An English Island methodology: didactic strategies for learning English in Italian primary schools

DAVIDE CAPPERUCCI

Ricercatore di Pedagogia Sperimentale – Università degli studi di Firenze

Corresponding author: davide.capperucci@unifi.it

ROBERT FRANK MUZZI

British School of Pistoia

ELENA NICCOLAI

British School of Pistoia

Abstract. In Italian primary schools the educational approach to teaching and learning foreign languages must be increasingly centered on the learner and focused on developing the acquisition of demonstrable competences through *learning by doing*. Based on a sequence of didactic strategies that form the *circular learning path* and on the association of three coded languages *(mime, visual, oral),* the methodology *An English Island* favours learner centered-instruction, as well as the learner's active participation and involvement in creating the *mental/physical grooves* through which the language flows and turns into long-term memory. This paper focuses on the theoretical and methodological foundations of *An English Island* supported by a set of practical exercises that describe the educational process in which the teacher becomes the coach, observer, and *scaffolder* in order to train the citizens of the future.

Keywords. teaching and learning foreign languages, didactic strategies, competences, *An English Island* methodology, primary schools

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of a foreign language today is increasingly based on a communicative and humanistic approach where the focus has shifted from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction[1]. This change places importance on the learner's' affective factors which, effectively challenged, contribute to successful early language learning through new teaching practices and approaches. All of the above help to improve self-confidence, increase motivation, reduce anxiety and promote the deve-

---

[1] S. Rixon, *Survey of Policy and Practice in Primary English Language Teaching Worldwide*, London, British Council, 2013.

lopment of communicative skills[2]. In line with national and international literature the *An English Island* methodology, focus of this article, seeks to better the quality of pupil learning and to empower the teacher in teaching processes.

Through a sequence of structured and coded didactic strategies where the pupil's role is central and participatory in addition to the synergy of three *coded* languages (*mime, visual, oral*), *mental/physical grooves* are created through which the language flows such that long-term memory is achieved thanks to this process of association, repetition, and good habits.

2. The teaching of foreign languages in primary education: regulatory and educational experimentation baseline

The teaching of foreign languages in Italian primary schools was established by the Ministerial Decree of June 28, 1991. It included the use of *specialized* teachers, i.e., those already part of a teaching team with other lessons, and of *specialist* teachers, working with several classes but teaching only second language (L2)[3]. Moreover specific, in-service teacher-training courses were organized based on the diverse starting levels by aiming at the achievement of common goals. Subsequent ministerial Circulars (no. 116 of April 21, 1992) clearly expressed identifying those personnel willing to acquire an L2 teaching qualification, and reaffirmed (no. 478 of April 8, 1997) that «successful candidates who have passed the optional L2 tests are required to provide such education» and may be assigned to specialized or specialist teachers for 3-6 hours beyond scheduled working hours to maximize the dissemination of L2 teaching. The Ministerial Circular no. 69 of August 29, 2003 extended the content of L2 teaching (English language teaching), providing for additional staff resources and an integrated e-learning training plan organized by INDIRE. In addition, it offered new training opportunities through the Rai Educational program schedule ("*Divertinglese*").

Law no. 311 of 30 December 2004 (2005 Finance Act) comprised:
- the mandatory use of all teachers qualified to teach English in their classes and/ or institutions;
- compulsory training in the teaching of English for all primary school teachers, starting in 2005-2006, regardless of the minimum access criteria for the training and qualification required by the Ministerial Circular no. 116/92;
- brief, comprehensive face-to-face and on-line training courses, according to the models proposed by INDIRE, which no longer take into account the training levels envisaged by the Ministerial Circular no. 478/97, whose minimum number of hours was 100.

---

[2] J.K. Shin, *Ten helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners*, in «English Teaching Forum», *44*(2), 2006, pp. 2-13; 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.
[3] I. Salvadori, *Learning Paths for Italian Primary School English Language Teachers: CLIL using ICT*, in D. Capperucci, E. Guerin (eds.), *Innovative European Approaches for In-service and Pre-service English Language Teachers in Primary Education*, Pisa, ETS, 2017, pp. 123-151.

The 2005 budget changed the primary school scenario in terms of English teaching, with the specialist teachers being re-employed as ordinary teachers. All curricular teachers had to be ready to teach English in their classes, which posed a significant problem with the risk of downgrading L2 teaching. The ministry's introduction of these innovations generated significant consequences for primary-school teaching staff, although the latter has always been fairly open to curricular and didactic-methodological experimentation. Certainly many teachers were apprehensive, with feelings of inadequacy or a lack of confidence in their knowledge and skills in English. It was from this very point in 2005 that it became necessary to carry out a needs analysis to identify the training requirements in linguistics and teaching methodologies of the teachers themselves.

In this period, both public and private institutions were developing several national-level training initiatives to increase the language skills of primary school teachers as well as preparation in teaching methodologies for English as a foreign language. Some of these research-training initiatives were also implemented in the province of Pistoia, starting with a survey of the teachers' needs throughout the province. Among these was the British School of Pistoia that, on the basis of results of a questionnaire given to 100 teachers, implemented in collaboration with several schools in the Province of Pistoia, the *Trinity Exam Pack* project, designed as the first steps towards certification of the European Languages Passport established by the Common European Framework of Reference[4]. This Project has nonetheless turned out to be even *more*. If, on the one hand, following students language training in a lingua franca like English meant embarking on a track to improvement, leading them towards the European Community's recognized standard levels[5], so as to acquire the cognitive tools to move autonomously about and relate to an ever larger world, on the other, it allowed us to create positive working relationships with the teachers of the assorted classes at the various schools, succeeding in involving them directly in both the planning and implementation phases.

