

PROCEEDINGS

Cultures, Practices,
and Change 02



third international conference
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*


education
and/or
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Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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Vol. 2

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Practices,
and Change**

Organizers and partners



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TEACHING INNOVATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SUPPORTING STUDY AND TEXT PROCESSING SKILLS

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The aim of this contribution is to describe an experience of didactic innovation co-designed with secondary school teachers in order to stimulate the activation of less motivated students and to improve their study skills and comprehension of written texts. This study recognises the importance of supporting the professional capacity of teachers in terms of their ability to create functional, innovative learning environments capable of reaching even the most disadvantaged students. The rationale for the intervention method was as follows: convergence in the identification of objectives to be improved in secondary school students; identification of an eclectic but sustainable methodology that could be applied to multiple subject contexts. The experiment aims to investigate the sustainability of the proposed methodology over time and to monitor its effectiveness. It is hypothesised that there will be a significant improvement in comprehension and summary production, with a more pronounced improvement for low-achieving students, and at the same time progress for all students in terms of an active attitude towards academic texts and discourse.

Secondary school teachers; teacher professional development; didactic innovation; text comprehension

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2018 recommendations of the Council of the European Union, functional literacy is one of the essential skills for personal fulfilment, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion. This competence includes the ability to understand, interpret and express concepts, feelings, facts and opinions in written and oral form (Council of the European Union, 2018) and is therefore essential for active participation in society and for achieving one's personal and professional goals. However, the OECD's PIAAC study (2023) and the recent Censis report (2024) are very worrying, as they both state that around one in three Italian adults can be considered functionally illiterate, with deficiencies in text comprehension. The OECD-Piaac report also points out that the Italian education system does not adequately address the gaps in basic skills, with marked differences between the different levels of education and uneven quality of teaching. Given this premise, there is an increasingly urgent need to devote time and space to the training of teachers, both initial and in-service, in skills related to the ability to comprehend

and produce texts and to think critically, in order to support literacy in a meaningful way and thus to reduce school drop-out and the social divide between pupils. This is intended to provide teachers with useful and necessary tools to help achieve educational goals for all. In light of this, the involvement of teachers in research pathways appears to be crucial for ensuring effective professional development and for positively impacting on student learning outcomes. Studies show that involving teachers in research encourages reflective practice, improves their understanding of educational theories and promotes innovative pedagogical strategies (Kowalczyk-Wałędziak & Ion, 2024). In line with the methodology of teacher professional development research or 'Ricerca-Formazione' (R-F) (Asquini, 2018), in the study presented here, the teaching intervention was co-designed not only to identify and address students' educational needs and create an inclusive learning environment, but also to support meaningful professional development for the teachers involved. The "Teacher Professional Development Research" is a methodology for conducting research in schools and with teachers, explicitly aimed at training and transforming teachers' pedagogical and didactic practices, as well as promoting reflectivity. This study recognises the importance of supporting the professional capacity of teachers in terms of their ability to create functional, innovative learning environments capable of reaching even the most disadvantaged students. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to describe an experience of didactic innovation co-designed with secondary school teachers in order to stimulate the activation of less motivated students and to improve their study skills and comprehension of written texts. The study therefore attempts to respond to a dual requirement: to support students' text comprehension as a key skill for academic success and, at the same time, to train secondary school teachers to promote this skill in their subject areas.

1. THE TRAINING AND RESEARCH PATHWAY

The study is part of a multi-year project to promote 'learning to learn' in secondary schools. During the first year, seminars on the study method were provided for teachers (n=140 secondary school teachers) and at the same time an R-F pathway was activated for a self-selected group of teachers who were interested in concretely experimenting with innovative strategies in their classrooms. This pathway consisted of 7 face-to-face meetings plus a teacher's work on classroom implementation and documentation of the activity. In order to involve the teachers and to design a truly meaningful course for them, the course began by asking the teachers to collect the most common difficulties their students faced in their approach to the learning process. The researchers then collected these difficulties and investigated possible training needs of the teachers on these matters. Difficulties reported by teachers were mainly related to language and vocabulary, connecting and reasoning in text comprehension, motivation and self-esteem, mnemonic learning. In the light of these elements, the researchers proposed specific training on the subject of text comprehension and, in particular, on the following topics: identification of key information, text processing, student's activation and autonomy. The researchers then proposed to the teachers, also by means of workshops, different

methodologies and strategies suitable for supporting these skills and discussed with them the potential and risks. The objective was to design and implement a methodology for the promotion of text comprehension and study skills, which can be applied to expository texts of various disciplines to foster identification of key information, text processing, student's activation and autonomy.

Teachers simulated the strategies in the classroom with the researchers, then proposed this activity in their classes and documented the experience. At the end of the course, the documentation was collected, feedback on the activities was given and joint reflection on the usefulness of the model was carried out.

In the second year, the RF course continued with the intention of carrying out an experimental intervention, with control classes, with the classroom application of the didactic 'model' developed and preliminarily tested in the previous year (no. 6 secondary school teachers – 5 subjects – about 200 students). The aim of the experiment was to test the effectiveness of this specially designed teaching intervention for improving text comprehension and study skills. In order to measure the impact and effectiveness of a controlled classroom intervention, the research team identified survey instruments to collect input and output data: Comprehension Test (Giovannini, Ghetti, 2015; Giovannini, Rosa, 2015; Giovannini, Silva, 2015); Study Method Questionnaire (short form) (Friso et al., 2012); Summarising Test (text and assessment tool jointly developed by teachers and researchers). The teachers administered the tests, collected the data and implemented the classroom intervention (6-10 sessions of 15 hours). The teachers attended 25 hours of training with the researchers and worked independently for 50 hours. The researchers accompanied the teachers throughout the experiment, provided opportunities for discussion and tools for monitoring and reflection, and shared the data collection and analysis with them.

