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SYLLABUS AND DESCRIPTORS FOR ILLITERATE, SEMI-LITERATE AND
LITERATE USERS. FROM ILLITERACY TO A1 LEVEL

LORENZO ROCCA
Università per Stranieri di Perugia
FERNANDA MINUZ
Former Johns Hopkins University – SAIS Europe
ALESSANDRO BORRI
CPIA Montagna - Castel di Casio

ABSTRACT: The need for descriptors of language proficiency for first levels in migration contexts has become apparent. Specifically, yet not exclusively, focused on illiterate and low educated adults, *Italiano L2 in contesti migratori. Sillabo e descrittori dall'alfabetizzazione all'A1* sets standards and recommends criteria for teaching both literacy and L2. It endorses the *Common European Framework of Reference* approach, especially the notion of language communicative competence as a multidimensional competence and a part of a more general action competence. It is coherent with an approach to literacy as a process that leads to a broader linguistic and communicative competence, beyond the acquisition of the technical abilities. The general purpose is to enhance the quality of the language provision aimed at vulnerable sections of the migrant population. A validation procedure of *Italian L2*, conducted in public and voluntary course providers, showed its positive impact on the L2 and literacy learning in Italy.

KEYWORDS: descriptors, standards, criteria, migration context

1. INTRODUCTION

Italiano L2 in contesti migratori. Sillabo e descrittori dall'alfabetizzazione all'A1 (Italian L2 for adult migrants. Syllabus and descriptors from illiteracy to A1 level) (Borri, Minuz, Rocca, Sola 2014) intends to provide a response, for the Italian L2, to the increasing international demand for tools for course design, curricula planning, language and literacy assessment aimed at illiterate and low educated adult migrants.

Although courses, teaching materials and educational research in the field of L2 for illiterate and low educated migrants have been in development since the end of the 1980s (Minuz, 2005), the topics of literacy and language teaching has come to a foreground at the turn of the century and it has become a specialised area of Language Teaching.

In 2001 the Canadian “ESL and Literacy”, just revised the past year, provided the first systematic guideline for a curriculum (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2001). In Europe, the language and literacy needs of migrants have led to the reviewing and integration of the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) (Council of Europe/Conseil de l’Europe, 2001). The need for descriptors below the level A1 has emerged in order to account for the learning paths both of speakers of languages typologically far from the European illiterate and low literate adults. We are now facing the new educational goal of teaching literacy while teaching the second language. Furthermore, teachers and course planners have to identify scenarios relevant to the adult migrants in the domains foreseen by the CEFR (private, public, occupational, educational).

Syllabuses for German, French, Dutch, Finnish, Swedish and Italian as L2s have been proposed. They are different in formats and focuses: the “can do” that identify stages of literacy in L2 (Beacco et al., 2005), the progression in the acquisition of literacy skills and study skills (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2009; Fritz et al., 2006), the relation between technical and functional literacy (Beroepsodewijs en volwasseneneducatie, 2008; Finnish National Board, 2012; Markov et al., 2015), the certification for low educated adults at A1 and A2 levels (Rocca, 2009). However, all of them define a progression towards A1 that is different from the progression of the literate learners, in contents and goals. Thus, they define curricula for illiterates and low literates that are parallel to the “ordinary” ones. In a first stage, which is defined alternatively “foundation”, “découvert”, “basis”, or “Grundlagen”, the learners explore the writings in their environments, become aware of the functions of the written words and what reading and writing entail, and acquire the first technical literacy skills. In the last stage, they can read and write short texts autonomously as means to interact in the host societies (Minuz, 2013). We agree that much more than the sheer ability to read and write is needed for an individual “to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society”, as the UNESCO (2005) definition of literacy states. Therefore, a specific focus on the acquisition of the writing is required, which is the perspective of the above-mentioned syllabi.

2. AIMS AND APPROACH

In designing *Italian L2* we aimed to the following objectives.

1)	Respond to needs of the adult migrants, insofar as they are different from the needs of other target groups of learners.
2)	Provide teachers, course designers and educational authorities with an instrument which is coherent with the other tools commonly in use, primarily the Common European Framework, and the syllabuses, guidelines and language profiles based on it;
3)	Integrate the descriptors for language competence with those for literacy learning;
4)	Provide referentials for language learning as well as literacy;
5)	Provide a single and coherent frame for beginner learners, which could accommodate different users' profiles.