The *Trinity Exam Pack* project (designed for the Trinity Exam) had its basis in the annual planning program, yet seen from that with a five-year perspective. The preparation of educational content, the methodology followed, and the proposed materials formed the teaching guidelines and had the virtue of uniformity and homogeneity for classes of the same year and for school districts.

At the beginning of each school year, the five topics to be developed in the classes were presented to the teachers. The five topics were different for each class level, were chosen on the basis of the students' horizon, and linked to their age and experience. The class teacher utilized an innovative methodology which did not use any written words to *teach* the children the vocabulary and underlying grammar for each topic[6]. During the

[4] Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, Strasbourg, CoE, 2001; S. Takala, *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – Continuities and Enrichments*, in D. Capperucci, E. Guerin (eds.), *Innovative European Approaches for In-service and Pre-service English Language Teachers in Primary Education*, Pisa, ETS, 2017, pp. 155-165.

[5] 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 19/09/2018).

[6] 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.

school year, the British School of Pistoia teachers made five *surprise* visits to the classes, as if a foreign guest had arrived who *communicated* with the children only in English. During these *visits*, *feedback* was given on what had been learned and the next topic was introduced. Particular attention was paid to the teachers by supporting them in their efforts and helping to increase their self-confidence. There were two aspects fundamental to the project's *sustainability*. First of all, the *syllabus* provided was extremely "*short and simple*", suitable for those with a limited knowledge of the spoken language, and was very easy to use. The second aspect was oriented on the "oral" part of preparation so as to change the "mindset" still present in schools and to overcome the overwhelming tendency to "*write, write, write*". In addition to *comprehension*, *listening*, and *speaking*, writing also had to take on the role of a *skill*[7].

Over time, the project has grown considerably. With the progressive participation of eleven state comprehensive institutes, there have been hundreds of encounters and annually the British School of Pistoia has "met" about 4,000 students from the 1st to the 5th classes. Such a widespread presence in the Province of Pistoia's primary schools has helped to create a synergy with the teachers to monitor their students' progress, but especially to begin implementing a methodology using learning strategies that enhance the *communicative* aspect of the English language. Thanks to a continuous, recurring R&D process carried out *in the field* through a tested and verified research as well as by virtue of the results, a methodological system has taken shape that is an effective and innovative tool for teaching English: *An English Island*.

As confirmed by the OECD studies[8], a teacher's professional competences have been a priority in order to improve teaching quality as teacher empowerment enhances the students' quality of learning. Competence itself is not characterized by something that the individual acquires suddenly; it is a continuous process in development and evolution[9]. The focus on lifelong learning and the need to develop appropriate skill profiles for teachers is, in this context, a key element to promote quality in on-going education courses[10]: «If teachers are now expected to prepare students to become lifelong learners, TALIS tells us that they themselves need to learn and develop throughout their careers. Teachers not only need to be able to use the latest tools and technologies with their students, but they also need to take advantage of the latest research on learning, pedagogies, and practices»[11]. These aspects have also been a constant point of reference for the primary-school teacher training activities developed by the British School of Pistoia.

---

[7] A. Applebee, *Alternative models of writing development*, in «Perspectives on writing research, theory, and practice», 2000, pp. 90-110.

[8] OECD, *TALIS 2013 Results: An international perspective on teaching and learning*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2013, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/talis-2013-results_9789264196261-en, (last viewed 28/08/2018); UNESCO, *Unesco strategy on teachers (2012-2015)*, 2012, http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002177/217775E.pdf (last viewed 18/09/2018).

[9] G. Le Boterf, *Construire les compètences individuelles et collectives,* Paris, Editions d'Organisation, 2000.

[10] G. Chianese, *The professional profile of teachers: analysis and development of competences and teaching methodology,* in «Active Citizenship by Management, Knowledge Management and Innovation, Knowledge and Learning», 19-21 June 2013 – Zadar Croatia International Conference, p. 170.

[11] OECD, *TALIS 2013 Results: An international perspective on teaching and learning*, cit, p.3 (last viewed 28/08/2018).

3. Theoretical and methodological foundations of *An English Island*

The methodology of *An English Island* began to be developed in the daily activities of primary school classes, with children at the center of the learning process in line with the guidelines for teaching English contained in Ministerial Circular no. 69 of 28 August 2003[12] and consistent with the objectives set out in the *National Guidelines*[13] of 30 April 2003. In the years following, it was converted from an experimental system to a structured, codified one that is supported in the *National Guidelines*, in which the educational value of teaching English in primary school is emphasized in terms of two fundamental objectives:

- develop a plurilingual and pluricultural competence;
- acquire the first tools useful to be an active part of society in which the student lives, and even outside Italy's borders[14].

The EFL teaching methodologies recommended by the *National Guidelines* must be based on the use of a communicative approach to language learning, «especially in consideration of the different coding systems of phonemes into graphemes that exist between the English and Italian languages»[15].

The philosophy underlying *An English Island* is structured along guidelines that enable the development of a teaching method that pays attention to learning needs of the students[16]. The predominant aspect is *communicative*, with the starting point becoming the oral, not the written language that, because of the lack of transparency in English, triggers interference and errors as well as creates disparities in students with SLD or other problems[17]. Particularly in primary school, *writing* means *speaking on paper*. Moreover, it is necessary for spelling to come only after speaking correctly, which is consistent with the *National Guidelines* that states, «in learning languages, motivation comes from the students' natural aptitude to communicate, socialize, and interact as well as from their willingness to *work with their tongue*»[18]. It is therefore important to work on motivation by involving the student in a personal relationship, creating a pleasant learning environment by presenting doable activities, and, above all, taking advantage of their progress.

