

The LEARN Project: Cultivating Cultural Connections in the Mediterranean

Il progetto LEARN: Coltivare le connessioni culturali nel Mediterraneo

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ABSTRACT

Pedagogical research is addressing important issues for the interpretation of the global socio-political situation. Multicultural aspects can be an element for interpreting social complexity and a tool for building intercultural pedagogy paths. Arabic is the third most spoken language in Italy and projects are needed to better understand this culture that grew up in the Mediterranean. Today, the Arab World consists of 22 countries, with diverse and complex political paths since the end of the Abbasid empire. The LEARN project aims to promote multiculturalism and language diversity. The project provides knowledge of the Arabic language and culture for all students of the participating classes, regardless of their cultural background. The project involves 350 students in 16 classes. Qualified native teachers from various Arab countries work in it. The project is a first of its kind at an Italian level, allowing educational institutions to make choices that conform to their educational offer.

La ricerca pedagogica affronta questioni importanti per l'interpretazione della situazione sociopolitica globale. Gli aspetti pluriculturali possono essere un elemento per interpretare la complessità sociale e uno strumento per costruire percorsi di pedagogia interculturale. La lingua araba è la terza lingua più parlata in Italia e servono progetti per conoscere meglio questa cultura cresciuta nel Mediterraneo. Oggi il mondo arabo è composto da 22 paesi, con percorsi politici diversi e complessi dalla fine dell'impero abbaside. Il progetto LEARN, mira a promuovere il multiculturalismo e la diversità linguistica. Il progetto prevede la conoscenza della lingua e della cultura araba per tutti i bambini delle classi partecipanti, indipendentemente dal loro background culturale. Il progetto coinvolge 350 bambini di 16 classi. Vi lavorano insegnanti madrelingua qualificate provenienti da diversi paesi arabi. Il progetto, primo nel suo genere a livello italiano, consente alle istituzioni scolastiche di effettuare scelte conformi alla propria offerta formativa.

Keywords: [interdisciplinarity](#) | [interculture](#) | [multilingualism](#) | [arabic culture and language](#) | [education](#)

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Preface

In Italy and in many Western countries, linguistic and cultural diversity is increasing. The new generations are increasingly multilingual, and school is an excellent training ground for children and young learners to experiment and practice their linguistic and social development. School is understood as one of the most important places where we learn to build relationships between individuals and here people (children, teachers, parents) can exchange opinions, objectives and educational suggestions. From a theoretical point of view, this approach is not only desirable but also practicable. However, the Italian school is governed by a complex administrative structure, which sometimes limits initiatives or inhibits their transformative potential. The law on school autonomy enacted with Presidential Decree 275/1999 (DPR n. 275/8 Marzo 1999) makes it possible to diversify the school's educational offerings, according to the demands and needs that come from the social environment and from the school's own inhabitants. Yet, the opportunities offered by the current law do not always seem to be fully utilised by schools and the 2012 National Indications themselves seem to have their days numbered (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2012). Therefore, classrooms are, even today, a privileged environment where quality and valuable *experiences* can be made, to recall John Dewey's thought, and despite so many difficulties and inconsistencies, the school remains the "natural place" where scientific educational research can be developed (Dewey, 2014). And linking up with the initial reflections on linguistic plurality, exploiting the educational and didactic potential offered to us by the laws still in force, and enhancing the role of the school as a "laboratory" to carry out research, this article aims to present the LEARN project on the teaching of the Arabic language in primary schools in the Florence area. An original educational narrative to read today's social reality in a postmodern key, through a significant intercultural approach.

1. The Mediterranean: a Place of *Conflict* and Dialogue

Intercultural education at school is one of the most evident transformations of our postmodern society (Macinai, 2020). We are facing a sudden and radical change in social and educational awareness. We are facing a new epochal orientation, which many still see – improperly – as an "emergency", but which has always characterised human experience.

Europe, as we know, was formed through a process of unification and differentiation at the same time. The unification process is due to two main categories:

a) the legacy of the classical world; b) the Christian worldview.

This has given Europe a profound cultural identity. Around these two major factors, the different ethnic and linguistic groups competed together (Cambi, 2006).

European culture, which then influenced the culture of the entire West, has a profound unity despite its differences. Just look at the Italian case of linguistic pluralism. There are many dialectal forms, which constitute an expressive wealth of popular and non-popular culture, but also other idioms that possess the status of languages, such as *Sardinian*, for example. Italian literature is rich in compositions in dialect form and for this multilingual production, we can already speak of cultural plurilingualism. In Europe, too, between the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, various national states were established, both as an ethnic and cultural, but above all as a spiritual unity. Only at the end of the Second World War did we begin to witness the decline of nations and nationalisms, with the beginning of a new, slow and gradual planetary social phenomenon: migratory movements. In ancient times (think of the barbarian invasions) this phenomenon involved the transfer of entire peoples to geographical areas that were more advantageous and profitable for their survival. Today, however, it involves small groups, partial displacements, but we must bear in mind that Europe has not had the grafting of different cultures on such a massive scale since the barbarian invasions (Idem).

