

A Freire based action-research approach to learning Italian as foreign language by migrant adults

Alessio Surian – Consuelo Surian

The paper presents the work of an action-research group that aims at connecting Paulo Freire's adult education approach to learning Italian as foreign language by migrants in the Veneto region. It offers a brief description of this literacy approach followed by a critical analysis of some of the key issues in adapting it to illiterate migrants focusing on generative (key) words and how to use them within the learning process. Examples are provided on how to identify and to play with syllables in order to create cluster families and to generate new words and sentences. Further information is provided on the first year (2018-19) of action-research work involving teachers of Italian as foreign language in different contexts around Padova where the project is co-ordinated by the CPIA adult education centre. The common focus and reflective practice is centred on structuring learning units that make use of playful and participatory activities and that follow the gestalt approach, i.e. going through four steps, including motivation, global approach, analysis, synthesis and reflection.

Keywords: generative word, non-literate migrants, adult learning, action-research

1. Introduction

Since the 1960's Paulo Freire's approach to literacy (Freire 1976; see also Brandão 1981; Feitosa 2008) goes beyond the mere acquisition of reading skills while it privileges raising awareness of socio-cultural challenges. It focuses on real-life situations, relevant questions, dialogue, hope and possibility. This approach favours a strong relationship between the ability to develop a growing familiarity with phrases, words and syllables and the everyday life and concerns of those who are participating in the learning process. In turn, this implies a critical and creative attitude by the group of learners. Such approach has relevant implications as far as the role of the teacher is concerned. The focus is on the ability to trigger and to scaffold dialogue with and among illiterate learners and to offer them literacy

tools in relation to contexts that are relevant to them. This also means that the literacy process cannot be organised with a top-down approach. It should be implemented by the group of illiterate learners with the facilitation and support by the teacher. Freire (Shugurensky 2014) suggests the “bank” metaphor to identify the education that does not favour the learners-teacher dialogue. The “banking” approach considers the learner as an empty box that the teacher should fill in on the basis of a pre-established curriculum. On the contrary, Freire claims that education is centred on the learners-teacher interaction and that both are learning from each other: “nobody educates anybody, nobody is educating her/himself, people educate each other in real life situations”. Thus Freire considers dialogue as an essential element of education as liberation practice. Such dialogues should address real-life situations. Important ideas in working with such situations include: they should be simple to identify and yet retaining a complex dimension, i.e. can be analysed from a plurality of views. The core idea is to symbolize such real-life situations through words and images. Such exercise helps learners to make connections between the concrete and the abstract while engaging in processes of de-coding and coding. But the educational process should not focus only on de-coding and coding. It should imply ways to build better knowledge of the social reality, mapping and exploring the causes of daily challenges, and the collective ways to cope with them and to transform problems and social contexts. The real-life situations at the core of the learning process should not end up in a slogan but rather be addressed as learning situations that have a potential to spark a critical reflection by the learners.

The role of the teacher/educator/facilitator is not to suggest her/his own worldview but rather to acknowledge how there are several worldviews. In doing so s/he tries to be *with* the learners avoiding the dichotomy teacher-learner. In this way s/he tries to steer the awareness raising process of the illiterate learner focusing on reading the world in different ways through enhanced knowledge and awareness. As illiterate people are often prevented access to various aspects of social life, enhancing their knowledge should also lead to enhanced awareness a critical view of the world we live in. Thus the literacy process is viewed as a civic and political emancipation process.

2. Literacy phases according to the Freire's approach

According to Freire, especially at the beginning of a learning process, educators should invest time in getting to know the world of the learners. He stresses the importance to read the world along with reading the word, acquiring critical analytical skills reading along with writing skills. The way we do it is important as well, i.e. the development of creative attitude and ability acknowledging both the collective and the individual dimension in knowledge construction. In the words of Freire, "As a young teacher, I changed my teaching and gave greater value to creativity. This was also a basis for me to understand later that creativity in teaching is linked to creativity in politics" (Freire and Shor 1987: 20). Based on this rationale Freire insists on the value of encouraging learners to write their own personal text, even simple texts, in order to develop their creativity.

Within Freire's approach, a key literacy element is the ability to choose the right generative words in order to organize the literacy process around a selection of significant words containing the relevant phonemes. Learners' motivation depends on the generative words choice as well.