Recent studies have underscored the importance of increasing communicative abilities, motivation, and self-confidence, while reducing factors related to stress and anxiety. Attention has been drawn to how «both activity and first-hand experiences – games,

---

[12] MIUR, Circolare Ministeriale no. 69, 28 agosto 2003, «Linee di indirizzo e di orientamento relative all'alfabetizzazione informatica e della lingua inglese».

[13] MIUR, *Indicazioni Nazionali per i Piani di Studio Personalizzati nella Scuola Primaria*, 30 aprile 2003.

[14] MIUR, *Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo*, in «Annali dell'Istruzione», numero speciale, 2012, p. 37.

[15] D. Capperucci, *English language teaching and learning in primary school. Theoretical and methodological perspectives*, in «Studi sulla Formazione», 20, 2017, p. 207.

[16] P.H. Hiep, *Communicative language teaching: Unity within diversity*, in «ELT Journal», *61*(3), 2007, pp. 193-201.

[17] J. C. Richards, T.S. Rodgers, *Approaches and methods in language teaching*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

[18] MIUR, *Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo*, in «Annali dell'Istruzione», numero speciale, 2012, p. 37.

bodily activities – play a key role in children›s early learning and development»[19]. While always bearing in mind the relationship between the mother tongue and English when constructing communicative skills, particular attention must be paid to phonological peculiarities and differences in pronunciation so as not to create difficulties in understanding and speaking[20]. By helping learners become aware of the sounds and sound differences always associated with the meaning/phoneme, the process of assimilation is carried out both consciously and unconsciously[21]. Consequently, the language is purposeful communication, and «language learning is grounded in children's appreciation of others' communicative intentions, their sensitivity to joint visual attention and their desire to imitate»[22].

Through a series of didactic strategies, *An English Island* changes the role of the teacher who becomes coach, observer, and organizer of the learning process, focusing greater attention on the learner's role (learner-centered) and on the learner's process (process- oriented instruction).

The ways a teacher intervenes facilitate the student's learning process, and the teacher's scaffolding is not merely intellectual or technical[23] but also emotional, cognitive, and metacognitive. Its emotional purpose is to stimulate learning among the students as well as to encourage and spur them to overcome any motivational barriers. It is metacognitive because the students are supported not only in the acquisition of a specific understanding or proficiency but also in the development of those metacognitive abilities that help the students learn to learn, facilitating a process of lifelong learning and enabling them to handle more complex processes like thought[24]. Being aware of their progress and of having the skills required helps the students to increase their self-esteem.

To keep the children's continuing motivation alive, it is important to use multi-sensory strategies that introduce information via different methods. In the learning phase, the effectiveness of integrating sensory input through other channels has now been recognized.

The methodology of *An English Island* develops a *circular learning path* that activates almost simultaneously three expressive languages (*mime, visual, oral*), so as to fix the elements by association. The synergy of these three languages helps to create *mental/physical grooves* that are developed over time through *practice*. Thanks to this mental groove deliberately created using mime, the child can globalize the written word with the oral one and read it correctly.

4. Learning always follows a circular pattern that

[19] M. Kelly Calzini, *Early Foreign Language Learning and Teaching*, in D. Capperucci, E. Guerin (Eds.), *Innovative European Approaches for In-service and Pre-service English Language Teachers in Primary Education*, ETS, Pisa, 2017, pp. 285-299

[20] D. Capperucci, *English Language Teaching and Learning in Primary School. Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives,* in «Studi sulla Formazione» 20, 2017, pp. 203-217,.

[21] E. Guerin, *Developing Phonological Awareness for English Language Learning in Infant and Primary School,* in D. Capperucci, E. Guerin (Eds.), *Innovative European Approaches for In-service and Pre-service English Language Teachers in Primary Education*, ETS, Pisa, 2017, pp. 301-333.

[22] P. K. Kuhl (2004), *Early language acquisition: Cracking the speech code*, in «Nature Reviews Neuroscience», *5*(11), pp. 831-843.

[23] A. Collins, J. S. Brown, S. E. Newman, *L'apprendistato cognitivo*, in C. Pontecorvo, A. M. Ajello, C. Zucchermaglio (a cura di), *I contesti sociali dell'apprendimento*, Milano, LED, 1995.

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

- becomes active from passive;
- focuses attention on motivation (*mission*) and consequent *problem solving*;
- trains the mouth/ear/mouth muscles to speak with rhythm and tone;
- becomes accustomed to the sensory use of the language through repetition; and
- becomes gradually familiar with different *islands* to increase knowledge/skills.

The primary purpose is to make *everyone* speak and to increase their *self-esteem* as speaking means communicating, relating, interacting, and being happy with oneself. This methodology also involves and includes children with SLD or other problems who are able to communicate effectively. In fact, one of the features of the *An English Island* method is its ability to be adjusted as it can adapt the content and its development to the specific needs of any child.

The fundamental principle on which the method is based can be represented by the acronym K.I.S.S. – *Keep It Short and Simple*. In other words, the children's cognitive process must proceed step by step simply and naturally, in order to «acquire the ability to use the language»[25].

The *An English Island* methodology is based on a sequence of strategies that make up the various stages of teaching/learning.