Table 1: Objectives

The coherence with the CEFR responds to a theoretical view of both literacy and literacy teaching and learning.

Adult literacy is a polysemic phrase, whose meanings vary along times, languages and national educational traditions. Following the OECD definition (2016), we restrict the term literacy to the ability to deal with written texts, which nowadays can be printed or digital, multimodal and multicode. Thus, we consider literacy as a component of the communicative language competence and the learning to read and write (*alfabetismo* in Italian) by adults, as an enrichment of the resources on which they can rely while acting in the world. This view differs from the approaches to literacy learning that focus *firstly* on the acquisition of the technical skills needed to read and write, although necessary. On the other hand, the proposed approach diverges from the views of literacy as the ability to deal with all the codes different from speech, among which is also the written language, or as a broader notion which coincides with basic education. Literacy and L2 teaching is a new field, which draws its methodologies both from language teaching and adult education. Referring to the conceptual frame of the language teaching helps to focus on the written language as semiotic code and on literacy learning as an appropriation of this code.

Adults learn to deal with the writing in L2 while creating and negotiating meanings. Literacy teaching, as well as language teaching, is founded on the oral and written texts that are produced in the classroom communication or brought into the classroom from the “outside world”. Literacy learning is rooted in the oral communication, from which the subject builds up the phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic competences involved in the first acquisition of the written language (Tarone & Bigelow, 2005).

Illiteracy and literacy are the poles of a continuum. The levels that the syllabuses propose are to be considered as steps that are meaningful from a cognitive, operational and social point of view. Since individual learners draw on their personal resources in their “can dos”, we are to expect shifting and imbalances among the components both of the communicative language competence and literacy.

3. The Learners

Italian L2 foresees four stages, three of them preceding the A1 level of the CEFR and the fourth coinciding with the A1 level, related to four profiles of literacy (Table 2). Pre-literates are Non-educated adults whose mother tongue is not written or is not the medium of education in the country of origin. Illiterates cannot read and write in their own L1s and have never been educated. Semi-literates have received a low level of education in their mother tongue (in general, less than 5 years of schooling) or partially lost the literacy skills because they do not read and write. Literates are educated in their mother tongue or other language(s).

<i>Learners profiles and learning stages</i>				
Stage	Pre alpha A1	Alpha A1	Pre A1	A1
Users	Pre-literate and/or illiterate "slow learners"	Illiterate	Semi-Literate	Literate
Program	Orientation and Pre-literacy	Orientation and Literacy	Close to CEFR	CEFR
Learning Hours	100	250	150	100
Progress	READING AND WRITING			
	Recognizing	Succeeding (early attempts)	Beginning to know how	Knowing how
	SPEAKING INTERACTION			
	Succeeding (early attempts)	Beginning to know how	Knowing how (first and second phase)	

Table 2: Learners Profiles and Learning Stages

If the learners Pre-A1 and A1 are literate using a writing system different from the Latin, they may require a period of familiarisation of the new system, but are not to be considered illiterate. Furthermore, we must stress that the four profiles are types, from which individual learners may differ and whose boundaries are loose.

The four stages configure either a progression or specialised path. They do not represent the steps towards the level A1 for all students, rather, they set objectives, which meet the literacy needs of non-educated or low educated learners, and are irrelevant for the educated ones. The learners of profile A might go through all four stages, although they may accelerate, slow down or even stop due to individual and contextual factors. The learners of profiles B, C, D enter the stage corresponding to their literacy competences. Note that the learning goals of every stage are "exit levels", that is the competences reached *at the end* of course.

Some learners who reach the objective of the Pre A1 stage necessitate tailored courses in order to consolidate and improve their literacy competences.

4. THE STRUCTURE

The structure of *Italian L2* is coherent with the above mentioned approach. *Italian L2* consists of two parts (Table 3). The Syllabus defines six areas related to the CEFR domains. For instance: for the personal domain it proposes the thematic areas "My person" and "My home". Three types of tables (A,B,C) organize the descriptors. The tables A reflect the CEFR approach and define levels of competence in terms of "can do", that is the actions which a learner should be able to perform in the four domains – private, public, professional, educational – and about six main topics. The table B lists the language contents that a learner should know to perform those actions. They are based on the Italian output of the European project "Reference Level Descriptions" (Spinelli & Parizzi, 2010) with the necessary integrations and modifications. The C Table, which we shall treat below, presents the "Literacy goals". A "Word list" completes the lexical area.

