



Language Learning, Teaching and Assessing during the Pandemic in Italy: Main Findings from a Survey¹

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the main results from a questionnaire which was spread among Italian teachers during the Covid-19 emergency in spring 2020 with the aim to investigate their perspective on some aspects related to language teaching, learning and assessing.

The questionnaire was developed within the current European policy discussion on plurilingualism and multilingualism: 2805 respondents filled it in, providing a non-exhaustive, but interesting picture of the teachers' perceptions and feelings related to language learning and teaching. The context of the survey is represented by the Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages and the survey was also aimed at spreading the Recommendation itself among Italian teachers, together with the other recent reports, such as "Education begins with languages".

Considering the inputs provided by the Council Recommendation in order to improve the quality of school curricula and to help reach the Barcelona objectives (two languages plus the mother tongue) re-launched by the European Commission, the survey was planned and delivered anonymously in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Education and with the supervision of the European Commission itself.

The main results will be highlighted in this paper, with particular reference to the Italian teachers' knowledge, reactions, feelings and attitudes towards the different dimensions related to language learning, teaching, assessing and CLIL, considering the challenges of remote and blended teaching during the pandemic. The respondents were 78,4% foreign language teachers, 5,3% CLIL teachers, 9,3% both CLIL and language teachers, 1% school leaders. Teachers taught mainly at upper secondary level (41,3%) and lower secondary level (31,9%), but also primary teachers were well represented (25,1%). The questionnaire collected a lot of very interesting inputs about remote teaching: teachers expressed their reactions about the strengths and weaknesses of repositories, open educational resources, platforms and digital tools. Despite the challenges due to the pandemic, the respondents stated it was a good opportunity to experiment new webtools and digital solutions to rethink and redesign their language teaching activities.

Keywords: *language learning, ICT, remote teaching, learning technologies.*

1. Introduction

The context of the research presented in this paper is represented by the Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages (2019) [1], together with other relevant reports, such as "Education begins with languages²". These documents provided a wide range of inputs aimed at improving the quality of school curricula and at reaching the Barcelona objectives (two languages plus the mother tongue) re-launched by the European Commission.

A survey was defined by INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research, Italy) research team³ supported by the Italian Ministry of Education and by the European Commission. It was spread during the Covid-19 emergency in summer 2020 and was aimed at investigating the perspective of Italian teachers as far as language learning, teaching and assessment are concerned. The survey was completed by 2805 Italian respondents, providing a non-exhaustive, but interesting picture of the perceptions and feelings related to different areas correlated to languages and CLIL. The research questions which represented the starting point of the research, were aimed at understanding if Italian teachers of foreign languages and CLIL were familiar with the Italian language policies, norms and reforms and at investigating their knowledge, reactions, feelings and attitudes towards the different dimensions related to language learning, teaching and assessing, with particular reference to the period of the pandemic.

¹ The full report published by INDIRE, is authored by Cinganotto L., Benedetti F., Langè G., Lamb T.

² <https://op.europa.eu/it/publication-detail/-/publication/6b7e2851-b5fb-11ea-bb7a-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

³ The author of this paper, in cooperation with Fausto Benedetti.



The data were analysed taking inspiration from Braun and Clarke's (2006) [2], qualitative approach, taking into account the following steps:

- Getting familiar with the data
- Generating initial codes and themes
- Looking for themes or main ideas
- Discussing in deeper and refining themes
- Identifying and naming themes
- Writing the research report.

The respondents were 78,4% foreign language teachers, 5,3% CLIL teachers, 9,3% both CLIL and language teachers, 1% school leaders. Teachers taught mainly at upper secondary level (41,3%) and lower secondary level (31,9%), but also primary teachers were well represented (25,1%),

Some findings from the survey, taken from the full report, are reported and commented in this paper, with particular reference to remote, blended and hybrid educational scenarios due to the pandemic.

2. The background

The European Commission report dated 2014 "Improving the effectiveness of language learning: CLIL and computer assisted language learning"⁴ [3] [4] had already highlighted the added value of ICT and OER (Open Educational Resources) for language learning and CLIL long before the pandemic, mentioning the importance of the following research strands: CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), TELL (Technology-Enhanced Language Learning), MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning).

The literature on the effectiveness of CALL is extensive and wide and confirms the potential of computer, device and technologies in general for supporting and facilitating language learning in face-to-face, distance and remote learning contexts.

The already mentioned Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages highlighted the key role of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), self-assessment tools, networks, communities of practice, to foster teachers' continuous professional development and initial teacher training with the help of learning technologies.

It is also worth mentioning the extensive literature on the potential of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) referring to the use of technologies to enhance and reinforce a specific teaching methodology [5]. TELL can be tailored according to the specific kind of activity (videos, chats, synchronous and asynchronous activities etc.), skill (reading, writing, listening, speaking, interaction), solution (fully online, blended) and type of technology (computer, Internet, blog, gaming, video etc.) [6].

