English Language Teaching and Learning in Primary School. Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

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Abstract. This paper focuses specifically on the development of design and teaching competences for pre-service and in-service EFL teachers in primary school which is considered as an essential aspect of the professionalism of teachers. According to the national and international literature, it addresses some epistemological and methodological aspects of EFL curriculum design with particular reference to how this is dealt with in the Italian school system, even though most of the reflections and methodological proposals that are here presented may be useful for any school system.

Keywords. EFL teaching and learning, primary school, instructional design, language competences

1. Introduction

In the last decades, parallel to the development of European and national policies on foreign language learning and teaching[1], the pedagogical reflection on these themes has devoted increasing attention to curricular issues and how to teach a second language or more foreign languages effectively[2]. This requires specific teacher expertise in the area of curriculum design, which must be treated with methodological rigour. In fact good educational actions, even before being implemented need to be thought out and carefully planned by reviewing the many variables (contextual, educational, organizational, emotional, relational, etc.) that accompany the teaching-learning process and the teacher-learner educational relationship.

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[1] Council of the European Union, *Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences*, Brussels, 20 May 2014, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/ en/educ/133790. pdf (last viewed 29/07/2017); M. Byram, L. Parmenter, *The Globalisation of Language Education Policy*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2012; S. Rixon, *Survey of Policy and Practice in Primary English Language Teaching Worldwide*, London, British Council, 2013; Commission of the European Communities, *Language Learning at pre-primary school level: making it efficient and sustainable – A Policy Handbook*, Commission Staff Working Paper, European Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020), Brussels, EU Commission, 2011.

[2] J.H. Hulstijn, *Language Proficiency in Native and Non-native Speakers. Theory and Research,* Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015; A. Pinter, *Children learning second languages*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; R. Ellis, *Language teaching research and language pedagogy,* Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012; G. Jacobs, T. Farrell, *Paradigm Shift: Understanding and Implementing Change in Second Language Education*, in «TESL-EJ», *5*(1), 2001, pp. 1-16; R. Ellis, *Language teaching research and language pedagogy*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Within the range of competences that a teacher should master, design plays a fundamental role to guide instructional action in an intentional, systematic and thoughtful way. School curriculum design requires the activation of intellectual, operational, relational and technical resources, aimed at 'translating' a specific vision of the world and human beings into instructional actions. It always implies being based on an objective, because design cannot be considered a simple technique which is transferable to different contexts, but needs to be adapted to specific learning situations, checking out to what extent it can change and improve the current situation. First of all, to design means to start from the analysis of the existing situation so as to move towards the future, towards the identification of concrete paths of reality which are able to transform and support an approach aimed at continuous improvement[3].

There are two main aspects that best characterise design in school-contexts (as well as in other training contexts): the conceptual, creative, constructive perspective on the one hand, and the control, guidance, monitoring and evaluation aspects on the other. In the first case, through a bottom-up approach, possible lines of action aimed at problem solving or needs satisfaction are considered. In the second case, design allows the "control" of leaning processes and teaching products; this increases the effectiveness and efficiency levels of learning activities, by intervening, even during 'construction', in relation to the re-definition of objectives, strategies, methods and means in order to achieve the final result. As Hargreaves and Hopkins[4] maintain design flexibility plays a very important role in the success of instructional activity.

In the pedagogical literature[5] have provided various interpretative models of the teacher professional profile, and each of them stresses the importance of design competences as a distinctive feature of teacher professionalism.

2. Teaching English as a foreign language in Primary School

In the current school-context, with regard to the teacher professional profile, design competence is a key element. In fact, improvement in the quality of pupils' learning can only be pursued by investing in the empowerment of teachers' initial training and vocational skills.

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[3] C.M. Reigeluth (Ed.), *Instructional design theories and models: An overview of their current status*, New York, Routledge, 2013; W.J. Rothwell, H.C. Kazanas, *Mastering the instructional design process: A systematic approach*, London, John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

[4] D.H. Hargreaves, D. Hopkins, (Eds.), *Development planning for school improvement*, London, Cassell, 1994.

[5] P. Perrenoud, *Dix nouvelles compétences pour enseigner*, Paris, ESF éditeur, 1999; C. Danielson, *Evaluations that help teachers learn*, in «Educational Leadership», *68*(4), 2011, pp. 35-39, http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec10/vol68/num04/Evaluations-That-Help-Teachers-Learn.aspx (last viewed 30/07/2017); C. Kyriacou, *Essential teaching skills*, London, Stanley Thornes, 2007; E. Morin, *La testa ben fatta. Riforma dell'insegnamento e riforma del pensiero*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2000; C.E. Feistritzer, S. Griffin, A. Linnajarvi, *Profile of teachers in the US, 2011*, Washington, D.C., National Center for Education Information, 2011; G. Bandini, A. Calvani, E. Falaschi, L. Menichetti, *The professional profile of the teacher trainees in the Course of Primary Education. The SPPPI Model*, in «Formazione Persona Lavoro», 15, 2015, pp. 89-104. http://www.unibg.it/dati/bacheca/434/77339.pdf (last viewed 15/02/2016); D. Capperucci, M. Piccioli, *L'insegnante di scuola primaria. Identità, competenze e profilo professionale*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2015.