4.1 Puzzle Method

Learning a language through individual words, detached from a context, does not correspond to a natural process. Let us think of how we address our children: *Do you want a glass of water? Do you like soup?* These clear, simple sentences become the cognitive heritage of all of us. They are the *building blocks* that allow us over time to construct our linguistic apparatus.

The *puzzle method* is based on a process for building the English language. Students are offered word *chunks* (*a red pencil, can I have, can I speak to*) and not individual words (*red, yellow, window, etc.*), but always *chunks meaningful for collecting and storing information*[26]. However, it starts backwards, going from "back to front" using the sentence's final *chunks* to arrive at its beginning using other *chunks*. What is important in a race? The start or the finish? Training the mouth muscle starts at the finish line, tracing the route backwards by adding parts of the sentence, so as to get used to being able to bear the "weight" of any sentence. Thus, the whole race course becomes important because being able to pronounce an entire sentence helps to raise the child's self-esteem. *Chunks* are the first physical exercise to develop the mouth/ear/mouth relationship and are useful to give rhythm and the right intonation to the sentence.

The *chunks* are related to the children's ages, at their *horizon* level. What they communicate must make sense to them in their own language and more importantly, can be used to communicate something sensible[27]. 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.

---

[25] A. Collins, J. S. Brown, S. E. Newman, *L'apprendistato cognitivo*, in C. Pontecorvo, A. M. Ajello, C. Zucchermaglio (a cura di), *I contesti sociali dell'apprendimento*, Milano, LED, 1995, p. 37.

[26] G. Jacobs, T. Farrell, *Paradigm Shift: Understanding and Implementing Change in Second Language Education*, cit.

[27] G. Jacobs, T. Farrell, op. cit.

Students must be offered authentic communicative contexts in which they can demonstrate their mastery of something, starting from what they know best, e.g., the class, the school and its settings, or the arrival of foreign students.

Consequently, it is a development method that initially has to connect only a few, small *chunks*, but, as the age of the students increases, so do the number of *chunks*.

One fundamental feature of this method lies in the concept of *interchangeability*. By knowingly acquiring the various *chunks*, the students succeed *by themselves* to build increasingly longer, more complex sentences using different combinations for different situations. The result is the success of acquiring one's own expressive autonomy and, at the same time, increasing their stock of linguistic knowledge without it becoming too much.

4.2 Mime strategy

The *Puzzle Method* is conveyed via the *Mime Strategy*, a very practical teaching strategy that combines gestures with oral expression and vice versa.

Using a *mime code* a connection is created with the *oral code*, so that a certain gesture/mime corresponds to a word, a set of words, a verb, or a preposition[28]. The teacher introduces these orally by associating them with mime gestures. Once the meaning of the gesture has been established and the students' understanding confirmed, the learning/acquisition is developed through the "*Passive-Active*" principle. This appealing strategy, through which students take ownership of learning content that is meaningful, captures the students' attention and increases their participation, making them become participating, knowledgeable *actors*.

Mime Strategy addresses the *National Guidelines*, which states that «children play with their bodies, communicate, and express themselves through mime…motor experiences allow different languages to become integrated and words and gestures be interchanged…»[29]. Yet it is precisely in the codified association of gesture/word that a new language with new modalities begins to be constructed, establishing a rule that «children learn following specific learning paths»[30].

4.3 Visualization – Puzzle cards

Once the mime phase has been applied and reinforced, the next phase is visualization where the children reinforce the mental groove already imprinted. This strategy is used to get students used to working in pairs (*pair work*) and uses two types of visualization to be completed in succession: one through drawings on a board/interactive board and the other using *puzzle cards*.

The cards are the *visual code*. Each card has a codified drawing of a verb, a preposition, a word, group of words and so forth, which reinforces the association with the other two codes (mime and oral). Unlike *flash cards*, which, by definition, are individual cards, each "with a word or a picture on it" and are basically used to memorize the sin-

---

[28] 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 18/09/2018).
[29] MIUR, *Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo*, cit. p. 19.
[30] *Ibid*. p. 19.

gle word itself, the purpose of the *puzzle cards* is to *construct a conversation*. The sequence of the *puzzle cards* and their positioning help to pronounce the sentences using the right rhythm and correct grammar. In addition to developing the memory, if used as a game, for example, they are an innovative teaching tool for reinforcing oral training.

Over time, the three expressive languages and the repetition of a fixed action of what has been learned flow into the mental grooves. Repetition is the principle catalyst and the association creates the background that allows the language learning to be internalized. Let us think about when we take new roads to go to a new place. The first time, we are uncertain about which route to follow. However, by returning there several times, we become increasingly sure to the point that we can arrive at our destination while thinking about something else, without paying attention to which road we have taken. It becomes a habit and this is the meaning of *mental grooves*.

4.4 Horizon, Mission, Problem Solving

We have repeatedly used the term *horizon*, as this is a fundamental constant. The topics proposed and dealt with must be within the students' reach, they must be part of their experiential world. The broader their *horizon* as they grow, the more they will be able to develop more general concepts. To keep the children's motivation and curiosity alive, each new topic must have a goal, a mission that, in order to be achieved, puts before them the problem to be solved where the solution comes through the "how". An innovative teaching method must develop the students' curiosity and ability of "learning to learn" by understanding how to act on problems. Skills are not simply having the "know-how" but knowing how to act[31].

4.5 M.A.P. to optimize students' learning and involvement

Our extensive teaching experience has enabled us to work out a functional device that optimizes the learning and involvement of all the students, which we have termed: M.A.P. *(Maturity, Ability, Personality)*.

