Latin orthography only after the independence, in the early Seventies. Moreover, they are nowadays in the process to be introduced in the Senegalese education system, but exclusively in the first years of primary school (Universalia, 2019). As a consequence, in Senegal literacy skills are developed in a second language, French or Arabic, depending on the kind of school attended. While French schools propose a “European” didactic approach, that gives priority to the acquisition of literacy abilities and to the development of metalinguistic awareness, the educational approach adopted in Qur’anic schools (*daaras*) is mainly based on oral learning and memorization, that conversely gives priority to oral skills (speaking and listening), trained through the reciting of Qur’an (Gandolfi, 2003).

3.1 PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

In order to evaluate if and how these different educational contexts in the country of origin could influence the acquisition of L2 Italian oral skills, 20 subjects were involved in the study: 10 learners who attended French school in Senegal and 10 learners who attended Qur’anic school (average of 7 years school attendance for all). They were all male, aged between 20 and 40, liv-

ing in Italy for a period ranging from 1 to 7 years and they all indicated Wolof as their mother tongue. At the moment of the research they were all attending L2 Italian classes offered by a voluntary association in Naples. Their literacy levels in French and Italian languages were assessed through standardised tests and resulted very poor. A test for Arabic was not administered because they all declared they were unable to read and write Arabic or to use it in real communicative situations.

An elicited imitation task was constructed and administered to all the participants: they were asked to listen once to 18 Italian utterances and to imitate them immediately after, as accurately as possible, regardless of the effective understanding of their meaning. The model utterances presented different degrees of complexity in terms of morpho-syntactic structures, length, lexical frequency and prosodic contours (assertion, questions and orders).

The entire corpus of imitations was object of two different kinds of analysis:

- an error analysis, conducted by a group of 10 experienced teachers of L2 Italian without any competence in phonetics, aimed at evaluating L2 utterances in terms of accuracy and kinds of errors;
- a spectroacoustic analysis, conducted by a phonetician through specific software, aimed at observing rhythmical and prosodic characteristics of Senegalese learners' imitations, in comparison to the utterances produced by the Italian models.

3.2 RESULTS

The results of the error analysis showed a higher level of accuracy in the imitations produced by French school learners, when compared to the Qur'anic school learners' productions. This difference in the performance of the two groups of subjects, somehow expected, was probably due to superior (even if very basic) analytic skills developed by learners in the context of French school education. Both in the case of simple and complex model utterances, French school learners were able to produce a higher number of complete and correct imitations, with lower percentages of errors, particularly in the case of segmental pronunciation and lexicon.

However, the spectroacoustic analysis revealed a "hidden" skill in the group of learners who attended in Senegal the Qur'anic school. Compared to the other learners, they were found to better imitate the intonational contour of simple and short model utterances, especially in the case of assertions and questions. Moreover, even when they were not able to correctly or entirely reproduce long and complex Italian utterances, they did not interrupt the imitations but instead they used a peculiar strategy in order to preserve the rhythmical structure of the original utterance: they correctly imitated the first

and the last syllables of the model utterances, while in the central portion they produced a meaningless sequence of hypo-articulated syllables, called “mumbling”, as in the two examples reported below (Maffia, Pettorino & De Meo, 2015).

Model utterance: *Fossi in te, non avrei la presunzione di essere impeccabile.*

Imitation (speaker 15): *Fossi in te xxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx cabile*

Model utterance: *Perché usi ancora il cucchiaino di plastica?*

Imitation (speaker 18): *Perché usare xxx di plastica?*

This study unveiled oral skills in a group of Senegalese learners of L2 Italian, specifically linked to the prosodic competence developed in the context of Qur’anic school education that can be normally “invisible” to teachers. A pilot study on L2 Italian teaching to this specific target of learners demonstrated that taking into account their peculiarities, grounding on them the entire educational path, can have a positive effect on language learning motivation and improve L2 literacy acquisition process (Maffia & De Meo, 2017).

4. UNVEILING WRITING SKILLS: FUNCTIONAL ADEQUACY IN L2 ITALIAN TEXTS OF VULNERABLE LEARNERS

In this paragraph the results of another study focusing this time on the writing skills development of low-literate refugees and asylum seekers learners of L2 Italian are reported (De Meo, Maffia & Vitale, 2019). The low level of literacy in the first language and, often, a brief and uncertain history of formal education in the country of origin are only two of the several aspects that contribute to the definition of vulnerability of this group of L2 learners. Personal features such as experience of trauma, anxiety, depression, lack of concentration, fragility, perception of invisibility and isolation can characterize refugees and asylum seekers, and have, of course, a negative impact on the motivation to L2 learning (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010; SPRAR 2010; Gordon 2011; Galos et al., 2017; Nitti, 2018).