The initial development and ongoing review of teacher professional competences, are aspects that internationally the OECD, UNESCO and the European Union recognize as a priority, not only to raise the quality of education systems in various countries, but also, to increase European competitiveness. The quality of teaching and teacher professionalism is now recognized as a strategic factor both for education and social growth policies[6].

The development of design competences is a key activity also in EFL teaching in Primary School, as evidenced in many studies conducted in Europe and other parts of the world[7]. Therefore, it is important that this aspect be developed with a lot of attention from the initial training of future teachers, giving it ample consideration within the educational offer for the Degree Courses in Primary Education, be that in courses, workshops and/or the practicum.

As stated by the Italian school legislation, such curriculum design competences must respect the provisions reported in the *National Guidelines for the Curriculum* published by the Ministry of Education, University and Research[8]. The latter represent the national curriculum that all Italian schools of the first cycle are called upon to implement, therefore, they constitute a constant reference point for instructional design.

In order to provide common guidelines to support EFL teachers' work, the *National Guidelines* have clearly defined two aspects, which will be detailed in the following sections:

1. purposes and epistemological foundations of teaching English in Primary School;

2. specific competences, knowledge and skills to be pursued over the five years of compulsory English language teaching in primary school.

2.1 Epistemological foundations of TEFL with young learners

The *National Guidelines* identify the cultural framework of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) to guarantee the single nature and equity of the national education system, as well as to support teachers' work. In emphasizing the formative value of teaching English in primary schools, the *National Guidelines*, in addition to the mother language, assign two specific purposes to the learning of English:

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[6] OECD, *TALIS 2013 Results: An international perspective on teaching and learning,* Paris, OECD Publishing, 2013a, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/talis-2013-results_9789264196261-en (last viewed 28/07/2017); OECD, *Teacher for the 21st century. Using evaluation to improve teaching*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2013b, http://www.oecd.org/site/eduistp13/TS2013%20Background%20Report.pdf (last viewed 30/07/2017); UNESCO, *Unesco strategy on teachers (2012-2015)*, 2012, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002177/217775E.pdf (last viewed 30/07/2017); UNESCO, *Teachers and educational quality: Monitoring Global Needs for 2015*, 2015, http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/teachers06-en.pdf (last viewed 30/07/2017); Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Improving the Quality of Teacher Education*, COM (2007) 392 final, 2007, http://www.cde-pc.it/documenti/20070803COM_2007_392.pdf (last viewed 30/07/2017); Commission of the European Communities, *Literature review. Teachers' core competences: requirements and development*, 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/teacher-competences_en.pdf (last viewed 30/07/2017).

[7] M. Kelly, M. Grenfell, R. Allan, C. Kriza, W. McEvoy, *European profile for language teacher education: A frame of reference*, Brussels, European Commission, 2004; M. Grenfell, M. Kelly, D. Jones, *The European Language Teacher: Recent Trends and Future Developments in Teacher Education*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2003.

[8] MIUR, *Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo*, in «Annali dell'Istruzione», numero speciale, 2012.

1. develop multilingual and multicultural competences within a complex, multiethnic and globalized society;

2. acquire the initial tools to practice active citizenship in the context in which the pupil lives and even beyond the borders of the national territory.

On the basis of the achievement of these objectives, some guiding criteria taken from the *National Guidelines* are proposed here:

1. Competences in foreign languages and European citizenship. By coming into contact with other European languages, the pupil is able to deepen his/her awareness of European citizenship, thus, developing a diversified repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources becomes a tool to interact with others, even when "the other" belongs to very distant cultural and geographical contexts. In fact, studying different languages, a pupil learns to recognize the existence of different linguistic and cultural systems and experiences the variety of means that every language has to think, speak, communicate, convey emotions[9].

2. Horizontal and vertical aspects of teaching and learning EFL. To make sure that learning becomes a highly educational activity, to the extent that it contributes to a person's growth and development considering the local and global context of which the pupil is part, it is necessary that teaching EFL is not an episodic event, fragmented, disconnected from the rest of the curriculum; it is essential that it is designed identifying horizontal connections with other subjects and developing vertically the progression of knowledge and competences needed to pass from one order of schooling to another. The horizontal and vertical aspects of the English Language curriculum must also be read in the perspective of building a synergic connection between the formal learning, that pupil acquires in school, and the non-formal and informal learning, with which (s)he comes into contact with in everyday life. With regard to English language learning, this transversal dimension, that links the contexts of life and the child's learning, is very strong. Indeed, in everyday life (s)he interacts, even unconsciously, with linguistic expressions, terms, phrases, idioms in English, conveyed mostly by the mass media and the Internet, which can be quite very familiar to him/her because they already belong to his/her linguistic heritage. The latter does not represent a *linguistic shock* for the child, i.e., a refusal for all that (s)he does not fully understand *about* the new language. The habit of using words borrowed from other languages assumes an absolute naturalness and spontaneity, so they are not perceived as "strange" because they are related to the common lexicon used in activities, situations and forms of interaction that are constantly present in everyday life[10].

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[9] L. Sercu, *The foreign language and intercultural competence teacher: The acquisition of a new professional identity*, in «Intercultural education», *17*(1), 2006, pp. 55-72; C. Garrido, I. Álvarez, *Language teacher education for intercultural understanding*, in «European Journal of Teacher Education», *29*(2), 2006, pp. 163-179; R. Johnstone, *Addressing 'The Age Factor': Some Implications for Language Policy. Guide for the development of Language Education Policies in Europe From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education: Reference Study*, Stirling, University of Stirling, 2002.