Freire's (1967) approach to literacy includes five main steps:

1. The search for the words that are most frequently used and that play a significant role in the lives of the learners.
2. The identification of generative words and themes taking into account syllabic richness and the potential for experiential involvement.
3. Dealing with real-life situation through a first coding of these words into visual images (drawings; pictures).
4. Triggering and facilitating dialogues and debates on the basis of basic canvas to be handled in a flexible way in order not to "cage" the learning process.
5. The decoding and re-coding of the generative words by the learner's 'culture circle'.

The way these steps are implemented should be adapted to the local context, taking into account the place, the people, their experiences, their habits etc. This means that one the main challenges for the

teacher concerns how to encourage the learner to take care and ownership of the learning process without delegating it to the teacher.

3. Specific features of foreign language literacy

Before the start of a literacy course in a foreign language it is useful to assess the learners' abilities with the support of linguistic mediators in order to have a proper knowledge of the learners' initial situation: their age, formal education degree, ability to read in the mother tongue; for example it is useful to have them reading a few short sentences and to have them copied in order to understand their literacy level. When the illiterate person does not know any word in the language that is going to be taught, it is of fundamental importance to start focusing on the oral language, both in terms of understanding and oral expression. It is important that the learner is able to understand what s/he is going to write and read.

From an operational perspective, we were and we are convinced that Freire's approach to literacy, based on generative words, can be instrumental to learning a foreign language as well. As already stated, the choice of generative words is of fundamental importance in order to motivate learners towards the learning process.

We also addressed the question concerning using only uppercase letters or also lowercase letters and whether to use both block and italic letters. We opted for using both uppercase and lowercase letters and to focus on block letters as these are the letters that allow reading a printed written text.

The focus is on activities that are close to learners' proximal zone of development, keeping activities simple, but making sure that they are challenging and motivating as well. Whenever possible we make use of drawings and photos. Learners are presented with few written texts and they are encouraged to produce their own texts. They are encouraged to write their own sentences and texts in a safe and supportive environment that attempts to create the conditions for them to express themselves freely and creatively.

Within our work, specific attention is given on how to apply generative words to the learning of a second language. Our experience with the Freire's approach to the literacy process in a

foreign language is that the use of generative words becomes relevant when at the oral level there is at least a minimal knowledge of the language that is being learned. The higher the number of words that is known by the learners, the more they are able to combine different syllables, to generate words and to feel involved in this process. The learning context focusing on a foreign language is very different when compared to a cultural circle that operates on the basis of a common mother tongue. The limited proficiency in the foreign language makes it harder to develop the dialogue within the group, a key factor in facilitating mutual feedback and individual reflection concerning the generative words. Often our learners come from very different migratory backgrounds and this makes it harder to find immediate common ground. Nonetheless, areas and generative words of common interest and dialogue are always available, for example concerning the way to cope with the new context in relation to mobility, bureaucracy, home, work etc.

4. Foreign language literacy specific challenges and responses

When the second language is totally unknown to learners, two conditions would be helpful at the beginning of the learning process: the support of a linguistic mediator and/or the teacher(s) being competent in a language that is known to the learners.

Throughout the learning activities, Freire's approach involves some degree of repetition in pronouncing and in writing the families of syllables based on the generative words. Especially when it is being done in a collective way, this habit of repeating the syllables generates focus and involvement by the learners. In our experience this has been particularly useful to those learners who are familiar with the Latin alphabet but tend to mistake sounds and syllables with one another as they have a poor knowledge of Italian.

4.1. Telephone, work and paper-work

Hereby we offer a short introduction to some of the activities that were implemented in Padova, in the North-East of Italy, during 2017-

2018 in collaboration with the adult education centre (CPIA) “Diego Valeri”. Based on this experience, in June 2018 the CPIA “Diego Valeri” started an action-research group involving teachers from the North-East of Italy focusing on migrant adult learners with different degree of proficiency in the Italian language.

