

Literacy, reading and writing in the Italian School System

Literacy, lettura e scrittura nel sistema scolastico italiano

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abstract

This paper reports on literacy, reading and writing, which are considered to be the first key competences across the EU (2006). The paper addresses some strengths and weaknesses of both the Italian school system and Italian society. More specifically, the paper examines reading comprehension skills, which are designated as an area to be strengthened. Furthermore, it discusses the research results related to this issue, and some innovative courses of action in the Italian school system and in the field of educational research.

Keywords: *Reading literacy, Italian school, Inclusion, National assessment, Educational research*

L'articolo affronta il tema delle capacità di lettura nella madrelingua, che sono indicate come la prima delle competenze chiave dall'Unione Europea (2006). Ne vengono indicate alcune criticità relative alla scuola e alla società italiana. Ma ci si sofferma in modo particolare sulle abilità di comprensione dei testi, che sono cruciali e risultano da potenziare. Vengono presentati significativi risultati di ricerca al riguardo ed illustrate alcune pratiche e politiche innovative, oltre che alcune interessanti direzioni di ricerca in ambito pedagogico.

Parole chiave: Capacità di lettura, Scuola italiana, Inclusione, Valutazione, Ricerca educativa

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1. Literacy, democracy and inclusion

Among the processes and structures of inclusion and exclusion, in order to allow everyone to participate in the knowledge society, we must emphasize the importance of literacy, reading and writing processes. Among the broad range of we must highlight “equal opportunities for all” and “access to and participation in an information or knowledge society”. This paper focuses on the topic of literacy, because it is strictly connected with the abovementioned goals.

In order to achieve authentic school inclusion, the school must allow all the students, including foreign students (immigrants or refugees) to possess communication and cultural skills.

Reading literacy is one of the first key competences for lifelong learning (UE 2006). «Communicating in a mother tongue: ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions both orally and in writing» (UE 2006). The meaning attributed to the expression *reading literacy* is defined in various ways and involves different connotations. For example, the PISA-OCSE (*Program for International Student Assessment*) defines the reading literacy as follows:

Reading literacy is understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society (PISA, 2006).

Currently, 2016, the PIRLS (*Progress in International Reading Literacy Study*) defines reading literacy as follows: “Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct

meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment” (Mullis, Martin, 2015).

In both frameworks, reading literacy is considered as a fundamental ability for each individual as to be part of a knowledge-based society, and in preparation for democratic citizenship. In fact, skills such as reading and writing in a complex and sophisticated world are increasingly necessary in order to become responsible citizens. Obviously, much information can be reached through new media (internet, app, forum, social media, etc.), but deep thinking is always guaranteed by solid reading comprehension skills. In order to understand the cultural heritage, to reflect, and to be able to discuss and debate, the ability to process properly written texts remains a fundamental and unavoidable skill.

In my opinion, this is particularly needed in Italy, due to the low level of public and political debate: it represents a challenge for democracy and democratic participation. The guidelines for the Italian school system include reference to the European key competence and highlight the central role of the Italian language mastery for promoting citizenship (Indicazioni Nazionali, 2012; Indicazioni nazionali e Nuovi scenari, 2017), with some words dedicated to written texts:

The Italian language represents the first tool of communication and access to the knowledge. The written language is a particularly deciding means for the world's exploration, for organize and reflect on the experience and knowledge (Indicazioni Nazionali e Nuovi scenari, 2017, p. 6).

Reading literacy is a key competence for lifelong learning, nevertheless it is still critical for Italian students (Mullis, Martin, Foy, Hooper, 2017; INVALSI, 2018).

However, we are facing an historical weakness in Italy regarding reading literacy, both in terms of reading diffusion and of comprehension skills.

