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Unconscious government assessment policy: language tests for immigrant students in Italian schools

1. Objectives

Our objective here is to present the situation of immigration in Italy and its effects on the world of education.

We will begin by describing the migratory phenomenon seen in Italy in the last thirty years, with a focus on reading quantitative data.

We will then analyse data regarding the scholastic world in terms of legislation put in place by the central government.

(In Europe) The linguistic issue is a central one, sweeping from the need to learn the language of the host society to the need to maintain the language of origin. European policy states that the preservation of diversity, and of linguistic diversity, is one of the main objectives to be reached for the construction of a new European identity. For European policies, this means that the rich heritage of different languages and cultures is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that efforts are needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding in order to overcome prejudice and discrimination. In this regard the role of migration is crucial. As migration processes are to be considered structural European phenomena, the EU and its member-states are investing in the integration of immigrants and their descendants, thus creating the conditions that should facilitate the development of a prosperous and sustainable multicultural society.

We will show that, unfortunately, the Italian government's response to this situation remains essentially anchored to a linguistic policy aimed entirely at monolingualism. This can lead to the use of discriminatory tools (language competence tests for foreign pupils, and consequent placement in separate "bridging classes") in the context of Italian education, where there is a total lack of assessment culture. We will present the results of a project carried out in schools, to illustrate how language learning and integration can be achieved very successfully in mixed classes - with Italian and foreign children together - not least by using suitable language competence assessment methods, and how these processes are tightly interwoven with those of socialisation.

2. Quantitative data on immigration in Italy

Italy has traditionally always been a country of emigration. But in the past 30 years, Italy and Italian society have experienced new conditions, marked by the increasingly large-scale arrival of a population of foreign origin. The latest socio-demographic data on foreign immigration in Italy are those produced by the annual Dossier Caritas, which, over the years, has earned itself a role as the most reliable and careful observatory of immigration movement in this country. The most recent Dossier (Caritas, 2008) shows that they now amount around

4,000,000 people, which accounts for over 6% of the resident population. The average annual growth rate of foreign nationals is around 350,000 persons, leading us to hypothesise that the immigrant population may double in the next ten years, which would then make Italy Europe's second-ranking immigration country, after Germany. Immigrants are spread throughout the country, albeit unevenly: North 62.5%, Centre 25% and South 12.5%.

The composition of the foreign population has changed repeatedly, due both to diachronic factors (differentiation of groups and ethnic groups over time), and synchronic factors (presence of different identities with varying social connotations), often highly dependent on the conditions of the labour market and the geographical configuration of the country. The tendency of groups and ethnic groups to stick together is a central feature of the Italian immigration phenomenon, with groups generally dotted throughout the country, and this also makes for a varied and complex demographic and geolinguistic panorama.

Despite the interventions mentioned, the phenomenon of immigration was practically ignored by public opinion until the 'Nineties. At that point two events brought the phenomenon into the spotlight: the massive arrival of illegal immigrants from Albania at the beginning of the 'Nineties, and the presence of an increasing number of foreigners in the Italian education system.

With the development of increasingly stable and permanent migration plans, Italian schools saw the arrival, in addition to the foreign adults attending literacy courses, of their children, gradually growing up through the education system. Nowadays the majority of residence permits indicate a long-term outlook: more than 9 out of 10 immigrants are in Italy for reasons of work (62.6%) and family (29.3%), and this confirms that the presence of foreign pupils in the classrooms has become a structural feature of the education system. All foreigners of school-age must attend lessons. Italian law N°. 40/98 on immigration guarantees the right and obligation for minors, including the children of illegal immigrants, to enrol at school.

3. Data on the presence of immigrant pupils in schools

During the school year 2007/2008, there were some 574,133 pupils with non-Italian citizenship attending school, accounting for almost 6.4% of the overall school population (Ministry of Education, 2008, *Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico italiano - academic year 2007-2008*). In 2006-2007 the figure was 5.6% (501,494).