2. DIDACTIC PROTOCOL

The researchers jointly developed an intervention model based on the premise of detecting and discussing the needs reported by the teachers and based on previous experiences (Cardarello, Pintus, 2018). The rationale of the intervention method was as follows:

- Convergence in the identification of the objectives to be improved in secondary school students;
- Identifying an eclectic but sustainable methodology that could be applied to different subject contexts.

There are many 'didactics' that can support the ability to understand texts (Cardarello, Bertolini, 2021). What seems to be crucial for text comprehension is the active involvement of the reader, with engagement in open-ended and challenging tasks, and the modelling of thinking by the adult, so that students become more aware of the use of cognitive strategies. In addition, organised work in pairs, with shared verbalisation, enables reciprocal behaviours that are functional for understanding the text and checking one's own understanding (Vezzani, 2023).

Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar, & Brown, 1984), now widely used, is a strategy consisting of several steps that allows teachers to support text comprehension through the practice of specific strategies. The teacher's role is to *model* the use of the strategies, leaving room for students to work autonomously and collaboratively, while providing feedback. The adult acts as a model for the students, showing them by thinking aloud how to think when reading a text. This is also thought to be important for student motivation, a prerequisite for the effectiveness of a teaching intervention (Lumbelli, 1993).

Therefore, the researchers proposed to work on a sustainable model of an instructional intervention for teaching reading comprehension strategies with the following characteristics

- Teaching strategies and techniques: modelling, thinking aloud, feedback;
- Text comprehension strategies: questioning and summarising;
- Didactic setting: paired work.

The experimental working method and teaching methodology involved collaborative work in pairs, as a derivation of Reciprocal Teaching (RT) (Palincsar A.S., Brown, 1984, from the Italian version adapted from SapiE, called Reading Comprehension Reciprocal Teaching RC-RT (Calvani, Chiappetta Cajola, 2019). The intervention provided for the teacher's use of *modelling* and final feedback to assess work in pairs, with the promotion of two classical strategies, *questioning* and *summarising*, which were revisited and finalized in the exercise of producing written summaries applied to classroom textbooks or standard subject texts.

The experimental intervention, for a total of 10 sessions, included an initial phase of teacher modelling with the use of thinking aloud to apply the strategies. The modelling proposed a reading of the passages, interrupted to ask some important questions for understanding, both lexical (What does this word mean? Do I write it down or underline it?) and more complex (What is the relationship with above?). With the modelling strategy, the teacher shows a variety of questions that the reader can ask with/without answers, within the text, beyond the text (McKeown, Beck, 2002). The teacher then shows out loud how to select some main information (summarise) by asking questions and untangling some comprehension knots. The teacher then gradually encourages the pupils to work independently in pairs on the texts, questioning and summarising them. In fact, students then repeatedly used selected text comprehension strategies, questioning and summarising in pairs, orally and in writing, always applying them to 'disciplinary' and study texts. The teacher then gradually withdrew (faded out) but provided constant feedback. At the end of all the pair activities, the teacher gave feedback on the products produced and guided reflection, first on the 'good' comprehension questions and then increasingly on the qualities of the summaries produced. Further teacher *modelling* was necessary during the 10 sessions.

During the training sessions, teachers experimented with and simulated the strategy of modelling the use of the two strategies, such as reading aloud. This activity was highly effective and had a significant impact on the classroom. The audio-

recording of the first modelling activities provided the researchers and teachers with valuable material for comparison and for finding greater convergence in the working group's use of the teaching protocol. Intermediate meetings of the working group made it possible to revise the proposal and to deepen the strategies on the basis of the criticalities and potentials that emerged during the application phase.

The research group revised the course outline and came up with an improved intervention, such as proposing more and more explicit work on large group feedback to address some of the difficulties encountered. In this case, the lecturers worked on how to use this moment of work to analyse more effectively examples of good summaries and good questions.

3. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this contribution was to present the overall picture of the course that was implemented. Data from the experiment are processed, not only pre-tests and post-tests, but also data collected through written records and documentation, including interviews and summaries of students' activities. From the teachers' testimonies and the ongoing review of the proposal, the importance of maintaining students' motivation to learn emerges as relevant. Pair work and repeated work on strategies make the proposal particularly inclusive in that it involves the whole class, and low ability students and students with learning disabilities had positive results, including in terms of participation in activities. The repetitiveness of the pattern was also a critical issue in grades 8 and 9, where motivation for activities tended to decline, and this also affected the quality of questioning. Teachers shared the importance of finding appropriate, challenging and complex learning texts for the application of *questioning* and *summarising*.

On a first qualitative assessment, the model seems to be sustainable and effective for the goals set, in particular for the progress of all students in terms of an active attitude towards academic texts and discourse.

Teachers' involvement in these activities was very high in terms of designing activities and preparing texts, monitoring and evaluating students' performance in the light of the objectives set, and actively participating in the collaborative reflection process. This turns out to be an important element of professional development and a prerequisite for teaching innovation.

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