CAN THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING ITALIAN TO FOREIGNERS CONTRIBUTE TO THE TEACHING OF ROMANIAN TO FOREIGNERS?

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Abstract

Italy has a long experience in the teaching of Italian as a second language (that is, to foreigners in Italy: more than 5 million foreigners live in Italy at the moment) and as a foreign language in the world, where there are some 80 million people of Italian origin.

The paper discusses the main issues of the Italian-to-foreigners experience to the Romanian and Moldovan scholars dealing with the teaching of Romanian as second or foreign language: (a) the definition of the syllabus, (b) b. the evolution of L1 Romanian teachers as L2 or LS Romanian teachers, (c) the nature of teaching materials, (d) the role of culture and civilization.

Key words: *Italian as a Foreign Language, Italian as a Second Language, Romanian as a foreign language, Romanian as a Second Language, Foreign Language Teaching.*

Where to look

A huge and high-level scientific literature on languages teaching is available in Italy. Italian research in educational linguistics from 1960 to today is reported in a large open access online bibliographic tool: *Bibliografia di Linguistica Educativa in Italia, BLEI*, on the website of the Center for Research in Educational Linguistics of the University of Venice (www.unive.it/crdl); every two months a newsletter, *ReteEducazioneLinguistica*, informs scholars and teachers about new publications (subscription: balboni@unive.it) and every year the annual update of the BLEI is sent around in the newsletter and is published in various journals (one in open access is *Educazione Linguistica – Language Education, EL.LE*, Rivista EL.LE). This corpus concerns:

a. *Italian L1*, that is, as a *mother tongue*: since Italian teachers who have always taught Italian L1 often teach Italian to foreigners, this research helps understand their interests and their training, but above all their *forma mentis*, way of thinking about teaching a language;
b. *Italian L2*, that is, as a *second language* taught to foreigners in Italy: these studies can be searched in the database by asking *L2* or *seconda*. Students of Italian L2

(mostly migrants and Erasmus students or the like) have a daily exposure to ungraded Italian and to Italian culture: it is the field of study where research is most widespread today in Italy, given that there are over 5,000,000 regular immigrants and about 10% of students in schools are foreigners; in Moldova and Romania the number of immigrants is much lower so the problem is probably less felt;

c. *Italian FL*, that is, as a *foreign language*, in the world: this area of research can be searched in the database with *straniera, stranieri* or *world*. Unlike the second language, the foreign language has little input, only a few hours a week, but this is graded. In reality, this item should be broken into two:
   - *foreign language*, FL, for students who do not have an Italian family background: they study Italian out of cultural, professional, or study interest;
   - *ethnic language*, EL, which is studied by descendants of Italian emigrants: they are convinced that they already know Italian, yet they often know local varieties or dialects, their Italian derives from that of grandparents or parents and therefore is obsolete, as well as being reduced in quantity and quality. It is a large audience of students in the world and it is very difficult to deal with in a course. Italian emigration is of two types: on the one hand there are the children and grandchildren of people who migrated after the war, on the other hand there are the children of today's emigrants (some 120,000 per year), who are constantly in contact with Italy through whatsapp or other platforms: Romanian and Moldovan emigration is mainly of this second type;

d. *foreign languages* taught in Italy to Italian students; much of this research concerns English as a lingua franca, so it is not useful for our purposes;

a. *classical languages*, i.e. Latin and Greek. The Italian idea of Language Education includes all the languages taught in the school system.

What to look for

In which areas can scholars and teachers of Romanian as a foreign or second language find interesting contributions? The points that seem relevant to us are:

a. the definition of the syllabus

The *Common European Framework* and its *Companion Volume* provide the general scheme for language teaching and, above all, language certifications; all teaching materials and courses of Italian as a second and as a foreign language have been built to meet the requirements of the A1, A2, B1, B2 syllables of the Council of Europe.

In fact, in many cases there has been an uncritical acceptance of the syllabi, with two consequences:

- for thirty years we have given up discussing a theoretical model of "Communicative Competence in Italian", without which we end up forgetting,

for example, the problem of nonlinguistic communicative codes, such as gestures, interpersonal distance, the communicative use of objects (clothing, gifts, food and drink, status symbols, etc.), all necessary to communicate; as well as reflections on pragmatic, social, intercultural grammars, all things that are mentioned in the *Framework* but which do not appear in the course programs and teaching materials;

