

# EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHER TRAINING: A FOREIGN LANGUAGE SYLLABUS FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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*PART I- European and Italian Foreign Language Policy in the Primary Sector. An Overview.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The present teacher training programme, specifically aimed at the primary sector and at the teaching of English in primary schools, follows in the wake of a number of actions on the part of Italian authorities in recent decades in the field of foreign language provision in education, designed to improve foreign language proficiency among Italian school children and students. On the one hand, Italian policy mirrors and is in response to a general European language policy which has seen the European Union committed to promoting the teaching and learning of European languages in all member states for several decades now; on the other hand, it responds to an internal demand for foreign language provision and reflects the growing awareness of the importance of modern language skills in Italy. In this section of the article we will attempt to place the present teacher training project in the wider national and European context, briefly tracing the evolution of European and Italian foreign language policy in the primary sector over the last few decades and seeking to explain the rationale behind the present project and the issues surrounding it.

## **1.1 The Early Learning of Foreign Languages**

In the second half of the last century there was much debate as to the benefits of an early start in foreign language education (hereafter FLE). Opinion tended to polarise with detractors arguing that it can actually damage foreign language development and supporters claiming that it can considerably enhance subsequent foreign language learning. Developmental psychology, which emphasises the emotional disposition and intellectual readiness of young children to learn a foreign language (Gesell 1957; Ilg 1956) and neuro-physiology with its critical period hypothesis and the concept of early brain plasticity (Penfield & Roberts, 1959; Lenneberg 1967) were both used to

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endorse the claims of early language learning but there were also strong counter-arguments, particularly the claim that the more highly developed learning strategies of older learners can compensate for early plasticity (van Parreren 1976; Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991). The research into second language acquisition has continued over the last decades, producing variations on the “critical period” theme, as in the “sensitive period” theory, the “tuning in” hypothesis and the “natural sieve” hypothesis (Cohen 1991), but there still appears to be no conclusive evidence either way. There are in fact so many variables at play and, as Johnstone (1994) points out, age is only one of many determinants of the ultimate proficiency attained in a second or foreign language.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is now general consensus that while a more receptive disposition is only an enabling factor and an early start is neither strictly necessary nor a sufficient condition for the attainment of proficiency in another language, if the right educational environment is produced an early start can be extremely beneficial and facilitate the introduction of a second foreign language at a later stage. Above all, an early start to foreign languages is seen to positively impact on the child’s overall language and educational development and in particular to help engender a positive attitude towards other cultures. It is this educational and pedagogical argument which underpins the primary foreign language policy in Europe which we will now briefly outline.

## **1.2 Early Foreign Language Policy in Europe**

Although the educational arguments for an early start to language teaching had been expounded by linguists and educationalists as early as the 1960s (Sterne 1967), it was only at the very end of the 1980s and in the 1990s that European language programmes specifically targeted young learners and began to promote the generalised introduction of foreign language learning in primary schools as a major policy initiative. Up till then provision widely varied in Europe both between countries and within countries.<sup>3</sup> In some European nations, foreign language learning had been a permanent part of the national primary curriculum for many years<sup>4</sup>, while in others it had been introduced in

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<sup>2</sup> For overviews of the debate see: Singleton D., Lengyel Z., 1995 *The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1995; Birdsong D., (ed.) 2001, *Second Language Acquisition and the Critical Period Hypothesis*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum. For recent studies on the subject, Nikolov M., Djigunovic V., 2006, “Recent Research on Age, Second Language Acquisition and Early Foreign Language Learning”, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Cambridge, CUP.

<sup>3</sup> For comparative data on early FL provision in European primary schools see: *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe. A comparative study*, Eurydice, 2001, especially paragraph 2.1; and the subsequent publication *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School*, Eurydice, 2005, in particular Fig B3 p.28. (Download available at website: <http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/showPresentation?pubid=025EN>, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2008).

<sup>4</sup> In the bilingual Benelux countries of Luxembourg and the German-speaking part of Belgium - where foreign languages include languages with official status and minority regional languages - primary foreign languages had been introduced in the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1950s they had become part of the compulsory primary curriculum in several Nordic countries, firstly in Denmark (1958), and subsequently in Sweden (1962) and Finland (1970); similarly, in eastern and central European countries primary foreign language provision had long involved the

certain regions of the country as an initiative or requirement of local and regional authorities, sometimes on an experimental basis<sup>5</sup>; in other countries still, early experimenting with foreign languages was abandoned and the subject was dropped completely from the primary curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

Yet in the last two decades this situation has changed markedly and early foreign language education has become a priority issue on the agenda of the European Union and of national governments throughout Europe with central government agencies and ministries committed to promoting it nationwide. Commitment to multilingualism (reiterated in the European Commission's White Paper 1995), the attention to the development of intercultural competences and their contribution towards building European citizenship, as well as the insistence on life-learning as an essential concept in Europe's new educational policy, have made early language learning a focal point in European programmes and actions. In particular, as part of the Council of Europe's Modern Language Project "Language Learning for European Citizenship" carried on between 1989 and 1997, international workshops and seminars involving cooperation between various European countries were carried out on the subject of foreign language teaching in primary schools. A report on the project was published by the Council of Europe Press in 1997 recommending that FLE should become an integral part of primary education in Europe and that the overall purpose should be intercultural communicative competence. Since the publication of the report in almost all European countries there has been a huge and rapid development in the provision of foreign language teaching in primary schools. The publication in 2005 by Eurydice of "Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe" revealed that in 2002 in many countries 50% or more of all pupils in primary education learnt at least one foreign language and that following reforms the teaching of a foreign language has been beginning at an increasingly early stage.