[10] B. Tomlinson, *Materials development in language teaching*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; J. Enver, (Eds.), *ElliE. Early Language Learning in Europe*, British Council, UK, 2011.

3. Interdisciplinary connections and "new humanism". As Gibbons[11] says, it is important to provide common design spaces between English and other subjects, implementing the concept of "new humanism" present in the *National Guidelines.* This means that the school is called upon to help a pupil recognize the relationships between his/her personal microcosm and the macrocosm of humanity and the planet, because what happens in the world effects everyone's life and at the same time every person is responsible for the future of humanity[12]. To educate children to this awareness and responsibility it is necessary to have a large store of knowledge, which, however, does not coincide with the accumulation of lots of information in many areas, but rather requires full mastery of single subjects and, simultaneously, the ability to process multiple connections at interdisciplinary level. Common curriculum design, which is easier in primary school because of the presence of a smaller number of teachers than at other school levels, can become an area of intervention aimed not only, at language development, but also, at cognitive development and the construction of transversal competences such as the *bridging*, of Feuerstein[13]. In this sense, it stimulates the development of associational and connectivist thought, through which the child uses knowledge learned in different contexts and subjects to structure and solve problems. It no longer operates within single subjects but in the broader perspective of learning to learn[14].

4. Build relationships between the mother-tongue and EFL. As regards the relationship between the mother-tongue and English, special care must be taken (starting in the first grades) to identify phonological peculiarities and differences in pronunciation, so as not to generate difficulties in understanding and speaking[15]. In this regard it is appropriate for the teacher to stimulate the child's ability to take control of multiple pronunciation and intonation patterns to activate as naturally as possible a multilingual system[16].

5. Methodologies for teaching EFL: using a communicative approach. From a methodological point of view, the use of a communicative approach to language learning must be favoured, especially in consideration of the different coding systems of phonemes into graphemes which exists between the English and Italian languages. The use of the spoken language should be introduced by the teacher in a systematic way, proceeding gradually according to the complexity of the language structures presented, On the other hand, speaking English for the child has to become a natural activity, preferably integrated with the use of creative and interactive games that can be supported by other nonverbal languages (music, movements, images, etc.) to promote participation and involve-

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[11] P. Gibbons, *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom*, Portsmouth (NH), Heinemann, 2002.

[12] MIUR, *Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo*, cit., 2012, p. 11.

[13] R. Feuerstein, M.B. Hoffman, *Teacher's guides to the Feuerstein instrumental enrichment Drogram*, Washington, DC., Curriculum Development Associates Inc., 1988.

[14] J.-C. Beacco, M. Fleming, F. Goullier, E. Thürmann, H. Vollmer, *The Language Dimension in All Subjects. A Handbook for Curriculum development and teacher training,* Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 2015, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Handbook-Scol_final_EN.pdf (last viewed 06/08/2017).

[15] J.H. Hulstijn, *Language Proficiency in Native and Non-native Speakers. Theory and Research*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015.

[16] M. Celce-Murcia, L. McIntosh, *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*, Boston (MA), Heinle & Heinle, 1991; S. Garton, F. Copland, A. Burns, *Investigating global practices in teaching English to young learners*, in S. Sheehan (Ed.), *British Council Research, Vol. 1*, 2013, pp. 35-69.

ment in cooperative learning activities[17]. At primary school level the use of a grammatical approach to learning English is not recommended. Such an approach, in addition to compromising the child's learning motivation, may generate confusion between different grammatical and syntactical systems[18]. In fact, the *National Guidelines* provide grammar knowledge as a task reserved for lower secondary school, where pupils can gradually recognize, rework and internalize modes of communication and rules of a foreign language, being able to understand much more easily the way the new language functions. It is important instead to promote a gradual integration of the elements of the new language in the native language system (or any other language spoken by the pupil) expanding implicitly the ability to manage various language components (phonetic, phonological, syntactic and semantic aspects)[19].

6. Gradual development of writing competences. Correlated to the increasing importance to be given to oral language, special attention has to be paid to the moment related to the introduction of writing. This should be presented in a gradual way and preferably from the third grade onwards. Initially writing will be limited to keywords to include in conceptual maps and diagrams, simple expressions related to the child's experiences to culminate, at the end of the fifth grade, with brief descriptions and presentations. Among the multiple language competences to be pursued, writing is definitely the lowest priority in primary school, also in consideration of specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography) that usually emerge at this school level and that may be, in some way, also increased in the mother-tongue by an approach to English which focuses too much on writing[20].

7. Teaching EFL, ICT and international learning experiences. Right from the start of primary school it is recommended to accompany active and participatory teaching methodologies by the use of ICT (computers, tablets, interactive white boards (IWBs), interactive tablets, educational software, etc.), which in many cases are often used by children at home. These can be useful to expand space and time for learning, creating opportunities to be in contact with the language even out of school and promote informal social interactions between individuals, school groups and local communities[21]. To this end, it is very

