

ICT resources and language learning: results of a survey on the actual use of ICT in teaching Italian as a second language

Francesca Maria Dagnino¹, Mauro Tavella²

¹Institute of History of Mediterranean Europe (ISEM), ²Institute for Educational Technology (ITD)
Italian National Research Council-CNR (Italy)
dagnino@itd.cnr.it, tavella@itd.cnr.it

Abstract

The role of technologies in teaching and learning a second language is widely recognized and a variety of ICT applications is also available for supporting the teaching of Italian L2; nevertheless, a specific research focus on the actual diffusion and use of ICT is still lacking. This paper reports data on the use of ICT tools in the field of the teaching of Italian as L2 to immigrant students in compulsory education. We tackled this issue by carrying out a survey within a sample of Italian primary and lower secondary schools.

This paper aims to report on current teaching practices in the field of teaching Italian L2, and pays special attention to the use of ICT tools. In particular, the survey was aimed to assess whether and how software products are currently used and also to understand which specific software products are used and which are the teachers' feelings as to their potential, effectiveness, strengths and weakness.

We actually collected 70 questionnaires from a casual sample of schools from three Italian regions; the schools were selected on the grounds of immigrant students distribution.

The results of the survey account for the teachers' positive attitude towards the use of ICT tools in the field, but also show their moderate use. This fact appears to be mainly due to logistic difficulties (e.g. unavailability of pc labs) and, possibly, to the lack of specific teachers' information and training on the existing ICT resources and their adoption in school contexts. The latter factor, though, was not always explicitly declared by responding teachers. The research findings provide helpful hints for a more widespread and effective use of ICT tools, for future specific teacher training actions and for the design and development of more sound and effective tools

1. Introduction

As highlighted in the last European Commission communication on immigrant integration [1] most European countries present a growing proportion of students with a migrant background and the school system has to adapt to this increasing diversity in order to deliver high quality education for all.

According to the official data of the Italian Ministry of Education, the number of foreign students in Italian schools has been steadily increasing in the last fifteen years, reaching 629.360 immigrant students in the school year 2008/2009 compared to 59.389 in the school year 1996/1997. Most of them attend primary and lower secondary schools and correspond to 8% of the whole population [2]. The high presence of first generation immigrant students in compulsory education has raised the issue of the teaching of Italian as a second language (L2), not only to satisfy the first communicative and literacy needs but also to allow the learning of the language for study purposes in order to guarantee an adequate level of instruction.

The teaching of Italian L2 is a specific educational area that requires adequately prepared human resources and specific tools. The involved population is heterogeneous as to origin, mother tongue,

level of instruction in the country of origin, learning paces. Often teachers face the challenge of thinking and designing personal learning paths according to the needs of each student.

Unfortunately, the teaching of Italian L2 is often in charge of curricular teachers, sometimes without any training or experience in the field.

As to educational tools, in the last decade a considerable amount of resources was developed by major publishers [3], nevertheless, teachers complain the lack of educational material for some languages or ages (as teenagers) and of self-learning tools.

It is a common thought that ICT tools could be very useful in this field [4]. As a matter of fact they could provide some advantages from the cognitive and motivational point of view. Due to multiple competences to be developed in language learning (speaking, writing, listening and reading comprehension) technology plays an important role in this teaching area [5]. Nevertheless, the use of technology in the teaching of Italian as a second language doesn't seem so diffused and integrated in the educational practice

2. The survey

Starting from these givens, a group of researchers of the Institute of Mediterranean History (ISEM) and the Institute for Educational Technology (ITD) of the Italian National Research Council (CNR) is carrying out a study on the use of educational technology to support the teaching of Italian L2. The research activity is focused on technology for reading and writing abilities enhancement and is part of the "Migration Project" of the Cultural Identity Department of CNR.

The first phase featured a survey on the actual use of technology in teaching Italian L2 to immigrant students; it involved a casual sample of primary and lower secondary schools located in three Italian regions - Liguria (in the northern area), Marche (in the centre) and Sardinia (an island). Data were collected from different areas considering that immigrants are not evenly distributed in all the country regions [2].

The survey was conducted by means of an ad hoc questionnaire directed to headmasters.

2.1 Participants

The research activity involved ninety primary and lower secondary schools. The latter were selected by means of a stratified sampling procedure¹, taking into account the immigrant students distribution in each region. Schools without immigrants were excluded from the procedure.

