

INNOVATIVE ASPECTS IN THE TEACHING OF ITALIAN AT THE SOMALI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

1. Introduction

It was in 1977 that the teaching of the Italian language began on a regular basis at the University of Mogadishu (SNU, Somali National University); this was an important part of a larger cooperation project, the so-called *Progetto Somalia*, launched with the financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As Italian had been chosen as the vehicular language¹, Somali students had to attend an intensive course in the language during a whole semester. This was devoted to developing the necessary competence in Italian through which they could later learn different disciplines according to the various subjects of the different faculties: Medicine, Agricultural Science, Veterinary Science or animal husbandry, Chemistry, Engineering and Economics.

Thus the primary aim of the Language Project was teaching Italian as a vehicular language to Somali students who had been selected and enrolled in the National University². In other words, Italian had to be taught as a foreign language in an environment where another language was used for everyday communication. This was Italian for specific purposes, namely academic purposes, to fulfil students' language needs in listening to and understanding *ex cathedra* lessons and lectures, as well as reading and understanding texts.

As is known, learners' needs influence the relative language teaching methods. Nevertheless, as far as Italian was concerned, there was no precedent for structured experiences of teaching Italian for specific purposes. For this reason,

Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli and Annarita Puglielli, the President and member of the Language Technical Committee respectively, along with other specialists who joined the working group over the years, like Milena Bandiera, Anna Ciliberti, Carlo Serra Borneto, Giovanna Stefancich and myself³, had to identify the students' needs. We had to decide *what* sort of language to select, how it was going to be taught and find suitable strategies which would not only maintain student motivation, but also fill the numerous intercultural and conceptual gaps caused by the non-homogeneous Somali education system as far as content, teaching organization and learning strategies were concerned.

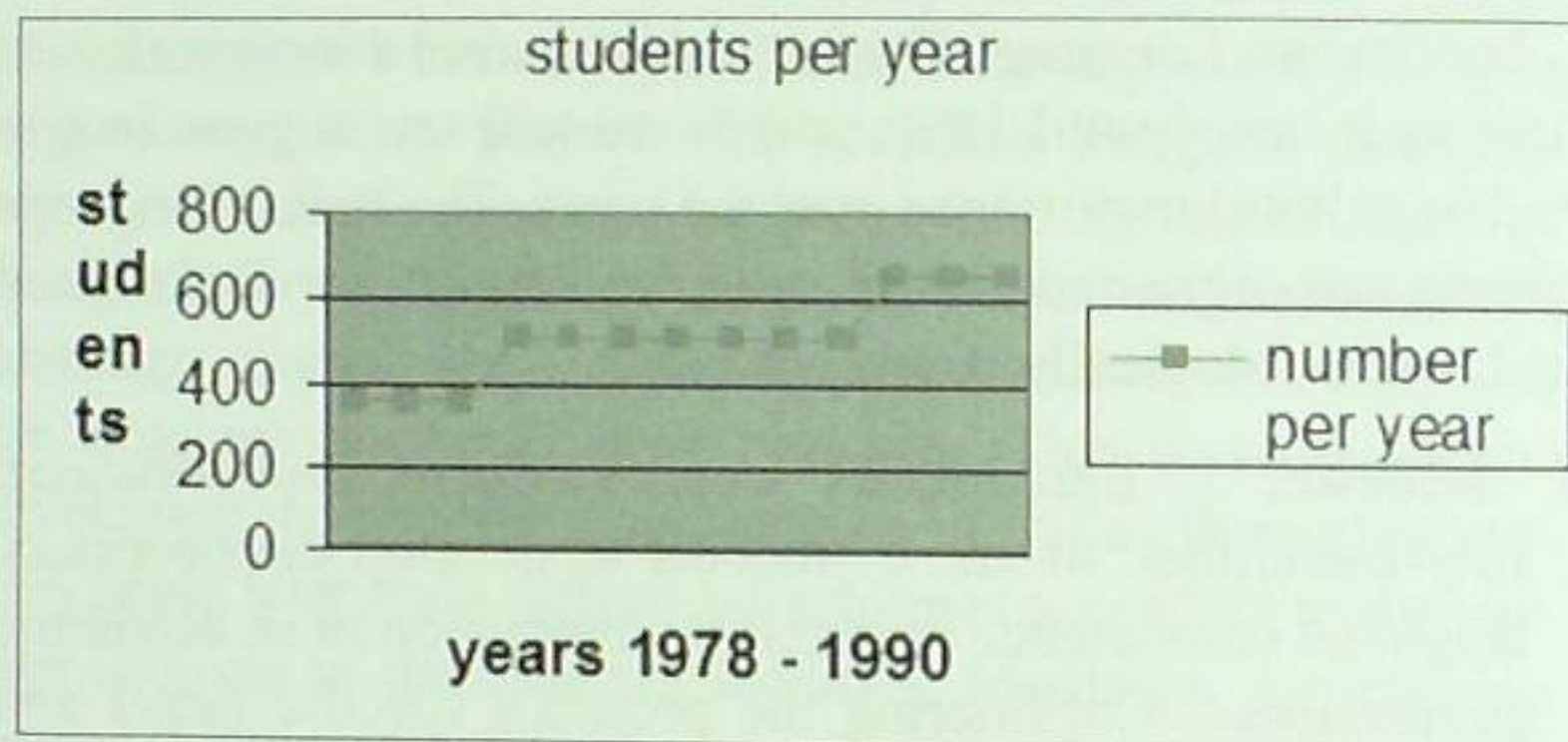
The Italian Language Project evolved over a long period of time as it lasted until 1990, and as we will see, it grew in size and in cultural importance over the years. The Italian language course was organized according to the following well-designed and methodologically sound structure:

- a. Semester 1, Introductory Course (*Corso Propedeutico*), July-December, to allow students to develop the necessary language competence required by interaction in an academic environment. Considering the project's specific target and the cultural environment, receptive skills (listening and reading) were privileged, even though speaking and writing were not completely disregarded. In this semester, particular attention was given to the development of language and meta-language competence through numerous manipulation and transformation exercises based on a morphological and functional repertoire realized *ad hoc*.
- b. Semester 2, Linguistic and Cultural Course or (*Semestre Linguistico-Culturale*), January-June, where the consolidation of language competence was based on numerous and varied interdisciplinary activities aimed at the development of both content knowledge and study skills such as generalization, classification, describing, inferring etc.. The special feature of this course was the contemporary presence in the classroom of both the teacher of the discipline (Physics,

Biology, Chemistry) and the Italian language teacher. This allowed for expanding competence in Italian while knowledge of specific content was being developed.

2. Specific aspects of the Italian Teaching Project: organization, methodology and content

The project was the first example of a 'mass teaching' of Italian. It operated over a time span of thirteen years (1977-1990) and every year involved a large number of students (to a total of approximately 6,500) as the following table shows:



Considering these figures (which include students of both semesters), the organisation and scheduling of the teaching needed a very tight in order to be effective. Taking Somali festivities into consideration, the semester was generally structured over a 20-21 week period, with classes six days per week (from Saturday to Thursday).

Logistics were optimised as far as possible for a project of this size, which continued to receive financing from the Italian authorities including the provision of books (their printing and shipping) and technical equipment (language laboratories, film projectors, etc.).

A. Organization of Semester 1: *Introductory Language Course*
In this semester, emphasis was on the Italian language; therefore learners had to attend classes four or five hours per day (considering the climate, from 8am to noon or 1 pm), for a total of approximately 500 hours of class work, testing and evaluation, and including four hours per week of language laboratory group activities⁴ in the afternoon (two hours twice a week from 4 to 6pm).

Students were divided into groups of a maximum of 20 students (20 groups were formed in the first few years, almost 30 in the late 1980s). Four groups were then put together to form five 'units' in which six teachers (four Italian and two Somali) alternated according to a fixed programme. This was to allow for a more varied input and to share responsibilities among teachers; it also prevented excessively personal ties developing with the students.

B. Organization of Semester 2: *Linguistic and Cultural Course*
This started in 1984 and underwent a three-year experimental phase during which new teaching material was provided. This was based on an analysis of the students' knowledge of the world, a representation of their cognitive skills and taking into consideration any gaps in specific area content. As already stated, Italian linguists and subject specialists worked together in the same student groups so that students learned specific content while observing how Italian was used in the particular discipline. From 1988 to 1990 it ran successfully and regularly, until it was stopped abruptly.

3. Methodology and contents

For both semesters, the eclectic methodologies adopted in the language teaching project were unique for that time. In particular, it is worth underlining that all learning input was authentic in the strictest sense, that is, the materials had not been produced for pedagogic reasons.