The figures, therefore, clearly point to rapid progress across Europe in the adopting of the entitlement policy, though we might ask how far they reflect the policy requirement of the central authority rather than the actual state of implementation of the policy at the ground level in schools. This is a crucial issue which needs to be borne in mind as we turn our attention to the situation in Italy.

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compulsory teaching of Russian although this was more often than not treated as a second rather than a foreign language.

<sup>5</sup> In Italy, for example, P. Balboni refers to experimentation with primary foreign languages in the 1950s and 1960s in parts of Tuscany and in the bilingual regions of Aosta Valley and the Trentino- Alto Adige/Sudtirol. See: Balboni P., 1988, *Storia degli insegnamenti linguistici nella scuola italiana dall'Unità ai giorni nostri*, Padova, ed. Liviana

<sup>6</sup> An earlier experiment of FLT was conducted from 1963 to 1973 in the United Kingdom as a government sponsored pilot scheme to test the feasibility of starting French from the age of eight but was abandoned after the publication of a very damning official report in 1974 which put an end to further experimentation in the country for the next twenty years see Sharpe K (2001), *Modern Foreign Languages in the Primary School*, London especially pp. 4-9.

### 1.3 Primary Foreign Languages In Italy

Interest in early modern language learning in Italy goes back several decades to as early as the 1950s and 60s. As we have already mentioned (see note 5), various projects and experiments were carried out in primary schools, although these involved only certain areas of the country, in particular the bilingual regions which had special legislation on the status of the languages spoken there, and most of these projects were the initiative of the local or regional authorities. One of the earliest projects sponsored by the central government dates back to the late 1970s when the ILSSE (*Insegnamento della Lingua Straniera nella Scuola Elementare*) pilot project was first introduced in four towns and subsequently extended to 44 provinces. Among the principles underlying the scheme was the recommendation to use the class teacher to teach the foreign language since as an interdisciplinary figure he/she would be able to integrate and embed the FL in the primary curriculum and thereby promote learning of the language as an instrument of communication, providing an authentic communication context in the classroom.

The vehicular use of a foreign language to teach a particular subject, which is technically referred to as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) or Immersion Learning, has traditionally been more widespread in the teaching of minority/regional languages and in bilingual schools and has been experimented in Italy as throughout Europe over the last decades.<sup>7</sup> However it has now found its own specificity in the primary school classroom. Significantly, it was the insistence on using primary school teachers to teach the foreign language which, according to Balboni, prevented the project from becoming generalized due to the scarce availability of primary school teachers with suitable language competence (Balboni 1988: 130).

Primary foreign languages continued to be the focus of government attention and of the New Teaching Programmes of 1985 which officially introduced foreign languages in the primary curriculum. Although the Programmes have been criticized for not giving specific and explicit guidelines as to the actual implementation of introducing foreign languages in primary schools and as to the crucial issue of who should teach the foreign language and what level of language preparation they should possess (*ib*: pp.147-149), they did lay down some basic principles which still hold sway today regarding the main aims of foreign language learning in primary schools and its specificity compared to language learning in secondary school: firstly the concept of global

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<sup>7</sup> Coonan M.C., (2002), *La lingua straniera veicolare*, Torino, Utet, pp.50-73. On more applications of CLIL in the primary school see COONAN C.M. (2005), *The natural learning of a foreign language. CLIL as a possible partial solution for the primary school*, Rivista SCUOLA E LINGUE MODERNE, volume 4-5, pp. 4-11.

language education and the implication that an initial approach to FLT must take account of the gradual process of children's development and secondly the idea that communicative competence is only one goal alongside general cognitive development and fostering children's understanding of other cultures. The Programmes also brought out the dualism that has always characterized Italy's language policy in promoting on the one hand general educational and cultural aims and on the other hand the utilitarian motivation in giving priority to generalizing English as the first foreign language.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the 1990s, following the primary school reform, the government set about the ambitious task of introducing foreign languages as a compulsory subject in as many primary classes as possible. The intention was to entrust the teaching to primary teachers already in possession of the necessary competences but shortage of staff thwarted the original intention to start the teaching from the age of 7 to the age of 8, and the idea to embed the language in the curriculum was also difficult to put into practice for the same reason that there were simply not enough class teachers with sufficient language competence. Once again it soon became quite evident that unless the vital problem of teacher training was addressed comprehensively and incisively all plans to generalize primary FLT would be doomed to failure.