Sixty three schools answered the questionnaire, thirty four primary and twenty nine lower secondary. The schools involved have a medium percentage of 10,7% immigrant students (the lowest percentage is 1% and the highest 43,3%). The schools have an average of three newly arrived students, i.e. students attending the Italian school from less than a year.

2.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed to better understand some important aspects in Italian L2 teaching, with special attention to ICT use.

¹ The school population of the three considered provinces was organized on the grounds of the percentage of immigrant students according to 2008-2009 data supplied by Regional School Offices: less than 10%; between 10 and 20%; between 20 and 30%; over 30%. A sample of schools proportional to the total of schools in each sector, was extracted from each sector through a number generator without repetition numbers.

The questionnaire encompasses 28 items, most of which are of the multiple choice type; it consists of three main sections: general information on the specific school context; educational approaches adopted to teach Italian L2 to immigrant students; specific educational resources used with special reference to ICT-based tools. The questionnaire addresses four key issues:

- a. WHO is in charge of sustaining the acquisition of Italian L2
- b. WHERE and WHEN educational actions mainly take place
- c. WHICH tools are employed in the teaching of Italian L2
- d. WHICH ICT-enhanced tools are used in the teaching of Italian L2

2.3 Results

a. WHO is in charge of sustaining the acquisition of Italian L2

Despite the specificity of the subject, in most schools (47 out of 63) Italian L2 is taught by curricular teachers. In three of them class teachers are supported by a colleague with a specific training, in fifteen of them by an external professional (a teacher or a cultural mediator or educator).

No schools with a high percentage of immigrant students (over 20%) have a trained teacher in the staff and in almost 1/3 of these schools teaching is in charge of curricular teachers only.

b. WHERE, WHEN and HOW educational actions mainly take place

The study distinguishes between the interventions directed towards newly arrived students and those that were attending Italian schools from more than a year and also aims to understand whether a continuity is maintained in the teaching of the language.

As expected (Fig.1), in sample schools interventions are mainly concentrated in the first insertion phase ("Intensive module" in the 33,3% of the schools) but in an equal number of schools actions oriented to the teaching of the language without a specific scheduling are carried out.

Yearlong fixed schedule linguistic labs, are organized in almost all the schools with over 20% of immigrant students, whereas "class insertion without any linguistic intervention" occurs only in schools with less than 20%.

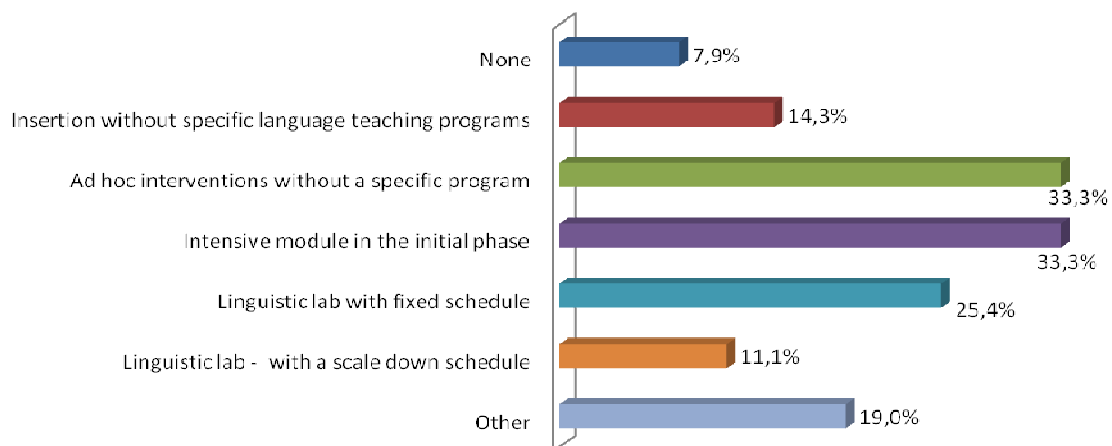


Figure 1 – Typology of intervention for new immigrant students

In all cases Italian L2 is taught during school time. Sometimes language activities at school take place in extra-school time (18 schools).

Specific interventions aimed at supporting and consolidating language learning, are acted upon by most schools (77,8%) also for students that have been attending the Italian school from more than a

year. All schools where language training occurs only during the insertion phase have a percentage of immigrant students under 10%.