Interviews were conducted with the learners before starting the learning process. Based on this interview, the learning process was structured around a core educational activity divided into four learning unit focusing on the theme “labour” and on four generative words: *telefono* (telephone), *lavoro* (labour/work), *document* (document), *colloquio* (interview). In order to structure our learning units, we have taken into account similarities between the Freire’s and the *gestalt* approach. According to *gestalt* pattern perception principles for organizing sensory stimuli into meaningful perception, we first process what we perceive in a global / holistic way and only at a later stage we proceed to analyse details (Rock and Palmer 1990). Therefore, each learning unit was structured according to the following four main phases:

- The first phase focuses on motivation: the learners are invited to watch/listen to an audio-visual input (video, song, pictures etc.) that has been selected to elicit their attention.
- In the second phase, in a holistic way, the theme at the core of the audio-visual input is addressed by presenting the generative word and its syllables.
- In the third phase words are being decoded and recoded, producing new words and matching images and words.
- The fourth and final phase privileges synthesis and reflection by encouraging learners to process what they have learned, play with it, produce new sentences and texts. Game activities included crosswords, memory, Kim’s game as they favour a variety of learning approaches and a more relaxed way to review what has been previously learned.

Participants appreciated that the educational approach was different from their previous schooling and educational experiences. They demonstrated interest and appreciation for the games especially because they offered them an opportunity to recall and to scaffold

what they had previously tried to memorise. In this way they were able to familiarise with the words and to pronounce them in ways that would tie the syllables with one another rather than pronounce the single syllables one after another. As time and learning units went by, they grew accustomed to this approach and were suggesting more and more words. This experience suggests to us the importance for the teacher to be well acquainted with the world of the learners as claimed by educators such as Paulo Freire (1967), Alberto Manzi (1972), Mario Lodi (1982). This is directly related to the way generative words are identified as well as to the necessary attention for the type of visual items that are used throughout the learning process. For example, some of our participants associate working with drawings in the educational setting with children's learning and prefer to relate to photo's. In the same way, we opted for using block letters uppercase and lowercase as this is instrumental to reading a printed text. While there are many constraints in the way Italian language course for migrants are organised, there are still valuable opportunities to plan courses that are learner centred and close to their specific desires. Within this framework Freire's generative words approach seems particularly important. Equally important is the ability to adapt the learning setting and interactions to the actual learning interactions and to the proposals that are suggested by the learners. Hereby we offer a sample of the activities that can be triggered by working with the generative word *telefono* (telephone). The word "TELEFONO" is introduced and "associated" with a corresponding picture such as:

TELEFONO



Figure 1. Word-image matching

The word is being written on the blackboard or on a flipchart. The teacher pronounces it several times while s/he pointing at the word's letters with one finger.

After pronouncing it aloud several times together, the word is being written again making sure to highlight the syllables: TE-LE-FO-NO. This time the word is being pronounced again several times while the teacher points at each word's syllable with one finger. Students can be invited to tap or to clap their hands to each syllable.

A way to introduce phonemes is to explain that each word includes several "parts". A house includes a kitchen, a bathroom, one or more room(s). In the same way, a word includes parts that we call syllables and phonemes. *Telefono* includes the following four: te-le-fo-no. Their reading is repeated several times. Each part belongs to a family. In the case of *telefono*, the "TE" family includes: ta-te-ti-to-tu. These syllables are being pronounced several times. The same exercise applies to all syllables and phonemes. This can be organised into four different sheets, with the syllables written in uppercase:

TA	TE	TI	TO	TU	(first sheet)
LA	LE	LI	LO	LU	(second sheet)
FA	FE	FI	FO	FU	(third sheet)
NA	NE	NI	NO	NU	(fourth sheet).

Once they are properly mastered, the four of them can be presented into one single sheet of paper. Now we can play with phonemes and syllables by pronouncing them and by pointing at the phonemes and syllables with one finger. They are read horizontally, vertically and diagonally, and then at random. Before moving ahead, the teacher checks that the previous step is being understood properly.

It is useful to repeat the same exercise by reading the same syllables with the syllables written in lowercase letters:

ta	te	ti	to	tu	(first sheet)
la	le	li	lo	lu	(second sheet)
fa	fe	fi	fo	fu	(third sheet)
na	ne	ni	no	nu	(fourth sheet)

Once they are properly mastered, the four of them can be presented into one single sheet of paper.

