



## COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION: AN EXPERIMENT IN INCLUSIVE METHODOLOGY FOR MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM (DRAFT)

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### Abstract

The specific objective of the paper is to present the theoretical framework and the structure of the experimentation of an inclusive methodology, conceived as motivating and stimulating for all learners, taking into account the various skills, cognitive styles and the different knowledge frameworks present in the multicultural classrooms (see Easycom project, [www.progettoeasycom.it](http://www.progettoeasycom.it)). The attention to linguistic and intercultural dimension allows to introduce into school curricula some elements of intercultural sensitive contents and various suggestions and awareness concerning the linguistic space experienced by students. This approach involves all the classmates in a cooperative learning process thanks to a series of active methodologies with the same approach: learners are regarded as competent individuals, and the teachers/trainers must support them in their learning processes. The teacher, then, has not a transmission role but builds the conditions (including the setting and the proposition of activities and materials) in which the pupils can develop their talents and creativity, explore interpretative hypothesis, self-organize themselves in time and space and develop creativity, driven by a series of suggestions related to multilingualism and the intercultural approach to disciplinary knowledge.

The teaching methodology adopted for classroom in Easycom project join three main aspects :

- 1) adoption of cooperative learning methodologies and linguistic teaching strategies (L2) according to the CLL model (Cooperative Language Learning, in Italian ALC: *Apprendimento Linguistico Cooperativo*<sup>1</sup>) developed in some important Italian experimental projects
- 2) building virtual and real classroom groups as editorial boards
- 3) developing mental and conceptual maps for curricular subjects through free software educational programs and applications

In this paper are discussed some elements of this project, taking into account useful suggestions from other perspectives to propose a real intercultural approach to inclusive education methods.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; intercultural pedagogy; multilingualism; migrations

### 1. CURRENT EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT IN ITALY

The current educational contexts are characterized by a strong presence of diversities. Among these, in Italy stands out that of pupils of foreign origin, which in a few years has exceeded the quota of 800,000 units (ISMU Foundation, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2015) and has brought innovations and cultural pluralism in the pews of the Italian school. According to the “Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students” (Ministry of Education, 2014) these “presences” have to be considered structural, and concern now all educational orders. It is therefore necessary and urgent to make the educational environments prepared to deal with these “new” diversities, from their inner

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<sup>1</sup> For CLL Method (in Italian, ALC) see Gentile, M., Chiappelli, T. *Intercultura e inclusione* Franco Angeli, 2016.



organization to the training of teachers, the planning of syllabus and the teaching strategies to be adopted in the classroom.

As the “Guidelines” point out, even if when initial language barrier have been trespassed, the additional skills - linguistic, but not only - necessary for a successful continuation of studies and academic proficiency- do not develop automatically. The school, therefore, must take responsibility for these new training needs and must think about a transformation of its action, and in particular the teaching methodologies, so that it can be possible to work in classroom reaching all the students, nobody excluded. In agreement with the social changes taking place, care must be taken for the effective inclusion of all pupils, including "new types of students with intercultural and integration issues, even if provided with Italian citizenship" (“Guidelines”, Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 5).

The path traced so far in Italy for these pupils operates mainly on the teaching of Italian language, usually conducted in labs separate from the entire class, and concentrated in the phase of initial reception (a sort of *first aid* for language learning). In some cases, it is also offered support for the subjects’ study using the Italian language, helping students to address curricular texts simplified and facilitated. This type of intervention too has been mainly designed in workshop/labs (i.e., a small number of students who are not Italian native speakers separated from the rest of the class). Much less there has been the attempt to transform the teaching practice in order to render it effective for the whole class members – immediately, or in any case as soon as possible, even for pupils who do not speak Italian, through various strategies aimed to involve all the students and taking into account the peculiarities of each one- and between them, also the different language levels in Italian.

## 2. COMMON LEARNING AND ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The aforementioned Ministry of Education “Guidelines” introduced as a strong step towards the integration of foreign students a phase called "common learning":

"The mode of teaching mediation and facilitation used for the whole class and for managing its irreducible heterogeneity can be largely effective for all foreign students" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 18).

