

Separate special classes in order to teach the Italian language to newly-arrived migrant students? The issues at stake and the proposal of a Randomized Controlled Test Design

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Classi speciali separate per insegnare l'Italiano agli alunni stranieri neo-arrivati? Le questioni sul tappeto e la proposta di un disegno di valutazione randomizzato

In Italy there has been a long debate whether to introduce in schools separate classes for newly-arrived immigrant students, in order to teach them Italian. Single schools are entitled to decide about policies for second language teaching, with little empirical support and in lack of a central normative regulation, resulting in a wide range of local practices.

This article traces a viable path that may offer an empirical basis to schools' and policy makers' decisions on this issue. The first step, based on the direct experience of teachers who took part in the Interculture Project, is the identification of points of consensus and doubts regarding the effects of intensive second language teaching on newly-arrived students. The second step is the consequent proposal of a randomized controlled trial that seeks to assess the effects on three essential aspects: language abilities, socialization with peers and disciplinary competences.

Keywords: immigrant students, newly-arrived students, second language, separate classes, experiment, RCT

Da anni in Italia si dibatte sull'opportunità di introdurre nelle scuole classi separate per insegnare l'Italiano agli alunni stranieri neo-arrivati. I singoli istituti decidono le modalità di insegnamento della seconda lingua e questo, unito a uno scarso supporto empirico e ad una debole regolamentazione centrale, dà luogo a un variegato panorama di pratiche locali.

L'articolo traccia una strada percorribile per fornire una base di evidenza empirica alle decisioni delle scuole e dei policy makers sul tema. L'esperienza degli insegnanti partecipanti al Progetto Interculture ha permesso di identificare punti di consenso e dubbi sugli effetti di diverse intensità di insegnamento dell'Italiano ai neoarrivati. Da qui muove la proposta di un esperimento randomizzato che valuti l'entità di questi effetti su tre aspetti fondamentali: abilità linguistiche, socializzazione con i pari e competenze disciplinari.

Parole chiave: studenti stranieri, studenti neoarrivati, seconda lingua, classi separate, esperimento, RCT

185

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Introduction

In many Western countries it is a well-established fact that immigrant students achieve lower results at school, compared to their native peers (Jonsson and Rudolphi, 2012; Schnepf, 2006; Marks, 2005). In the Italian school the presence of immigrant students is relatively new: thirty years ago there were only few thousands of them, but starting from the 90's their amount began to grow fast and it boomed in the last decade. In Italy, many researches agree that immigrants' children are less likely to enroll in a high school, and are disproportionately concentrated in vocational schools. Compared to their Italian peers, immigrant students are at an increased risk of drop-out, and they have an average lower scholastic achievement (Checchi, 2009; Azzolini and Barone, 2011; Barban and White, 2011).

On different levels of analysis, many factors bear on educational performance: the features of the national school system, the features of the very school of attendance and its way of organizing the teaching activities, the family background, and the individual abilities and attitudes (Nusche, 2009). The knowledge of the language of education, which is the second language for immigrant students, is a fundamental determiner of school achievement, in that it is essential for every learning process that takes place through listening, reading, writing and interacting with peers and teachers. It has been proved that a scarce use of the communication language frustrates the cognitive development, which causes an impasse or even a regression in the schooling achievement. Language underdevelopment is also correlated with little self-esteem, especially in minority children or children with learning difficulties (Green, 2000).

The first paragraph of the article describes the institutional and normative framework of school decisions about non-Italian students and explains the reasons why I choose to focus attention on the teaching of second language (L2 from now on), among all the schooling activities aiming to reduce educational inequalities between migrant and native students. The absence of a standardized methodology of Italian L2 teaching that is fixed by law allows politics and ideology to impact school decisions on this matter. The great autonomy for Italian schools is currently jeopardizing the immigrant student's right to equity of treatment. Italian L2 is mostly taught in tutorial groups, but in recent years there has been a much heated debate on the advisability to teach Italian L2 to newly-arrived students intensively, in separate special classes, before they can join a regular class.

The second paragraph explores the advantages and disadvantages of these two approaches through the consideration of a large group of teachers involved in the Interculture Project, supported by Fondazione Cariplo in Lombardy. Teachers from different educational levels agree on the long-term outcomes the effective teaching of Italian L2 should have: the newly-arrived students should forge closer relationships with their classmates, increase their language abilities, and be more able to understand lessons and do their homework in Italian.



The third paragraph defines the theoretical and methodological framework of my research hypotheses. Empirical evidence for L2 teaching is scarce. International studies show that an effective teaching should provide both explicit lessons about linguistic structure and opportunities to exercise the language in relations with native children. Studies, however, neither answer the key question of what is the optimum trade-off between exercising the language and learning its structure, nor offer empirical evidence on the effects of a disproportion between the two activities: these are precisely my research questions. Among the viable methods to estimate the effects of different intensity of L2 teaching on newly-arrived students, I chose the experimental method.