2. A country with too few readers

The international survey data have shown that the reading rate in Italy is one of the worst in Europe and data from a recent national survey (MIBACT CEPELL, 2015) shows that Italy is the country in which the time devoted to digital devices is the highest, and the time spent in the traditional cultural consumptions is the lowest. The percentage of book readers was just the 41,4% in 2015, assuming that readers are “those who read at least one book a year not for professional nor academic purposes”. But other surveys attest that the percentage of readers decreased compared to the previous years: compared with 2013, the abovementioned percentage decreased from 43% to 41,4% (2014), and worse in 2015: just 40,5% (ISTAT, 2017, p. 2).

In the same questionnaire, the Italians interviewed provided reasons for this: lack of time is the most evoked reason for not reading book, and not reading at all.

3. Reading comprehension. International surveys

However, the historical weakness in Italy regarding reading literacy results also through the bad or uncertain performance in reading comprehension.

As many international surveys have shown since 1990s, Italian students are low comprehenders (IEA, OCSE-PISA), but in more recent years, through the creation of a specialized institute for learning evaluation (INVALSI), those results have been confirmed and clarified.

What has been observed internationally applies also to Italy: the numerical overrepresentation between the students' population with the lowest levels of text comprehension of the students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds (Milne, Plourde, 2006; Rothstein, 2010).

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) promotes the periodic survey PIRLS for 9 years olds: some good results for Italian students on reading literacy come from PIRLS survey 2016: their performance has been improving since 2001 (2006 and 2011). IEA-PIRLS check two main fields: reading purposes, i.e. literary experience and acquire and use information; comprehen-

sion processes, including focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, and make straightforward inferences. The recent data assigned a good ranking to Italian school students: with difference between literary and informational text comprehension, and an increasing score achieved in informational ones in a survey realized in 2016. At the same time Italian students are increasing in both retrieving/straightforward inferencing, and in interpreting/ integrating/evaluating [PIRLS, 2016].

THE OCSE PISA survey (Programme for International Student Assessment financed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) for 15 year old students reported, since 2003, results below average for Italian students. Nevertheless, the last survey shows some improvement for them, however describing a very inhomogeneous situation (PISA, 2017).

The landscape on Italian reading literacy is not improving if we widen our gaze to the adult society. The international survey about comprehension of written messages in adult (16-60 years old, *Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC*, 2013), is an international survey conducted in over 40 countries. It measures the key cognitive and workplace skills needed for individuals to participate in society and for economies to prosper. In 2013, it showed the Italian population in the lowest rank between 24 countries (ISFOL, 2014).

4. Performance in reading comprehension and national assessment

INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of Education Systems) checks every year about 2 millions and 2 hundred thousand students in basic subjects such as mathematics, science and reading, including reading comprehension and linguistic knowledge, using a mixed frame from different comprehension theories. As many international surveys have shown, the data collected by INVALSI regarding the entire school population confirm many problems related to reading comprehension (INVALSI, 2018).

The most important findings regard the high differences existing among regions (and schools) and the fact that performances tend to worsen in higher school levels.

The most recent data confirm that, there are high differences in the average results among regions, already detected: the Southern regions achieved significantly lower results than the national average. The gap is increasing passing at the transition between grade 2 and grade 10. Furthermore, there is a discrepancy in results between schools and between classes in the southern regions, highlighting a problem of equity in the educational system starting from the beginning of the primary school. In the upper secondary school, the differences between regions are worsening. In the southern regions, the differences increase compared to the North. We might just note other gaps. The gender gap in reading performances: Italian females performed better than males. Differences based on Italian or foreign origin (grade 8 and grade 10): the gap is high among Italian students, but it is reducing among immigrant of second generation. Nevertheless, an overall study of school equity shows that the variability is low between students, but high between classes and schools. Therefore, there is a problem of equity in the Italian school system [INVALSI, 2018].

5. Purposes and perspectives to contrast illiteracy

First of all, a mistake to avoid is separating pleasure reading from text comprehension. The exposure to written text is more likely and frequent among students who show no comprehension difficulties. Texts' comprehension appears to be increased by the amount of time dedicated to reading activities (Stanovich *et al.*, 1996; Stanovich, Cunningham, 2004; Lumbelli, 2009). The connection between enjoyment and comprehension is identified, e.g. in the English National Curriculum. In order to improve both reading pleasure and text comprehension the school system needs strong policies and specific research.