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[17] J.K. Shin, *Ten helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners*, in «English Teaching Forum», *44*(2), 2006, pp. 2-13; A.L. Herrell, M.L. Jordan, *50 strategies for teaching English language learners*, Boston, Pearson, 2015.
[18] S.J. Savignon, *Communicative language teaching: State of the art*, in «TESOL quarterly», *25*(2), 1991, pp. 261-278; P. Foster, *Task-based language learning research: Expecting too much or too little?*, in «International Journal of Applied Linguistics», 19, 2009, pp. 247-263; J. Lee, *Tasks and Communicating in Language Classrooms*, Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2000; T. Lynch, J. Maclean, *Exploring the benefits of repetition and recycling of a classroom task*, in «Language Teaching Research», *4*(3), 2000, pp. 221-250.
[19] E. Guerin, *Progettazione per "unità di competenza" e insegnamento della lingua inglese: dal Common European Framework of Reference alle Indicazioni Nazionali*, in D. Capperucci, G. Franceschini, E. Guerin, G. Perticone (Eds.), *Progettare per unità di competenza nella scuola primaria*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2016; P.H. Hiep, *Communicative language teaching: Unity within diversity*, in «ELT Journal», *61*(3), 2007, pp. 193-201; J.C. Richards, T.S. Rodgers, *Approaches and methods in language teaching*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.
[20] A. Applebee, *Alternative models of writing development*, in «Perspectives on writing research, theory, and practice», 2000, pp. 90-110.
[21] K.E. Holbert, G.G. Karady, *Strategies, challenges and prospects for active learning in the computer-based classroom*, in «Education, IEEE Transactions on», *52*(1), 2009, pp. 31-38; S. Mumtaz, *Factors affecting teachers' use of information and communications technology: a review of the literature*, in «Journal of information technology for teacher education», *9*(3), 2000, pp. 319-342; M. Muscarà, R. Messina, *Perceived competency, perceived ICT usufulness in classroom and teachers training models*, in «Italian Journal of Educational Research»,

important for the school to participate in European projects such as Comenius, Erasmus+, E-twinning, etc. that may facilitate the exchange and interaction with schools and pupils who come from other countries, by joining in with activities and partnerships where English is used as a *lingua franca*, a language to communicate with everybody. Doing so, pupils can move step by step from an interaction centered essentially on their own needs to a communication oriented towards other stakeholders, peers and adults, experiencing cultural differences and similarities, the personal habits of others and the traditions of other countries, as well as starting to develop intercultural sensitivity[22].

8. Reflection on language and self-assessment of EFL learning. Only in rare cases and especially with pupils who have a high level of competence, or in cases where children themselves highlight specific linguistic aspects about language conventions and linguistic rules, syntactic structures, similarities and differences between Italian and English, will the teacher deal with caution and gradually with simple aspects of linguistic reflection[23]. Such activities, in a certain way, may also be used to enhance the ability of self-assessment and awareness about how pupils acquire an ability which is important to develop in all pupils from the start of primary school[24].

2.2 EFL curriculum design and organization

Based on the guideline criteria mentioned in the previous section, EFL curriculum design must be focused on the achievement of specific results declined in terms of knowledge, abilities and competences. In line with the structure of the *National Guidelines* (2012), the competences to be pursued are reported primarily in the *Student Profile* (*SP* – It. Profilo dello studente) and then in the so-called *Outcomes for competence development* (*OCD* – It. Traguardi per lo sviluppo delle competenze); knowledge and abilities of each subject instead are expressed by *Learning objectives (LO* – It. Obiettivi di apprendimento).

The *Student Profile* describes the general competences related to all teaching subjects as well as to those linked to citizenship education (Civics) that a pupil should possess at the end of the first cycle of education. Recently, the Ministry of Education in Act no. 3/2015 about the certification of achievements provided an intermediate level of the *Student Profile* competences at the end of primary school, highlighting the extent to which these competences must be developed in an eight-year period of education (*Table 1*).

13, 2015, pp. 181-196; C. Lankshear, M. Knobel, *New technologies in early childhood literacy research: A review of research*, in «Journal of Early Childhood Literacy», *3*(1), 2003, pp. 59-82.

[22] B. Barros García, G. Kharnásova, *La interculturalidad como macro-competencia en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras: revisión bibliográfica y conceptual*, in «Porta Linguarum », 18, 2012, pp. 97-114.

[23] M. Byram, *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship: Essays and reflections,* in: «Multilingual Matters», Vol. 17, 2008, pp. 522-541.

[24] D. Little, *The Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio: Involving learners and their judgements in the assessment process*, in «Language Testing», *22*(3), 2005, pp. 321-336; D. Little, G. Erickson, *Learner Identity, Learner Agency, and the Assessment of Language Proficiency: Some Reflections Prompted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, in «Annual Review of Applied Linguistics», vol. 35, 2015, pp. 120-139; Y. G. Butler, J. Lee, *The effects of self-assessment among young learners of English*, in «*Language Testing*, *27*(1), 2010, pp. 5-31; A. Hasselgreen, G. Caudwell, *Assessing the Language of Young Learners (British Council Monographs on Modern Language Testing)*, Sheffield, Equinox Publishing, 2016.

Type of school	*Student profile* competence indicators
Primary school	The pupil is able to express him/herself in English at elementary Level and to communicate in an essential way in simple everyday situations.
Lower Secondary school	Meeting people of different nationalities, pupil is able to express him/herself in English at Elementary Level and to communicate in an essential way in simple everyday situations, using a second European language. (S)he uses English language to work with information and communication technologies.