But, of course, the opposite is also true: the activities and strategies developed for teaching pupils who do not speak Italian, as well as educational programs aimed at their inclusion in the context of class, can give an important impetus towards inclusive education for all the diversities present in the classrooms, which are full of stratified skills and are intrinsically complex (linguistically, culturally and socially). Starting from a reflection upon the lesson learned from this specific area, and combining it with the many important acquisitions that result from the experience gained in relation to special education needs, an innovative intervention modality aimed to respond effectively not only to pupils' needs but also to the teachers themselves, particularly interested in the underway processes, has been conceived. In fact, various studies point out that teachers often feel heavily burdened by the difficulties they meet in the management of increasingly multicultural classes and that, because of this, in many cases they risk to loose motivation, not being able to grasp the stresses and challenges implicit in the situation (Taylor and Sober, 2001; Cockrell et al. 1999).

According to Lucas (1997), a particular source of frustration for teachers is to see how teaching styles used successfully with native students fail in the case of foreign students, ending up with the attribution to the pupils of the difficulties created by the school context and the new language as if they were intrinsic characteristics of the children (at an individual personal level but also for entire ethnic groups). Horenczyk and Tatar (2002) have also studied burnout phenomena of teachers in multicultural contexts, developing an index according to the degree of heterogeneity in the classroom. For Horenczyk and Tatar, the assimilationist vision shared by many teachers, according to which immigrant students must become like the locals, leads the teachers to face levels of unmanageable stress, clashing daily with an unrealistic goal and therefore virtually impossible to



achieve as well as pedagogically ill-founded. Obviously, the attention of the teacher to develop high skills in the language of instruction, if supported by appropriate theoretical and practical awareness, is essential to support the actual processes of the pupils of foreign origin reception. If however, such attention is based on a conception of education not pluralist, teachers are very much subject to tensions, which in turn are reflected in the poor attitude of these students to act according to relational and communicative exchanges with peers in the context of school, also preventing them, as a consequence, to develop language proficiency in L2 (Horenczyk & Tatar, 2002). For this, offering to teachers an overview of the reception processes and the construction of school inclusion that is not of an integrative / assimilationist type can have the effect, certainly not marginal, to free them from a misplaced sense of responsibility that makes them subject to continuous disappointments, with the liberating effect -only apparently paradoxical- to render their didactic actions most appropriate and effective (Gobbo, 2000).

### 3. COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE AGE OF SUPERDIVERSITY

In "Some issues for cooperative learning and intercultural education", Gundara and Sharma (2013) relate the Cooperative Learning with intercultural education as a particularly suitable working arrangements to educate the future citizens of democratic societies, starting from the observation of the widespread presence, in classrooms, of skills and multiple intelligences (Cohen, 1991, 1994; Gardner, 2006). The adoption of cooperative strategies declined through an intercultural approach is seen both in terms of greater effectiveness of the action of teaching, and for the construction of positive interdependence relationships between students coming from particularly heterogeneous contexts. Combining cooperative learning with an intercultural perspective can be a useful teaching resource to the professionalism of teachers, mired in management of what sociologist Vertovec (2007) has called *superdiversity*, or differentiation of diversity, namely "ethnic" diversity which in turn contains other diversities (of legal and/or socioeconomic status, social capital, gender and, in schools, different cognitive profiles, pupils with special needs or some kind of learning difficulty, etc.). It becomes, therefore, necessary to gain an overview on the current complexity of schools and classrooms and, closely related, on the role that educational institutions play in the construction of a cohesive society and the (new) professional tools to be given to school staff (deans, teachers, educators, administrative employees, janitors etc.).

#### 3.1 Cooperative learning and intercultural education in easycom project

According to all these considerations, the first part of the Easycom project has concerned the training of school teachers and L2 teachers who worked in the involved classes. The topics addressed during the training have concerned: strategies in Cooperative Linguistic Learning; creation of a positive and collaborative (real and virtual) relational climate in the classroom; use of mental and conceptual maps for studying; ICT and educational programmes in free software environment. A common underlying theme has been the approach based on an intercultural orientation to learning and to handling the class group. This approach not only envisages the revision of knowledge from an inclusive perspective but also includes a particular focus on enhancing the value of multiculturalism and multilingualism. The second part of the project has concerned the creation of workshops in the classroom using the ICT for the preparation of facilitated conceptual maps and texts. In this case, the school teachers have been supported by linguistic (I2) teachers and by an intercultural expert in ICT education. The students of the first grade of Italian secondary school have produced facilitated learning units through the use of the tools the school already had (Interactive Whiteboard, computers and e-learning platforms) to support the co-operative linguistic learning workshops thank to the resources of the Municipality of Prato.