The fourth and last paragraph proposes a randomized controlled test which seeks to assess the effects of the intensity of Italian L2 teaching on the three crucial aspects identified before by teachers and literature: language abilities, socialization with peers, and disciplinary competences.

1. Institutional and normative framework for the school support of non-Italian students

In Italy, the school treatment of non-Italian students is not a matter of central regulation. Unlike what happens in other countries, Italy does not have a common national program imposed by law to integrate them in schools, and the Ministry of Education guidelines (MIUR, 2006; MIUR, 2007; MIUR, 2014) are the only weak attempt to influence school choices on this sensitive subject. By law¹ the school's teaching staff has the right to decide the school policy regarding the academic inclusion of non-Italian students. This lack of regulation at the central level is the main premise to the discretion of school treatment currently suffered by non-Italian students around the country. Thus, predominant ideological and political orientations in the teaching staff have the possibility to heavily impact on school choices. The risk is the creation of very different sets of "local rights", as was stressed by the National Report on the Development of Education in 2008 (MIUR, 2008).

The presence of newly arrived students is an additional workload for teachers, because of their specific language and disciplinary needs. No preferential treatment is provided by law to simplify teachers' work in this situation. For instance, unlike what occurs when there are one or more disabled students, schools are not allowed to restrict the number of students in the class and teachers are not required to attend courses on language simplification techniques. Very recently², schools have been given the possibility to design individual training plans for newly arrived immigrant students, in order to make learning activities fit for their language skills and be eligible for the distribution of specific funds, but only as a temporary additional measure and in exceptional cases³. In addition to this, the very poor central resources are channeled to few schools located in depressed areas⁴. As a consequence, the lack of institutional aid increases the reliance of school policies

1 D.lgs 286/1998 e D.P.R. 394/99.

2 D.M. 27/12/2012 and C.M. 8/2013.

3 Nota 23/11/2013.

4 C.M. 6/4/2004, n. 40.



on school resources (both human and economic), multiplies the types of support provided to address newly arrived students' special needs and increases the risk of common-sense adjustments: for instance putting newly arrived students into the hands of the most motivated and attentive teachers, the only ones that are likely to support them to their detriment.

In most cases, support provided by Italian schools to immigrant students addresses two of their main needs: acquisition of the Italian language and simplification of educational contents. I choose to focus on the first one because is a necessary precondition to integration, necessary at the same time to learn educational contents and to communicate with peers and teachers. A comparative study (Christensen and Stanat, 2007) identified some cross-country characteristics of an effective teaching of L2. First of all, countries obtaining the best results established models to conform to, and titles to achieve at the end of the courses, whose programs are based on national curricula. Secondly, teachers holding L2 courses need to be specifically trained for that. Lastly, courses are intensive and last for primary and middle school, with no interruption. In Italy, as I stated before in more general terms, there is no L2 teaching model or curriculum established at national level. Not only regular teachers generally hold L2 courses in schools, but even teachers specifically assigned by the education ministry to the schools with a high percentage of non-Italian students (the so-called "facilitators") are not required to have attended a well-defined training (Favaro, 2002). The last critical point of comparison is the fact that Italian as a L2 programs rarely are intensive and the total autonomy of the schools in defining them is a great source of discontinuity within individual careers. These few details are enough to conclude that the quality of L2 teaching in Italy is very poor and has not improved in more than a decade. Even today, like back in 1999, we could say:

The priority for teachers is language acquisition. Yet there is no coordinated or nationwide programme to assist immigrant children in learning Italian. Responsibility is passed to schools to resolve as they see fit. [...] Unfortunately, the successful insertion of immigrant students depends on the efforts of single schools and teachers (Chaloff, 1999).

The following recommendations concerning L2 teaching were the only explicit ones in the Ministry of Education's guidelines (MIUR, 2006; MIUR, 2007) before the Interculture Project (see next paragraph) was held:

- social interaction with native peers has to be paired up with necessary separation of immigrant students from the rest of the class, in order to teach them L2;
- it is necessary to develop different types of L2 support in order to distinguish, among immigrant students, the newly arrived ones.

The purpose of the first recommendation is to prevent the immersion of newly-arrived students in regular classes, without allowing them to benefit from L2 support. This non-supportive policy of inclusion implements the "sink or swim" model, based on the belief that language acquisition in early childhood can be replicated in the school environment. The newly arrived student is required to learn language by himself, through observation and listening to native peers, and imitation. The "immersion without support" model chooses to ignore the differences between family and school environment, and between the acquisition of native and L2. In many cases it dooms newly-arrived students to be almost invisible



among other students, and it severely reduces their understanding of lessons for a long period, making them lose self-assurance and motivation. All these difficulties have a negative impact on future performance. In Italy the model was common in the '80s and '90s, when migrant students were very rare, but now is dying out. In addition to this, the first recommendation highlighted the two elements that an effective model needs to combine: social interaction with native peers and L2 teaching specifically addressed to migrant students. There is a trade-off between the amounts of time devoted to the two elements and uncertainty regarding the effects of increasing one to the detriment of the other. In the following paragraph this very point will be analyzed in-depth through teachers' experiences and opinions.