- students who enroll in Italian courses simply want a certification, believing that only what is going to be certified is useful to learn. Without a reflection shared with students on the nature of communicative competence (which for students becomes: "what does it mean to know a language?"), students consider useless not only non-linguistic codes but also the whole dimension both of daily *culture* and of Italian *civilization*, that is, the values that create the Italian identity, in our case, the Romanian identity, in yours;

b. the evolution of L1 Romanian teachers as L2 or LS Romanian teachers

There are many problems to overcome in the process form L1 to L2/FL teaching:

- the L1 teacher *enhances* the students' competence, while the L2 and LS teacher helps *creating* competence, guides the acquisition of communicative competence in Romanian;
- the L1 teacher does not use a graded language, that is, A1, A2, Romanian etc.; L1 teachers have no idea (and do not need to) about acquisition sequences, which on the contrary are fundamental in non native language aquisition: language in fact is not acquired on the basis of what the teacher and the teaching materials present, but rather based on a natural order of acquisition that is specific to each language: if a different sequence from that implied in a language is followed, the mind does not acquire permanently but only temporarily: useless work. The acquisition sequences of Italian are quite studied, although there is still much work to be done: I do not know if there exists a research corpus on Romanian acquisitional linguistics, but what is known should be shared with the authors of teaching materials and with L1 Romanian teachers who become LS or L2 Romanian teachers;
- there is also a different cognitive perspective: the L1 teacher works at the is analysis and reflection on something known, L1 Romanian, and the goal of hie/her work is *correctness*; the foreign language teacher work on an unknown language, which therefore cannot be analysed, and the aim of his/her aork is *pragmatic effectiveness*, at least up to B1, and only at that point does the issue of *correctness* become central;
- we need a different paragraph to point out a subtle but fundamental difference: for the L1 teacher, correctness is formal, i.e., orthographic, morphological, syntactic, while for the L2 and LS teacher, the most important fields where

correctness is necessary are both social, pragmatic, cultural correctness and non-linguistic correctness, that is the correct use of kinesics, proxemic and objectemics.

c. the nature of teaching materials

In L1, the main type of teaching material is the paper book, with other supports such as input from essays, literature, newspapers. Essentially it is written language to reason about, or to summarize, paraphrase, etc.

LS materials also have a book, which serves as a guide, but they have videos, audio files, online sites linked to the manual, exercises with computer automatic correction, blogs, chats, etc. Moreover, the impact of artificial intelligence is changing the nature and role of translation, both as a skill to be developed from B2 onwards and as a teaching technique to enhance the quality of vocabulary and to work on the intercultural dimension.

d. the role of culture and civilization

Traditionally, we talk about civilisation and culture in language teaching, uniting *culture* and *civilization* as synonyms, even though they are two different things, with enormous consequences in the teaching of non-native languages:

- *culture* is a general word, which in anthropology as well as in everyday language includes everything that is not "nature"; in language teaching, however, *culture* indicates everyday culture, the way of life of a people: if one does not master it, effective communication is impossible; culture is not an accessory element in a manual or a course or a lesson, yet students, who are mostly interested in certification, seem not to realize that culture is as important as language, and in some situations even more than the language they are learning because cultural mistakes are more dangerous than language mistakes and can lead to abort communication without any possibility to resume it;
- *civilization*, which comes from the Latin word that indicated the culture of cities, that is "high" culture, indicates those cultural models that constitute the identity of a people, its way of thinking, its way of being.

Students start a language course willing to learn to communicate and therefore it is possible to convince them to include the necessary elements of everyday culture in order to be able communicate effectively, but once the B1 survival level is reached, most students stop attending foreign language course, whatever the language taught; only those students who come into contact with *civilization*, with what Stendhal called *le génie d'un peuple*, do not settle for a threshold level B1 but want to continue, to deepen their knowledge of the language.

In the teaching of Italian to foreigners, civilization, understood as the founding values of "Italianity", has often been confused and replaced by the great cultural history of Italy, from Dante to Michelangelo to Verdi and Fellini: *civilization* is more complex,

it concerns the values, the way of being “Italians” centuries before Italy was united in 1861.

In Europe, as far as I can see, everyday Romanian/Moldovan *culture* is unknown, and Romanian/Moldovan *civilization* is reduced to a few stereotypes, often mixed up with Balkan or Hungarian elements: there is a great deal of work to be conceived and designed, even before being implemented as audios and videos to be used in manuals of Romanian for foreigners.

I was asked to share my 50 year long experience in the teaching of Italian to non native students, and I hope the points – which in my opinion are key points that cannot be eluded – can help scholars, teachers, authors and publishers working for a more effective teaching of Romanian as a second and a foreign language.