These few preliminary remarks to emphasise that we are facing a new historical and anthropological reality, which calls into question the socio-political-cultural balances of the old continent, and which confronts us as a cultural, political and above all educational challenge. Europe has long been a land of emigration between the 19th and 20th centuries (think of Italy, Greece, Spain). The working classes, who lost

their jobs due to economic crises, and the groups linked to the rural world, forced into conditions of pure survival, chose the path of emigration to give themselves hope. Today we are witnessing a radically inverted phenomenon: it is Europe – the old Europe of nations and nationalisms, the Europe of many languages and ethnicities, but unified around a Christian creed and the legacy of classical culture – the destination for different and new cultures (Bettini, 2012). It is not only crossed but also *occupied* by minorities who settle in various European geographical areas and gradually become less and less minorities. We are facing a change that is probably permanent, certainly of long duration. These are events that disturb, that break the balance, that affect the millenary traditions typical of a morphogenetic society, but it is still an irreversible change, for many an *emergency*, therefore a problem. The most advanced parts of the western world are surrounded by countries that are tormentingly on the road to development, an uncertain path, full of *stop-and-go*, characterised by great poverty and decades-long conflicts. These countries are in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and many men, women and children make long and difficult journeys to secure a better life perspective. There is an urgent need to move towards a better condition, as our emigrants did, and we must always have these things in mind in order to understand and address the issue of interculturalism and multilingualism, which are *primarily* an educational problem.

Industrially advanced countries are now characterised by multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in Europe has always been there (think again of Italy and what De Mauro said in *Storia linguistica dell'Italia Unita* to find multilingualism like ours, you have to go to the “Babel of India”) (De Mauro, 2021).

If we think of the *Mediterranean* as interpreted by Fernand Braudel (or the Mediterranean *Colloquies* of Giorgio La Pira), Italy is depicted as that platform stretching out into the sea where all cultures land and where only in the distant past did one, the Greek, emerge and become the language of the culture that cements the entire Mediterranean. (Braudel, 2017; Giovannoni, 2006). Later on, Rome, through its legal activity and culture, would be the cultural leader of the Mediterranean and the West, but today Europe shows itself in all its ethnic and linguistic complexity. Europe, despite being a land of many ethnicities and cultures, was produced precisely through their union and blending following, as already pointed out, two common and important paradigms, Christianity and classical culture. Now, however, it is totally other cultures that are entering the gears of the European world. The reasons are social, economic and human emancipation and therefore irreversible.

We cannot deny that these changes have caused numerous contrasts within the host countries, even between populations that are part of the same Europe, but some of them present characters of profound otherness compared to the cultures of the advanced European countries. In these cases, a contrast is created mainly due to their historical asymmetry: backwardness versus advanced development that becomes irreconcilable and incommunicable. But it is not only this. The Mediterranean, which was the cradle of Western culture, was cut in two with the expansion of Islam. Henri Pirenne's thesis, elaborated and expounded in his book *Muhammad and Charlemagne*, tells us that these two great figures, who lived on the shores of Europe and Africa, represent the separation of the Mediterranean (Pirenne, 1997). The two shores separated, and a war broke out between them, marking an important change in the history of peoples and civilisations. The Middle Ages were characterised by the commercial closure of Europe in the face of the advance of Islamic peoples, who, on the other hand, continually threatened a fratricidal war against the Christian infidels. These issues come from afar and are still very relevant today. People are fleeing North Africa in large numbers because of backwardness and poverty, their lack of a future, and many young people are preparing to move to Europe, learning the rudiments of Western languages. Not only that. Unfortunately, escapes by sea, across that Mediterranean Sea that has shaped our history, to reach places more favorable to the survival of entire families and generations, are well-known and daily facts.

We know that many of these people die in makeshift crossings, and this is to reiterate the extreme will in the search for a better place to live (Nasser, 2018). The migrants arriving in Europe are mostly of Arab language and culture and in Italy Arabic has become the third most spoken language. This has allowed us to rethink our system of international relations to a great extent, but above all to reorganise reception from an educational and schooling point of view. There is an ever-increasing need for knowledge and dialogue around the so-called “other” cultures, and it is precisely an in-depth study of the Arabic language and culture that has been placed at the center of an intercultural and multilingualism project developed by the University of Florence and a number of primary schools of the same geographical area.