The second recommendation officially recognized the necessity to adopt different methods in order to teach L2 at different stages of immigrant students' careers, because each method has to meet different sets of needs. In this paper I will focus my attention on the support provided by schools to newly-arrived students right after their migration and their entry in a new educational system.

After the Interculture Project, the new Ministry of Education's guidelines (MIUR, 2014) have gone further, recommending for the first time a definite amount of time to devote to L2 teaching for newly-arrived students: 8-10 hours per week during the first 3-4 school months, and a gradual reduction after that. The policy is labeled as effective in the Ministry's guidelines, but no empirical research in support of it is cited. The debate on the effectiveness of language teaching policies to include newly-arrived students in the Italian schools is still open, as showed by a recent claim of ASGI⁵ for the opening of a round table among all the actors involved (e.g. institutions, schools, scholars, associations of parents)⁶.

There are no data on the effective diffusion of different L2 supports in Italian schools⁷. In this article I will consider two main types: the so-called "L2 laboratory" or tutorial group, and the so-called "welcoming class" or special separate class. The first one is considered the most widespread choice (Favaro, 2002) among Italian schools. It's a sort of tutorial group attended by all newly arrived students together for few hours a week, whereas they stay in their regular classroom with native peers for the main part of their school calendar. This methodology puts the stress on the natural acquisition of L2 through the informal communication with native speakers. In 2008 there has been a much heated debate on the advisability to intensively teach Italian to newly-arrived students in separate special classes, before they can join a regular class. The debated was provocatively raised in the Italian parliament by a proposal of Lega Nord, the right-wing Federalist Party, and it gained a large echo on the media. The stress, in the case of special classes, is on the acquisition of L2 through the formal teaching of its structures and guided exercises.

I will concentrate my attention on these two methods through the study of the controversial trade-off, in matters of time, between interaction with native peers and explicit teaching of L2 to immigrant students. In the following paragraph this

5 Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione (Association for Law Studies on Immigration).

6 http://www.asgi.it/public/parser_download/save/1_0131_scuola_minori_stranieri_asgi-documenti.pdf

7 The Ministry of Education Provincial Sections collect only the number of hours devoted to second language teaching per school in a year.



point will be discussed by teachers and the need to find empirical evidence to address different methods' effects will emerge.

2. The Interculture Project in Lombardy: the teachers' points of consensus concerning second language teaching

Interculture Project was an educational project supported by Cariplo Foundation and carried out between 2007 and 2010 in Lombardy, with the collaboration of the Ministry of Education Regional Section and ISMU Foundation. Its aim was to support and improve school practices devoted to help integration of non-Italian students. Out of 169 applications, 29 schools were selected to participate in the Project: they represented different educational levels (primary, middle and high school) and different areas of Lombardy, but they had in common a high rate of immigrant students and a strong experience in the implementation of educational projects.

Through the assignment of supporting facilitators, each school was helped first to select and design its own set of practices to improve the integration of immigrant students, and then to implement it. At that time, I worked as a junior researcher for an organization⁸ monitoring the project. My role was, first of all, to help school teachers think critically about the implemented practices and their effects, and, secondly, to collect and analyze data in order to identify successful practices worth being further developed in the future. Surveys and focus groups were used so as to explore teachers' experiences and opinions regarding different fields of school support to non-Italian students.

The survey was administered to the schools twice during the implementation phase, in order to collect descriptive data and first impressions on the developing practices. Focus groups were designed on the basis of this first data collection and along with the Scientific Committee of the Project, composed of University teachers and intercultural communication experts. It was decided to organize the discussion around five main key topics: welcome procedures, L2 teaching, curricula revision, extra-school activities and relations between school and other local subjects. The five focus groups were repeated twice in a six-month time span: during the first session the discussion the focus directed on implementation difficulties and expected effects of the practices; during the second session, the focus diverted on changes observed, work methodologies and solutions developed. Every focus group hosted at least a delegate teacher for every school that implemented an important practice on the topic: participant teachers were numbered between ten and twenty, depending on the session. The role of facilitators was covered by a senior researcher and myself, as a junior one of the same organization.

