
A training course for volunteer language teachers of low-literate migrants. Suggestions and indications to encourage effective teaching practices.

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R sum 

This paper reports the characteristics and results of a teacher training course devised for volunteer teachers of L2 Italian operating in a non-profit institution in Legnano (Milan post-industrial area) that provides courses of L2 Italian to migrant citizens, in most cases with low levels of education and literacy and troubled personal experiences. As underlined by numerous studies (e.g. Trulli, 2014 and Naeb & Young-Scholten, 2017), access to quality training that promotes effective and informed teaching practice is one of the main needs of volunteer teachers engaged in such didactic contexts. In the case reported here, 26 volunteer teachers took part in the training course, which consisted of 4 meetings of 4 hours each. Before the course, the teachers' needs were assessed by the observation of some lessons and a questionnaire. Six critical points of the teaching practice emerged, in line with that found by other studies dedicated to voluntary second language teaching (see, e.g. Vinogradov & Linden, 2008; Minuz & Pugliese, 2012): 1) the primacy of grammar in language teaching; 2) the use of a syllabus made up of discrete entities, sorted according to grammar macro-subjects and not functional elements (cf. the so-called "Monday morning's menu" of Long, 2007); 3) the lack of awareness that a language can be learned even incidentally; 4) the difficulty in managing a very occasional attendance at the lessons; 5) the difficulty in coming into contact with the "cultural dissonance" (Ibarra, 2001) of these students, often not accustomed to Western-style teaching practices and 6) the conviction that, in cases of (semi)illiteracy, language teaching must necessarily be preceded by a long process of alphabetization. The training intervention aimed at relativizing some of these beliefs and to reason critically on the efficacy of the teaching practices so far deployed, and it focused on 4 macro areas: 1) andragogy and its didactic needs; 2) basic principles of L2 acquisition and their relevance to L2 teaching; 3) psychological and sociological aspects of language learning; 4) some "alternative" teaching techniques such as task-based language teaching, a cyclical grammatical syllabus, and an effective communicative-centered lesson plan. The outcomes of the intervention were measured in three stages (a few days after the course, two and ten months after its end) with an abridged version of Guskey's (2000) Teacher Training Evaluation Questionnaire. The data show a generally positive impact of the intervention. However, the management of poor literacy and the difficulty of designing lessons that address the linguistic needs of migrant citizens remain two grey areas of the course, as especially evidenced by the delayed evaluation questionnaires. We will critically present the positive and negative effects of the training course, proposing some suggestions for implementing effective educational paths for L2 voluntary teachers.

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*Intervenant

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