The long term solution, of course, lay in reforming and revising initial primary teacher education to ensure that adequate provision of language training and instruction and practice in foreign language methodology would lead to a supply of suitably qualified teachers ready to enter the profession. In the meantime, the immediate solution was to employ language specialists (i.e. those possessing a degree who were qualified to teach foreign languages) and external experts with suitable qualifications and to begin a programme of in-service training. Early in 1992 the DIRELEM-LISE in-service training project was organised by the Ministry, setting the precedent for future operations and initiatives<sup>9</sup>. In particular, the language centres of seven universities were asked to collaborate to devise a training programme in line with European Framework and to monitor systematically diverse initiatives; the University was seen as the best setting for the cultural development and advanced training of adults directly related to foreign language learning. The universities were

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Programme see Coppola D., "L'Introduzione della Lingua Straniera nella Scuola Elementare" in Coppola D., (a cura di) (1988), *L'apprendimento delle lingue nella scuola elementare*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, pp.1-10.

<sup>9</sup> See report *La formazione degli insegnanti di lingua straniera nella scuola elementare*, CEDE-MPI/DIRELEM-UNIVERSITA', PROGETTO LISE, 1997, download available at: [archivio.invalsi.it/archivio/ricerche/progetti-descrizioni/direlem/direlem.htm](http://archivio.invalsi.it/archivio/ricerche/progetti-descrizioni/direlem/direlem.htm).

asked to research on defining a specific primary language teaching profile, bearing in mind the ministerial indications about the basic aims of teacher language education. These were:

- Mastery of language for communication in daily situations with sufficient fluency, formal accuracy and appropriate vocabulary, regarding audio-oral abilities
- Gaining knowledge of culture of countries where FL is spoken
- Ability to decode written language “in texts with most relevance to the child’s experience of life and school”
- Able to write short passages
- Being informed about methods and approaches to FLT with reference to Education.

While the in-service training programme was being implemented, the need to resort widely to specialists in this first attempt to generalise primary foreign languages led to a fragmented approach which tended to isolate and marginalise the language and which ran counter to the prevailing view of the need to integrate it into the primary curriculum. Experimentation continued as part of the Project LINGUE 2000 which also addressed the vital issue of teacher training; the need to carry out a full scale survey on the actual state of training and qualifications of primary teaching staff employed in schools was expressed by the Ministry, particularly with regard to the numbers of those qualified to teach English, the demand for which was huge.

However, the real turning point in Italian primary FLE policy came in 2003-2004 when the government passed legislation introducing English as a compulsory language from the first year of primary school<sup>10</sup>, aligning Italian policy with that of several other European countries which had formally adopted English as the mandatory first foreign language and translating into strategic action a conviction which had long held sway both by the authorities and the community at large<sup>11</sup>. In keeping with the principle of plurilingualism and to safeguard the teaching of other European languages, a second foreign language was to become compulsory for the middle school.

In compliance with the pedagogical recommendations to use general class teachers and with the aim to make a substantial saving on the cost of employing specialists, the government intended to

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<sup>10</sup> Legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53.

<sup>11</sup> The priority for English was already declared in the Progetto Lingue 2000: “il ruolo della lingua inglese come lingua di comunicazione transnazionale e come alfabeto delle nuove tecnologie indica alla scuola una scelta prioritaria: nel documento elaborato dalla Commissione dei saggi...emerge con forza l’idea che l’offerta dell’inglese deve essere generalizzata e metodologicamente adeguata, sia ai bisogni comunicativi, sia alle esigenze di orientamento e di utilizzo delle tecnologie informatiche e multimediali ormai presenti in tutti i settori del lavoro e nella vita quotidiana”. Progetto Lingue 2000, Capitolo 1, 1.2.

meet the staffing demands created by the new law by financing a nationwide programme of in-service training through general funds made available in the 2005 national budget. This has given rise to the present Project “Sviluppo delle competenze linguistico-comunicative e metodologico-didattiche – lingua inglese – dei docenti di scuola primaria”, which has set in train a huge, concerted action and multilateral collaboration involving the Ministry, regional and provincial educational authorities, universities and the national television network, with the immediate aim to train at least half of all primary teachers not currently qualified to teach the language. A survey in 2005 revealed that only 30% of primary school teachers possessed the necessary competences and estimated that 69,000 teachers needed to be trained, a huge figure by any standards and a presenting a mammoth challenge to those responsible for implementing the project.

Success will obviously depend on various factors, among them the need to provide a quality product with regard to both the content of the language and methodology syllabuses - which need to be anchored firmly to the professional profile of the primary language teacher according to current theory – and the final certification which has to reflect the effective level of linguistic proficiency required. We will now turn our attention to these two operational aspects of the primary foreign language policy.

## **PART II A foreign language syllabus for primary school teachers: theoretical basis and practical application**

### **2.0. Introduction**

The main aim of the current in-service training programme for primary school teachers -which has been set out according to the directives contained in ex Comunicazione di Servizio Ministeriale n.1446 of 29<sup>th</sup> July 2005- is to develop linguistic and communicative competences in English as independent users at the threshold level (B1) of the CEF as well to provide them with the fundamentals of foreign language teaching methodology. It is a complex project which has been divided into three main operational phases: the assessment of the starting level competences, the running of language courses of varying duration for different levels of language competence (A1, A2, B1) and the final assessment. The distinctive element of the language programme lies in the cultural and professional background of the trainees, themselves qualified and experienced teachers, who are a potentially fruitful resource for ideas, insights and suggestions which can be used for enriching their own teaching and for helping to foster in more motivating learning context.

