



# Inclusive Foreign Language Learning through Digital Tools

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## Abstract

*Learning foreign languages, in particular English nowadays is a necessity for individuals as our world citizens. Although a wide variety of languages spoken in Europe, and around 7000 in the world, only a few of these are studied in schools as foreign languages due to the role they have in our daily professional, cultural, social and political life. “English is unquestionably the main foreign language learnt in Europe” as stated in Eurydice Key-Data-on-Teaching-Languages (2017). Acquiring a new language can be somehow difficult for any student, further more for students with peculiar learning difficulties. The students, who can be classified as Special or Different needs, cannot be set apart in a world pushed towards change by constant varying emigrational streams. A global education in a multilingual world requires a quest for the most effective and “different” methodologies to overcome the learning gap each student, facing a particular learning situation, can go through. In this sense, digital instruments offer a variety of methodological approaches, which can help them to acquire a proper level of competence in foreign language. According to this, I have been experiencing 10 years of teaching English as a foreign language, using mainly digital tools to create personalized contents in order to break away from the one-size-fits-all models and meeting the student’s “unique” special needs.*

**Keywords:** *ICT Based Language Teaching, Learning Approaches, Language Learning, International Mobility.*

## 1. Introduction

Learning foreign languages, in particular English is thoroughly a necessity for any individual living in our contemporary world. Although a wide variety of languages are spoken in Europe, and around 7000 in the world, only a few of these are studied in schools as foreign languages due to the role they have in our daily professional, cultural, social and political life. The society is more and more globalized around a main language, which, nonetheless, remains English. In an era dominated by the web, this is utmost true and although the increasing role of other languages, which are commonly spoken all around the world, Chinese or Spanish, commercial, financial, diplomatic, technical language is an Anglo-monopoly and it is unquestionable. Therefore, any individual in order to live actively nowadays needs to reach a good level of competences in a second language at least, English in this case. It is, in this way, mandatory to acquire a proper level of language skills, skills that can be, further on, along the educational path, refined and improved through a specialization on the field, which can be the most proficient for the placement of students as workers in the economic world. A good ground on which to establish further language competence, nonetheless, should be granted to all students even those with learning disorders or different learning needs, according to their own abilities.

### 1.1 Different levels of learning require flexible tools

Each student as each individual owns different learning styles; it can be auditory, visual or kinesthetic. Even in the common practice of teaching foreign languages the differences have to matter, moreover in cases such as students with Special Learning disorders (Dyslexia or Dysgraphia for instance) or students with Different Learning needs due to their disabilities. In the lower grades of education, and in particular in Italy, where a thorough inclusive Educational approach is established, it is one of the main issue to find methodologies and tools which can provide the acquisition of foreign language skills to the widest target of students. In my experience based on a flexible methodology built up on digital tools, software and devices in a laboratorial asset (M&ICT LAB- methodologies and Information Communication Technology)[Fig. 1], teaching foreign language has been the most inclusive and adaptive one in order to promote in each student, one at his or her own path, the acquisition of a basic competence in foreign language, whatever the starting level, the learning style, or difficulties could be,