Table 1 - Student profile competence indicators related to EFL teaching

The *Outcomes for competence development*, which are prescriptive and common to all private and state schools within the Italian education system, are provided at the end of the fifth grade of primary school and constitute constant references for teachers, in so far as they indicate cultural and educational paths to follow and help to finalize instructional action towards pupil's integral development. In the first cycle schools (primary and lower secondary schools) the *Outcomes* represent criteria for assessing the expected competences and schools must work to ensure that every pupil can achieve them, to guarantee the unity of the national system and quality of service. They correspond to the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[25] (*Table 2*).

The pupil comprehends oral and written messages related to familiar areas.
The pupil describes orally and in written form aspects of life, the context where he lives, matters related to immediate needs.
The pupil plays an active role in group games, communicates in an understandable way, even using pre-structured phrases and sentences, in simple and routine information exchanges.
The pupil performs tasks following the instructions given by the teacher in a foreign language, makes demands and asks explanations.
The pupil identifies some cultural elements and understands relationships between linguistic forms and foreign language uses.

Table 2 - Outcomes for competence development at the end of primary school

The *Learning objectives* represent the knowledge and abilities functional to achieve the *Outcomes for competence development.* They are not prescriptive, so those proposed in the text of the *National Guidelines* can be taken as they are, or adapted by each school according to its own specific educational offer and pupils' needs. They are provided at the end of third and fifth grade of primary school (*Table 3*)[26].

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[25] Council of Europe, *Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 24; European Parliament, *The implementation of the Common European Framework for Languages in European education systems,* 2013, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/495871/IPOL-CULT_ET(2013) 495871_EN.pdf (last viewed 06/08/2017).

[26] D. Capperucci, C. Cartei, *Curricolo e intercultura. Problemi, metodi e strumenti*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2010; P. Foster, P. Skehan, *The influence of planning on performance in task-based learning,* in «Studies in Second Language Acquisition», *18*(3), 1996, pp. 299-324.

Learning objectives at the end of third grade	
Listening *(oral comprehension)*	Understand words, commands, expressions and everyday phrases, spoken clearly and slowly referred to pupil, to his/her class mates, to the family.
Speaking *(oral production and interaction)*	Produce meaningful sentences concerning objects, places, people, known situations.
	Interact with a class mate to introduce him/herself and/or play, using structured phrases and sentences appropriate to the situation.
Reading *(written comprehension)*	Understand postcards, cards and short messages, preferably accompanied by visual or sound recordings, catching words and phrases already known at oral level.
Writing *(written production)*	Write words and simple phrases related to everyday classroom activities and personal group interests.
Learning objectives at the end of fifth grade	
Listening *(oral comprehension)*	Understand short dialogues, instructions, everyday phrases and sentences when pronounced clearly and identify the general theme of oral text about familiar topics.
	Understand short multimedia texts by identifying keywords and the general meaning.
Speaking *(oral production and interaction)*	Describe people, places and familiar objects using common words and phrases already met in listening and/or reading activities.
	Report simple information related to the personal sphere, integrating the meaning of what is said with mime and gestures,
	interact in an understandable way with a class-mate or an adult who is familiar, using phrases and sentences appropriate to the situation
Reading *(written comprehension)*	Read and understand short, simple texts, preferably accompanied by visual aids, taking their overall meaning and identify words and familiar phrases.
Writing *(written production)*	Write in an understandable way short and simple messages to introduce him/herself, to wish, to thank or invite someone, to ask or give information, etc.
Reflection on the language and learning	Analyse pairs of similar words for sound and understand their meaning.
	Analyse words and expressions in their use context and grasp the relations among different meanings.
	Analyse the sentence structure based on language constructs and communicative intentions.
	Recognize what has been learned and what has still to be learned.

Table 3 - Learning objectives at the end of third and fifth grade of primary school

In other publications[27], we proposed a competence design model based on the "competence unit", called the CUD-Mod (Competence Unit Design Model), experimented in a variety of action-research projects conducted in Tuscan first-cycle schools, in the years 2010-2012.

3. English Language Learning: some key strategies

As indicated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)[28], the five basic language skills represent, at any level, someone's capacity to express one's own linguistic competence, according to the mastery that one is able to perform in different communicative situations[29].

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[27] D. Capperucci, G. Franceschini, E. Guerin, G. Perticone, *Progettare per unità di competenza nella scuola primaria*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2016; D. CAPPERUCCI, *Strumenti per la costruzione del curricolo*, in «Studi sulla Formazione», *19*(2), 2016, pp. 143-170.

[28] B. North, *The CEFR in practice – English Profile Studies 4,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014; M. Byrm, L. Parmenter (Eds.), *The Common European Framework of Reference: The Globalization of Language Education Policy*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, pp.14-34.

[29] A. Green, *Language functions revisited. Theoretical and empirical bases for language construct definition*

In agreement with what has been written by Bazo Martínez and Péñate Cabrera[30], it is possible to point out some helpful methodological guidelines to reach the competences provided in the *Outcomes* as well as the knowledge and abilities of *Learning objectives* for listening, speaking, reading, writing and reflection on language. Such methodological guidelines, here considered as key strategies, may be applied by teachers for their competence-based curriculum design.