Semester I. Although students' groups were linguistically homogeneous, teacher and learners did not share a single language of communication (no Italian teacher knew Somali). We therefore had to start from visual input which showed authentic contexts and uses: clips from silent movies and films or from scientific documentaries from RAI television archives were used as the initial input for each of the six micro units that constituted the *ad hoc* created teaching material. This aspect merits some explanation regarding the criteria adopted in choosing these visual aids: each extract could not require particular knowledge for understanding the visual component and so any possible difficulties in comprehension were only to arise from the language component.

Once the six extracts were selected, they were gradually introduced in order of difficulty: first those short visual texts (less than three minutes long) which were self explanatory; then some longer ones (approximately 10 minutes) whose understanding depended on the comprehension of both a visual and vocal component; finally, the longest ones (up to 20') whose understanding relied mainly on the understanding of the spoken text.

Obviously, each extract was subdivided into segments to allow for pedagogic exploitation. Generally, there were three phases: the presentation of the whole extract to introduce the topic; exploitation of the visual component to introduce related lexis and the main grammatical structures; exploitation of just the audio component, first to develop listening comprehension and then to encourage productive activities⁵.

Another relevant component of this language teaching project was that devoted to the introduction of scientific discourse (*Avviamento al linguaggio scientifico*) from the first stage. This was necessary to overcome difficulties caused by two main factors: the local oral-mnemonic pedagogic and learning tradition, combined with a scarce familiarity with scientific language even in the mother tongue. The teaching material was organized with the aim of fostering certain important cognitive

operations regarding the given texts. Depending on the aim of the individual module, these exercises might include finding and giving definitions, inferring non-explicit meaning and trans-codification (information to be transferred from text to graphics or synthesised in a formula or to relate to corresponding forms or pictures). Themes were selected in fields close to those of the macro-unit and activities were systematically organized and learning strategies were constantly fostered⁶.

As has already been stated, the development of receptive skills was one of the aims of the Introductory Italian Language Course. Therefore, one particular section was devoted to reading skills (*Lecture guidate*). In particular, the different text types and different content required different strategies for comprehension, above all analytical or 'study skills', and also global skills which enabled the reader to identify specific information quickly. For the first group of reading texts, the comprehension of content was assisted by three different types of activities: numerous comprehension questions, work on vocabulary and activities on text structure where particular attention was given to cohesive links and the coherent development of information. For the second group, activities were aimed at developing the understanding of the main idea, disregarding details, redundancies or aiming at a rapid identifying of specific data⁷.

One final aspect of the Somalia Language Project deserves special mention: this was the assessment component where particular emphasis was given to testing both language use or communicative functions, and formal language patterns or usage. These were objectively tested on a regular basis at the end of each macro unit using various techniques: gap-filling exercises, multiple choice questions, dictation etc., while the final test focussed on the level of the receptive capacities reached by students. According to the aims of the course, and also for the assessment of input, texts were selected only if they belonged to the register termed 'low stratum' by Huddleston i.e. the register used in scientific communication between specialist and educated reader. Final tests were regu-

larly validated and the results were analysed after each testing session⁸.

Semester II. The experimental teaching material – again created *ad hoc* for class learning activities by a group of applied linguists and specialists of the various scientific disciplines – was based on authentic scientific texts from the aforementioned disciplines. This time, however, the register of the selected texts was of the ‘specialist to learner’ kind, that is, corresponding to that found in secondary school and university textbooks. A specific structure was given to all the macro-units of the textbook. Each of them, besides expanding the forms and functions of Italian present in the input passages and linked to the specific scientific discourse, had three different components or sections, each with a determined aim: section I, the development of instrumental skills (the underlying philosophy was ‘learning by doing’); section II, the development of logical skills; section III, knowledge organization: strategies and means.

4. Innovative aspects for the time

From this brief description of the Italian Language Teaching Project at the Somali National University, and considering the time when the project was operating, innovations were made in accordance with contemporary advances in the field. From insights later gained in other contexts by various applied linguists, we can identify innovations made in three different fields: methodological, psycho-pedagogical and organizational. We shall try briefly to list and comment on some of them.

a. The rigorous identification of learners’ needs and descriptions of language and cognitive targets in order to develop teaching material that in a relatively short period of time encouraged learners to gain real use and control of the vehicular language with respect to the organization of scientific discourse. Particular attention was given to this aspect in

designing the learning process in both semesters. Above all, no tools existed at the time for Italian regarding the pioneering repertoire of functions and structures of the scientific discourse upon which the new teaching material was based. Moreover, from the continuous monitoring of the Somali university students’ learning processes, it was confirmed that priority should also be given to the building of links between Italian language and scientific thought⁹.