2. *LEARN – Mother Tongue and Other Languages*

Dismissing ethnocentrism and becoming aware of the value and importance of dialogue are fundamental elements in interpreting and inhabiting today's society (Morin, 2000, 2011). Collaborating and bringing different cultures together can become an opportunity for growth and development: culturally, but also educationally, historically and experientially. Today, in order to develop a system that supports and promotes civilised coexistence, it would be important to abandon the idea of self-sufficiency, autonomy and the supremacy of one's own culture (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2012; Giaccardi, 2005).

In order to facilitate a proactive and dialogic attitude, the University of Florence, together with some local primary schools and the Good World Citizen cultural association, launched the *LEARN – The Mother Tongue and Other Languages* project. The aim of this project is to introduce and teach the rudiments of the Arabic language to children in primary classes and build inclusive and intercultural spaces (Certini, 2023). LEARN is an encounter and an exchange of alphabets, phonemes, very different graphic signs, images and sounds, stories and scents, linked to unusual food traditions, and ways of dressing that are not usual with respect to local traditions, but are already *ours*, because they are present every day in the reality we live (Marcato, 2012). The educational and didactic challenge of this project dedicated to multilingualism, intercultural education and active citizenship consists in introducing a weekly hour of Arabic language and culture into the school curriculum of some primary schools in the Florence area. As is the case with the traditional teaching of English as L2, the scientific *team*, which organised the project, introduced an hour of Arabic taught by mother tongue teachers into the POF (Educational Offer Plan) of the various schools. The project began in the 2022 and is currently underway, having already completed two full years, and is ready to inaugurate the third year of multidisciplinary teaching. The initial idea came from the *Good World Citizen* association, a cultural organisation based in Florence, which has explicit intercultural objectives and aspires to share *good practices* for the construction of spaces open to dialogue and mutual knowledge. As the Arabic language is one of the most widespread non-native languages spoken in Italy, the idea was to introduce it in some primary school classes in Florence and neighbouring areas, to start a pilot project. The project was born out of the collaboration with several educational and institutional *partners*: the University of Florence, FORLILPSI Department; QFI (Qatar Foundation International); USR – Regional School Office; three comprehensive school institutes, IC “Le Cure”, Collodi School (Florence); IC “Puccini”, Villani School (Florence); IC 3, Balducci School (Sesto Fiorentino, province of Florence). The initial classes were 7, but in the 2023-2024 school year they became 12 (with the addition of 5 classes in the first year, an experimentation within the “experimentation”), testifying to the interest aroused by this educational and didactic pathway: both by the schools and by the families.

LEARN is based on a well-articulated scientific structure: the native Arabic-speaking teachers (in the initial number of 6, which became 8 in the second year) worked with teachers from the University of Florence to develop the educational, interdisciplinary and relational skills necessary to carry out their activities within the Florentine primary classes. A work built on dialogue and comparison, on sharing and linguistic choices, on relationships and didactic experimentation, in order to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations, with respect to a cultural and linguistic reality that is very often subjected to heavy criticism and ostracism. This approach stems from respect for professional deontology, which cannot be measured solely on scholastic performance and disciplinary learning, but above all *on the ethics of narration* and the freedom/need for restitution by the children, who are the main actors and users of these immersive experiences. All of this bearing in mind what the 2012 *National Indications* have endorsed on the subject of the *new humanism*, that is, disseminating on a planetary level “the great problems of the current human condition” – environmental problems, social disparities, difficult dialogue between different cultures and religions, lack of resources, lack of equal opportunities, and much more – that can be addressed and resolved not only through dialogue and confrontation between nations, but starting from education, from schools, “from disciplines and cultures”. This educational endeavour needs to be cultivated in its institutional matrix, passing through the school, seen as a place to share one's *diversity and peculiarities*; to learn to recognise the importance of community work, to improve relations between peoples and nations, starting from intercultural experimentation within an autonomous and structured *microcosm*, which for John Dewey was, precisely, the school.