It is evident that teaching a language to a class of 24 students, *communicating in English* is a very difficult undertaking, both because of such high "numbers", and of the mixture of skills/abilities that need to be addressed. Since the essential purpose is that all students be able to learn and communicate, it is important to get them used to working in "groups" and to reinforce pair and group work by dividing the class. But how? According to our "M.A.P." criterion:

M: *Maturity* (identify the most "mature" students in the class);

A: *Skills/Ability* (individual ability to learn English and fluency);

P: *Personality* (create mini-groups formed by students with various personalities: more extroverted, more introverted, more responsible, etc., in order to allow exchanges and helping each other).

It is the job of the class teacher to carry out a sort of survey of the students by considering the students' psychological, personal, and cognitive characteristics. This makes it

---

[31] D. Capperucci, G. Franceschini, E. Guerin, G. Perticone, *Progettare per unità di competenza nella scuola primaria*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2016.

possible to form mini-groups of three students, which should consist of one student with a talent for English, one with average skills, and a weaker student. As the lessons progress, the "strong" students become our "group leaders" (tutors). We then slowly delegate some responsibilities (e.g., correcting grammar or pronunciation errors during group work or telling another group member to pay more attention), in order to create a group of mini-teachers. In a series of activities, the "average" and "weak" students can also be named *group leader*, i.e., becoming a tutor, to everyone's great satisfaction. The idea of a "tutor" essentially helps teachers to address one of the main problems, namely that of have classes with so many students of "mixed ability"[32].

In addition, M.A.P. becomes a very interesting tool for its psychological implications, creating synergies and growth in terms of responsibility within the mini-groups. The exchange that takes place between the various *strengths* enables a more direct, knowledgeable participation as well as, in some way, solidarity. The group becomes used to working together, taking care *of the other*, and feeling part of a whole. Moreover, the use of small groups, including pairs, represents one means of enhancing learner autonomy[33]. By collaborating with their peers, learners move away from dependence on the teacher. Group activities help students harness that power and by doing so, they enlarge their pool of learning resources because they can receive assistance from peers, not just from the teacher[34].

5. *"Round and round we go"*: practical examples of how to teach English using *An English Island* methodology

The methodological structure of *An English Island* is characterized by constant and continual research and development. Over time, it has been designed via practical experience *in the field*, noting the needs and challenges of the teachers, and involving them in the innovative methods of this educational process. The various phases making up this process have been formulated, verified, and validated, with each of them becoming an integral part of a teaching/learning method that has three features.

Circular path: The steps follow each other sequentially, starting always and exclusively from the three expressive languages *(mime, visual, and oral)* to arrive the written language *(circles, twin brother, initials)* that represents *speaking on paper*. A fundamental aspect is that the continuously calibrated tests contribute to *closing the circle*.

Spiral learning: From a grammatical and lexical point of view, the content of the topics will expand as the students' *horizon* broadens. Spiral learning takes place when what has been acquired is continually repeated, reviewed, and reused in a proficient and autonomous way, such that *linguistic growth and skill levels* develop along an ascending line *(vertical continuity)*.

Pendulum movement: Often hear as a reason to move on to another topic that "we've already done this" and, perhaps, what has been acquired over time in a given period has

---

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

[33] V. Harris, G. Noyau, *Collaborative learning: Taking the first steps*, in «Autonomy in language learning», 1990, pp. 55-64; E. Macaro, *Target language, collaborative learning and autonomy*, in «Multilingual matters», Vol. 5, 1997.

[34] G. Jacobs, T. Farrell, op. cit.

been forgotten. Instead, to be effectively internalized and to improve linguistic-cognitive development, effective learning, this movement is necessary so as to go forward but also to go back to make use of and keep alive the knowledge/skills acquired in a sort of sports training *(horizontal continuity).*

The National Guidelines outline the skills to be achieved in the *Student Profile*, establishing the *Outcomes for competence development* that, at the end of primary school, correspond to the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)[35]. The guidelines also include *Learning objectives* that represent the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve the *Outcomes for competence development.*

Designed for the five years of primary school, *An English Island*'s methodological structure has 48 learning units that follow a pre-established plan. Each unit begins with a specific *mission* to be accomplished through *problem solving* by introducing key-phrases, lexis, and kiddie grammar from both a communicative and a structural point of view. It is important to note that grammatical rules are never explained. Instead, the structure of a sentence and the positions of its fundamental elements are interiorized (adjectives, possessive pronouns, interrogative, negative phrases, etc.) through the conscious use of the language. The units have the necessary *helpers* to assist the teacher in performing various activities such as videos for the mimes, audio for key phrases, and a set of puzzle cards.

This educational process, known as a "circular learning path", is divided into a series of phases whose theoretical and practical aspects are then individually brought into focus and explained.
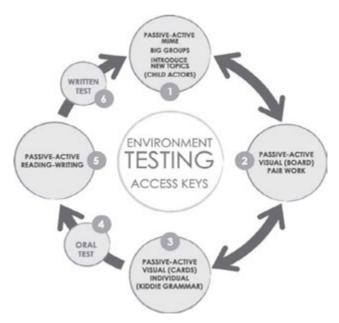

Image 1. The circular learning path

---

[35] Council of Europe, *Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 24.

1. Passive/active mime
2. Passive/active visualization (board)
3. Passive/active visualization (cards)
4. Oral tests
5. Passive/active reading and writing
6. Written tests

5.1 Passive/Active Mime

The teaching/learning sequence starts from the concept of *Passive/Active*.