Fig.1. ICT Foreign Language Lab

In the last years, this methodology proved to be particular effective on students with specific learning disorders ,SLD or slight learning difficulties. The common feature among these students was strong issues in reading and writing, some of them even in handling pens or pencils, lack of concentration and a really slight attention time. This implied that lesson time should not be too long, and should not be based on traditional practices such as writing or reading aloud. In foreign languages teaching, actually, the use of audio or video support has been fostered for many years giving foreign language teachers a more advantaged methodological ground rather than teachers of other disciplines. The idea was that to focus learning on digital devices and learning by doing strategies. All this could be realized building up an ICT based Language Lab within the school , provided of laptops for each student, laptops connected to a central unit run by the teacher , of an Interactive board ,and an efficient internet connection. My first approach was so based on audio and visual learning styles,using for instance movies and cartoons in order to focus the students' attention, sometimes both in native and second language, small clips and songs with subtitles ,thus implementing reading and listening skills. In this sense the employ of YouTube supported by comprehension exercises to acquire vocabulary, correct spelling and pronounce using specific software and digital tools is really effective. Some of the most valuable free software in my experience proved to be the following ones: -to create "fill in the gap" or matching vocabulary word exercise, *Hot Potatoes* (<https://hotpot.uvic.ca>) or *Learning Apps* (<https://learningapps.org>), -for online tests, *Edmodo* ( [www.edmodo.com](http://www.edmodo.com) , a virtual class platform allowing the creation of quizzes ) and *Kahoot* ( [www.kahoot.com](http://www.kahoot.com) ). They all provide a light, inclusive methodology, a flexible and game based approach. Students with learning issues can more easily type on a laptop rather than write on a paper, in particular the ones suffering Dysgraphia, and can be helped by digital tools to match sounds and images in order to acquire lexicon. Moreover, these methodologies allow creating unique materials, different items according to each student's own path. Learning becomes easier, possible and fun; students learn with pleasure and become aware of their progressions, avoiding frustration or that sense of being "different" from the others or "not capable". All of them can acquire, in particular, a basic vocabulary and a basic language structure necessary to communicate in foreign language. Moreover, the digital tools allow the teacher to provide different types of approach to cope with the different skills and different styles or languages they students can have. For SLD students the use of the following tools have been very effective: word text writing with spellchecker, text to speech, audios and videos which fostered the abilities of communication. In addition to that, adopting the PBL (Project Based Learning) approach with a twin path together with other schools and foreign students (such as in an eTwinning project [www.eTwinning.net](http://www.eTwinning.net) ) it was possible to increase the level of oral skills through a real communicative task.. Adapting the abilities young people nowadays have deeply acquired in the management of online chats to the requirements of a foreign language communicative exercise with foreign students, plays a significant role in acquiring a proper level of language skills. Moreover, the spell checker has proven to be very useful to improve writing and reading skills in students with reading and writing disorders as well as a strong visual approach through images (Fig. 2). Obviously this has required a solid attention to the students, testing and experiencing how their attitudes and



their different styles , visual, auditory or practical, could require a different adaptation of the learning strategies to be combined in order to promote school success in any of them . In 19 years of experience the use of practical exercises helped me a lot in order to promote and maintain attention, increase motivation and provide equal access to learning materials for any of them.



Fig.2. Learning Apps matching exercise

### **1.2 Digital storytelling**

Another tool, which revealed to be effective in inclusive learning, is digital storytelling, a tool that is affordable and expendable with students with learning disorders. It mixes, actually, visual, auditory and kinesthetic practical learning styles. An example is the following didactic plan, an activity carried on in a class of 20 students in grade sixth among which 6 students with cognitive difficulties, in particular, slight retardation in language speaking and certified Dyslexia. All students working in pair or in groups were able to follow the steps of the plan:

#### **Steps:**

- The teacher chooses a text, a text already known by the students as related to their Educational path in Native language, a legend which is very common among young students and also part of their childish culture. (“King Arthur and the Sword on the Stone“)
- Pre reading activities. The teacher introduces the main characters and the main story reading the title and locating the events on a map in the interactive board (use of digital software [www.zeemaps.com](http://www.zeemaps.com))
- Step one: The teachers read the story aloud.
- Step two: The students, to reinforce reading watch the Disney’s cartoon movie “The Sword in The Stone”, in second language (English) with subtitles in Native Language to facilitate the global comprehension.
- Step three: A digital multiple questionnaire based on matching images and sentences describing events and characters is proposed to the students to reinforce their retained memory on topics, events and characters of the story read ([www.kahoot.com](http://www.kahoot.com)). This tool is very effective if used in a proper way, as to answer the question it is necessary to choose the right colour matched to the sentences. The teacher use images and short clear sentences.
- Step four: The students are divided into groups and create in a cooperative way a storyboard for story telling. Each student can produce both captions and images to reproduce • what they learnt about the story.The teacher revise the work and collect in a proper way the sentences.
- Step five: The students put in order the images with their captions and prepare the storyboard on paper guided by the teacher
- Step six: The students in group retell the story orally following the storyboard reading short sentences.



- Step seven: The students take picture or scan the images and prepare the digital storyboard in a collaborative book using a digital tool to produce their ebook ([www.storyjumper.com](http://www.storyjumper.com)), rewrite the captions and read them recording their voice. The ebook is ready. It can be read, seen and listened to.
- Step eight: Final multiple choice comprehension questionnaire on the text ([www.kahoot.com](http://www.kahoot.com))

## Conclusion

Digital tools allow the most inclusive approach in order to foster and promote skills in students for whom sometimes a traditional approach can represent an issue. As educators, we are claimed not to leave anyone behind and it is still an open question which kind of educational opportunities individuals with different abilities do really have within the Global school system and which ones they really can have. Italian educational system promotes inclusion and ,in order to fulfill it in the most effective way, teachers in every field need to find proper strategies to promote school success for all their students. The acquisition of equal educational opportunities and in particular Second Language as well as Digital Competences is a right for everyone in order to be an Active Citizen of this world.

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