40% of pupils of foreign origin are in primary school, but there are a growing number of pupils entering tertiary education, a sign of structural immigration, rooted in the region and investing in the education of its offspring. The distribution of foreign pupils around Italy reflects the uneven spread of the different groups in the country, with the greatest concentration in the northern and central regions. The foreign pupils in Italian schools are reckoned to originate from 191 different countries, but the top five countries (Romania, Albania, Morocco, China and Ecuador) account for 50% of all foreign pupils. These data are based solely on the criterion of pupils who hold citizenship of a country other than Italy. This approach does not provide us with data regarding all those who have acquired Italian citizenship (their number is growing, due to the fact that there has been an immigrant presence since the 1980s), those who are the adopted children of Italian couples, those who have one Italian and one foreign parent, or Roma children born in Italy, who are Italian citizens by law.

And yet still today, almost thirty years after the first work on foreign immigration in Italy, although the presence of foreign students is now a stable feature, it is difficult to get out of the attitude of astonishment at the news of the emergency intervention, both in socio-political terms and in terms of educational operations. The speed of change in Italian schools is often cited as justification: from 50,000 foreign students in the year 1995/96 to 574,133 in 2007/2008. However, we will see how, in actual fact, both the relevant institutions and the education world had already prepared procedures and responses in the late 'Eighties and early 'Nineties, but these were then either forgotten or remained limited to the location and period of their initial use.

4. The response of the Italian institutions: State legislation and memoranda from the Ministry of Public Education

One of the first institutional documents published in Italy on the issue of the education of foreign/immigrant pupils dates back to 1989. C.M. 8/9/1989, n°. 301: a memorandum of the Ministry of Education of the time, dealing with the “Inclusion of foreign pupils in compulsory schooling. Promotion and coordination of initiatives for exercising the right to study” [*Inserimento degli alunni stranieri nella scuola dell'obbligo. Promozione e coordinamento delle iniziative per l'esercizio del diritto allo studio*]. This is a highly innovative document, containing in germinal form the elements needed to set out an educational operation based on respect for individuals' rights, and thus of multilingualism and multiculturalism. It both identifies the general criteria around which to shape interventions, following the principles and values of the Italian constitution and of relevant European legislation, and highlights the weak points in the education system to be addressed in order to be able to put in place fitting policies, respectful of diversity.

Despite complaints about the vagueness of operative directions, we do feel that the memorandum cited provides the general principles for effective educational operations:

- 1) the central importance of the language issue is recognised, considered both from the point of view of learning Italian, an essential requisite for integration and social promotion, and of maintaining the language of origin, which is an instrument for the formation of identity (Vedovelli 2005, Extra, Yağmur, 2004);
- 2) respect for differences is elicited, in order to consolidate community living through reciprocal familiarity with languages and cultures (on the part of Italians and foreigners);
- 3) recognition of pupil's previous knowledge (both Italians and foreigners) is placed at the centre of the learning experience, in order to construct personalised paths of learning;
- 4) the necessity of training teachers in suitable skills is pointed out, recognising the need for specific training courses for L2 teachers, who should ideally also know the languages and cultures of their pupils;
- 5) emphasis is placed on the importance of coordination on a local level, including non-institutional organisations, in order to enhance individual skills and “put them into a network”, available to all operators.

The following year, subsequent to the newly-enacted immigration law (Martelli law - n. 39 of 28 February 1990), a new ministerial memorandum (CM 205/90) reiterated the central nature of the language issue, underlining once again the advisability of creating tests suitable to verify pupils' levels of knowledge, especially in Italian, “in order to better plan teaching

activities, rather than for purposes of selection” [*“piuttosto che in funzione selettiva, ai fini della programmazione mirata alle attività didattiche”*].