The concept of *Passive/Active* is the basis of the methodology of *An English Island*, and is based on the child's cognitive approach regarding their mother tongue, an approach that was transferred to the teaching of English. However, there is a big difference between children learning their mother tongue and those learning a second language. In their own country, the former have thousands of hours available to learn their mother tongue so that the how much, the when, and the where matter somewhat. Given the relative time/hours teachers have at their disposal, it is important to always limit both the vocabulary and the environment according to the children's *horizon* and give them access keys by learning things that are not useful only now, but also for the future.

Translating gestural language into spoken language is developed in two phases, with the first using passive mime and the second using active mime.

Unlike the TPR[36] strategy, teaching based on *An English Island* does not use commands via imperatives, but rather actions connected to speaking in a cognizant as well as a codified way. Long-term memory comes from synergy and the meaningful association between the three languages (*mime-visual-oral*), which imprint the acquired knowledge, turning it into important skills.

5.2 Phase A: Passive mime

Step 1: The teacher starts by saying and miming the *chunks* being taught and having the pupils mime them as they are repeated. It is necessary to make sure that the mime is performed correctly, even exaggerating the movements. The smaller the children are, the shorter the final sentences to be learned should be.

As one example, some sentences that can be used in the 1st class are *Point to the door*, *Point to the window*, and *Point to the bin*.

The teacher starts by *miming* chunks like *the door*, *the window*, or *the bin*, depending on the sentence has to be built starting from the end, going towards the beginning. This serves to stimulate an awareness of the meaning of words, the order in which they are placed, and the language function.

Step 2: After pronouncing and miming the words being taught, the whole class must be checked to see if passive knowledge has been acquired. A visual check verifies if the pupils have under-

---

[36] J. J. Asher, *The Total Physical Response Approach to Second Language Learning*, in «The Modern Language Journal», *53*(1), 1969, pp. 3-17.

stood what they are miming. They can also be asked, '*the door? What does it mean in Italian?*', and have the following possible answers: *Open the do*or... *door*. It is important that they know that the chunk being mimed means *the door* and not just *door* without an article. No grammatical explanation is given and the chunk is simply said by the teacher. Sometimes the use of Language 1 is helpful to explanations more quickly[37] and to make sure that all the pupils have understood.

Step 3: Divide the class into four sections, as if drawing a perfect X, and then select random children. This will help to concentrate their attention as well as their desire to do well.

Now the teacher says the chunk and the child chosen must mime the chunk pronounced (visual test).

Now Block 1, *Point to*, is introduced and the previous steps are repeated.

Step 4: Block 1 + Block 2 are put together so that the pupils mime the whole sentence: *Point to the bin*, *Point to the door*, or *Point to the window*.

5.3 Phase B: Active mime

The same steps from the previous phase are then performed by reversing roles. The teacher is now passive, which means he/she mimes *the window*, *Point to the window* and the pupils say it. Students in this phase are active, sometimes finding it more difficult to do this exercise. This is normal as the children now have to *produce* and not simply parroting (Listening test).

Child Actors Strategy
In order to increase both participation and concentration and to facilitate the learning process as well it is essential the children become *actors*.

The sentences *Point to the window*, *Point to the bin* and *Point to the door* are used again. Some children are chosen and given one of the sentence elements. For example, Marco will be *Point to*, Anna will be *the*, and Alessandro, Luigi, and Bianca will be *door*, *window*, and *bin*, respectively.

Now the teacher says the sentence, *Point to the door*. «Marco, Anna, and Alessandro go to the front of the class and mime the sentence by putting themselves in the correct order».

A child from the class is called to read the sentence while the child *actors* mime it. Gradually other children are involved, starting with the stronger ones and ending with the weaker ones. As this latter group will have the opportunity to hear the sentence several times, it becomes a means to reinforce and help them.

Next a*ll the child actors* switch places, and other children from the class are called to *write* a sentence as it is said. Writing means that a child goes to the actors, takes the words/child needed, and puts them in order:

Ex.: *Point to the bin*: Mark = *Point to* + Anna = *the* + Bianca = *bin*
Point to the window: Mark = Point to + Anna = the + Luigi = window

This creates a human sequence that corresponds to a sentence. By varying the sequence elements, the sentences change.

---

[37] J. K. Shin, *Ten helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners*, in «English Teaching Forum», *44*(2), 2006, p. 4.

5.4 Passive/Active Visualization (board/interactive board)

Once the mime phase has been completed and reinforced, the visualization phase is introduced where the children expand the previously imprinted groove. Using spoken activities once again, two types of visualization are carried out in succession, with one using drawings on a board/interactive board and the other, puzzle cards. Each card/drawing is coded, representing a word or group of words corresponding to a mime form.

Phase A: Passive visualization through drawings on the board
As an example, the following sentences are taken:

She has got long hair
She has got curly hair
She has got short hair

In the visualization phase, the sentence also starts from the end going towards the beginning.
Method:
1. The teacher draws *hair* as shown on the corresponding card and writes a letter of the alphabet, e.g., "B", next to *hair*.
2. The teacher draws the adjectives *long/curly/short* as shown on the corresponding cards and writes next to each one the number to be taught (e.g., 16, 6, 26).
At this point, the passive recognition exercise begins. The teacher says *hair* and the pupils say B; then *long* and the pupils say 16; and lastly, *long hair* and the pupils say 16-B. In this way, the children get used to recognizing and correctly using adjectives in English, by starting from the end of the sentence and moving towards its beginning.
On the board, *She has got* (3 cards) is drawn, then mimed, spoken, and lastly, a sound is attributed, e.g., *boing*! The pupils learn to connect the words represented by the drawings with the sound, number, or letter that has been established. In this case, the children will say, *boing-16-B*, demonstrating they have understood the sentence passively.
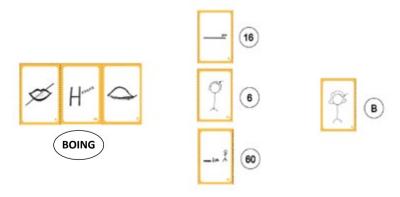

Image 2. Example of a passive/active sentence

This phase double-checks listening comprehension and the correct pronunciation of the exercise's elements (numbers, letters of the alphabet, or colors).