In the past decades some actions and policies were finalized to promote reading for pleasure as a tool aimed to share cultural issues. For example, the *Circolare Ministeriale 27 marzo 1995, n. 105* focused on enhancing reading within the school system, which merely fostered reading promotion activities in all schools. However, if we check the statistics about reading for pleasure the results were not positive and, however, no economic support have been provided for it.

More recent actions were undertaken to promote “book and reading” among the Italian population by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage (*Ministero per i Beni Culturali*), through the establishment of a national center named CEPELL, Center for Book and Reading (D.M. 23.10.2013 E D.M. 8.8.2014). This Center drawn up in 2014 a National Plan aimed to promote reading (Piano nazionale di promozione della lettura).

The plan report recognizes and indicates the most important actions to be undertaken, according to international literature and on the basis of the specific situation of the Italian population: the Plan Report (CEPELL, 2014) is an useful reminder and a thorough overview of the activities necessary for school:

- improving reading among children aged 0- 6 , without losing sight of the importance of the project “Nati per Leggere” (Italian version of the program Born to read);
- implement and disseminate reading aloud Practices (from adults and teachers) in the schools;
- promote teacher education about reading and books;
- enhance librarians education;
- strengthen the national library system;
- strengthen school libraries;
- recognize good practice of reading promotion (a data base of good practice is available at <http://www.progettointro.it/attentiachilegge/index.xhtml>);
- focus on southern regions and degrade suburbs.

Furthermore, in order to improve the quality of teaching in Reading Literacy (EU High Level Group, 2012) RAI and CEPELL are setting up a training project for teachers called “Invitation to read”¹.

1 The first issue is available at <<http://www.raiscuola.rai.it/programmi/invito-alla-lettura/265/1/default.aspx>>.

6. The side of comprehension. A new challenge

In the Italian text comprehension's curriculum is not an explicit subject neither for primary nor for secondary school. In the curriculum for teacher education (at a university level) there are no teachings or exams dedicated to it: text comprehension is often covered in the teaching of the Italian language, but text processing and comprehension is not the core of the teaching. There is therefore a lack of knowledge about how reading comprehension is taught and experienced in the schools.

But since the beginning of the text comprehension's objective assessment realized by INVALSI, since its language test includes items on text comprehension, many schools and teachers have begun to concentrate on text comprehension activities in a new fashion. They started spending more time and devoting more attention to text comprehension activities, as we can deduce from the following facts:

- During the Conference “Invece del cheating” – “Instead of cheating” (INVALSI, 2016), many schools have exhibited the activities undertaken to promote text comprehension, given the negative results achieved by their students in the *Invalsi* Test.
- In the past few years the purpose “Promoting and enhancing text comprehension” appears with great emphasis in many RAV (the report of self-evaluation of the schools).
- Certain schoolbook publishers (*editori scolastici*) began to publish books and textbooks focusing on text comprehension (f.e. Erikson and Giunti).
- Since 2016, INVALSI promotes annual seminars “INVALSI data: a research tool”: in these meetings, many researchers presented (or started to) analysis of the didactic and contextual variables of the data collected by Invalsi assessment.

7. Research, from assessment to interventions

Since the 1970S in Italy many researches and studies regarding comprehension assessment and tools have been carried. Furthermore, an

analysis regarding effect school or effect class has been realized (f.e. Lucisano, 1994; Giovannini, 2015, but little attention was payed to methodologies for teaching, and fostering text comprehension.

Moreover, there has been much research focused on teaching comprehension for students with special needs (dyslexia, learning disorders, or impaired children) or students who do not speak the Italian language at all, but few researches attempt to promote text comprehension for all the students, and overall for disadvantaged pupils, who really need educational support for their inclusion. In fact, as shown by the mentioned data, we face a more spread weakness in written texts comprehension among students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such difficulty is not imputable to a cognitive disorder. Instead, it relates to a variety of historical and cultural elements, and results more evident during the changeover between primary and secondary school. More recently, some researches have been carried in order to experiment new teaching methodologies related to text comprehension, undertaken with solid methodology and evidence-based.

