



Digital Foreign Language Learning in the "Intercultura" Lab

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Abstract

Among the most innovative and challenging strategies in Foreign Language learning digital tools play a strategic role. In particular concerning English as a foreign language as all the basic vocabulary related to ICT is English Language based. Therefore, innovative approaches fostering the use of digital tools are essential in implementing language skills. In the Foreign Language Intercultura Lab of the Comprehensive School I currently teach and that I personally run in school years 2009.-2017 this input was thoroughly promoted encouraging both autonomy and teamwork in students. The Lab, provided of laptop stations for each student, all connected to the central teacher station promoted the acquisition of digital skills using language as a tool and the acquisition of "other" competences through language and digital tools. All the subjects in the school curricular educational program concurred to create a portfolio of knowledge for each student built up in foreign language. Using digital and multimedia instruments, virtual platforms, students have been encouraged to produce their own materials in a flipped classroom asset, working in a flexible set-up. In this way, digital learning and foreign language learning are thoroughly involved and combined together in order to produce "something", to do "something". Motivation in learning and consequently an increased school success have been achieved so far in these years. The intent is that to provide the most effective and innovative teaching - learning practices in order to promote for the students a better chance for their future social and working life.

Keywords: *ICT Based Language Teaching and Learning Approaches, Studies in Second Language Acquisition;*

1. Introduction

Acquisition of a proper level of second language competences, in particularly English, is one of the most relevant issues education has to face in Europe as well as worldwide in particular as job careers and job opportunities are specifically grounded on it. Regarding this point, education to the second language starts really soon in most educational system, nonetheless Italy is one of the latest in the European framework for level of good foreign language users (English specifically) and particularly, Sicily is the second to last in the Italian context. Actually, although some improvement has been achieved in three years of monitoring by the Ministry of Education, the survey conducted in 2017 by EF (one of the oldest and more accredited language certification centres) stated in the EPI (English Proficiency Index) report, suggests that "in particular ...in Italy It would be really useful to adopt in public education the most practical communicative aspects of English language, including specific language lessons in all Degree programs and helping adults to develop specific language job competences". Therefore it is necessary a constant update in teaching methodologies and styles to promote success in every learning process. Certainly the acquisition of a good level of only one Second Language, in particular English, cannot be satisfactory in an ever-changing world where the borders open up and close following the stream of the political issues but this could be a starting point for all multilingual education as well. A good basic assumption is to choose tools and methodologies that can be flexible and near to the daily life of the students to acquire competences and reuse them in an optic of *Long Life Learning*.

2. The "Intercultura" Lab

This was the hint given to the building up of a Laboratorial space for Second Language learning in our school, the *Istituto Comprensivo Laura Lanza Baronessa di Carini*, a school located in a really social and economical disadvantaged area close to Sicily's chief town Palermo. The Lab as a learning space to promote a better level of acquisition of skills in foreign language was conceived within the framework of our School academic plan based on *Beauty and Innovation*. Sense of Beauty and Innovation are the keys of a new educational program focused on advanced and experimental



strategies for disadvantaged students, coming from the lowest social level families. The main goal is how to ensure youngsters that did not choose where to be born, a way to get a concrete better future. It has been conceived as an open and multidisciplinary lab in which CLIL (Content and Integrated Language Learning), PBL (Project Based Learning) and ICT are the keywords in the process of learning, fostering autonomy and skills together within both school and home work. Students and teachers are free to explore within and without the limit of an educational standard curriculum a field which is not specifically related to teaching a language. In particular this lab has been equipped with laptops, a network managed by the teacher, headsets, projectors, screens, interactive boards and a working table to realize also handcrafts. That implies that digital tools are complementary to other instruments, instruments which in a PBL approach are required as well, such as writing, drawing to create posters, cards or leaflets, cutting and assembling to realize, for instance, plastic models. The benefit of digital tools lies also in the Basic English vocabulary they rely upon and in the easiness to access to info virtually.



Fig.1. Students in a “filling the gap” online activity in the Lab using specific software

3. Digital tools and foreign language learning

New digital technologies are not the *panacea* of any sort of teaching and learning process; they are learning tools, not learning objectives. Every kind of education bears social aims within. It links in a dialectic connection individual and society; educating the individual, at the same time, achieves the education of the society. This allows supporting the individual growth and at the same timing the thoroughly social improvement. Our Language lab moreover employs the foreign languages not as a goal but as a learning tool in an intercultural dimension. An individual learns languages through their use to accomplish “other” tasks; in this way, the community acquires an intercultural dimension. Of course, the use of ICT tools has to be adapted according to the specific social context. In some social environments an excessive use of ICT can produce an extra exposition of the students to a virtual world they privately abuse. On the other side there are disadvantaged social contexts where without a public school education to new technologies students wouldn't be adequately trained to a proper use of digital tools. Nonetheless, in the Italian school system, the use of the ICT tools is limited by an unconscious fear by teachers about eventually damages to school devices due to a presumed carelessness by students. Since 2007, Laura Lanza School, on the other side, gave the responsibility of the care and of the use of the school digital equipment to the students themselves. A proper use of ICT tools can offer better learning opportunities to disadvantaged students and is able to open the territory borders through virtual online education. Digital devices, which are kept inside school, bring the educational action beyond its contingency. In this sense ICT are basic to the Intercultura lab. They allow a daily exchange among students belonging to different countries in a *peer education* asset