Phase B: Active visualization through drawings on the board
Reversing roles, the same steps are performed as in the previous phase. The teacher is passive, i.e., says the letters, numbers and sounds, while the pupils are active this time, gradually saying the parts that complete the sentence.
This exercise can be done with the whole class and then as *pair work*.
In this phase, listening comprehension is tested. It is always essential to establish a parallel objective.
Which color, number, or letter of the alphabet should be used and when?
Here are some examples for the various classes:
1st class = numbers up to 9 and colors;
2nd class = numbers up to 19 and colors;
3rd, 4th, and 5th classes = numbers up to 99 and the alphabet.

Pair Work/visualization (board)
All the exercises presented so far are very useful when carried out between a teacher and the class. However, they are particularly useful because *pair-work* activities can be introduced. *Pair work* is essential for creating those grooves that are so important in a natural learning process. When using *pair work*, great care must be taken in choosing the *correct* pairs. In *pair work*, there is always a "*teacher*" and a "*student*". Since the exercises always begin passively, the "*teacher*" is the weaker student in the pair as he does not have to produce. With respect to what was explained in the previous exercise, the "*teacher*" (weak student) says the numbers, letters, and colors corresponding to the drawings on the board and the "*student*" (strong student) mimes and then says the sentence. Being designated "*teacher*" has two positive effects on the weaker student. First, the student's self-esteem will increase (I am the teacher!!!). Secondly, it will let her hear the correct sentence repeated several times. After a certain period, the roles are reversed, an action with a dual purpose. To start with, the strong student will also feel like a "*teacher*", and hence important. Furthermore, a mini-test on what the weak student has learned can be done.

5.5 Passive/Active visualization with puzzle cards

At this stage of the learning process, everything developed through *body miming* and passive-active *visualization* (*board*) has been repeated and strengthened. All the activities "that involve listening, observing, and then acting are some of the most successful"[38]. The next step is to use the *puzzle cards*. By working alone, each child, through the use of his/her cards, is able to:
1. review and enrich vocabulary;
2. improve rhythm and fluency; and
3. reflect on the language (but only in the last two years of primary school).
For the first time, the child becomes the language creator, manipulating the cards

---

[38] S. J. Savignon, *Communicative language teaching: State of the art*, in «TESOL quarterly», *25*(2), 1991, pp. 261-278.

and personally putting into practice what has been learned up to now. The first individual oral test is given using the cards.
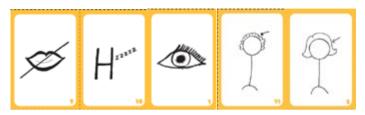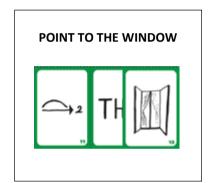
SHE HAS GOT CURLY HAIR

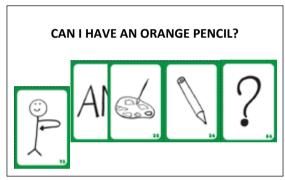**Image 3.** Card sequence of an affirmative sentence

Image 4: How to use the "a/an/the" card

Note that the card for definite/indefinite articles is partially covered to have them be pronounced together with the noun that follows, forming a single word/sound.
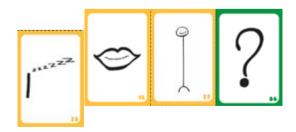
IS HE TALL?

Image 5. Position of auxiliary card in interrogative sentences

The card for auxiliaries must be placed lower than the others to give the right rhythm to the interrogative sentence.

In the children's hands, the puzzle cards are a conscious, active tool for *building a conversation*. By means of their placement, substitutions, additions, and inversions, the students can produce a very wide range of sentences without having yet seen a written word. The teachers have got a helper list of all the coded puzzle cards (see below an example) which allows them to use the cards well overtime.
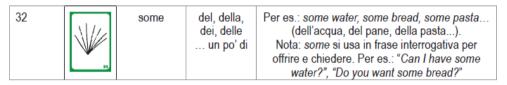
32		some	del, della, dei, delle ... un po' di	Per es.: *some water, some bread, some pasta...* (dell'acqua, del pane, della pasta...). Nota: *some* si usa in frase interrogativa per offrire e chiedere. Per es.: *"Can I have some water?", "Do you want some bread?"*

Image 6. Visual code with explanation

18		drawer	cassetto	Fa rima con *"or"*, *"Black or white ?"*

Image 7. Visual code with pronunciation suggestion

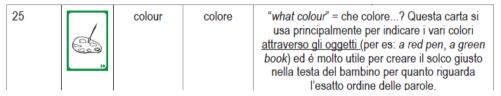| 25		colour	colore	*"what colour"* = che colore...? Questa carta si usa principalmente per indicare i vari colori attraverso gli oggetti (per es: *a red pen, a green book*) ed è molto utile per creare il solco giusto nella testa del bambino per quanto riguarda l'esatto ordine delle parole.