The language teaching activities vary according to the school as for time devoted, resources and typology. The latter activities are carried out during school time in most sample schools.

c. WHICH tools are employed in the teaching of Italian L2

Figure 2, shows the percentage of use for each type of tool employed by sample schools in the teaching of Italian L2.

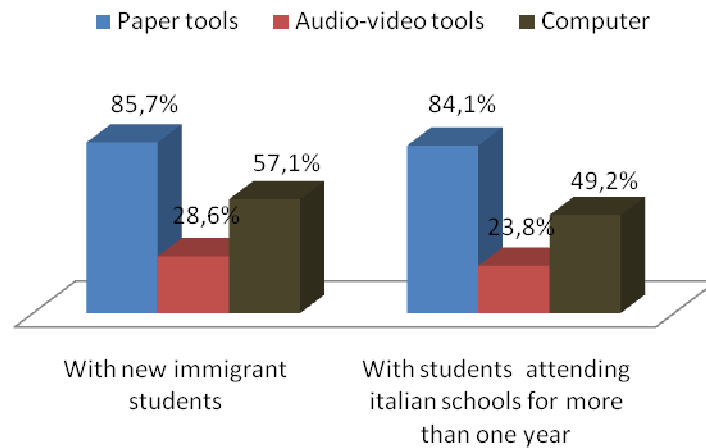


Figure 2 – Percentage of use of different tools in Italian L2 teaching

Paper textbooks integrated with duplicated material (sometimes self-produced) are the most used tools with new immigrant students and other foreign students.

More than half the schools use PCs, whereas a small percentage of teachers use audio and video devices despite the fact that, if compared with other school subjects, the teaching of languages has always made a large use of technology to foster learning.

d. WHETHER and WHICH kind of ICT tools are used in the teaching of Italian L2

Figure 3 shows the frequency of use of the various types of software tools in sample schools that state the use of ICT in teaching Italian L2 (36 out of 63).

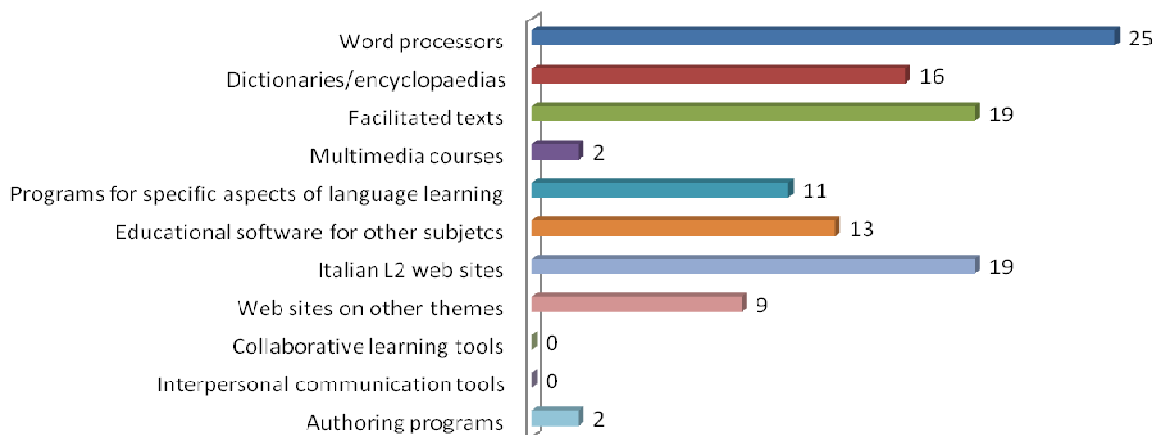


Figure 3 - Frequency of use of ICT tools in L2 teaching

Most schools (25) make use of word processors. The use of specific web sites (19), simplified texts (19), dictionaries and encyclopaedias (16) is quite frequent. Programs for specific aspects of language learning to improve single aspects of the language (grammar, lexicon, etc) are less used (only 11 schools). Only 2 schools use multimedia courses and the same number employs author programming; no one makes use of tools for collaborative learning (like Wiki) and for the improvement of written communication like social networks, forums and blogs. The use of traditional tools prevails whereas innovative and collaborative ones are quite uncommon.