Italian L2 gives indications on how to develop the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences that are component of the communicative language competence. For example, the general and specific notions and lexical list cover the semantic area whereas functions and texts address the sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects. The progression in "Phonetics and orthography" complements the descriptors for literacy.

Syllabus	Thematic Areas						Macro sections
	Personal domain		Public domain		Occupational domain	Educational domain	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Descriptors	TTA						Progression
	TSA.1	TSA.2	TSA.3	TSA.4	TSA.5	TSA.6	Functions
	TTB1						General notions
	TTB2						
	TTB3						Specific notions
	TSB3.1	TSB3.2	TSB3.3	TSB3.4	TSB3.5	TSB3.6	
	TTB4						Textual genres
	TTB4.1	TTB4.2	TTB4.3	TTB4.4	TTB4.5	TTB4.6	
	TTB5						Grammar
	TTB6						Phonetics and orthography
	TTC						Literacy goals
	Word list						Lexical goals

Table 3: Thematic Areas

5. LITERACY GOALS

The Table C, "Literacy goals", complements the other sections with descriptors concerning the acquisition of the technical literacy, that is, of the notions and skills

necessary to code and decode writings, and to make meaning from the output of these activities. So, regarding the reading skill at stage Pre-alpha A1 on the theme "My home", one finds the descriptor "Recognising some words begins to orient him/ herself in buildings" in TA and "Begins to read the simplest and most frequent words in the HC language, especially if he/she knows the meaning" in TC.

The table C consists of two parts: "Pre literacy and basic literacy skills (technical skills) and "Study skills".

The descriptors of this table primarily regard the notions that are pre-requisites for reading and writing, such as the awareness of the representational and conventional nature of the writing. We have taken into account the relevant research, such as studies on the development of the notion of word, and the role of the phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, metalinguistic awareness, and size of vocabulary (for the relevant bibliography, see Minuz et al., 2016).

Concerning the reading skill, the Table C lists descriptors both for the sight reading and the analytic-synthetic reading, following the "dual route" model (Coltheart, 1978) and its applications in literacy learning for the Italian language (Vegni, 2007).

The section on the study skills presents the learning strategies that the teachers can intentionally foster. It also takes into consideration the difficulties that those who never attended school, or only attended for a short period, may face when confronted with the conventions and activities of the specific communicative context, which is the language lesson.

The following example illustrates how *Italian L2* has been used during the validation process. The writing is the result of a teaching unit on food, which took place after 50 hours of instruction and involved students in several activities – such as speaking, copying, sentence and word segmentation – through different techniques. The photo shows, above the sentence, a previous exercise aimed at developing phonological awareness.

The student, a Malian young man without previous schooling, wrote the sentence with a strong guidance by the teacher and the aid of syllabic tables, cards and words written on the blackboard. We tested the relevant objectives of *Italian L2* in assessing the item. At a phonological and orthographical level, we considered the descriptor: "He/she succeeds in writing syllables and words autonomously". Among the relevant descriptors for literacy acquisition we cite: "he/she understands the alphabetic principle (correspondence between graphemes and phonemes)"; "He/she understands the notion of word and starts to understand the idea of sentence"; "if supported, he/she starts to write very short familiar sentences".

The student starts to write single familiar, well-trained words correctly (*latte/milk, biscotto/cake, io/I*), and he is able to reproduce familiar phrases with a degree of accuracy (*a colazione – a colazione/ at breakfast*). He seems to have understood the representational nature of written language, but some areas are still in a developing stage. The attribution of a given phoneme to the correspondent grapheme is sometimes incorrect. In *benve – beve (he drinks)*, the student seems more focused on the graphic form of the word than in the representation of the sounds. In *manego – mangio (I eat)*, the complex syllables combination is normalized in three syllables CV, the most common type in the Italian language and the first to be taught. In both cases, one can assume difficulties in the segmentation of words into phonemes and phonemic groups, probably due to difficulties in treating the new phonetic system. The delimitation of the words (*io – latte/manego*) seems uncertain. As far as the language competence is concerned, the sentence shows that the system of verbs (*benve – bevo*), as well as the noun syntagma

(*biscotto – un biscotto, biscotti*) are not completely acquired. The incorrect repetition of the pronoun *io* is due probably to the focus on the good reproduction of the sentence, in terms writing conventions.