These are generally local and limited experiments, promoted by a few schools or a few networks of schools within University departments or by university teachers (from pedagogues, educational psychologists and some linguists). On the other hand, the linguists often deal with the second language-learning topic.

The patterns inspiring the various research are different, including different aims: teaching how to process text content, and teaching to learn from textbooks, which are obviously similar but include also different processes (Kintsch, 1998; Palincsar, Brown 1984; Duke *et al.*, 2011). Such studies are also drawing from a metacognitive and strategic approach (Zanetti Miazza, 2004, Duke *et al.*, 2011; Duke, Pearson, 2002; Tarchi, 2015; Baker, 2002), or from a content approach (McKewan *et al.*, 2009), or from a mixed perspective. Moreover, these studies have been carried with a theory basis in different frameworks: there is either an increased focused on lexical competence or a focus on competences needed in processing information. These experimental practices focus often on specific skills, such as making straightforward inferences, or summarizing, or interpreting ideas and information. These reports are particularly interesting and useful for producing good practices for the educational school system. (f.e. Car-

darello, Contini, 2012; Castellana, Benvenuto, 2017; Fontani, 2017; Cavazzini, 1999; Bertolini, 2012). Many reports can be found in reviews such as the *Italian Journal of Educational Research*, *Cadmo*, *Form@re*, *Psicologia e Scuola*, *LLL*.

Some emergent research lines in Italy are worth mentioning, because they express academic contributions in three different and interesting directions.

One emergent line of research carried out by Roma3 University (coordinated by Professor Vertecchi) is devoted to the promotion, through a variety of activities, of students' writing [*In intellectu et in sensu*]. Since the first project, focused on time needed for writing (*Nulla die sine linea*), the project aimed to improve literacy and writing by increasing the time spent writing in primary and secondary school (Vertecchi, 2016). The interaction between writing text and text comprehension is highlighted by many researchers.

A second new research line recently undertaken in Italy from SapiE (*Società per l'Apprendimento e l'Istruzione informati da Evidenza*) (Association for Learning and Instruction inspired by evidence) and a University research network is starting in these weeks to experiment at a national level the Reciprocal Teaching methodology (Palincsar, Brown, 1984). This methodology is aimed to teach pupils to understand and summarize texts (prof. Calvani), (Calvani, Fornili, Serafini, 2018).

Some projects on Reading Aloud have been undertaken by the University of Perugia (prof. Batini) focusing on promoting life skills: for example LaAV - *Letture ad Alta Voce*- (Reading Aloud) is a national association grouping reading volunteers engaged in reading in the hospitals, in retirement homes, in homes for young mothers, for young disadvantaged people etc. A project on Reading Aloud in the Primary and secondary School ("Read me again, reading aloud and life skills") has begun in these months on the basis of previous research (Batini *et al.*, 2018) showing that students tend to improve their text comprehension skills if they have been exposed to reading aloud in the classroom, by teachers or by different adults. (<https://www.giuntiscuola.it/catalogo/eventi-e-formazione/convegni-/leggimi-ancora-lettura-ad-alta-voce-e-life-skills/#4657286>).

Conclusions. Some priorities for policy and research

Concluding, we can just note some priorities regarding the Italian context.

Supporting scientific research on reading literacy and understanding more fully how reading comprehension is taught and experienced by the wider community. The research project TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey by OECD) (TALIS, 2013) investigates Perspective on Teaching and Learning and practices at school, but its focus does not regard a specific topic such as reading literacy.

The lack of link and interaction between the different pilot researches is however their strongest limit. Therefore, a greater coordination between institutions (Universities, Ministries, Schools. Invalsi etc.) needs to improve the knowledge.

Greater coordination between researchers in different fields, such as linguists, psychologists, pedagogues is also needed .

Introducing content of text comprehension and literacy within the teacher education curriculum for primary and secondary schools.

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