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The paradox of oral skills at CEFR level A1 and the role of digital technologies

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At CEFR level A1 the socio-communicative tasks envisaged are predominantly related to the resort to oral skills. Theoretically speaking, new students even when unable to write and read in their language/s of origin and/or in the target language, could thus directly join an A1 group without risking to find themselves in an irredeemably disadvantaged situation when compared to their literate classmates. Yet in current teaching practices and materials, because of the way spoken activities are generally presented (i.e. mostly by means of dialogues, samples, and exercises in written form), they are likely to find serious difficulties in starting from an A1 group and normally end up in pre-A1 courses. The present contribution argues that digital technologies could represent a way out from this apparently unsolvable paradox.

Keywords: non-literacy, L2 teaching, digital technologies.

1. Introduction

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) proposes a road map towards L2 proficiency based on a series of increasingly complex communicative goals, to be achieved throughout the learning process, related to various real-life situations. Thus CEFR-based learning, teaching, and assessment practices present learners, as they move ahead in their study of a particular language, with a progression of socio-communicative tasks (SCT) that reflect actual language uses in a variety of authentic contexts. Such SCT range from common everyday beginner tasks, such as *introducing oneself* or *asking for directions*, to advanced and specialized tasks, such as *writing an academic essay* or *giving a public speech*.

When the SCT envisaged at each CEFR level are analyzed on the basis of their association with spoken activities (reception, production, interaction, mediation) and written activities (reception, production, interaction, mediation) we find that level A1 shows:

a clear predominance of oral skills at the expenses of written skills [...] due to the fact that SCT at lower levels mainly refer to daily situations in which learners have to cope with different conversational basic tasks such as *the fulfillment of needs of concrete types, presenting themselves, asking for the price of an item*, that are predominantly associated with oral skills. (Giolfo and Salvaggio 2018: 62)

If this is actually the case and if at lower levels (and in particular at level A1, as illustrated below), as a consequence of the specific nature of the SCT involved, that are predominantly related to oral skills and spoken activities, new students, even when unable to write and read in their language/s of origin and/or in the target language, could, from a strictly theoretical standpoint, directly join an A1 group without necessarily finding themselves in an irredeemably disadvantaged situation when compared to their classmates who can read and write. Yet in everyday teaching practice we witness a quite different situation with those students experiencing extremely serious difficulties in starting immediately from an A1 group and normally ending up being grouped in so-called A0 (or pre-A1) courses.

The present contribution aims at illustrating how such a separation of beginner non-literate students (i.e. students unable to write and read in their language/s of origin and/or in the target language) and literate students into distinct A0 and A1 classes is not an ineluctable necessity in itself (at least not always, not in all cases, and not necessarily throughout an entire specific language course) and has to do not only with differences between beginner non-literate and literate learners in their capacity to cope with A1 SCT but also with the way such SCT, mostly based on oral skills, are conventionally presented.

We are confronted here with a paradoxical situation. At CEFR level A1 the vast majority of tasks imply the resort to listening and speaking skills and yet the level is not directly accessible to non-literate students because those oral tasks, despite being oral, are predominantly and conventionally taught through written texts consisting of transcriptions of dialogues, written conversational formulas, and relative written exercises. We argue that digital technologies can represent a possible way out from this apparently unsolvable paradox.

By managing different sets of data through distinct output channels (audio vs. video) digital technologies enable the separation of spoken and written activities throughout the learning and teaching process. This is particularly critical at level A1, and especially when dealing with non-literate learners, since digital technologies may help us to work on spoken activities directly via aural inputs thus avoiding transcriptions of oral conversations when not strictly necessary. In this way digital technologies permit us to reproduce the complexity of the distribution of SCT related to spoken and written activities at lower levels and especially at the entrance level, A1.

By the present contribution, without underestimating the implications of literacy also on the development of oral skills, we hope to stimulate language pedagogists and teachers to consider the unexplored potentialities of digital technologies as a means to avoid unnecessary transcriptions and experiment new approaches for dealing simultaneously with mixed groups of non-literate/literate beginner learners especially when working on the enhancement of oral skills at level A1.

2. Spoken and written activities at CEFR level A1

In order to show the relation between spoken and written activities and different SCT at level A1, we can analyze the SCT envisaged by CEFR at level A1 and observe how they relate to spoken and written activities (reception, production, interaction, mediation). To establish the association of spoken activities (SA) and written activities (WA) with SCT at level A1 we will initially refer to CEFR general overview of proficiency levels or global scale (Council of Europe 2001: 24).