5. Analysis phase

Once the group is able to recognise the various phonemes families, the teacher goes back to the original word: *telefono*. The word was pronounced as a whole and then divided into syllables and now the *telefono* syllables are identified across the available twenty syllables and re-united. The same exercise can be applied to other words. The teacher asks the students whether they can identify other words, but avoiding being pushy. In case nobody dares to take the initiative, the teacher can suggest the first word, for example “*fine*”:

TA	TE	TI	TO	TU
LA	LE	LI	LO	LU
FA	FE	FI	FO	FU
NA	NE	NI	NO	NU

In this phase what is important is that students are motivated to look for new words. The key issue is to try to combine phonemes into words, even invented words. Then they can try to distinguish existing from newly invented words. The teacher invites them to create as many word as possible and to write them down. Examples of Italian words that can be recognised by combining *telefono*' syllables are: *fila* (cue), *fine* (end), *fune* (rope), *foto* (photo), *fata* (fairy), *telefonino* (smartphone), *telo* (sheet), *tela* (canvas):

1) TELO

a)



2) FOTO

b)



3) FILA

c)



4) FATA

d)



5) FUNE

e)



6) TELEFONINO

f)



Figure 2. Word-image matching activity: for example 1) & b)

5.1. Syllables memory

In our experience the “Syllables memory” is an effective activity to focus students’ attention on syllables learning. The syllables of the word “telefono” are written onto a significant amount of cards, using both upper and lower cases: TE, LE, FO, NO, te, le, fo, no. The cards are placed on the table or floor so that the syllables are hidden. Players take turn in uncovering a card and then uncovering a second

card, trying to match the first one with a card that presents the same syllable. When this happens the two cards are left so that the syllables remain visible. When the second card's syllable does not match the first one, the two cards are left again on the table or floor so that the syllables are hidden again.

The winner is the player that collects a higher number of matching cards.

6. Synthesis and reflection phase

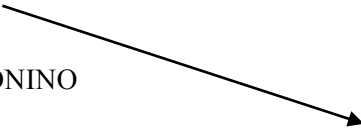
6.1. Fill-in activities

These activities make use of the same words that were used in the Word-image matching activity:

- 1) T E _ _
- 2) _ _ T A
- 3) T E L E F O _ _ _ _
- 4) _ _ N E
- 5) F I _ _
- 6) _ _ T O

6.2. Upper-lower cases matching activity

This activity asks students to identify and to match identical words such as in the following example: 1) & d):

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) FATA 2) FILA 3) TELEFONINO 4) FOTO 5) TELO 6) FUNE |  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) fila b) telo c) fune d) fata e) telefonino f) foto |
|--|---|--|

With the words that they have identified, students can produce phrases and write them down.

7. Discussion

According to Shugurensky (2014:64) a core issue within this literacy process is that when learners reconstruct words from independent syllables and as they experience a shift from illiterate to literate individuals, an important transformation begins to occur. This has implications for the motivation and accuracy concerning writing about their own experiences, reading each other's writings, and seeking solutions to their problems as a collective. This development could be observed with the group of learners that participated in the activities mentioned above as well. Therefore we are collecting positive evidence to answer our initial question concerning the applicability of the Freire's approach in the present Italian situation and when teaching Italian as second language. We see significant results when approach the teaching of Italian as foreign language on the basis of generative words within the Freire's approach. Learners provide positive feedback during the learning units and show significant achievements over a short period of time.

Within contexts where the learners are becoming literate in a language different from their mother tongue it becomes even more important Freire's attention for the centrality of the illiterate learner within the learning process and for her/his ability to take an active role. It is important that learners become aware of their achievements and at the same time are motivated to generate and to structure written texts.

Concerning the use of generative words in effective ways we have observed three core issues:

- Generative words have to be carefully selected, paying attention to phonetic difficulties as well as to themes that are of actual concern for the learners;
- Generative words are effective when they are being used within a gestalt approach to the learning units which requires both preparation work and an awareness of the group dynamics and interpersonal communication with and within the group of learners;
- Generative words demand the teacher to be able to adapt the educational materials and to improvise concerning the way

they are being used throughout the learning process according to the specific features of the learners.

The main difficulties concern the fact that in the Italian context it is very rare to be able to teach Italian as foreign language with a group that has a significant degree of homogeneity in terms of ill-literacy level and cultural and linguistic background. Nonetheless, we see that within heterogeneous learners contexts it is possible to identify significant themes and areas of common interest. Freire himself was describing his approach as a canvas that was open to be re-invented according to the different contexts and learners.

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