b. The focus put on the simultaneous development of both Italian L2 and specific subject competence. Nowadays, with some slight variation, we might call this approach either CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Activities), whose goals are for students to learn both essential academic content and language and thus become independent learners through their increasing command over a variety of strategies for learning, or CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). As David Marsch stated in 1994, “subjects are taught through a foreign language with dual-focussed aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language.” We all know that a content-based instruction lesson is on a specific topic or subject matter and that during the lesson students are focused on learning about something. They learn about the subject using the language they are studying, rather than their native language, as a tool for developing knowledge. In so doing, they develop their linguistic control over the target language. Today, this kind of learning process, based on explicit instruction in using learning strategies for academic tasks, is thought to be a more natural way of developing language ability and one that corresponds more closely to the way we originally learn our first language¹⁰.

c. The constructivist approach adopted in writing our teaching material. All our teaching material embodies a cognitive philosophy of the learning process, that is, it embodies constructivist concepts as it positions learning in a rich authentic problem solving environment. The fostering of this par-

ticular kind of learning is of great significance in the Somali context, considering the traditional mnemonic learning style of the population. The realization of this innovative aspect is particularly evident in the methodology adopted in writing teaching material, particularly in the development of Italian L2 scientific discourse courses where learners were constantly encouraged to formulate hypotheses on linguistic and scientific data, comparing new information with the knowledge they already possessed. Of the numerous scholars, see Wilson and Cole (1991) and Ernest, P. (1995).

- d. The investment made in teacher training regarding the new methodology. This was offered before each semester started and it was supported by constant, local coordination of the program made possible by the presence in loco of a highly specialized supervisor. This aspect, together with the development of good professional practices established through cooperation with specialists from other departments, gave all the teachers a high level of job satisfaction and contributed to the achievement of many positive results.
- e. The constant monitoring of the students' learning processes gave the program twofold fringe benefits: the satisfaction of the learners, as they became familiarized with testing procedures and the constant feedback through the objective assessment that teachers made of their courses and achievements. As far as the Italian language is concerned, no other program has ever covered such a wide population involved both in an *in itinere* and final assessment programme.
- f. Last but not least, the *in loco* training of Somali teachers together with Italian colleagues created – for the first time in that country – new professional skills. Through shared understanding and the assignation of analogous teaching tasks, this ongoing training helped generate in both Italian and Somali teachers an awareness of alternative cultural perspectives.

NOTES

- ¹ Because of its past presence in Somalia, and because of the financial support given by Italy, Italian was considered to be more appropriate than English and Arabic – even if these languages were already used in the Somali education system – to be the language of instruction at the NUS.
- ² The selection of students was the complete responsibility of the Somali authorities.
- ³ For an complete list of those who have contributed to the Somalia -Teaching Italian Project at NUS, see Tedeschini Lalli and Puglielli, 1981: 12. *Ricerche sull'insegnamento dell'italiano in Somalia*, Ministero degli Affari Esteri – Dipartimento per la Cooperazione allo sviluppo, Rome.
- ⁴ Unfortunately the existing labs didn't allow for individual learning activities.
- ⁵ For further details, see Dal Fabbro, E. (1981), 'Una proposta sull'utilizzazione di materiale audiovisivo autentico per l'insegnamento della L2', in Tedeschini Lalli and Puglielli, 1981.
- ⁶ For further details, see Serra Borneto, C. (1981), 'Problemi relative alla costruzione di materiale linguistico per scopi speciali con particolare riferimento al Corso di Italiano per l'Università Nazionale Somala', in Tedeschini Lalli and Puglielli, 1981.
- ⁷ For further details, see Ciliberti, A. (1981), 'Obiettivi di lettura in un corso di italiano come lingua veicolare', in Tedeschini Lalli and Puglielli, 1981.
- ⁸ For further details, see Ambroso, S. (1981), 'Verifica dell'apprendimento: i test nel Corso di italiano dell'Università Nazionale Somala', in Tedeschini Lalli and Puglielli, 1981.
- ⁹ See Bandiera, M. and Serra Borneto, C. 1994:100.
- ¹⁰ Teaching material for the learning of English reflects our approach: Chamot, O'Malley, and Küpper (1992).

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