Of course both the original CEFR (Council of Europe 2001: 26-29) and its *Companion volume with new descriptors* (Council of Europe 2018: 55-102) do provide more detailed descriptions of the SCT involved at each level. Nevertheless, the choice to start our analysis by referring to the global scale lies in its conciseness which gives us an overall and immediate idea of the main and essential features, goals, tasks, and skills that characterize each particular level and which explicitly aims at providing “teachers and curriculum planners with orientation points” (Council of Europe 2001: 24).

As we can see from the following table, at CEFR level A1, all the SCT involved are almost exclusively related to spoken activities.

Level	“Can do” descriptors
A1	<p>Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type.</p> <p>Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has.</p> <p>Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.</p>

Table 1. Distribution of language activities at CEFR level A1.

It is a quite remarkable fact that the concise description of level A1 provided by the global scale presents us with a list of “Can do” descriptors that seem to refer almost exclusively to oral tasks. This scenario is due to the fact that CEFR global description of level A1 focuses on basic conversational SCT such as *using everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type* or *asking and answering questions about personal details* that are normally carried out by the sole use of oral skills.

As discussed in the next section, we should not jump to the conclusion that written skills are irrelevant and not represented at level A1 or that the time dedicated to their enhancement will be minimal in comparison to that dedicated to oral skills. Although not included in the global scale, CEFR, in more detailed descriptions, does list SCT that require written skills at level A1. Such SCT include understanding “familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues”, writing “a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings”, and filling in “forms with personal details, for example entering” one’s “name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form” (Council of Europe 2001: 26). Thus both spoken and written activities are essential to achieve proficiency at this level, but, at the same time, the level itself seems to be mainly characterized by its association with SCT that mostly require the resort to oral skills.

3. Current teaching practices and materials

As seen in the previous section, CEFR global scale (Council of Europe 2001: 24) does not list any SCT directly related to the use of written tasks at the entrance level A1. Thus if a set of skills had to be chosen to define the main goals of A1 level that would undoubtedly be the set of oral skills. This notwithstanding, as already stated above, this does not mean that written skills are not represented at level A1 or that they are not essential to the achievement of the communicative goals envisaged at level A1. Nor does this imply that the time dedicated, in the teaching practice, to the enhancement of written skills should be marginal in comparison to that devoted to oral skills. In fact both the CEFR first version (Council of Europe 2001: 26) and its *Companion volume with new descriptors* (Council of Europe 2018: 55-102) do provide us with a detailed list of A1 SCT that require the resort to reading and writing skills. The following table sums up the main SCT related to written activities listed in the *Companion volume* (Council of Europe 2018: 60-65, 75-77, 93-97).

Written reception

Overall reading comprehension	Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required.
Reading correspondence	Can understand short, simple messages on postcards. Can understand short, simple messages sent via social media or email (e.g. proposing what to do, when and where to meet).
Reading for orientation	Can recognise familiar names, words and very basic phrases on simple notices in the most common everyday situations. Can understand store guides (information on which floors departments are on) and directions (e.g. to where to find lifts). Can understand basic hotel information, e.g. times when meals are served. Can find and understand simple, important information in advertisements, in programmes for special events, in leaflets and brochures (e.g. what is proposed, costs, the date and place of the event, departure times etc.).
Reading for information	Can get an idea of the content of simpler informational material and short simple descriptions, especially if there is visual

and argument	support. Can understand short texts on subjects of personal interest (e.g. news flashes about sports, music, travel, or stories etc.) written with simple words and supported by illustrations and pictures.
Reading instructions	Can follow short, simple written directions (e.g. to go from X to Y).
Reading as a leisure activity	Can understand short, illustrated narratives about everyday activities that are written in simple words. Can understand in outline short texts in illustrated stories, provided that the images help him/her to guess a lot of the content.

Written production

Overall written production	Can give information in writing about matters of personal relevance (e.g. likes and dislikes, family, pets) using simple words and basic expressions. Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences.
Creative writing	Can write simple phrases and sentences about themselves and imaginary people, where they live and what they do. Can describe in very simple language what a room looks like. Can use simple words and phrases to describe certain everyday objects (e.g. the colour of a car, whether it is big or small).
Written reports and essays	<i>No descriptors available.</i>

Written interaction

Overall written interaction	Can ask for or pass on personal details in written form.
Correspondence	Can write messages and online postings as a series of very short sentences about hobbies and likes/dislikes, using simple words and formulaic expressions, with reference to a dictionary. Can write a short, simple postcard. Can write a short, very simple message (e.g. a text message) to friends to give them a piece of information or to ask them a question.