Bearing all this in mind, in this section we will propose a language syllabus which is specifically designed for the teaching of English at primary school and which is aimed at those teachers who already have some knowledge of the language. As it is well known, the levels of language competence among teachers taking part in the programme are far from being homogeneous. For the purposes of our study we have assumed a starting level of competence corresponding to level A1 of the Common European Framework, leading to A2 as the final level of competence to be attained by the trainees.

## **2.1. Criteria for syllabus design**

In defining the structure of the proposed syllabus we have drawn up key points which are needed in order to specify learning objectives, select and grade activities as well as to evaluate grammar progression. These are:

1. customising the global Common European Framework descriptors to meet the specificities of the training course/s;
2. identifying specific topic modules to be used without considering any particular chronological or developmental order in terms of grammar and lexis complexity;
3. identifying seven syllabus areas (grammar, lexis, phonology, functions, language skills, CLIL and methodological indications which are strictly related to the topic areas) and their corresponding focus specifications;
4. creating tables and grids for (self-)assessment and evaluation;
5. proposing extra benchmarks and activities to develop in an ‘expanded’ version of the *Performance and Language Integrated Syllabus*.

### **2.1.1. The *Common European Framework* in teaching practice: problems and proposals. The *performance-led syllabus* and the *grammar-led syllabus*.**

In designing a ‘tailor-made’ syllabus which can reconcile such diverse elements as learners’ previous knowledge and experience in the foreign language, professional competence and objectives as well as CEF descriptors, we have first started from an insightful analysis of the CEF documents and then a careful examination of the current curricula for the primary school in Italy. In fact, the main aim of our study is the creation of a syllabus which reflects both the basic elements of the European descriptors and a specifically selected range of grammatical structures and communicative functions, that is to say an ‘English for Specific Purposes’ syllabus specifically designed for primary school teachers (‘English for the Primary School Teacher’ or EPST). This

objective has drawn our attention on firstly the potential trainees' language learning needs and secondly on their pre-existing teaching experience. In this way, the term '*performance*' in the acronym PLIS (*Performance and Language Integrated Syllabus*) we have coined, acquires a twofold meaning: one referring to the trainees' learning aim to *perform* the foreign language according to the 'can do' statements in a range of communicative situations, the other one referring to their teaching '*performances*' as future language teachers to young learners. Thus the starting point of our syllabus design is the need to take account of the trainees' experience as primary school teachers and therefore the need to be particularly sensitive to children's cognitive development and learning strategies. The main question to be addressed is to put together these two distinct learning perspectives in order to provide an adequate response to this 'self-reflecting' approach to L2 acquisition. As for the term '*language*' in the acronym, it is important to stress the fact that 'although situational/functional language is a strand in school language programmes, grammar-based planning has been favoured in recent years' (Kedde 2004:45) since the grammar used is implicitly a part of the performance of the task .

Some of the outstanding features of the CEF rely on the continuing interest in communicative competencies which reflect the functional-situational use of language, with its focus on oral/aural skills covers all skills which inevitably leads to its limited attention to grammar<sup>12</sup>. The CEF global descriptors refer to any ideal educational context, whereas the detailed descriptors do not generally match with the grammatical contents of the most widespread syllabuses at school and university.

This particular characteristic underpinning the entire document results in an overall discrepancy between the expected outcomes in terms of descriptors and 'can do statements' to be reported in the language Portfolio and grammar progression which is at any rate part of any language syllabus. As a matter of fact the CEF is based on *what you can do* with language in real contexts rather than on *how/by which means* you can do it:

The Framework cannot replace reference grammars or provide a strict ordering [...] but provides a framework for the decisions of practitioners to be made known. [...] Users of the Framework may wish to consider and, where appropriate, state:

- How grammatical structure is a) analysed, ordered and presented to learners and b) mastered by them.
- How and according to what principles lexical, grammatical and pragmatic meaning in L2 is conveyed to/elicited from learners. (CEF 2001:152f)

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<sup>12</sup> The descriptive scheme of the CEF is based on an analysis of language use in terms of the strategies applied by learners to activate general and communicative competences in order to carry out the activities and processes involved in the production and reception of texts and the construction of discourse dealing with particular themes, which enable them to fulfil the tasks facing them under the given conditions and constraints in the situations which arise in the various domains of social existence.