In legislation issued in the following years, the importance of an intercultural education is stressed. In the context of schools, greater fortune was struck by the topic of interculturality (v. CM 73/1994): no other concept has been so heavily abused at all levels of the education system. The intercultural perspective was immediately perceived as being adequate to give a theoretical framework and guide operative interventions to solve the problems of receiving immigrant children in school, be it simply for use as a slogan, or with reference to innovative practices (Vedovelli, 2003).

What is surprising is that in the various documents, issued year after year and up to the present day, there is continued reference to the presence of foreign pupils in schools as a “problem” and that still, this problem is referred to as an “educational emergency”. In one of the more recent examples, a document issued by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, entitled “Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign pupils ”[*“Linee guida per l’accoglienza e l’integrazione degli alunni stranieri”*] (March 2006) particular emphasis is placed on the fact that the learning and development of the Italian language as a second language must be central to the learning experience. Thus we appear to be witnessing a more ethnocentric view, less designed to harness linguistic diversity in schools.

Consequentially, insufficient protection and regard is afforded to the richness of this linguistic wealth and its maintenance. In everyday practice, this manner of hiding the other languages and protecting Italian can even result in racist and segregationist attitudes that consider linguistic richness as something to be suppressed by schools, otherwise immigrants would have better opportunities in the future than Italian pupils.

The same nationalistic approach, of defending linguistic identity, led just two years ago to the initial approval in the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Republic of an article that is set to modify the text of the Constitution. The article reads: “Italian is the official language of the Republic, in the respect of the guarantees provided by the Constitution and by constitutional legislation”. This acknowledgement was not included even in the Constitution of the Republic, which, moreover, was written in a different historical context in which the recognition of the language of the newly-formed republic might perhaps have made more sense. We believe that the approval of this article at this time is a sign of the desire to reaffirm the identity of the state with its language, exorcising the fear of diversity as the state feels threatened by the presence of others. We are deeply concerned as to the consequences that this law may have on the approach to plurilingualism in Italy, be it in regard to the historic minority languages, or to those more recently arrived.

Possession of Italian language competence, seen as the right to expression, as sanctioned by the Italian Constitution, is emerging as a tool to create a barrier, to prevent access.

5. The “Cota motion”

In confirmation of this, in recent months the Italian political debate has seen the emergence of a number of proposals, including the so-called ‘Cota motion’ of 14 October 2008.

The objective of this motion was and is to push the government to approve the creation of separate classes (“classi ponte”) for pupils of foreign origin. The introduction to this document states that

- immigration and its consequences on the way school is organised,

- the substantial numbers of foreign pupils that create teaching difficulties for staff and learning difficulties for students, and
- the varying degrees of linguistic literacy

compromise the school's effectiveness, which essentially translates as the Italian pupils' chances of success. Consequently, the motion proposes a policy of "provisional positive discrimination", in which the government should "review the system of access for foreign pupils to all levels of schooling, with entry conditional upon passing tests and specific assessments; establish access classes so that foreign pupils who do not pass the above tests and assessments can attend Italian language courses, prior to the entry of the foreign pupils into their permanent classes".

On the part of the proponents of this motion, the contents under discussion highlight

- a lack of due consideration of existing legislation on the matter, and of research regarding language learning,
- the failure to indicate who would be involved in preparing and administering the tests,
- the lack of reference to professional figures such as Italian L2 teachers,
- the lack of knowledge of the structural elements of foreign immigration in Italy and of the role of maintaining the languages of origin.

Furthermore, it maintains the ambiguous criterion of citizenship, which is insufficient for language issues (indeed, the definition of the intended recipients of these provisions proves contradictory, with a varied array of expressions including 'pupils holding non-Italian citizenship', 'nomads', 'minors of immigrant origin born in Italy, or attend their entire schooling in Italy', 'immigrant children'; 'foreign children, but also nomads or the children of parents with political refugee status, 'non-Italian students', 'many different citizenships'). Finally, learning and integration are perceived as distinct phenomena, and not as the fruit of socialisation processes for which the best conditions for development are to be found in mixed classes.