The survey revealed that, among all the practices realized by the schools during the Interculture Project, L2 teaching ones were the most supported, both economically and logistically, by public administrations. This is evidence of the importance of language acquisition for the general integration of immigrant students and their families in the society. Furthermore, the survey revealed that only a couple of schools didn't carry out any intervention of L2 teaching or welcome proce-



8 A.S.V.A.P.P (Association for the Development of Public Policies Evaluation and Analysis) <http://www.prova.org/>

ture. The priority given by schools to this two types of support emerged clearly and immediately during the focus groups, too. In a hypothetical situation of very poor resources at their disposal, teachers agree on the schools' strong need to keep alive at least these activities. The target population of both of them are the newly-arrived students, clearly the most disadvantaged and in need of support among non-Italian students. In particular L2 teaching meets newly-arrived students' need to self-communicate without help provided by cultural mediators or more skilled migrant students. The acquisition of the communication language eases educational learning, and both of these skills gratify newly-arrived students in several ways. For instance, they allow the newly-arrived student a more and more complete fruition and enjoyment of schooling time, thus decreasing the social gap between them and native peers. Being able to make the best of their newly gained language abilities, the migrant students see an increase in their motivation to learn more and more Italian. On the school side, the faster newly-arrived students increase L2 ability the bigger the savings, because they will be no more in need of cultural mediators and welcome activities. Secondly, the faster students' educational abilities grow, the faster teachers can give up special homework, have the students follow the common program, and mark their progresses. For all these reasons teachers considered L2 teaching to be a basic school service, very unlikely to be quit because it meets fundamental needs of newly-arrived students as well as organizational and educational needs of the school institution.

Despite the institutional and normative framework doesn't provide opportunities to share common methods and gain consensus around them, the majority of teachers taking part in the focus groups did agree at least on the main results they expected from an effective L2 teaching: improved language abilities, improved socialization among peers and increased educational performance. The improvement in language abilities is a direct outcome of the L2 teaching, occurring in a short time and easy to test with specific tools (almost all the schools involved in the Interculture Project used to do that with different methods, at the beginning and at the end of a school year). On the other hand, the improvement in socialization among peers and the increasing in educational performance are long-term results, mediated by the acquisition of language abilities and not so easy to test for schools. In fact, very few schools measured the improvement in socialization with peers and they did it only providing schemes to help teachers' observation. No school specifically measured educational performance, and only two or three took in consideration data collected for other purposes, i.e. the marks during the school year or the number of absences. Teachers agree also on the need to measure these results before the beginning of L2 teaching (immediately after the student's entry in the school), at the end of the school year, but also at different times during it. In the last paragraph you can see how, within a randomized controlled trial, I design to test all these abilities on newly-arrived students.

The second main finding of this exploration is the strong disagreement, among teachers taking part in the focus groups, on a central issue. What is the optimal equilibrium between amounts of time devoted to the two fundamental elements of language acquisition: the interaction with native peers on one hand and the explicit teaching of language on the other? In teachers' opinions this equilibrium could substantially modify the effects of L2 teaching, both in the short and in the long term. Teachers don't call into question the necessary separation between the newly-arrived students and their native peers required by the L2 teaching. They know very well the acquisition of L2 ability is a necessary condition to understand subjects' contents and to socialize with Italian peers. In spite of this, almost half



the teachers attending the focus groups is convinced that devoting a very big part of newly arrived students' schooling time to L2 teaching goes to the detriment of socialization with native peers and, to a second extent, even of L2 acquisition too. The assumption that lies behind this idea is that the time spent in regular classes is useful to absorb the language and create the condition of socialization with native peers, even when the newly-arrived student doesn't have basic language abilities to communicate with them. For this reasons many teachers refuse to take into account intensive methods of L2 teaching, even if temporary: in their opinion, it prevents newly-arrived students' effective integration. In summary, I found two quite opposite opinions among teachers: on one side, the supporters of little time amount of L2 teaching, with newly-arrived students spending the most of their schooling time in their regular classes; on the other side, the supporters of large time amount of L2 teaching, with newly-arrived students spending the most of their schooling time in separate classes. In order to achieve the same results, the supporters of little L2 teaching give priority to communication with native peers, whereas the supporters of intensive L2 teaching consider it as secondary.

These findings stress teachers' need for empirical evidence to support their work and schools' decisions on the matter. In the next paragraph I will discuss my decision to help collecting empirical evidence through the design of a randomized controlled trial. At first, my impression looking into this dilemma was that the teachers know very little about different elements and stages of language acquisition. To understand the extent to what this is true, in the next paragraph we ought to make a short digression in linguistic research, mainly American, concerning L2 teaching.