This lack of grammatical references is, on the one hand, an advantage in terms of a major emphasis on function, situation and communicative competence, but on the other hand it causes problems by promoting a purely performance-based syllabus which neglects grammar. The general descriptors only speak of learners' manipulation of grammar in terms of 'use simple phrases' or 'connect phrases in a simple way' and they are not sufficiently linked to concept areas to provide a basis for teaching programmes (Keddlé 2004:49). Furthermore, the CEF descriptors refer to learners' competence as the ability to communicate fluently, whereas most of the syllabuses used at school are based on grammar and lexical knowledge. As Schulz (1983: 34) states:

Sound syllabus designers must recognize that semantic and linguistic considerations are irrevocably interrelated and that no approach can deal exclusively with either grammatical patterns or situational settings or communicative language. In the final analysis we are still studying words and configurations of words that express specific meanings, depending on who says what to whom, how, when, why, and in what social context. the most appropriate approach to communicative course design is probably one that applies functional operations to a central framework of grammatical form and structure.

Another important issue deriving from a 'learner's competence-based' perspective is the concept of "partial competencies" in foreign and/or native language which stimulates syllabus designers/teachers to carefully modulate learning objectives, communicative activities, tasks and materials according to the possible learning contexts.

Taking all this into consideration, the overall descriptors underlying any communicative /speech act for the six levels of language proficiency (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) in the CEF (Appendix 1) have been re-defined to be adapted to specific A2 competences for primary teachers (Appendix 2) .

On the basis of the selected specifications which refer to overall competencies we have then produced a breakdown of specifications (Appendix 3) for the various sub-skills required at the A2 level which can account for the specific professional profile of the potential English teachers/trainees. From this perspective, the language competences and skills which have been selected are to be seen not only in terms of 'what trainees will be able to do *in* a foreign language' but also 'what they will be able to do *with* the foreign language' they have acquired in the future context of a primary school class. In a recent report on early applications of the in-progress nationwide programme (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione 2007:34f), researchers insist on the 'integrated nature' of the profile which necessarily leads to the identification of three areas of the language to be taught to trainees that specifically focus on:

1. classroom language needed to manage activities and interactions with children;

2. language for professional (self-)training aiming at a steady improvement in the foreign language which may help increase trainees' motivation;
3. language awareness concerning meta-language implications of teaching a foreign language at a primary school level.

### 2.1.2. The topic modules

With regard to the thematic areas to be developed during lessons, the main focus of our research has been the identification of topics of specific relevance to primary school around which we have re-defined the CEF descriptors and planned topic-related learning modules to be dealt with during the training courses. This is a crucial point since it can constitute the basis for trainees' further/future teaching activities in the primary school classes. This issue is also stressed in *Linee di orientamento per la formazione in servizio dei docenti di lingua inglese delle scuole dell'infanzia e primaria*

E' comunque importante per tutti i docenti in formazione, seppur con tempi e modi diversificati in relazione ai bisogni e ai livelli in entrata, acquisire le competenze linguistiche secondo un approccio progressivo alla lingua, introducendo da subito esercizi, attività, risorse, estensioni riconducibili al lavoro didattico-metodologico da svolgere in classe.

La parte più strettamente tematica – vedi gli ambiti specifici del profilo professionale del docente della scuola primaria – potrà essere oggetto di particolare attenzione.

As a consequence, in the selection of the above mentioned topics which have been arranged as 'thematic modules' we have also considered the fact that the trainees themselves (just as their young learners) should experience the language that encourages them to process language for meaning. In fact, it is widely believed that the meaningful, situational use of the foreign language in the classroom may have very positive effect on learning because of its communicative potential and effective issues can be raised by integrating language work with other subjects. Therefore, the *Nuovi Programmi Personalizzati per la Scuola Primaria* have been subjected to a careful reading aiming at the identification of meaningful topic areas across the primary school curricula. The selection has resulted in ten macro-areas such as ***Personal identity and routine, Storytelling*** and so on which cover a wide range of co-related topics such as *Family and Relatives, Adjectives for describing personality, Times of the day, Meals and Fairy tales, Words for describing physical appearance* respectively as specified in Appendix 4.

### 2.1.3. Syllabus areas and CLIL indications

With regard to the content aspects of the syllabus, the seven syllabus areas (grammar, lexis, phonology, functions, language skills, CLIL indications and classroom language which are strictly related to the topic areas) and their corresponding focus specifications have to be placed within an integrated framework in which each area matches with one another. Such matching is on the whole fairly logical and self-evident: for example in the module on story-telling (see Appendix 5) the grammatical structures of the past tenses are matched to the function of narrating a past event, the language skills include “Write a storyboard”, the lexical items cover the vocabulary of physical description and fairy tales and phonology includes the pronunciation of *-ed* in the past tense of regular verbs.

However, matching items is not always so straightforward: this is particularly the case with phonetic and phonological items the selection of which may appear to be somewhat arbitrary and random in some modules. In actual fact, the phonology items constitute a mini-syllabus within a syllabus and the main criterion we have followed is that of selecting items on the basis of contrastive linguistics – that is to say, identifying the sounds and patterns which are most difficult for Italian learners because of the differences between the two languages, as in the short and long vowels /i/ and /iː/, the voiceless fricative consonant /θ/. Frequency of occurrence is another important criterion so the most common English vowel sound /ə/ should be introduced early on in a training course. In both the selecting and grading of contents, general syllabus designers usually take into consideration a number of criteria such as learnability (from simple to more complex), frequency (from most frequently used by native speakers to less frequently used), coverage (multiple use of item) and usefulness (directly related to the learner’s situation).