This motion, which for the first time proposes discriminatory action, defining it as provisional, and at the same time positive (terms which might be seen as contradictory), has provoked a range of reactions in public opinion (which tends not to be very well informed on these issues, and for this reason to some extent favourable to measures designed to protect Italian pupils) and amongst those working in the field. The Italian Glottology Society (SIG), the Italian Linguistics Society (SLI), the Italian Association of Applied Linguistics (AIIta) and the Group for Intervention and study in the Field of Language Education (GISCEL), jointly highlighted the critical issues already described (such as the lack of specifications regarding the type of linguistic knowledge to be tested and assessed; a pass grade in the test as a compulsory condition for access to regular schooling; the creation of 'bridge' classes in which to learn Italian, without any explicit description of course content, other than a vague 'essential teaching curriculum'). They also took a proactive position, expressing the need for language support from specialist staff, through the establishment of the specific role of the Italian L2 teacher, but also the need for clarity when talking about tests and assessments to evaluate competence in Italian in foreign pupils, i.e., non-Italian-speakers. On this aspect the situation is particularly delicate, given that at present we cannot speak of a clear equivalence whereby 'pupil with non-Italian citizenship = non-Italian-speaker', or 'Italian pupil (who may also be of foreign origin) = Italian-speaker'. The concept of competence in Italian can be further defined by subdivision into levels of competence, and the progression through these levels in terms of managing different domains and contexts, and these are the issues on which

the education system, called to assess the linguistic competence of its pupils, must reflect and discuss.

More in general, it seems to us that the Cota motion reflects and corroborates the institutional lack of a language assessment culture, an *ethical milieu* (Davies 1997) which, as mentioned above, unfortunately seems to be typical of the Italian school system, and to some degree fruit of the same system.

In order to illustrate the groundlessness of the reasons underlying the Cota motion, first and foremost on a theoretical level, we will present, albeit summarily, the results of a language learning, teaching and assessment experience performed in schools in the academic years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 by the University for Foreigners in Siena's CILS Italian language certification centre together with the City of Florence Public Education Department (in the project "Parlato è bene, certificato è meglio. La valutazione delle competenze linguistico-comunicative in italiano L2: la proposta del *Quadro comune europeo di riferimento*" [Spoken is good, certified is better. Assessment of linguistic and communicative competence in Italian L2: the proposals of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages]).

6. *Mixed classes and language assessment*

As discussed in Krakow (EALTA Conference 2006), the first phase of this experience (general training programme offering guidance for the activities of literacy facilitators and teachers; seminar meetings - one working group for primary schools and one for secondary/middle schools) gave excellent results, with participants working to determine contents for learning, teaching and assessment in terms of knowledge and/or skills. The objective of the work was to create a common and shared basis for literacy facilitators and teachers, so that they could work together to create instruments and 'products' for use in class, and this was fully achieved.

The second part of the project, again seminar-based, aimed to devise reading comprehension tests using a passage from a history text. Reading comprehension was chosen due to the fundamental role that this skill plays both in school and social contexts, whilst history texts were selected because of the difficulties in handling this type of writing, for both Italian and foreign pupils, due to the highly abstract nature of the concepts presented, the high number of cultural notions required, and the syntactic and lexical complexity of the texts.

Following initial reflections on the difficulties of handling a history text in comprehension activities and on the elaboration of criteria and tools for the assessment of reading comprehension skills, we then moved on to the second phase, the construction of batteries of tests with which to assess this skill.

The format of the tests can be seen in tables 1 and 2. They were administered in plurilingual classes (39 classes, 679 pupils, including 84 foreigners - 12.4% of the total number of participants in the project).