### 3.2 Objectives and theoretical background

The specific objective of Easycom project has been to experiment in the classroom with an inclusive methodology that is motivating for all learners and that enhances the value and stimulates the various skills, the cognitive styles and the different know-how in the multi-cultural class. The focus on the linguistic and intercultural dimension makes it possible to introduce into the school curriculum a series of contents subject to intercultural review of knowledge and various suggestions and awareness relating to the linguistic space experienced by the students. This type of approach is different from the “compensatory” approach which can very often be found in teaching planning addressing immigrant pupils: it was extended to include the entire class in a co-operative learning path and in active methodologies, according to which the learner is seen not as a passive subject to whom merely executive tasks must be given or whose competence gaps (linguistic, cultural, etc.) must be bridged. On the contrary, people in training – both Italian and foreign pupils – are considered as competent individuals, whom the teacher or trainer have to support in their exploratory process of reality. The teacher does not therefore have (only) a transmission role but builds up a sort of direction (which includes the setting and the proposal of materials and activities) within which the youths can make interpretative hypotheses, they can try to organise themselves in terms of timing and spaces and they can propose creative solutions guided by a series of suggestions relating to multilingualism and intercultural perspective.

### 3.3 Methodology and results of easycom project

The methodology has combined co-operative learning, which intervenes on the construction of the group and the promotion of a positive work attitude, and the strategies of L2 teaching which works on the linguistic-communication skills paying attention to the inclusion in school subjects of the intercultural and multilingual perspective. The operational model envisages that each session of work lasts 2 hours and each Learning Unit (5 sessions) splits up into 3 macro-phases: 1) Introductory relational phase. 2) Central work phase focusing on micro-linguistic skills and disciplinary knowledge. 3) Conclusive self-evaluation, feedback and evaluation phase.

As main results Easycom project has showed:

- 1) an improved knowledge of the Italian language in first-grade secondary school classrooms through the preparation by students, in a co-operative way, of facilitated multi-media learning units in a multi-media environment and virtual classroom.
- 2) the construction and/or consolidation of a positive climate in the classroom (both real and virtual) that also welcomes all differences, with a focus on relational aspects
- 3) an improved knowledge of specific contents of the curricula dealt with (geography).
- 4) an improved knowledge of on-line educational programmes for the preparation of mental and conceptual maps.

## 4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

New social scenarios require that the education systems, in general, and particularly schools, are transformed in order to better address the new needs. The scientific literature has stressed a number of significant points to ponder. In particular, the theme of so many diversities present in the classroom needs to be managed with new awareness and effective strategies. From a series of actions carried out on the territory of Prato for the inclusion, on the one hand, of pupils with special educational needs and, on the other, the immigrant (or of immigrant origin) children, the experts working with the Municipality have begun to identify a *fil rouge* in skills and good practices brought into play by schools to address diversity.

Reflecting on the reception of foreign students and linguistic teaching of L2 and on integrations



programs paying attention to interculturality, it was identified as a possible teaching method the cooperative learning. Thank to the analysis of its application and the materials and activities used in the Italian context, however, we realized how it should require an enrichment in the linguistic and intercultural way. As presented in textbooks and scientific essays, in fact, it results to be not easily applicable in classrooms highly complex, with too different types of students possessing stratified levels of competence in Italian as L2, with different cognitive skills, and non-homogeneous social and cultural contexts of origin. In this landscape, treasuring the reflections on inclusive education in relation to disability, the strategies for the reception and inclusion for welcoming immigrant children, and the teaching connected to the L2 laboratories and language facilitation, it was developed a complex intervention model based on specific professional skills that have interacted and contaminated each other, creating and / or readjusting activities, content, tools of observation, intervention strategies.

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