Notes, messages and forms	Can write numbers and dates, own name, nationality, address, age, date of birth or arrival in the country etc. such as on a hotel registration form. Can leave a simple message giving information on e.g. where he/she has gone, what time he/she will be back. (e.g. 'Shopping: back at 5 p.m.')
Online conversation and discussion	Can write very simple messages and personal online postings as a series of very short sentences about hobbies, likes/dislikes, etc., relying on the aid of a translation tool. Can use formulaic expressions and combinations of simple words to post short positive and negative reactions to simple online postings and their embedded links and media, and can respond to further comments with standard expressions of thanks and apology.

Table 2. SCT related to written activities at level A1.

As we can see, the *Companion volume*, at level A1, enumerates several SCT that entail the resort to writing and reading activities. For all the SCT envisaged though, the resort to written skills is limited to the reception and production of *short* and *simple* written texts that make use of *basic*, *familiar* and *predictable* vocabulary. Moreover the ability to cope with those written communicative tasks is not considered as a preliminary condition for the access to level A1, rather is supposedly developed as the result and the goal of the learning process taking place at such a level.

This may seem an uncalled for remark, and from a theoretical point of view it certainly is, but when looked at from the point of view of current teaching practices and materials the obviousness of such a consideration should not be taken for granted.

Figure 1, taken from a popular series of Italian L2 textbooks, can perhaps help to illustrate this point. The series, following the progression of CEFR's levels, is specifically tailored to the needs of adult migrant learners and is widely appreciated for its choice of appropriate vocabulary and exemplifications as well as for its selection of simplified texts and exercises. In the image, we can see the second and third page of the very first unit of the textbook dedicated to level A1. Thus the transcription of the dialogue, with related exercises, the exemplifications, and the tables, as well as all the titles and instructions for the exercises, are, in most cases, the first written texts that the targeted beginner students are likely to encounter

unità 1 ciao, buongiorno

BUONGIORNO!

LI PING: Buongiorno, io mi chiamo Li Ping. E tu?
OLGA: Io mi chiamo Olga. Piacere.
LI PING: Piacere mio. Di dove sei?
OLGA: Sono ucraina, di Borodjanka. E tu?
LI PING: Io sono cinese, di Pechino.
OLGA: Lui, come si chiama?
LI PING: Lui si chiama Mustafa.
OLGA: Di dove è?
LI PING: Come?
OLGA: Di dov'è lui?
LI PING: Ah! Lui è marocchino.

COME SI CHIAMA LEI? LEI SI CHIAMA _____
DI DOVE È OLGA? LEI È _____

COME SI CHIAMA LUI? LUI SI CHIAMA _____
DI DOVE È LI PING? LUI È _____

COME SI CHIAMA LUI? LUI SI CHIAMA _____
DI DOVE È MUSTAFA? LUI È _____

3. COMPLETA

LI PING: Ciao, io Li Ping. E tu?
OLGA: mi chiamo Olga. Piacere.
LI PING: Piacere.
OLGA: E lui, come chiama?
LI PING: Lui si Mustafa.
OLGA: Di dove?
LI PING: Come?
OLGA: è lui?
LI PING: Ah! è marocchino.

4. RIORDINA

- 1 si / Mustafa / lui / chiama / è / Casablanca / marocchino / di
- 2 Olga / chiama / di / si / ucraina / lei / Borodjanka / è
- 3 Pechino / Li Ping / è / chiama / lui / si / cinese / di
- 4 Casablanca / mi / marocchino / io / di / sono / Mustafa / chiamo

DI DOVE SEI?