3. Research framework and hypotheses

3.1 *Theoretical framework*

The knowledge of a language is made up of several skills: reading and writing skills, listening and speaking skills. All of them are extremely necessary to fully learn L2 so as to attend school successfully and integrate into the society of arrival. Research in learning of L2 has mainly focused on the reading and writing skills (literacy), and studies agree that to acquire them an explicit and focused teaching of particular competences (lexicon, grammar, syntax, phonetics, and orthography) is needed. Oral skills have received poor attention from researchers instead: even United States based research, the most flourishing in the field, has left out any attempt to determine best ways of teaching and promoting listening and speaking skills in school classes (Goldenberg and Coleman, 2010). It is however widely agreed⁹ that oral skills development is correlated to the improvement of literacy skills, though no causal chain between the two has ever been established. In order to better understand the matter, is fundamental to distinguish between the fluency in “conversational language” and “academic language”: the first one is acquired in a relatively short time span, but it takes longer to master the second one. This distinction recalls the one between BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1984) or the Italian one between *Italbase* and *Italstudio* (e.g. Favaro, 1999 and 2002; Balboni, 2008)

9 The two most important American reviews about research on English teaching to ELLs (English Language Learners), published in 2006 by CREDE and NLP, agree on this point.

and is cited in the Ministry of Education's guidelines as well (MIUR, 2006; MIUR, 2014). The aforementioned correlation between reading and writing skills on one side, and listening and speaking skills on the other, is bigger in the academic language and smaller in the conversational language. The two kinds of language are to be kept distinct: the ability of a newly-arrived student to relate with peers in the conversational language is not an indication of her or his ability to understand a lesson or succeed in an oral test. Anyway the conversational language and the academic language are not completely unrelated: the fluency in the first is a necessary first step (but not sufficient) toward the fluency in the second. To master the conversational language it may be enough to speak it every day with native speakers, but to master the academic language it is necessary a thorough teaching of the language structures.

An effective teaching of a L2 for the academic use must take into account two factors:

- the opportunity to practice the oral language, possibly in significant and motivating situations, with the aim of developing listening and speaking abilities with conversational language;
- a thorough and explicit teaching of the language structures necessary to the development of reading and writing skills, and to upgrade from the conversational language to the listening and reading of the academic language.

Research gives no hint as to what the optimal balance between the two factors may be (Goldenberg and Coleman, 2010). There is no answer to the Interculture Project teachers' need for an assessment of the optimal intensity of explicit teaching of L2 during the first year of attendance of newly-arrived students. The answer to this need is the design of a randomized controlled trial, which I will describe in the next paragraph.

In the light of what linguistic research tells us, we can try and analyze the opposite opinions expressed on the matter by the Interculture Project teachers. Those in favor of a "light" L2 teaching avouch that the interaction with local peers allows newly-arrived students to practice conversational language and establish positive relationships. Research says that conversational language can be learned just by practice, but that may not apply to the particular condition of newly-arrived students. If not adequately motivated by teachers, local peers may avoid the interaction with the foreign student, as it requires much willingness and patience, with the perspective of a poor and unproductive communication from a scholastic point of view. Teachers themselves may not be willing to engage in the study of the practices that could ease the interaction between newly-arrived students and local peers. Even though they spend most of the time in their regular classes, newly-arrived students face the risk of finding themselves isolated, without any positive relationship with their peers, and unable to learn and practice even the conversational language. My design of a randomized controlled trial will investigate the proportion of this phenomenon.

Interculture Project teachers that lean toward a "light" L2 teaching also assert that the interaction with local peers makes the newly-arrived students get a hang of Italian more easily, which will come in handy for a good educational performance. Research, however, shows that the development of oral skills in everyday language are only slightly correlated to the abilities in reading and writing, and that in order to achieve the oral skills in academic language students must receive and explicit teaching of the language. It is likely that a greater number of hours dedicated to the explicit teaching of L2 are directly correlated to a broader grasp of the abilities that are necessary to a good educational performance. This infe-



rence favors the “heavy” L2 teaching, which should be more effective to the learning of academic language.

Those Interculture Project teachers in favor of a “heavy” L2 teaching imply that it promotes positive relationships with local peers. They suggest that this way the newly-arrived students will be able to communicate more effectively in a shorter span of time, having a better knowledge of their L2. Although this may be true, I mentioned before that an effective learning of L2 relies both on the explicit teaching and on the opportunity of practicing it, possibly in significant and motivating situations. If L2 teaching is too “heavy”, it will shrink down to the minimum the opportunities to practice the language with local peers and this may affect the learning of the conversational language necessary to build relationships. My design of a randomized controlled trial will investigate also this effect.

3.2 *Research hypotheses*



These considerations lead to the formulation of the hypotheses regarding the comparative effects of the two intensities of L2 teaching. The effect of the “heavy” L2 teaching in respects of the “light” one could be a significantly increased learning of reading and writing skills, a non-significantly increased learning of listening and speaking skills of academic language, and a non-significantly decreased learning of oral skills of conversational language. As to the building of positive relationships with local peers, the “heavy” L2 teaching will have a significantly weaker effect than the “light” one on the short run, but significantly stronger on the long run. The hypotheses tend to favour the “heavy” L2 teaching, but only the measure of the effects from a randomized controlled trial can substantiate or discard them, and identify the optimal intensity of L2 teaching. This will finally give an answer to the question posed by the teachers of the Interculture Project.