Another important feature of the module is the inclusion of the item “Classroom Language and Interaction”. In preparing an ESP syllabus, as we have pointed out in the general introduction, while not ignoring the other criteria, we have in particular considered usefulness and customisation a priority. Furthermore, the relevant stress on learners’ exposure to meaningful and realistic use of language in contexts that can also be transferred to normal situations (classroom language/expressions such as: *Open your books at page...ex. ...; Are you ready to start?; Can you repeat, please?; I don’t understand*) makes the foreign language a medium of instruction which “de-emphasises the content focus of classroom procedures and is more likely to favour attitude and educational goals [and] contributes to developing confidence in exploring the language and desire to communicate in the language” (Bondi-Alessi 2004: 2). In our example module, since story telling typically involves classroom movement as sample language, we have suggested *Everyone sit in a*

*circle. I'm going to tell you a story* which is also an effective way of drawing children's attention to the activity. Furthermore, in story telling there is wide recourse to formulaic expressions such as *Once upon a time* or *What happens next?* which are also suggested here. The particular stress placed on the use of formulaic language used in the performing of specific daily school routines reflects a common practice generally used in nursery and primary schools where school time is marked by precise moments from pupils' arrival at school to short breaks and end of the lessons (Coonan 2001: 22; Calabrese 2002b: 45).

#### **2.1.4. Assessment and evaluation**

Another important question to be clarified is the evaluation of performances which involves balancing different features. A rater-mediated approach to the assessment of language competence is becoming more and more crucial to language teaching and learning above all in syllabuses focused on communicative performance in meaningful contexts. A first step in determining performance values is the identification of relevant criteria for assessing performance at a given level (see Appendix 6). Therefore, achievement has been seen as a continuum in which different levels of achievement can be easily recognized and represented by scales (Appendix 7 explains how to interpret the performance scale). The use of scales for rating allows great flexibility to the users who may decide to use all the distinctions made in a scale or focus on only a band of the scale. Descriptors of oral proficiency have been stated in terms of what trainees are expected to do in a functional sense as well as in the level of mastery of the content domain rather than in terms of the structural features they have not yet mastered.

The global achievement scale takes into consideration learners' overall ability to complete the tasks, their ability to interact with the interlocutor and other trainees, their use of grammar and vocabulary (which refers to sufficient grammar and vocabulary to complete the tasks rather than to the number of errors) and their pronunciation.

As for the evaluation of learners' language competences, an overall scale with three dimensions has been taken into account (see also Little-Simpson 2004:56):

1. vocabulary control
2. grammatical accuracy
3. phonological control

which can be applied across the three macro-skills of *understanding* (in listening and reading), *speaking* (in spoken interaction and production) and *writing*.

### **2.1.5. The teacher as learner and the learner as teacher**

Finally, the search for elements in the syllabus which can embrace the professional experience of the trainees sets itself perfectly in line with the recommendations included in *Formazione di competenze linguistico-comunicative della lingua inglese dei docenti di scuola primaria*, an important document set out by the scientific committee of the Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione per l'Innovazione e la Ricerca Educativa (I.N.D.I.R.E.) in 2005. Among the more important methodological issues in the project, special attention is drawn to the following aspects:

- il coinvolgimento attivo dei docenti nel percorso di formazione, come presupposto dello sviluppo professionale;
- l'esplicazione di approcci e modelli formativi aperti, fondati sulla riflessione guidata tra professionisti adulti e sulla condivisione consapevole di scelte educative, didattiche ed organizzative, quali presupposti di una formazione efficace a supporto dell'attuazione di iniziative finalizzate all'innovazione;
- l'idea che l'attività ordinaria di una scuola costituisca di per sé un "laboratorio" per la formazione, in quanto luogo di pratiche riflessive e di ricerca-azione;
- la creazione di "laboratori" per lo sviluppo professionale dei docenti che promuovano azioni strategiche quali il confronto e la condivisione di esperienze interne alla scuola, la rielaborazione mirata all'innovazione delle pratiche educative e didattiche in atto, la relazione costruttiva tra scuola e contesto familiare e sociale, l'interazione tra scuole per la valorizzazione delle specificità e per l'individuazione di elementi di trasferibilità;
- l'attenzione ad accogliere e potenziare in modo integrato le diverse componenti della funzione docente (conoscenze, atteggiamenti, abilità, competenze) di natura teorica, descrittiva, strumentale, pragmatica, riconducibili ad ambiti generali quali quelli della pedagogia e delle scienze dell'educazione e ad altri più specifici di tipo disciplinare ed epistemologico.

These points highlight the *experimental dimension* of the primary teacher training programme which opens up new perspectives and proposals based on the feedback from the classroom where the trainees teach. For example, an information sheet could be filled in by the trainees at the end of each learning unit in which they could be asked to describe how they would use what they learned with their primary school class and then to plan their own teaching unit by filling in a table

(Appendix 8) in which the information can provide trainers and trainees with important feedback to reuse in their teaching practices.