Through LEARN the attempt has been, and will also be in the coming school year, to build a space not only dedicated to learning, but useful for designing activities useful for all and to be built together. The classes involved are already multi-ethnic and multi-lingual (Giannini, 2024). The two 5th primary classes of the IC “Le Cure” were composed of 42 children in all, 2 groups of 21 pupils, belonging to the following ethnic groups and with specific characteristics: Italy, Bangladesh, Romania, Kosovo, Peru, Philippines, Morocco, Albania, Sri Lanka, children with bilingual families (Italy-Morocco; Italy-Ireland) and some children with special educational needs. The Arabic-speaking teachers worked with the classes one hour each week using a variety of teaching approaches: *Cooperative Learning*, *Peer Education*, *Problem Solving*, *Laboratory Teaching*, *Spaced Learning*. Wanting to follow the Deweyan teaching on the *quality of experience*, the teachers tried to replace traditional teaching with many varied research activities. To best support the pupils’ potential, the teachers made *active* didactic proposals (making talking posters, building stories, videos and musical representations through the interactive whiteboard, etc.), ensuring that much of the language and writing knowledge took place through *discovery* and *practice*, constructing an educational and relational space truly centred on the child. The spatial orientation of the graphemes, for example, not only intrigued the youngest, but was the subject of appropriate debate for all participants, in order to be able to recognise and appreciate the cultural uniqueness of the Arabic alphabet and the possibilities it offered as a tool capable of decentralising the partiality of everyone’s point of view. It was a complex, highly articulated journey, made up of *stop and go*, not always smooth in its development; at times the interdisciplinary objectives requested by the school were not fully reflected in the didactic collaboration, but the results, in the end, were truly surprising: beyond expectations.

3. Multilingualism as Growth and Educational Opportunity

LEARN is the first Italian project of its kind. Even at European level, as noted by the international symposium organised in Brussels in May 2022 in the presence of many nations, the project was evaluated as unique and *original*: both in terms of its structure (completely in-presence and curricular) and its general objectives. The methodology used was the result of a real synergy between several institutions (university, school and cultural associations) and this yielded important results.

At the end of the first year, but especially of the second year, the pupils of the primary classes were able to construct essential sentences independently and to be able to engage in dialogue with Arabic-speaking classmates and acquaintances in a simple but correct manner. With the teachers, they made short videos and dramatisations of what they had built up during the school year, yielding a wealth of new knowledge that they could use to better and more authentically experience their daily relationships. Obviously, the project did not claim to be an exhaustive course on Arab culture, but it was important to change perspective compared to the teaching tradition of Italian schools. It was equally important to create an interdisciplinary course, clearly responding to the complexity of the principle of postmodern citizenship. Respecting the peculiarities of each person, without ever slipping into drifts linked to political or religious proselytism. It was also able to highlight some important elements linked to multilingualism, a phenomenon that is now well established in our society and school. First of all, the importance of *contact* between languages, a process made up of interference (as emphasised by Uriel Weinreich as early as 1954) (Weinreich, 1979) that aids the development of languages and enhances them in the light of social changes. Respecting the complexity of the concept of multilingualism, we must consider the educational scope that refers to the practice of several languages. This involves significant cognitive training, the development of sophisticated verbal and interpretative skills, the ability to interconnect words from different idioms, the ability to quickly re-set one’s communicative system and, finally, the ability to converse with individual and collective uniqueness. Learning a new language does not simply mean *placing* another linguistic code *next to* one’s mother tongue but has more articulated educational implications: a greater awareness of social and cultural otherness; a greater readiness to construct shared places of life; the ability to develop a *pluricentric* outlook. It is a choral approach with respect to the many voices that narrate contemporary social history, and it is an approach that educates to respect these multiple points of view. Is it a simple, linear path, positive in its intrinsic implementation? Not at all. LEARN, for example, has received a very large consensus from the families of the children involved in the experiment, but some dissenting views have been raised among

the parents of the young students. These numbers are indeed small, but they reflect prejudices and rigidities towards cultural diversity that persist today. It would be important to *migrate/apply* critical thinking to places of doing and building knowledge, and school is, even today, one of the irreplaceable institutions for achieving this goal.

LEARN is about to enter its third year of experimentation and there will be the possibility of organising, for the first time, a path of didactic and educational continuity: the fourth primary classes from last year will be able to follow the *advanced* course in Arabic language and culture, included in the regular school program, with interdisciplinary aims made explicit in the POF.

As already underlined, LEARN is a new project, both in Italy and in Europe, but to recall its main characteristics, we can summarize it as follows: 1) it is a journey beyond linguistic and cultural differences; 2) it is a *step* towards the new *school*, that school thought by Dewey, made up of experiences, interdisciplinarity and dialogue; 3) it is an attempt to develop *new* spoken and written language skills in the youngest learners and their teachers; 4) it is a push towards real change, to overcome that fractioned way of knowing human events; 5) and finally LEARN is the possibility of building a truly *inclusive* place, starting from the intercultural approach of contemporary pedagogy, to build an inner circle that will define itself as a *mental habitus*. The *main goal* of LEARN is to indicate in *pluricentrism* the lintel of postmodern education, so that *multi-ethnicity* is not perceived, yet, as a novelty or a social limitation, but as the most authentic face of a narrative with infinite canons (Remotti, 2001, 2011). From the classical setting of western society to the construction of possible future horizons, through the practice of so many different languages that, today, are already so close and part of the reality of us, but which we are still struggling to fully accept.

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