PAESE	MASCHILE	NAZIONALITÀ	FEMMINILE
ALGERIA	ALGERINO		ALGERINA
BRASILE	BRASILIANO		BRASILIANA
CINA	CINESE		CINESE
EGITTO	EGIZIANO		EGIZIANA
FRANCIA	FRANCESE		FRANCESE
GIAPPONE	GIAPPONESE		GIAPPONESE
INGHILTERRA	INGLESE		INGLESE
ITALIA	ITALIANO		ITALIANA
MAROCCO	MAROCCHINO		MAROCCHINA
MOLDAVIA	MOLDAVO		MOLDAVA
PERÙ	PERUVIANO		PERUVIANA
POLONIA	POLACCO		POLACCA
ROMANIA	RUMENO		RUMENA
RUSSIA	RUSSO		RUSSA
SENEGAL	SENEGALESE		SENEGALESE
SRI LANKA	CINGALESE		CINGALESE
TUNISIA	TUNISINO		TUNISINA
UCRAINA	UCRAINO		UCRAINA

5. SCRIVI LA NAZIONALITÀ DI OGNI PERSONAGGIO
 Formula frasi come nell'esempio. Fai attenzione alla **È** con accento.

LI PING / CINA
 LI PING **è** cinese

 ALVARO / PERÙ ALVARO _____	 SHIRO / GIAPPONE SHIRO _____
 FELIPE / BRASILE FELIPE _____	 ANDREI / POLONIA ANDREI _____
 TAMARA / ROMANIA TAMARA _____	 ABEDI* / SENEGAL ABEDI* _____
 MUSTAFA / MAROCOCO MUSTAFA _____	 VLADIMIR / RUSSIA VLADIMIR _____
 KATE / INGHILTERRA KATE _____	 SAHLA / TUNISIA SAHLA _____

Figure 1. From Cassani et al. (2008: 6-7).

during their learning process. According to CEFR principles SCT presented to learners should be progressive and should reflect real-life situations.

The methodological message of the CEFR is that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations, expressing

themselves and accomplishing tasks of different natures. Thus, the criterion suggested for assessment is communicative ability in real life, in relation to a continuum of ability (Levels A1-C2). (Council of Europe 2018: 27)

From CEFR's point of view, a written text that describes a dialogue between people introducing themselves, such as that illustrated in Image 1, does not represent the kind of written texts that a beginner learner will come across in a real-life situation. Students at this stage, according to CEFR, should be presented with very short written messages related for instance to understanding "store guides (information on which floors departments are on) and directions (e.g. to where to find lifts)" or "basic hotel information, e.g. times when meals are served" (Council of Europe 2018: 27) and even those basic tasks could be considered quite demanding if approached during the very first lesson. Moreover written messages, such as *formula frasi come nell'esempio* 'formulate sentences following the example' or *fa' attenzione alla è con accento* 'pay attention to the è with a stress mark', that can be found among the exercise instructions in the pages reproduced above, are definitely not related to any possible authentic communicative context.

This evident inconsistency of the proposed materials with CEFR principles cannot be ascribed to a peculiar pedagogic choice of the authors. It rather reflects the conventional way in which spoken activities are commonly presented in L2 textbooks. It is evident that the unit does focus on typical A1 SCT such as *introducing oneself* or *asking and answering questions about where one lives or comes from*. It is also clear that such SCT have to be ultimately carried out orally and that the written texts and explanations are only conceived as the means to reach that goal and not as samples of the actual written texts that, according to CEFR descriptors, students should approach at this particular level. Nevertheless, the unit is fundamentally based on written texts and we should not be surprised if non-literate learners find very serious difficulties when trying to directly join an A1 lesson like the one illustrated above. No wonder then that teachers are often forced to separate non-literate students from literate beginner students by creating *ad hoc* A0 or pre-A1.

We are confronted here with the paradox of a level, A1, in which written activities play a minor role in terms of communicative goals to

be achieved and that is, this notwithstanding, precluded to non-literate learners because of the way oral skills are currently taught and enhanced.

In our opinion, in order to overcome this apparently unsolvable contradiction, one should start by clearly disentangling, from a theoretical stance, the resort to written skills for the sake of enhancing students' ability to cope with the specific written SCT envisaged at CEFR level A1, from the resort to written skills with the ultimate goal of improving oral skills. Then one should look for alternative ways to teach oral skills that minimize the resort to written skills where not necessarily required. In the next section we will try to show how digital technologies could help us design inclusive tools for the enhancement of oral skills at level A1 that could hopefully benefit both literate and non-literate beginner students.

4. Digital technologies and the enhancement of oral skills at level A1

In order to understand how digital technologies can help us minimize the resort to written skills, when not strictly required by the SCT associated with a specific level and in particular with level A1, we will first have to consider how spoken and written skills relate to digital technologies in human-computer interaction (HCI).