Figure 1: Activity from Validation Process

6. THE VALIDATION PROCESS

A validation procedure has been set up, in order to assess accuracy, validity and impact of *Italian L2* (Minuz & Borri, 2017). With the term "accuracy", we intend the descriptive power of *Italian L2*. Can it guide the users in identifying levels of competence in language learning and literacy with an acceptable degree of precision and discriminatory power? "Validity" here means its appropriateness to an end. Is *Italian L2* useful, and user-friendly? Is *Italian L2* useful in setting realistic learning objectives? The third goal of the trial has been to assess the impact on the quality of the language courses and testing. Has *Italian L2* affected approaches to language teaching, course planning – i.e. in the progression of language contents, selection of the texts, or techniques in literacy teaching, and test design?

The trial has focused on the development of writing ability, starting from instrumental and functional literacy. Methodology and steps were as follows.

1. *Sampling of the participants.* Ten educational agencies were selected taking into account the diversity of the language teaching provision (State Adult Education Centres, NGOs and associations, vocational training agencies), and the geographical distribution. 17 teachers participated on a voluntary basis, after a short training.
2. *Overview of the teaching situations.* We asked teachers to fill in two types of questionnaires, in order to identify the research participants' profiles, the size and compositions of the classes, and the learners' profiles and backgrounds.

3. *Collection and analysis of samples of learners' written productions.* In order to assess the accuracy of the descriptors, we tested them on samples of writing produced by the students (about 800 pages of their exercise books), focusing on the new proposed levels Pre-Alpha, Alpha A1, Pre-A1.
4. *Feedback from the research participants.* In order to assess the validity of *Italian L2* and its impact on teaching practices, we instructed the research participants to experiment *Italian L2* by integrating it into their everyday practices. At the end of the trial, we asked for feedback through structured-interviews.

The research participants used *Italian L2* to plan and implement 14 courses: 2 AlphaA1/preA1; 10 A1 with literate and illiterate participants; 2 multilevel classes.

The average duration of the courses was 60 hours, from a minimum of 30 to a maximum of 100 hours. 167 students attended the course, 104 men and 63 women, from 18 countries, and with 19 mother tongues. 48 of them claimed to be able to speak at least one Second language (11 L2 other than Italian).

Research confirmed heterogeneity and irregular attendance as critical issues in L2 courses in Italy. Most of the classes were highly diverse in terms of language competence, literacy, and linguistic backgrounds of the students, in some cases ranging from illiterates without any knowledge of Italian to A2 educated students. Furthermore, individual students rarely presented homogeneous profiles. For example, pre-A1 students in writing skills could speak Italian up to B1. Thus, teachers – all of them with extensive experience and/or specific qualifications – claimed to use differentiated teaching techniques, mostly based on cooperative learning approaches. Course attendance was irregular, even when learners showed strong interest and motivation to language learning. In any case, the majority of teachers commented that the class environment was pleasant, cooperative and motivating; two reported that illiterates sometimes showed “distress”, “discouragement”, “confusion”.

As a positive feature, the participants pointed out, the coherence with the CEFR, as they are used to turning to it for course, material and test design. In particular, they appreciated the articulation between early literacy teaching and language teaching from a communicative perspective.

Overall, the validation results confirmed the accuracy of *Italian L2* as a descriptive and assessment tool and its validity in representing the development of communicative language skills and literacy. According to all research participants, it proved useful in outlining the profiles of students, thus in better designing tailor-made courses. It has sharpened their diagnostic skills, drawing their attention to aspects less in foreground in the standard entry assessment tools, such as the main domains in which learners habitually use the Italian language or their multilingual repertoires. The stress on different forms of illiteracy, in the continuum between illiterates and strong literates, has been appreciated.