3.3 *Choosing the method for the evaluation of the effects*

Thanks to teachers’ experience and to linguistic research, I was able to define my cognitive objective: analyzing the effects of more and less intensive L2 support on educational performance and peer-relations of newly-arrived students, during the first year of school in the new country of residence.

I am aware that in doing so I am entering the field of public policy analysis (Regonini, 1989). Within this framework I am interested in analyzing the effects of an activity, not in reconstructing the decision-making process that has led to its implementation.

In the vocabulary of effect analysis the first word I need to use is “treatment”: I will use it to indicate an action to which correspond clear expected results. There are several methods aiming at reconstructing the counterfactual situation, so as to reach plausible estimates of a treatment’s effects. The main distinction is between experimental and non-experimental¹⁰ methods. The experimental method

10 Part of the literature calls them “quasi-experimental” methods, as a tribute to Donald Campbell, author with Julian Stanley of one of the first and basic works about the topic, published in 1966.

(RCT¹¹) is considered the most robust method to estimate effects, the “gold standard” among all the existing ones (D. J. Torgerson, C.J. Torgerson, 2008), because it provides the unique possibility to avoid distortions coming from two sources: selection bias and maturation. Maturation is the natural tendency of a phenomenon to evolve during a certain period of time, regardless of the treatment’s implementation. Selection bias is the natural tendency of individuals to choose among the alternatives they are facing, depending on their individual characteristics: observable (gender, age, social status) or unobservable (attitudes, preferences, motivation) from the outside (Martini, Sisti, 2009). This doesn’t mean estimates provided using non-experimental methods are not reliable at all, but the error could be bigger. As I’m saying below this point, the use of RCT method has a lot of limitations and in a high number of situations the only possibility to provide empirical evidence is the use of non-experimental methods.

In order to obtain strong estimates of the effects using RCT method, is required the random assignment of individuals coming from a very large sample to the treatment. Randomization represents at the same time the strength and the weakness of this method. Below, I will mention the pros and cons of using RCT and the considerations pushing me to adopt it in this attempt to provide empirical evidence.

Let’s begin with the pros. Randomization is the random assignment of individuals to groups. If the sample of individuals is very large, randomization creates groups in which there is an equivalent distribution (same mean, variance, quantiles) of individual features, either observable or unobservable by the researchers (D. J. Torgerson, C.J. Torgerson, 2008). By preventing individuals to choose the group in which they want to be or the treatment they want to access, randomization prevents selection bias: such as the influence of personal attitudes, preferences and features on the possibility to receive the treatment. After the period of treatment, by the confront of (at least) two groups of individuals statistically equivalent, one assigned to a treatment and the other excluded from it, we can single out the differences between the groups specifically caused by the treatment. In this way we take into account the maturation bias, originated by events happened during the treatment period that can distort its effects. In conclusion, thanks to randomization in a large sample, we can identify the treatment’s effect as the difference between the two means¹² on the supposed result variable: the one measured within the treated group and the other within the ‘control’ group. As I will explain below, in my RCT design I consider three different treatments corresponding to three different amount of time devoted to L2 teaching. In conclusion, the superiority of RCT method in providing internally robust¹³ estimates of the effects is uncontested. This is the main reason why I chose to use it to provide empirical evidence on the effects of different intensity of L2 teaching.

The cons of using the RCT method are its limited possibilities of application in reality. Manipulating the selection of individuals through random assignment poses different kinds of problems. First of all, there are problems related to the research implementation. RCTs can’t be designed and implemented ex-post, when the policy has already been realized: this restrict the application of the method to