When humans and computer interact they exchange information through different input and output apparatuses. Each of the two sides (humans and computers) produces outputs and receives inputs. What is produced by one side as an output is received by the other as an input and vice versa.

A person's interaction with the outside world occurs through information being received and sent: input and output. In an interaction with a computer the user receives information that is output by the computer, and responds by providing input to the computer – the user's output becomes the computer's input and vice versa (Dix et al. 2004: 13). As we can see in the Table 3, computers' productions take the form of aural and visual outputs that reach humans as inputs received through human perceptive systems and interpreted by means of their perceptive skills (listening and reading).

Computer		Human	
Output	Output Device	Perceptive System	Language Skill
aural	speakers/headphones	auditory system	listening
visual	monitor/screen/etc.	visual system	reading

Table 3. Perceptive skills in HCI: human systems and computer devices involved.

Computers' aural outputs are produced by computers via speakers and headphones and reach humans in form of inputs that are received by their auditory system and interpreted by humans by means of listening skills. Computers' visual outputs are produced by computers via screens and monitors and reach humans in form of inputs that are received by their visual system and interpreted, as they involve the understanding of written language, by means of their reading skills.

Computer Channel	Output Device	Human sense	Skill
audio	speakers/headphones	hearing	listening
video	screen/VR helmets/etc.	sight	reading

Table 4. Computers' channels, listening and reading skills, and senses.

As shown in Table 3, computers' aural outputs are related to humans' listening skills and computers' visual outputs to humans' reading skills. Moreover computers' aural and visual outputs are generated through distinct output devices (speakers vs. screen). The consequence of this situation is that, as we can see in the following table, digital technologies, by using different output channels (audio vs. video), allow the separation of activities involving listening skills from activities involving reading skills. Digital technologies thus allow the reproduction of oral texts in the form of aural outputs. This,

though it might sound as a tautology, is extremely important in that it avoids presenting learners with written transcriptions of oral conversations, interviews, etc. Such transcriptions, as discussed in the previous section, are very common in current teaching materials and, among other factors, may account for the difficulties encountered by non-literate students in joining directly an A1 course. Digital technologies can thus represent an alternative to writing for sound reproduction. As already suggested by Ong (1982) the act of writing can be conceived in itself as a technology for sound reproduction.

Because we have by today so deeply interiorized writing, made it so much a part of ourselves [...] we find it difficult to consider writing to be a technology as we commonly assume printing and the computer to be. Yet writing (and especially alphabetic writing) is a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment: styli or brushes or pens, carefully prepared surfaces such as paper, animal skins, strips of wood, as well as inks or paints, and much more [...] It initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist. (Ong 1982: 80)

Of course the integration of sound reproduction technologies, such as tape-recorders, record players (and more recently CD and MP3 players), in the teaching practice is no novelty at all. In fact the shift from traditional grammar-based methods to methods focusing on the development of oral skills alongside written skills would not have been conceivable

without the advent of technologies enabling an approach to language in its use. [...] For a language pedagogy that focuses on listening and oral production skills, on phonetics and sound articulation, on direct contact and full immersion in the foreign language, having at one's disposal a tool allowing the replication of an oral text for a virtually infinite number of times without variations, means to have at one's command an extremely valuable and priceless resource to work on students' linguistic habits (Chini and Bosisio 2014: 238; *translation* FS).

Nevertheless we argue that in order to face the challenge of the inclusion of non-literate students in A1 courses we are perhaps in

need of a further paradigm shift. This entails an approach to the resort to sound reproduction technologies to enhance oral skills which is consistent with CEFR principles illustrated above and which harmonizes with the distribution of oral skills at level A1. Thus aural input introduced in the teaching practice should not, as is often the case, simply work as a mere duplicate of what is concurrently presented in written form. Instead it should work as a real alternative to written presentations of contents whose ultimate aim is the improvement of oral skills. Digital technologies represent the condition of such a paradigm shift in that, compared to other traditional technologies for sound reproduction (tape-recorders, record players, etc.), they enable the management of aural contents in a more complex and flexible way. We suggest that the potentialities of digital technologies in enhancing oral skills are to be fully explored and the implications of the use of digital technologies at level A1 in a way more consistent with CEFR principles require further investigation and experimentation. We argue that such an experimentation in the designing of digital tools for the enhancement of oral skills at level A1 and for the inclusion of non-literate students in the A1 classroom should take into account the following suggestions:

- clearly disentangling the resort to writing in order to train written skills from the resort to writing to improve oral skills;
- avoiding the resort to written transcriptions of oral texts where not necessarily required by the SCT involved;
- presenting learners with new contents according to the progression of SCT and relative language skills as conceived by the CEFR;
- using digital technologies for the reproduction of oral texts in the form of aural outputs in a way that is consistent with the remarks advanced in the present contribution;
- using digital technologies (computers in particular) to emulate the main features of writing by organizing aural outputs in strings that, as in the listening process, can be fragmented, repeated, navigated backward and forward, reordered, completed, matched with images, etc. (traditional technologies for sound reproduction such as tape-recorders and record players, but also more recent CD and MP3 players, are not easily adaptable to these tasks);
- trying to include non-literate students in the A1 classroom

whenever possible and especially when focusing on oral skills in order to make use of everybody's language resources.

5. Conclusions

Technologies and pedagogic approaches are significantly interdependent. The success of different pedagogical approaches can be often related to the concurrent availability of specific technologies that support the implementation of those approaches. For instance, traditional grammar-based approaches, that mainly focus on reading and writing skills, almost exclusively rely upon printed materials such as grammars, handbooks, and dictionaries. On the other hand, communicative methods that emphasize the harmonious development of both oral and written skills would not be imaginable without the resort to technologies that allow the use in the classroom of different authentic materials related to meaningful real-life socio-communicative contexts. In the present contribution we maintained that digital technologies can play a crucial role in helping develop teaching strategies for the enhancement of oral skills at level A1 that are more consistent with CEFR principles. Through digital technologies, pragmatic fakes, such as those represented by written oral conversations (i.e. oral conversations reproduced in written form), can be avoided in the teaching practice and substituted by digital materials based on realistic and progressive aural inputs. We believe that such materials will benefit all beginner learners, both literate and non-literate. One should not, of course, underestimate the relation between literacy acquisition and the development of oral skills and in particular the implications of the acquisition of writing and reading skills for the processing of oral language and for phonological awareness (cf. Tarone et al. 2009). Hence written skills should also be progressively and carefully developed throughout the whole learning process and from its beginning. Nevertheless the engagement in realistic, meaningful and progressive spoken activities, in its turn, will also hopefully have a positive impact on the acquisition of written skills on the part of all beginner learners. Research shows that the preliminary acquisition of new vocabulary in

L2 is considered a fundamental prerequisite for the development of writing skills.

Numerous research findings in language pedagogy and the psycho-linguistic field confirm the importance of the relation between the development of lexical competence and reading abilities. (Cardona 2008: 10; *translation FS*)

More specifically, as demonstrated by recent neurolinguistic studies (Kolinsky et al. 2014: 179), the possibility to draw on an orally acquired vocabulary repertoire supports the automation of the mechanisms involved in the process of script decoding when learning a new writing system (this of course applies to all new language learners). In conclusion it is essential to engage non-literate students in written activities from the very beginning of their learning process since literacy acquisition is a complex, delicate, demanding, and long process that, with some non-literate learners, can take up to 500 hours of tuition before the inclusion into a proper A1 level (see the case of “pre-Alfa” non-literate learners in Borri et al. 2014: 27). Moreover literacy has an impact not only, as obviously expected, on the development of written skills but also on that of oral skills. At the same time the exclusion of non-literate students from A1 courses, in our opinion, does not depend only on the differences between the respective language abilities of non-literate learners and their literate classmates but also on the way learning activities, and spoken activities in particular, are commonly presented in teaching materials. We suggest that while it is essential to work separately with non-literate students when working on their writing skills, non-literate students could also be included in some A1 activities, together with literate classmates, especially when the class group is involved in spoken activities based on the use of specifically tailored inclusive digital teaching materials. We hope that the considerations exposed in the present contribution will stimulate L2 teachers and language pedagogists to explore new ways in which digital technologies could be used to develop tools designed to help both non-literate and literate students cope with spoken SCT envisaged at level A1 and foster the initial acquisition of language vocabulary and structures. Thus in accordance with the tenets of an inclusive approach, such tools will hopefully be beneficial not only to non-literate students but also to

literate beginner learners and will allow teachers to work simultaneously, when dealing with those particular spoken activities, with mixed groups of non-literate and literate learners thus maximizing “learning opportunities for every student” (Rose and Meyer 2002: 6).

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