Italian L2 has helped in reviewing current practices and notions. Participants quoted, for example, the notions of levels and profiles, the role of oral competence in literacy learning, the teaching and learning pace, the different rates of acquisition of spoken language and literacy, the difficulty of focusing on relevant and stimulating themes for the most vulnerable students such as the asylum seekers in hosting centres.

Problems have been signalled in the complex structure of the tool and, by one participant, in the distinction between illiterate and pre-literate learners.

7. OPEN QUESTIONS

The validation process has focused on at least three topics that need either to be made explicit or require further research.

7.1. LEVELS AND PROFILES

Italian L2 does not represent *one* progression but *progressions*.

Migrants use the language of their plurilingual repertoire strategically, including the L1, L2s, and their varieties, to act as adults in the host society. They develop a heterogeneous communicative language competence due to their linguistic backgrounds, the language skills more frequently employed, the types of interactions in which they participate, the most familiar language domains, language varieties and registers with which they come into contact. The heterogeneity touches both the levels of competence and the language areas. The oral skills could be stronger than the written skills. Morphological forms typical of the basic stage of the interlanguage may occur with elaborated pragmatic structures or a precise vocabulary.

Literacy and communicative language competence are not to be understood as unitary profiles, but as indicators of competence that must be re-assembled case by case (Beacco, 2008, Minuz et al., 2016).

As far as the teaching practices and methodologies are concerned, further research should better understand the heterogeneous profiles and how to deal with them, also in terms of formal language tests such as certification exams.

7.2. ACQUISITION OF THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Italian L2 assumes that the incoming learner is at a minimum level of oral ability or is not able at all; therefore, it defines sequences of language contents that proceed in parallel in terms of written and oral abilities. However, the relationship between oral abilities and levels of education, for adult illiterates in particular, is not yet fully understood. Teachers' experience emphasizes that illiterate subjects most likely need longer time to learn oral language, than semi-literate or literate subjects. The practical data is confirmed by psycholinguistic research, even though still at an early stage. Illiteracy seems to be related to a lower ability to be aware of and to process linguistic forms (i.e. phonemes, morphemes, words), which influences the development of oral language.

Moreover, illiterate people and people with low literacy skills cannot access the variety of texts and uses of language that reading and writing allow; the language input is less rich and varied

7.3. LITERACY PROFILES NOWADAYS

The Profile A (pre-literate) is well established in the literature on literacy in L2. Like others (Canadian Benchmark, 2015), we considered maintaining this profile appropriate, while we are uncertain about the term. Learners responding to the profile are relatively

frequent among asylum seekers coming from some geographical areas, while their presence is not significant among adult illiterates who reside in Italy and are constantly in contact with a highly textualized society.

However, we think it necessary to refocus the characteristics, individual resources and educational needs of the illiterate adults who speak a language that is not written, or that is not the language of schooling and public communication in the countries of origin. An important issue is the role of information and communication technologies in the representation of the written and spoken language, an issue that we are investigating.

8. CONCLUSIONS

We are convinced that the ongoing revisions of the CEFR, in order to make it more suited to the language learning and teaching to migrants, is a European endeavor, to which the experiences rooted within national contexts can contribute best.

Migration has both local and international dimensions, as the constantly changing routes and forms of people's movements show.

Although *Italian L2* focuses on the Italian language, we propose it as a contribution to a European L2 and literacy syllabus. For this reason, translations in English and French have been made available (<http://ida.loesch.it/italiano-l2-e-alfabetizzazione>) and a large extract of *Italian L2* is published on the CoE LIAM (Linguistic Integration Adult Migrants) website (<http://www.coe.int/it/web/lang-migrants/literacy>).

In addition, in ALTE (Association of Language Tester in Europe) two Special Interest Groups (LAMI - Language Assessment Migration and Integration group, and TT-Teacher Training group) are assessing the adaptability of *Italian L2* descriptors to other European contexts. The first results are expected in 2017. We would like to engage in the developing of a common tool international researchers and practitioners.

As the validation procedure of *Italian L2* showed, accurate tools for course planning and language and literacy assessment can positively affect the quality of teaching. Furthermore, a European framework could bring the attention of educational policy makers towards the needs of a vulnerable group among the migrants themselves, that is, the low educated and non-educated learners.

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