3.1 Listening

Listening is the language skill that, at least initially, pupils find most difficult. This often occurs because pupils think or are led to believe they have to understand every single word they hear, which in fact does not happen even in the first language. In this case, the preparatory work on listening tasks, designed by the teacher, is very important. Therefore it is appropriate for the teacher to determine the degree of difficulty of the listening text, to the extent that it must contain words and linguistic structures already known by pupils. Then it is useful to illustrate briefly the context to which the listening task is referred, that in any case has to be close to situations experienced by the child and/or with which (s)he feels familiar. In authentic situations quite often listening is supported by a variety of situational stimuli that can be, not only heard, but also, visual, related to familiar places, prior learning, body language, etc. In a school task, even if simulated and rendered as real as possible, all these aids cannot be present so it is important that the teacher promotes the context of listening to facilitate decoding and message comprehension. By explaining what the context is to which the listening text refers, the teacher can ask some questions and simultaneously check the answers given by the pupils as well as the degree of familiarity they demonstrate that they have with the task itself. In this phase, the teacher's questions also help to refresh the vocabulary required for understanding the general meaning of the listening activity[31].

Children must feel at ease, so it is good to repeat the listening activity at least two or three times. During the first listening, pupils will be invited not to take notes, or be distracted by images, drawings or anything else, but just to focus on listening in order to understand at least the context and general meaning. The following listenings can be used to strengthen the understanding of information already heard, and in this case it may be useful to graphically set out some concepts or words. From mid-3rd. class upwards, once finished the listening activities the teacher can put some questions to the whole class, and confirm the accuracy of the answers, (s)he can write pupils' responses on the board and repeat the listening again, only at the end, will (s)he give the correct answers to the questions posed. In a later lesson, after having repeated the listening another time, some questions can even be put to individual pupils[32].

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across the ability range. English Profile Studies 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[30] P. Bazo Martínez, M. Péñate Cabrera, *The effects of repetition, comprehension checks and gestures, on primary school children in an EFL situation*, in «ELT Journal», *55*(3), 2001, pp. 281-288.

[31] R. Ellis, *Task-based language teaching: sorting out the misunderstandings,* in «International Journal of Applied Linguistics», *19*(3), 2009, pp. 221-246.

[32] C. Goh, Y. Taib, *Metacognitive instruction in listening for young learners*, in: «ELT journal», *60*(3), 2006, pp. 222-232.

3.2 Speaking

As shown by many studies[33], the oral production competence goes hand in hand with pupil's listening and comprehension abilities, these are usually held at a higher level than pupil's ability to communicate orally. So although the teacher is required to speak orally in a natural way, using also verbal forms and words that the child does not yet know, to enhance speaking it is crucial for the teacher to keep in mind what the level of competence is that the pupil has in this area and consequently proposes speaking activities which may also be conducted starting with a very limited vocabulary. Especially in the first years of Primary School, in many cases (s)he can also make use of supplementary materials such as images, drawings, flash cards, etc. With pupils in the final years of the Primary School cycle (fourth and fifth grade), the teacher can invite children to express themselves in a more personal way, by using independently and spontaneously the linguistic structures they know. In this case, it is important that the correction of any errors in pronunciation, sentence construction, vocabulary, etc. is highlighted in a formative way, in order to increase pupils' ability to express themselves orally without the worry about having to do everything correctly. At this stage, in fact, mistakes have to be seen as an opportunity to learn and not as something negative to stigmatize, because this would have the immediate effect of restricting or even blocking the child's ability to speak.

In instructional activities for speaking development songs, chants, poems, rhymes, preferably fun and rhythmical activities to accompany with body movements, clapping, stamping feet and so on, can be used[34]. Apart from this, the teacher can also work in small groups or in pairs, giving first a model to reproduce and mime, and then leaving more space to spontaneous communicative forms where pupils can choose between different alternatives that the teacher is able to monitor.

Speaking activities should not be an end in themselves, children are the first to feel the mechanical and stereotyped nature of a task, with the consequence of a decrease in motivation and interest. For this reason, speaking activities should be as authentic as possible, they should be brought to real-life situations in which the child may really need to communicate with other people, asking questions and giving answers[35]. An authentic communicative setting can also be identified starting from the classroom environment, considering situations, events, concrete problems that the class is going through at that time, such as the arrival of a new school mate, a school visit, a holiday, something that all pupils know about, etc. A general recommendation for all activities related to spea-

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[33] K.M. Bailey, *Practical English Language Teaching: Speaking*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2007; E. Grugeon, L. Hubbard, C. Smith, *Teaching speaking and listening in the primary school*, London, David Fulton Publishers, 2005³; I. Tsiplakides, A Keramida, *Helping students overcome foreign language speaking anxiety in the English classroom: Theoretical issues and practical recommendations*, in «International Education Studies», *2*(4), 2009, p. 39-55.

[34] J.E. Gromko, *The Effect of Music Instruction on Phonemic Awareness in Beginning Readers*, «Journal of Research in Music Education», *53*(3), 2005, pp. 199-209.

[35] K.M. Bailey, *Speaking*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2005; A.A. Baker, *ESL teachers and pronunciation pedagogy: Exploring the development of teachers' cognitions and classroom practices*, in J. Levis, K. LeVille (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2nd Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference*, Ames, IA, Iowa State University, 2011, pp. 82-94; Z. Kralova, R. Metruk, *Teaching and learning pronunciation*, in «Journal of Interdisciplinary Philology», *3*(2), 2012, pp. 39-54.

king is that pupils speak English as much as possible, avoiding the use the of the native language when they are in difficulty. About the use of the mother-tongue with a subsidiary function there are different points of view, some authors argue that in some cases this could be useful, others are not convinced of its usefulness[36]. The author agrees with this second position, in fact, we believe it is appropriate to limit as much as possible recourse to the mother-tongue whenever the child faces a communication problem, so as not to generate artificial situations, but rather, maintain a high degree of authenticity in relation to the tasks proposed. In case of difficulty pupils can recourse to other channels of expression, using images, gestures, help signs, etc.