The research originated from the observation of frequent failures in passing the written task of L2 Italian Certification Exams in classes for refugees and asylum seekers at the CLAOR, the Linguistic Centre of the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. The study had, therefore, a twofold objective: firstly it intended to monitor the development of writing skills in low-literate vulnerable learners of L2 Italian in the context of formal education; moreover and secondly it meant to test the effectiveness of different assessment methods of L2 Italian writing skills for this specific target.

4.1 THE CORPUS AND THE TWO SCALES

In order to reach these goals, 50 refugees and asylum seekers were involved in the research (only 5 women), coming from 16 different countries of Northern and sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia and with 20 different mother tongues (Arabic, Bambara, Bangla, Bissa, Mandinka, Urdu, Wolof, Yoruba etc.). A group of low-literate learners (0-8 years of schooling in the home country) was distinguished from a literate group (9-18 years), in order to understand if the variable level of literacy could have an impact on the development of writing skills and on the effectiveness of different assessment methods.

At the moment of the research, all the involved learners were hosted in an Extraordinary Reception Centre and in SPRAR centres in Naples and they were all attending L2 Italian basic classes. Their writing skills were monitored in a period of six months through the regular administration of written tasks. A corpus of 450 written productions, composed by narrations, descriptions and written interactions, was collected and all the texts were evaluated by experts using two different rating scales:

- a traditional scale, focused mainly on formal accuracy and in which the analytical criteria used in L2 Italian Certifications were considered and rated (language use, morpho-syntactic correctness, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation);
- a functional adequacy scale, assessing the ability of the writer to successfully transfer information and the socio-pragmatic appropriateness of his/her production. This scale is composed of four global dimensions - content, task requirements, comprehensibility, coherence and cohesion (Kuiken & Vedder, 2017; Vedder, 2016).

4.2 RESULTS

The first result of the study was a confirmation that writing skills development of low-literate refugees and asylum seekers learners of L2 Italian is a long and slow process. Nevertheless, a specific focus on L2 writing in the classroom context was found to be very helpful to improve quality and appropriateness of written productions in the second language.

Furthermore, through the application of the functional adequacy scale, higher and more stable scores were obtained, even at the very beginning of the observation and especially in the assessment of low-literates' productions and in the case of narrations and written interactions. While with the traditional scale the low scores given by raters in particular to the parameter of

morpho-syntactic correctness resulted in very negative evaluations, the functional adequacy scale appeared to be a reliable and efficient tool for valorising also poor writing skills, instead of underlying the limits of low-literates' productions.

Such results led to suppose that an assessment method focused on socio-pragmatic appropriateness of a written (but also oral) production, independently from the formal accuracy of grammatical structures, could be effectively used in classroom context but above all in L2 Italian Certification Exams for low-literate vulnerable learners, at least for A1 and A2 levels. This could avoid further educational failures that, in the case of this specific target, risk to have a disastrous effect on second language learning motivation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this contribution two different studies have been presented: the former focusing on the oral skills in the L2 Italian of Senegalese learners; the latter on the assessment method used to evaluate written texts produced by a heterogeneous group of refugees and asylum seekers attending Italian language classes offered by reception centres in Naples.

Despite being very different in terms of objectives, methodologies and linguistic materials analysed, the two studies have at least three aspects in common.

The first one regards the participants involved: adult low-literate learners of a second language, a target that has been neglected for a long time, drawing only recently the attention of academic community in Europe and also in Italy, due to the general growth of the migrant population and to the influx of refugees and asylum seekers also from countries with low literacy rates.

The second aspect is that both studies represent attempts to change perspective when describing low-literate learners' abilities: instead of pointing out to what they lack, these researches try to unveil and valorise what they can actually do with language, their "hidden" and maybe unexpected oral and writing skills.

Furthermore, what the two studies are also sharing is that they are deeply rooted in the L2 classroom experience and have important implications for teaching, constituting metaphorical bridges between the university and the different contexts in which L2 Italian courses are often provided, such as reception centres or voluntary associations.

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