Image 8. Visual code with kiddie grammar explanation

5.6 Reading & Writing – Passive/Active

Up to now, written words have never appeared in any phase of the methodology. Children are confident of what they are saying because, through repetition and the order of the various processes, the mental/physical groove has been created into which all acquisitions flow. Once the necessary tests have been completed, it is possible to proceed with Reading & Writing.

The steps towards correct and purposeful reading/writing follow a series of innovative exercises, which, starting with *speaking*, *facilitate listening* and *understanding*, leading the child to *speak on paper*.

The *Circles* exercise starts by connecting a grammatical structure to several *circles* below, completing the sentences *heard* by drawing a *chunk*, with the pupils sketching inside the various circles what they have heard. It is important that the pupils be taught to draw what they hear as if they were words on one or more of the ordered lines. This serves to facilitate the reading of the drawings even when there are students with specific learning difficulties.

1. The teacher draws the grammatical structure (ex. *She has got)* and three empty numbered circles below on the board. The pupils copy the scheme in their own exercise books.
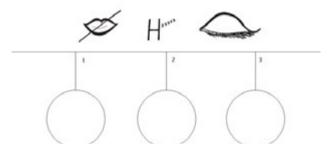

Image 9. Empty circle scheme

2. The teacher says the complete sentences, one by one, and the pupils sketch the chunks (*long hair/curly hair/short hair*) in the corresponding circle.
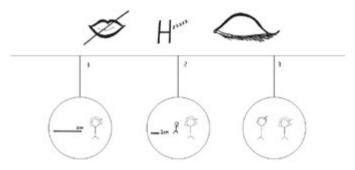

Image 10. Full circle scheme

3. The teacher asks the pupils to *read* the sentences.

The second passage is based on *Initials*. The teacher writes the first letters of the words contained in the various circles in random order on the board, and then numbers them.

Image 11. Initials to connect to circles

By reading/pronouncing the drawing, the pupils recognize the group of letters and write them below the corresponding circles.
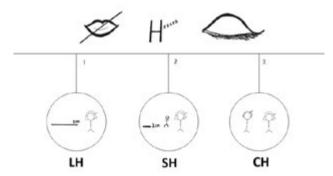

Image 12. Complete circle exercise

Called *Twin Brother*, the third exercise is used to associate the drawing/spoken word with the written word and serves to demonstrate the spelling. This exercise is useful for helping students to understand that *you do not always know how to write what you know how to say.*

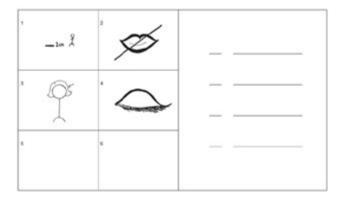1. Scheme with drawings on the left and empty lines on the right.

Image 13. Empty Twin Brother exercise

2. The teacher writes the words in random order with a number next to them on the board. The pupils associate the written word on the board to the pronunciation they have given to the drawing. They write in their scheme the written word and then through the numbers match the drawings with the written word.
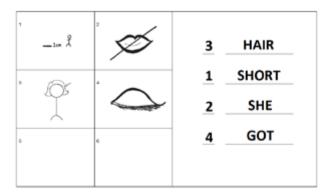
Image 14. Full Twin Brother exercise

Finally, the *Complete Initials* exercise lets students construct sentences by linking words to their spelling, inserting missing parts, and recognizing the logical-grammatical meaning of the sentence itself.

INITIALS	BLANKS
SH..GLH	[_ H _][_ _ S][_ O _][_ _ N G] [_ A I _]
SH	[_ H _ _ T][H _ _ R]
CH	[_ U _ L _][H _ I _]

Image 15. Fill in the blank exercise

All these steps can be *adjusted* to address such assorted problems in the classes as, for example, children with SLD and SEN.

An English Island is an inclusive methodology that enables all students to actively participate in the learning process. According to the principle of *adjustability*, the teacher must establish individual goals and adapt the objectives accordingly, so that a weak student or one with specific learning difficulties can participate with expressive/communicative effectiveness, (sensory, intellectual, and social stimulation). While the goals for "special" students are within their reach, it is important that these children be able to recognize their ability to learn[39]. A participatory learning environment is socially useful and psychologically constructive as it increases self-esteem.

---

[39] M. Gentile, *Nuove tecnologie e apprendimento cooperativo*, in «Scuola e Formazione», 2008, pp. 21-25.

6. Conclusions

As highlighted in the *circular learning path*, *An English Island* is a series of strategies that mark a learning process in which the teacher acts as a guide to help the children explore new cognitive content. In addition to improving the students' active approach, this methodological tool also increases the quality and effectiveness of their learning outcomes. Today innovation means, among other things, shifting the focus from teacher-oriented to student-oriented, using methodologies that, in teaching English in primary schools, promote an active and participatory approach to communication. In order for teaching to be inclusive, by cultivating in all the children curiosity and the skill of learning to learn, it is essential to start with speaking in order to finally arrive at writing, which then becomes speaking on paper using the *An English Island* teaching model. The methodological structure presented is meant to develop competences through *learning by doing*, which can be acquired by both the students as well as the teachers themselves using a practical, structured tool designed to be used during the five years of primary school.

The article was conceived by all the authors, who contributed to the text as follows: Davide Capperucci wrote the sections: Introduction, The teaching of foreign languages in primary education: regulatory and educational experimentation baseline; Robert Frank Muzzi and Elena Niccolai wrote the sections: Theoretical and methodological foundations of *An English Island*, *"Round and round we go"*: practical examples of how to teach English using *An English Island* methodology, Conclusions.