3.3 Reading

In promoting a communicative approach to foreign language learning, the introduction of reading requires serious attention. Indeed, it seems better to avoid this aspect especially in the early years of primary school when the child is beginning to learn reading techniques in the native language. At this stage it is appropriate to avoid any form of interference between the two languages especially considering the different decoding rules of graphemes into phonemes present in English rather than other European languages, such as the Neolatin languages (Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Romanian). Quite frequently it happens that children themselves notice some differences in the way of reading between the mother-tongue and English, therefore, especially in the first grades is important not emphasize too much these differences and simply associate the word sound to its written form[37].

Reading, like listening activities, might be boring and in some ways even frustrating to the extent that a pupil feels unable to comprehend what (s)he has just read. It is important to repeat that it is not necessary for primary school pupils to fully understand all the words of a passage, what it is really significant is they grasp "the gist", the main meaning of the phrase, command, short passage, and secondly search for the information needed. To encourage pupils to read it is very important to propose texts that are engaging, funny, able to stimulate their curiosity so that they are urged to read by themselves again. So in choosing a text, even before considering the language difficulties, the choice must be based on the pleasure and interest for reading that the child can find in the passage proposed by the teacher[38]. Also, in this case, pre-reading activities cover a very significant role, because they introduce the child to what (s)he is going to read, providing useful information for text comprehension. In this case, using questions or images, the teacher can provide information on the reading content, call up a few keywords, anticipate some facts or characters from the story, stimulate children's curio-

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[36] M.A. Nippold, L.J. Hesketh, J.K. Duthie, T.C. Mansfield (2005), *Conversation versus expository discourse: a study of syntactic development in children, adolescents and adults*, in «Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing Research», vol. 27, pp. 197-205.

[37] T.A. Ukrainetz, *Scaffolding Young Children into Phonemic Awareness*, in T.A. Ukrainetz (Ed.), *Contextualized Language Intervention: Scaffolding preK-12 Literacy Achievement*, Eau Claire, WI, Thinking Publications, 2006, pp. 429-467; H. Yopp, R. Yopp, *Supporting Phonemic Awareness Development in the Classroom*, in «The Reading Teacher», *54*(2), 2000, pp. 130-143.

[38] P. Harris, *Reading in the primary school years*, Cengage Learning Australia, 2005; A. Van Kleeck, (Ed.), *Sharing Books and Stories to Promote Language and Literacy*, San Diego (CA), Plural Publishing, 2006.

sity highlighting some clues that then they will find in the text[39]. Passage choice must be related to simple texts, preferably accompanied by images about the content[40]. According to the objectives established by the teacher, individual reading may be preceded by his/her reading aloud, paying attention to intonation and rhythm; during the child's individual reading the teacher will provide all necessary aids so that pupils do not become discouraged and stop reading[41]. In the case of difficulty which extends to a significant number of pupils, additional materials to support the reading and understanding process underway, can also be proposed. Another way to stimulate interest in reading is to transform the selected text into a short script, assigning each child a role to play or a situation to mime. In this case it is important to check that pupils have actually understood what they are playing rather than focusing only on what they are saying[42].

3.4 Writing

What we have said about the prerequisites for reading is also valid, in many ways, for writing. The child will proceed gradually from copying single words and sentences to writing short texts, descriptions of people and pets, simple stories and dialogues about familiar situations (family, home, school, friends, hobbies, food, pets, etc.[43].

In primary school many pupils are still not able to build a text autonomously, except in the final primary school grades. It is important that the necessary time is devoted to this activity, even starting with a pre-structured model prepared by the teacher that, once decomposed, the children will reconstruct. At a second stage, once children have acquired the model, they will proceed to write a similar text autonomously. Initially it may be useful to start with drafting collective texts, asking children questions about the characters, what facts to put into the text, why to develop the story in one way rather than another, how to choose the ending, etc. Alternatively, the input for writing a simple story could start from reading an image, a photograph, a drawing to articulate into phrases, sentences, short paragraphs, and so on[44]. With children of the initial grades, it can be useful to combine images and short sentences, or reorder a story in sequences through images[45]. With reference to the collocation of reading activities within a teaching unit it is recommended that these are realized after the pupils have worked orally on language structures and vocabulary thanks to listening and speaking activities[46].

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[39] W.E. Nagy, J.A. Scott, *Vocabulary processes*, in M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*, vol. 3, Mahwah, NJ, Erlbaum, 2000, pp. 269-284.

[40] J.H. Stewart, *Foreign language study in Elementary Schools: Benefits and implications for achievement in reading and math*, in «Early Childhood Education Journal», *33*(1), 2005, pp. 11-16.

[41] U. Goswami, J.C. Ziegler, L. Dalton, W. Schneider, *Nonword reading across orthographies: How flexible is the choice of reading units?*, in «Applied Psycholinguistics», *24*(2), 2003, pp. 235-247.

[42] L. Desiatova, *Using different forms of drama in the EFL classroom*, in «Humanising Language Teaching», *11*(4), 2009, http://www.hltmag.co.uk/aug09/sart07 (last viewed 30/07/2017).