None of the schools has a platform for e-learning

These data are confirmed by the major learning objectives pursued by means of ICT tools. Most schools use these tools to improve reading comprehension (20) and writing (27). Their use to improve listening comprehension and speaking (15) and meta-linguistic abilities (11) is less common.

Figure 4 shows the most common topics dealt with by software tools and their frequency of use.

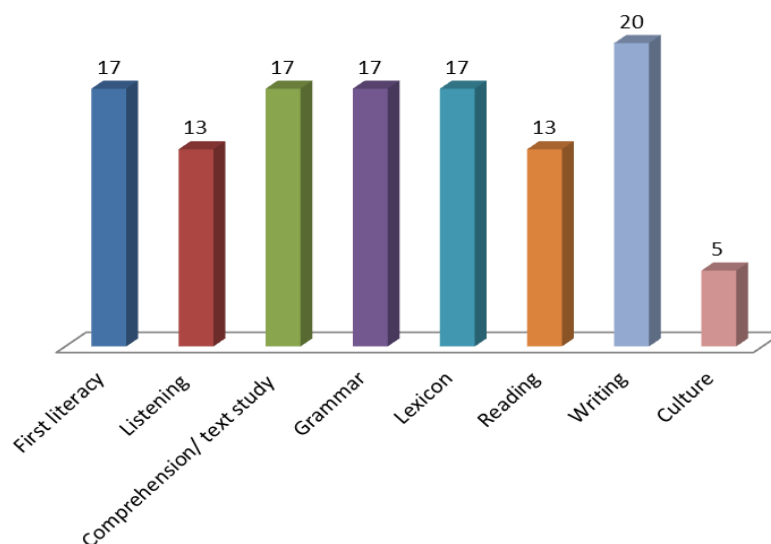


Figure 4 – Frequency of use of software tools by schools according to the topic

As stated before, the use of word processors prevails (20 schools), but also software tools for basic literacy, grammar, vocabulary and texts comprehension are used by some sample schools(17).

The questionnaire also asked what are the positive and negative aspects of teaching through ICT.

As for the positives, most answers (29) refer to aspects having to do with motivation (e.g. funny, motivating, captivating, etc.); others highlight the immediacy of this resource (22) which is easy and accessible. Benefits coming from interactivity and multimedia (9) or from self-learning opportunities (8), are less appreciated. Few answers emphasize the possibility of sharing and reusing materials (5).

Rigidity and repetitiveness are among the negative aspects (14 answers), as well as students isolation (12) and learning out of context (9). Practical problems like the availability of fully operative PC labs (13) or lack of computer skills (7) are also reported.

3. Conclusions

The results of the research study show that most schools have structured targeted interventions for immigrant students, both for the newly arrived ones and for those attending the Italian school for more than a year.

Italian L2 is usually taught by classroom teachers regardless of whether or not they have a specific training or experience in this field. The lack of an adequate expertise could play a role mainly in the choice of the most effective educational methods and resources (including ICT tools).

As to ICT it is quite evident that, despite more than half the schools make use of the PC, almost all employ traditional tools, like word processors and disregard tools and opportunities offered by web 2.0 (wikis, blogs or social networks). Opinions expressed about the negative aspects of teaching with technology reflect a traditional view of software tools for language learning, perhaps derived from "drill and practice" programs experience. Although this kind of software aids is the more diffused and effective, opportunities offered by ICT are greater and allow the student to work in a collaborative way.

Most teachers recognize the motivational drive for computer use with students. This aspect, however, can not be the only driving force that promotes the use of ICT by teachers, hence, a specific training in this field is highly recommended.

References

1. COM (2011). European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. http://ec.europa.eu/ewsi/en/news/newsdetail.cfm?ID_ITEMS=22035. Retrieved August 2011
2. MIUR (2009). Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico italiano. A.S. 2008/2009. http://www.istruzione.it/web/ministero/index_pubblicazioni_09. Retrieved August 2011
3. Micciarelli (2005). Alfabeti interculturali. Glossario e appunti per un percorso di autoformazione. Provincia di Ancona
4. JRC (2009). ICT for learning the host country's language by adult migrants in the EU. <ftp://ftp.jrc.es/pub/EURdoc/JRC57387.pdf>. Retrieved August 2011
5. Picchiassi M. (2007). Apprendere l'italiano L2 nell'era digitale. Le nuove tecnologie nell'insegnamento e apprendimento dell'italiano per stranieri. Perugia: Edizioni Guerra-Soleil