According to the literature, TELL can help language teachers improve the quality of input, authenticity of communication, and provide more relevant and useful feedback, in order to foster the students' deep learning.

3. Language learning and teaching during the pandemic

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in Italy were closed from March 2020 until the end of the school year. During this period, teachers discovered and experimented a wide range of e-learning platforms and webtools for their remote teaching activities and had to cope with a lot of challenges and problems linked to the lack of face-to-face interaction and communication. Language teachers could benefit from a large number of repositories and digital resources available on different educational websites, such the Council of Europe or the European Centre for Modern Languages, where they could find useful suggestions and materials to plan and implement effective teaching activities.

In order to support teachers and school leaders with remote teaching, INDIRE organized a wide range of initiatives, including a repository of open resources and webtools for different subjects and different school grades, named "Library of innovation"⁵. Webinars, virtual round tables and conferences run by teachers, school leaders, researchers and experts on different topics, including language learning and CLIL were held during the pandemic and their recordings can now represent food for thought for rethinking and reshaping present and future educational scenarios.

According to the results of the survey delivered during the pandemic, almost all the respondents had been teaching remotely during the COVID-19 emergency and the majority of them organized their lessons both synchronously and asynchronously. The need to balance online synchronous and

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/working-group-report-clil-language-learning_en.pdf

⁵ <https://biblioteca.indire.it/home>



asynchronous teaching activities represented an important challenge, especially for younger learners who could not spend too many hours in front of a digital device.

All the respondents used digital platforms for their remote teaching and the majority of them used the platform provided by the school (85,8%), which represented a guarantee for teachers and students, in terms of security, data protection and other relevant issues related to GDPR.

Nearly half of the respondents used specific webtools for languages, which can be considered as a meaningful result, showing the teachers' will to personalize their remote teaching activities, choosing the specific webtool or app that could be deemed suitable to their classes and target groups.

The language skills that turned out to be the most challenging in remote teaching contexts are oral interaction (60,5%), listening (57,4%) and oral production (44,6%).

Oral skills, oral production and oral interaction were actually difficult to foster in remote teaching scenarios, considering the limitations of the digital learning environment, the students' anxiety, the lack of non-verbal communication, the lack of eye contact. In fact, in those contexts it is particularly difficult to stimulate the students' willingness to communicate, especially with teachers or with peers as the fear to be judged can be stronger than in face-to-face interactions.

A lot of very interesting comments are collected in the full report, with specific reference to remote teaching and only some of the most significant ones will be reported here:

- "During this emergency I learnt to better organize my lessons in order to make my materials fully accessible and always available for my students. Despite the problems and the difficulties that I faced, I managed to learn more about the use of internet tools and platforms. To conclude I'm proud of what I learnt and I think this represents a very valuable experience".
- "I think I will go on using online tools to monitor the students' work at home and to have quick feedback on their learning experience and progress".
- "It was amazing to discover so many new tools I could apply to Foreign Language teaching. It made me change my way of preparing lessons and interacting with my students. It was challenging and rewarding at the same time".
- "I think that studying at home has helped students to be more relaxed, focused, not to get distracted and not waste their study time. Thanks to the use of Youtube and in-depth studies on English culture, they became more passionate about studying English".
- "Teachers need more training on teaching online. Distance teaching/learning should be part of the ordinary teaching/learning process".
- "New stimulating materials need to be offered continuously. No books".
- "Online teaching/learning should be retained as part of a more complex, large-scale blended teaching/learning which makes quite an extensive use of ICT to provide students with 21st-century competencies".

According to the teachers' comments, the remote teaching experience was not so negative: despite the challenges and the problems they had to face, it was an opportunity for them to discover and experiment new webtools, platforms and resources they found effective and they would probably use also in the future. In fact, they experimented how these webtools can improve the students' learning outcomes, easily check their progress and provide effective feedback.

The use of videos [7] for language learning and CLIL was also found to be helpful and attractive for the students, increasing their motivation and eliciting their interest towards cultural and other relevant topics to be dealt with through a foreign language.

3. Conclusions

The data from the survey on language learning and teaching during the pandemic, extracted from the full report and commented in this paper, showed that teachers were generally quite satisfied with remote teaching, despite the challenges and problems they had to face. Face-to-face lessons are still considered necessary, but webtools, platforms and digital resources are considered useful and effective also for future educational scenarios. In fact, teachers commented that they had found out new ways of planning and organizing teaching activities, making lessons more attractive and interactive. As far as languages are concerned, oral skills were the most challenging ones, due to the limits of the digital learning environment and to the lack of face-to-face social interaction and communication, which can also take advantage of non-verbal language, facial expressions, body language, etc.

Therefore, the overall message is not so negative as expected, highlighting the teachers' flexibility and "growth mindset", helping them overcome the challenges of these unprecedented times.



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