[43] O.L. Pysarchyk, N.V. Yamshynska, *The importance of integrating reading and writing for EFL teaching*, in «Advanced education», 3, 2015, pp. 77-83.

[44] M.A. Nippold, J.M. Ward-Lonergan, J.L. Fanning, *Persuasive writing in children, adolescents, and adults: a study of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic development*, in «Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools», vol. 36, 2005, pp. 125-138.

[45] G. Kress, T. Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Cornwall, Routledge, 2006.

[46] M. Reichelt, *A critical evaluation of writing teaching programmes in different foreign language settings*, in

When completed, writing activities probably will have some mistakes, also in this case it is important that the teacher does not emphasize the severity or number of mistakes, but (s)he will select the most frequent ones to correct them both individually and collectively[47]. In this sense, it is also advisable to provide some games designed for the whole class where, the teacher recovers some mistakes directly from pupils' texts and asking questions about the right solution. Time has to be devoted also to the self-correction of mistakes, by first proposing those made by the single child and then those of other class mates[48].

3.5 Reflection on language and learning

Reflection on language can be introduced in the last years of primary school starting from the problems raised by the pupils themselves. This is a transversal activity to all the other skills, because it provides the child with the conditions to analyse the structures and the way of thinking which underlies the language. In primary school, it is neither required nor recommended that this attention to grammar rules be conducted in a deliberate way, but may instead be treated according to the reflections that children are used to making on language. In this sense, they are able to recognize some linguistic, orthographic and morpho-syntactic differences which exist between the mother-tongue and English very early on, and right from their questions activities aimed at comparing elements of different linguistic systems can be started.

At the operational level, many are the fronts on which to work, from the lexical to the semantic, communicative, pragmatic, morphological and syntactic ones. In fact, language games with words that have similar sounds or others that have the same pronunciation but different written forms might be proposed, together with identifying matches between graphemes and phonemes, on written word form, exceptions related to gender, number, meaning etc.[49] From a purely morphological and syntactic point of view, reflections on sentence structure and the position of the fundamental elements of the sentence (subject, predicate, complements), verb declination may be conducted together with activities related to linguistic structures not existing in other languages, differences related to tenses, interrogative and negative sentence construction, position of adjectives, adverbs within the sentence, etc. The analysis of these linguistic aspects can be useful for a better use of the foreign language but also for a deeper comprehension of one's mother-tongue[50].

In relation to reflection on learning a foreign language, specific activities focusing on a pupil's self-assessment, aimed at gradually developing a greater awareness of his/her strengths and weaknesses in learning English can be set. When adopting an appro-

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«Writing in foreign language contexts: learning, teaching, and research», 2009, pp. 183-206.

[47] J. Bitchener, S. Young, D. Cameron, *The effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing*, in «Journal of second language writing», *14*(3), 2005, pp. 191-205.

[48] A. Hasselgreen, E. Moe, *Young learners' writing and the CEFR: where practice tests theory*, presentation at the 3rd EALTA Conference, Krakow, 2006.

[49] T.M. Derwing, M.J. Munro, *Second language accent and pronunciation Teaching: A research-based approach*, in «TESOL Quarterly», *39*(3), 2005, pp. 379-397.

[50] J.C. Richards, W.A. Renandya, *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

ach that emphasizes pupil's successes and acquisition rather than his/her mistakes, it is important that the teacher constantly asks child's opinion on task executions, inviting him/her to support and justify his/her choice of terms, expressions, answers to questions, etc., as well as the reason for some mistakes, the processes that (s)he has used to identify the correct answer among several options, etc.[51] All this information about the cognitive and linguistic processes that the child gives should be recorded by the teacher in order to assess the progress or lack thereof in the long term, as well as to build cognitive biographies which are able to highlight how the child relates to the subject emotionally and rationally[52].

4. Conclusions

As highlighted in the preceding pages, there is a close relationship between curriculum design, subject knowledge, and the ability to use different teaching and learning strategies to make language acquisition authentic and meaningful. To achieve this outcome a high degree of specialization in the use of design competences is needed and this must be part of the professional profile of all teachers, both for in-service teachers and trainee-teachers. In fact, it is important for teachers to be aware of the many existing design models, developed both from educational research and practical knowledge acquired over the years in classrooms.

To renew the school curriculum and increase teachers' design competences, it is not enough to introduce new legislation. We also need to systematically check the direct impact that the introduction of new *National Guidelines*, for example, have on design practice and on the adoption of new teaching models. Innovation in language education and learning today requires overcoming the teacher-centred face-to-face approach and one-way communication flow of traditional teacher-pupil communication, in which the teacher does the talking and pupils are supposed to listen. We need to move towards an integration of multiple teaching methods, in which the teacher acts as a guide who helps learners explore new cognitive situations. These aspects are part of any "good teaching", but for teaching English as a foreign language in primary school, the adoption of active and participatory teaching approaches plays an even more important role, in order to improve the quality and effectiveness of the school curriculum on the basis of the learning outcomes achieved by pupils.

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[51] B. Otto, *Literacy development in early childhood: Reflective teaching for birth to age eight*, Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson Education, 2008.
[52] N.G. Mathew, *Reflective classroom practice for effective classroom instruction*, in «International Education Studies», *5*(3), 2012, pp. 205-222.