## **Conclusion**

One of the key aspects of the present project is to develop a special language syllabus in which linguistic content is embedded with methodological and pedagogical content through a “loop input” process in which the trainees are presented with input they can immediately use in their own primary classroom contexts. The trainees, in turn, can significantly contribute to the definition of this input and through their experience as primary teachers and their on-going experimentation, in the primary classroom, of the language learnt during the training courses, they will be able to provide valuable feedback for researchers involved in developing the language syllabus.

The importance of capitalizing on the experience gained during the training programme, adopting the “research action” approach, has already been highlighted by Bondi (2006: 34)

La necessità di varare un corso di formazione strutturata nell’ottica della ricerca-azione deriva dall’utilità di un impianto di ricerca immediatamente correlate alle prassi didattiche di un numero di classi e docenti rappresentativo della realtà nazionale, dalle quale emergano elementi significativi in relazione a obiettivi e competenze comunicative da perseguire nel sistema scuola, che possano concorrere a definire un curriculum nazionale di lingue straniere nelle scuole di ogni ordine e grado.

The outcome of the present training scheme could, in fact, be extremely useful for developing a national framework for systematic primary teacher language education. Researchers in the universities and education faculties need to work closely with local schools where teaching practice is carried out so that trainees may experiment with methods and materials on the basis of the emerging primary foreign language syllabuses and provide input through feedback for the experts to develop and improve the syllabus and create an acceptable national standard .

The experience in Europe shows that, although delivering the foreign language learning opportunity for primary school children presents many challenges, it can be successful if the effort is made to build a sound infrastructure, develop teacher capacity and promote best practice, interacting with the profession in the way suggested above. This assumption, however, raises the all important question of professional commitment and motivation which will surely be decisive in the success or failure of the scheme. Certainly, the expectations regarding the primary teacher language profile are by no means exiguous. In Europe, following the international workshops, a general profile for teaching languages

in primary school has been drawn which specifies the specific competences a teacher needs to possess:

Teaching young learners calls for the profound linguistic, educational, psychological and cultural preparation of the teacher and demands high qualifications including social and communication competence (Komorowska 1997: 89)

A general concept for language teacher education has also emerged, which needs to embrace

a combination of theory, awareness-raising activities, experiential activities, demonstration activities, personal study and research and, if possible, provision of feedback about the performance in class (Felberbauer 1997:148).

The personal commitment of the trainees, appears, therefore, to be an important pre-requisite for the success of the project. However, a crucial factor is already emerging relating to the motivation of the participants and the need to prevent a large fall out. Motivation is always a key factor in the success of any language learning process, and in the case of primary school teachers who attend courses after a very demanding day at school, it is proving one of vital importance. Most primary teachers have no former experience of learning a foreign language at primary level; some will have had FLL in the past (at school), which may have been unsuccessful and unenjoyable so there is a need to build their self-confidence. In this connection, Gianferrari (2006: 106) raises the provocative question as to whether it is expecting too much of primary teachers to acquire a competence in FLT considering their already demanding teaching load in the other disciplines and whether the aims of the present project do not overstretch human resources.

It will be some time before we will have an answer to this question, although evidence from other European countries in which primary FLT is consolidated suggests that it can be successful if done in the right way.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1.

#### CEF overall descriptors for the six levels of language proficiency (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2)

RECEPTION			INTERACTION		PRODUCTION	
Spoken	Audio visual	Written	Spoken	Written	Spoken	Written
Overall Listening comprehension	Watching TV And film	Overall Reading comprehension	Overall spoken interaction	Overall Written Interaction	Overall Spoken production	Overall Written Production
Understanding Interaction between Native speakers		Reading correspondence	Comprehension In interaction	Correspondence	Sustained Monologue: Describing experience	Creative writing
Listening to Announcements and instructions		Reading for orientation	Understanding a Native speaker interlocutor	Notes, messages and Forms	Sustained Monologue: Putting a case	Reports and Essays
Listening to Radio and audio recordings		Reading for information And argument	Conversation		Public announcements	
		Reading instructions	Informal discussion		Addressing audiences	
			Formal discussion			
			Goal-oriented Co-operation			
			Obtaining goods and services			
			Information exchange			
			Interviews			

## APPENDIX 2.

### Re-adapted overall descriptors

RECEPTION			INTERACTION		PRODUCTION	
Spoken	Audio visual	Written	Spoken	Written	Spoken	Written
Overall Listening comprehension	Understanding short video texts TV	Overall Reading comprehension	Overall spoken interaction	Overall Written interaction	Overall Spoken Production	Overall Written Production
Understanding short exchanges between Native speakers	Reading brief letters and messages	Comprehension In interaction	Brief letters and messages	Short Monologue: Describing Experience	Creative writing	
Listening to short announcements and instructions	Reading for orientation	Understanding a Native speaker interlocutor	Notes and Forms			
Listening to short audio recordings	Reading for information	Conversation		Giving General Instructions		
	Reading instructions	Informal discussion		Addressing audiences		
		Goal-oriented Co-operation				
		Obtaining goods and services				
		Information exchange				
		Interviews				