11 Randomized Controlled Trial.

12 For a formal dissertation about this point, see: Martini and Sisti (2009), pp. 149-161.

13 External validity is a goal that is only possible to approach, although no method can obtain it for sure.

new policies and extends the research time, because at least three to five years have to pass before obtaining an estimation of the effects. On another hand, the need of a control group composed of individuals randomly excluded from the fruition of the treatment makes universalistic policies' effects not estimable using RCT method. For instance is possible to use RCT method in order to assess the effects of a training program for adults, but it's impossible to use it in order to assess the effects of the primary school for children because the attendance is compulsory (Martini, Sisti, 2009). Not less concerning, moral and political problems are to be borne in mind when considering the use of the RCT method. For many people, the exclusion of potential beneficiaries from the fruition of a treatment is morally intolerable, even if the aim of the experiment is precisely to establish with more certainty what type of benefits it provides to them (Orr, 1999). Political opposition to the use of RCT method is also very common, because the benefits are hard to explain to common people via mass media communication. Finally, unaccommodating attitudes are very common among social workers and service operators: this is understandable because in many cases they have to face potential beneficiaries' objections, when trying to justify a logic they don't understand. Unaccommodating attitudes can be a powerful source of problems, the most dangerous one being the randomization's subversion. Service operators are the ones performing and managing the treatment, thus they have the power to admit individuals to the fruition of the treatment even though they are assigned to the control group. Usually they believe the new treatment to be more effective than the previous one and consequently they act in the interests of the beneficiaries (D. J. Torgerson, C.J. Torgerson, 2008). An example can be the teacher who gives the possibility to attend a new remedial course to a troubled students assigned to the control group. If researchers aren't able to identify these situations and correct them, collected data are not reliable.

All these limitations must not induce researchers to give up working with RCT method, but only to contemplate very carefully if it's appropriate to the specific situation. RCT method requires uncertainty about the expected results of an action to be widespread among decision-makers and operators. This is precisely the case of L2 teaching's intensity: the heated debate that was raised by the Lega Nord's proposal in 2008 divided politicians, media, experts and teachers on the effects of special classes on newly-arrived students' integration within school and society. If this were not the case, the experiment could be compromised from the very beginning (Martini, Sisti, 2009). A second very important condition to be able to estimate the effects of a treatment using RCT method is the presence of a discontinuity, between different moments or between different groups of individuals. This allows the researchers to identify a treatment-variable. In the simplest case it is a dummy variable: the code '0' is assigned to data collected on individuals belonging to control group or to data collected when the treatment was not yet implemented, whereas the code '1' is assigned to data collected on treated group or to data collected when the treatment was implemented. In my RCT design, as I will explain in the next paragraph, I decided to use a treatment-variable with three codes, because I want to split my sample in three groups corresponding to different intensity of L2 teaching to newly arrived students.

4. The proposal of a Randomized Controlled Trial design

4.1 *Effects on what? The outcome-variables*

Outcome-variables are observable and measurable variables, through which we can estimate the expected results of the treatment. As noted before¹⁴, teachers agreed on the expected results of L2 teaching. The following are to be expected in a short-term:

- achievement of a good level of L2 abilities;
- positive socialization with native peers.

In the long run, otherwise, we should expect:

- achievement of a higher level of L2 abilities;
- maintenance of positive socialization with native peers;
- acquisition of educational contents.

I want to measure the newly-arrived student's level of L2 ability through a standardized test. The level of language ability could be represented:

- globally, by the level acquired on CEFRL¹⁵ scale ;
- more specifically, by one mark for every ability field (written comprehension, oral comprehension, written production, oral production).

The results of a test aiming to assess the level of ability in the L2 achieved by a student, if written in the second language itself, may not exactly be reliable, because the comprehension of the test instructions requires the same ability that is to be measured by the test (Koretz, 2008). Unfortunately in Italy it is almost impossible to use tests written in all the primary languages of immigrant students, because of the large variety of countries they come from. Following Interculture teachers' suggestion, researchers need to administer the test to newly arrived students of the sample more than two times (before and after the treatment): intervals between each administering should be shorter during the treatment (for instance every three months) and longer after its end (for instance only at the end of the following school years).

I want to measure the level of social integration/isolation of the newly arrived students within their classroom using the Moreno's sociogram, a diagram analyzing the interactions of individuals within a community. The sociogram needs to be administered to all members of the class, in order to reconstruct the position of immigrant students (leader, popular, outcast, marginal, solitary) within the social network of their peers. Moreno's sociogram could be administered together with the language ability test. Finally, I want to measure the educational performance through the INVALSI test, administered by INVALSI in all the Italian School but not at the end of every school year. Concerning this, is important to keep in mind the fact that the educational performance has to be measured also in the following school years after the treatment, when all newly-arrived students of the

14 See paragraph 2.

15 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.



sample return to a common status-quo situation. If we suppose our sample to be composed only of middle school students, the treatment could take place during the first year because at the end of second and third year INVALSI is going to administer the test. To measure educational performance of newly-arrived students is better to consider only the portions of the test concerning not-linguistic abilities (science, mathematics).

To help the interpretation of test results other data have to be collected, through questionnaires administered to teachers more connected with newly-arrived students and consequently more able to evaluate the occurrence of expected results in their careers:

- the questionnaire exploring social relations with peers has to be administered to the teacher with more hours of lessons in the class;
- the questionnaire exploring educational acquisition has to be administered to the teacher, among the ones related to a scientific subject, with more hours of lessons in the class;
- the questionnaire exploring L2 acquisition has to be administered to the main teacher of L2 (if there are more than one).