through the net, so that learning a second language can be detached from a formal approach and be enriched in a practical way, more appealing and interesting. The best contribute is setting aside the role of the teacher on behalf of the role of the student as a learner. Each teacher becomes a facilitator of learning and is not a lecturer any longer as it has been promoted for years although a strong central resistance; his/her task is only to check the right direction the students' autonomy tends to. On this assumption, ICT tools are considered a learning transversal instrument of acquisition of languages and different multidisciplinary contents as well. The use of laptops is associated with the use of specific software not only to write and to listen to real materials in foreign languages, as YouTube videos or movies in original languages, but also to produce new contents. Different tools are exploited also to facilitate learning processes and manipulating contents. Software to build up mind maps (Mindmap, Mindomo, Coggle etc), online Quizzes and questionnaires (Kahoot, Edmodo tests) as well as virtual classroom platforms engage both students and teachers in researching, exploring , developing , sharing and creating new contents related to different topics , topics linked to the whole Educational Curricula (Science, History, Geography, Literature, Arts, Technology). The use of virtual classrooms, therefore, allows new perspectives, facilitating the exchange of information, a closer relation and feedback by the teachers, a follow up at home which becomes really meaningful in a context where home support in learning processes is very poor. Permitting on the other side the students to employ their mobiles (BYOD) for educational purposes ,next to a laptop or a personal computer , affords this generation of digital "touchists"(users of digital "touch" dispositive), to compare the use of the same software on different devices and to realize similarities and differences acquiring wider competences, such as typing on a keyboard , saving files and creating folders, competences which can be expendable in their future job field, whatever it could be.



Fig.2. Students use virtual class Edmodo both on their mobile and on their laptop

In this way they are also led to reflect on the practical use of a vocabulary they already know without being aware and to adapt it to a context other than usual : for instance words such as *files*, *upload* ,*download* etc. which previously have been unconsciously employed are properly comprehended. The contents are transversal to most disciplines, exploited and remastered through these tools, promoting the acquisition of specific vocabulary. Most of the tools are visual, like Multimedia Presentations or Videos, since building up both images and texts makes learning foreign language and contents easier; a brainstorming at the beginning of a new project to carry on can be discussed and then realized with *Mentimeter*, another software giving immediate visual feedback and collecting results of polls and ideas. Uploading images and files, mp3 allows the students to feel confident with both language and ICT tools. All this increases interest and motivation as it is not for its own sake. All the subjects in the school curricular educational program contribute to create a *portfolio* of knowledge for each student in foreign language.

In order to enhance writing and reading skills the use of writing software has proven to be very useful, also to cope with writing or reading difficulties more disadvantaged students could face. The employ of



the spell checker matches the correct spelling and the correct phoneme, improving in a much affordable way the quality of written skills.

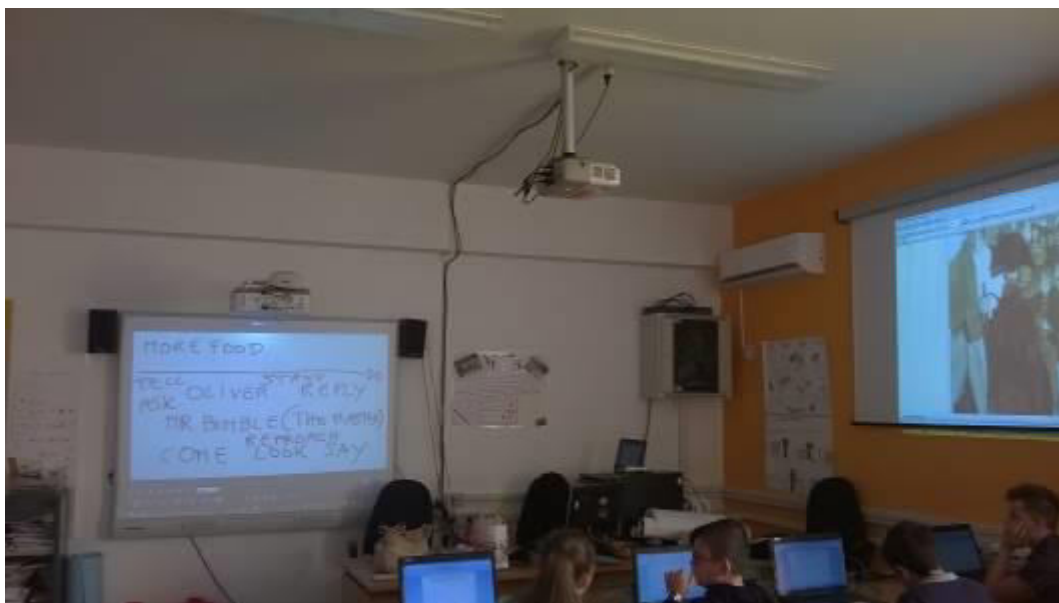


Fig.2. Students in story writing activities using another online pad collaborative tool

3. Conclusions

Despite the disadvantaged context, in around nine years of experimentation and implementation of innovative methodologies based on ICT, the level of acquisition of foreign languages, in particular English has increased year by year among our students in Laura Lanza School as well as the level of interest and motivation. A Survey carried out in our school in 2016 promoted by the Ministry of Education together with *Cambridge English Language Assessment* using CBT has given a positive feedback in comparison to the National benchmark of proper standard level of English as a Second Language at the end of low secondary school in Italy. This means we are on the right pathway and it is valuable to pursue it onward.

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