Primary school			
	1st test	2nd test	3rd test
Score	4 points	8 points	8 points
Type of text	narrative	expository	expository
Topic	<i>The life story of grandma Lina</i>	<i>Life in the old stone age</i>	<i>Life in the new stone age</i>
Technique	transcoding	questions with multiple choice answers	multiple choice sentence completion
N° of questions	3	4	4

Table 1. Test format – Primary school

First year secondary school			
	1st test	2nd test	3rd test
Score	1A: 4 points 1B: 2.5 points 1C: 1.5 points	6 points	6 points
Type of text	expository (descriptive)	expository (descriptive)	expository (descriptive)
Topic	<i>Life in the castle</i>	<i>Medieval homes: from castles to huts</i>	<i>The Bayeux tapestry: a forerunner to comic strips</i>
Technique	1A: matching exercise 1B: questions with multiple choice answers 1C: open questions	multiple choice sentence completion	questions with multiple choice answers
N° of questions	1A: 4 1B: 5 1C: 3	12	6

Table 2. Test format – 1st year secondary school

Analysis of the data regarding the type of school and class attended (table 3) showed that foreigners accounted for: 11.7% of pupils in the third year of primary school; 12.0% of pupils in the first year of secondary school; 11.8% of pupils in the third year of secondary school. These percentages are considerably higher than the national ISTAT data on foreign pupils in Italian school in the academic year 2005-2006, when the second phase of the project was carried out. The ISTAT figures give the percentage of foreign pupils in primary school as 5.8%, and in secondary school, 5.5%. They are also far higher than the more recent Ministry of Education data for 2006-2007, although these do show an increase in foreign pupils, rising to 6.8% for primary schools and 6.5% for secondary schools.

Type of school	N° of classes	N° of pupils	N° of foreign pupils	% of foreign pupils
Primary	14	263	31	11.7%
1st year secondary school	15	258	31	12.0%
3rd year secondary school	10	158	22	11.8%
	39	679	84	12.4%

Table 3. Type of school, classes, n° of pupils, n° of foreign pupils

Analysis was performed on the results attained *a)* in the entire test by each pupil; *b)* in the entire test by each class; *c)* in the entire test by the foreign pupils.

(a)

In the primary schools (3rd year) 98.5% of pupils passed the test, and 24.5% achieved full marks (20/20). There is a significant, and absolutely predictable, decrease in the number of pupils passing the test in the first year of secondary school, dropping to 90.1%. The percentage of those gaining full marks also falls drastically to 4.0%, highlighting the greater difficulty in reading-comprehension for secondary school pupils.

(b)

The results (table 4) show that the presence of foreign pupils in the classes does not determine a good or bad outcome in the tests. Indeed, the behaviour of each class appears more or less homogeneous, and does not depend on the presence or number of foreign pupils. In other words, the classes that achieved the best scores are not necessarily those with less foreign pupils, thus refuting the common opinion that the presence of pupils whose first language is not Italian in a class slows down the rate of learning

School	B	c	E	F	G	H
N° of foreign pupils	1	2	3	4	2	4
Average score	13.3	15.3	16.6	17.0	16.3	15.0

Table 4. Results attained for the entire test by each class. Examples from 1st year secondary school classes.

(c)

The results attained by the foreign pupils at primary school are very satisfactory, with a pass rate of over 90%, compared with 91.2% of Italian pupils, whilst the results of the foreign pupils at secondary school are less encouraging, with only 62.5% passing the test, as against 95.3% of Italian pupils. These data confirm the results of research carried out on the Italian and foreign school population, highlighting the fact that the pupils' greatest difficulties are concentrated in the secondary and tertiary schools.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, the results show the positive effects of combined learning, teaching and assessment actions, addressed to Italian and foreign pupils, and in which assessment is seen more as a learning event than as a mere assessment of learning (Rea-Dickins, 2008). Indeed, each assessment event laid down in the project

- was part of a programme, and not an isolated, impromptu event; for this very reason, it
- had a central role among the skills required of the teacher in carrying out their vocation,
- offered an opportunity to reflect on the way pupils learn, as assessment has a strong emotional impact on them;

- provided motivation for the pupils themselves, who, regardless of their level of linguistic and communicative competence in Italian, were stimulated to continue in their course of study.

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