4.2 *Effect of...what? The exposure-variable*

The exposure-variable I chose is the L2 teaching to newly arrived students. It has three modalities, corresponding to each time intensity and the group assigned to it:

- 10% of weekly school hours devoted to L2 teaching – Group 1;
- 50% of weekly school hours devoted to L2 teaching – Group 2;
- 100% of weekly school hours devoted to L2 teaching – Group 3.

The control group is Group 1. The amount of time devoted to L2 teaching here is very limited, but can't be 0% because it would arise teachers' and families' protest and it would increment the possibility of randomization's subversion. Another reason to prefer a limited amount of hours devoted to L2 teaching instead of no one is the recognition that this situation probably is the most common in Italian schools and thus corresponding to the status-quo.

The L2 teaching method has to be the same in the three groups, in order to maintain only time-intensity as a variation between them, thus the difference between variables' codes can be identified as the effect of this variation.

Newly-arrived students entering in the school after the beginning of the school year don't enter into any of the groups. Anyway, they can receive the same type of L2 support, if provided by other teachers in separate classrooms. The exclusion from the experiment of the newly-arrived students after the beginning of the school year is needed to avoid the slowdown in the L2 teaching within the groups.

The treatment period is to be one year for all the three groups. Group 1 and Group 2 slowly, and at the same time, decrease the time-intensity of the L2 teaching during the school year to facilitate the inclusion of students into their regular classrooms.

In the sample will be included only newly-arrived students entering for the first time in the Italian school system at the beginning of the school year and having null or minimal L2 ability (below level A1 of CEFR scale).

4.3 *The randomization and the sample composition*

In most trials in the field of education, it is impossible to randomize the students per se: for ethical and organizational reasons, it is highly unlikely that teachers and parents will willingly accept the coexistence of two newly-arrived students treated differently in the same class. I chose to randomize the schools, instead of single classes, because this will minimize the risk of contamination between groups: the coexistence of more than one treatment in the same school may lead some teacher to “cheating”, for example having some students attend a greater amount of L2 teaching than expected from randomization. It is more likely that the integrity of the trial will be ensured, if all the newly-arrived students of the same school are assigned to the same kind of treatment. The precision of the evaluation relies for the most part on the number of school involved, rather than the number of newly-arrived student attending those schools (Martini and Sisti, 2009). An adequate sample should be made up of a great number of schools, even with few newly-arrived students in each school, rather than a great number of newly-arrived school for each academic year. The number of schools that should be involved in the experiment is determined using the analytical method of the Minimum Detectable Effect.

Finally, it is necessary to contemplate on a method to increase the external validity of the inferences about the effect deriving from the trial. The most viable method to increase the external validity is to pick the school in a way that is representative of the statistical population, in respect of the variables that bear on the effect of the treatment. These variables must be detectable in the sample, and their distribution in the statistical population must be known: these two requirements are not easily met in most cases. An example of a viable variable is the age of arrival of foreign students, as it can affect the learning of the L2. If we assume the type of school as a measure of the age of arrival of the newly-arrived students, it could be a good option to focus the trial on a single order of school: we would be able to extend the valuation of the effects only to the population of that order of school, and thus to the corresponding interval of age of arrival. We could also pick schools of different orders in the same proportion as they are present in a certain area of study.



Conclusions

This article wants to contribute to the knowledge of the topic of L2 teaching, which is the key activity for schools to support the integration of newly-arrived students. Nevertheless, the topic is too often debated in Italy only by linguists and pedagogists, while it is neglected by sociologists of education and political scientists.

Thanks to my participation as a junior researcher to the evaluation of Interculture Project in Lombardy, I was able to collect the opinions of teachers from different school levels, who everyday have the opportunity to observe the effects of L2 teaching policies on the newly-arrived immigrant students. Teachers' experience is a very important source of empirical knowledge about the risks and the potentials of different intensities of language teaching on the integration of newly-arrived students. Last but not least important, the analysis of the opinions of teachers is a way to approach the topic from a practical point of view and clear the air of all prejudices and ideologies sedimented in years of public debate. Teachers' empirical knowledge is then compared with and completed by linguistic re-

search about L2 acquisition, creating a rare *corpus* of knowledge on the topic of L2 teaching intensity and its effects.

The research questions and hypotheses emerging from this review concern the trade-off between exercising the language and learning its structure. What is the optimum equilibrium between these two essential activities? In the case of separate special classes for newly-arrived students, what effects can a disproportion between the two activities have on children's language abilities, school achievement, and socialization with peers? The Randomized Controlled Trial designed in the last part of the article could represent, were it implemented, a viable option to answer those questions with a reliable estimate of the effects. This evidence would be a tool for the decision-making in schools on this matter, for the work of teachers, and for policy makers interested in favoring the integration of migrant students.

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