### APPENDIX 3.

#### A sample of breakdown of A2 specifications

<b>OVERALL SKILL: SPOKEN PRODUCTION</b>	
<b>SUBSKILL</b>	<b><i>Short monologue: Describing experience</i></b>
	1. Can describe people, places and possessions in simple terms 2. Can describe his/her educational background, present job and teaching plans/projects
<b>SUBSKILL</b>	<b><i>Giving general and classroom instructions and explanations</i></b>
	Can deliver very short announcements of predictable content which are intelligible to listeners, with special reference to school and classroom routine
<b>SUBSKILL</b>	<b><i>Addressing audiences</i></b>
	Can give a short basic presentation on a familiar subject, with special reference to the primary curriculum.

### APPENDIX 4.

#### Selection of thematic modules and co-related topics

<b>Macro-area</b>	<b>Co-related Topics</b>
<b><i>Personal identity and routine</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Family and Relatives</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Adjectives for describing personality</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Times of the day</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Meals</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Storytelling</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Fairy tales</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Words for describing physical appearance</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Lifestyle</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Food</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Clothes</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Shops</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Health</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Parts of the body</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Adjectives of colour, size, shape</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Money</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Customs</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>The calendar</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Names of festivals in the UK</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Special occasions</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Countries and nationalities</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Nature and environment</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Geographical features</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Weather and climate</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Animals and pets</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Communication and technology</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Basic computer terminology</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Means of communication</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Games</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>School</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Classroom objects</i></li> <li>▪ <i>School subjects</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Places and buildings</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Tourist attractions</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Facilities</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Houses, rooms, furniture</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Leisure</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Sports</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Hobbies</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Entertainment</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Personal experience/everyday life</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Jobs and Occupations</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Countries</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Holidays</i></li> </ul>
<b><i>Leisure</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Sports</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Hobbies</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Entertainment</i></li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 5.

### An example of learning module on the theme ‘*Storytelling*’

<p><b>MODULE/LEARNING UNIT</b> _____</p> <p><b>TOPIC: <i>STORYTELLING</i></b></p>
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<b>SYLLABUS AREA</b>	<b>SYLLABUS AREA FOCUS</b>
<b>Grammar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Narrative tenses</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Direct and indirect speech</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Simple linking devices</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Intensifiers and extreme adjectives</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Adverbs</i></li> </ul>
<b>Lexis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Fairy tales</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Words for describing physical appearance</i></li> </ul>
<b>Phonology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Pronouncing auxiliary verbs</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Sounds: /i:/ and /i/</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Sounds: /e/ and /eɪ/</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Pronunciation of –ed</i></li> </ul>
<b>Functions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Describing physical appearance</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Linking and sequencing events</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Narrating past events</i></li> </ul>
<b>Language skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Reading: understanding a fairy tale</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Speaking: telling a simple story and dramatization</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Writing a storyboard</i></li> </ul>
<b>CLIL indications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>History: narrative structure of a story</i></li> <li>○ <i>Music: rhymes, non-sense, fairy tales</i></li> </ul>
<b>Classroom language and interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Everybody sit in a circle, I’m going to tell you a story</i></li> <li>○ <i>Listen to the story about...</i></li> <li>○ <i>Once upon a time</i></li> <li>○ <i>What is going to happen next?</i></li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 6.

### Assessment criteria

Criterion being assessed	Performance Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
Overall ability to complete the task					
Ability to interact with the interlocutor					
Use of grammar					
Use of vocabulary					
Pronunciation					

## APPENDIX 7.

### Interpretation of the performance scale

1	Unable to complete task even with substantial prompting and assistance. Very limited ability to handle even short social exchange. Long hesitations require undue patience of listener. Inadequate range of even short memorised phrases or words to be able to attempt the task. Word and sentence stress as well as individual sounds are so erroneous as to be frequently incomprehensible.
2	Pronunciation is heavily influenced by L1 features. Student is able to complete the task only with frequent prompting and assistance.
3	Although breakdowns and misunderstandings occur, the student is able to complete the task with frequent prompting and assistance. Produces utterances which tend to be very short with hesitations and pauses. Is dependent on memorised formulaic phrases with limited generative capacity. Some mistakes with word and sentence stress and individual sounds makes some of the utterances difficult to understand.

4	Although breakdowns and hesitation still occur, student is able to complete the task even though he/she sometimes needs some assistance.
5	Although there is noticeable hesitation and false starts, the task is carried out successfully and straightforward follow-up questions are dealt with. Student is able to convey basic meaning in familiar and predictable situations. Demonstrates an ability to use short memorised phrases, essential vocabulary and some simple grammar structures correctly, although basic mistakes will still occur. These words and phrases are pronounced sufficiently clearly as to be comprehensible.

## APPENDIX 8.

### Information sheet for teaching activities

	DESCRIPTION
<b>Class</b>	
<b>Topic</b>	
<b>Objectives</b>	
<b>Language exponents</b>	
<b>Materials</b>	
<b>Tasks</b>	
<b>Time</b>	

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