

An Analysis of Different Teaching Approaches for Foreign Pupils Using the Tillis Test

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Abstract

This experimental study seeks to design and assess effective teaching strategies aimed at enhancing the language acquisition of foreign students, for whom integration into the school environment often presents significant difficulties. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative elements, the research utilized the TILIS test (Italian Language Test for Foreign Students) to assess the students’ initial language proficiency and subsequent development. Complementing this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, students, and parents to gather in-depth qualitative insights. The didactic strategies adopted were multimodal in nature, incorporating visual, audio-visual, and digital tools to engage various learning modalities. Additionally, cooperative learning techniques and peer tutoring were implemented to foster an inclusive and supportive educational climate. The study aims to show how a personalized and integrated pedagogical model can promote not only academic achievement but also the social integration of migrant students—aligning with current educational challenges and policy directives. Beyond expanding the understanding of inclusive practices for migrant learners, the findings offer valuable empirical data to guide future educational policies and targeted interventions.

Keywords: *Inclusion, Foreign Students, Special Pedagogy, Innovative Teaching, Language Skills.*

Introduction

In recent years, Italian schools have experienced a notable rise in the number of foreign students, a trend closely linked to broader global demographic and migratory transformations. As reported by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2022), this group constitutes an increasingly significant segment of the student population, posing both challenges and opportunities for the national education system. These students often encounter linguistic and cultural obstacles that can hinder their academic success and impede their social integration. Benvenuto and Rossi (2020) underline the necessity of adopting specific educational methods and approaches that respond to the unique linguistic and cultural needs of foreign learners. In line with this, the Ministry of Education (2021) has issued comprehensive guidelines for the integration of foreign students, advocating for inclusive strategies, targeted interventions, and a welcoming school climate. The recommendations emphasize the importance of flexible and

innovative teaching methodologies—such as cooperative learning and multimodal instruction—as effective responses to the heterogeneous needs of students.

Scholarly literature consistently highlights the value of cooperative learning and innovative pedagogical tools in fostering both academic achievement and integration among migrant pupils. Cummins (2000), for instance, notes that meaningful social interaction with peers and educators contributes significantly to language acquisition and supports intercultural understanding. Moreover, an increasing number of studies demonstrate how the adoption of multimodal and digital strategies can enhance the language learning process by offering varied, engaging, and interactive learning experiences (García & Kleifgen, 2018).

This research is designed to identify and evaluate effective instructional strategies aimed at improving the acquisition of Italian as a second language (L2) among foreign students in primary schools. The TILIS test was selected as the principal assessment instrument due to its standardized and detailed evaluation of both comprehension and production in language use. Fontana (2018) reinforces the notion that cooperative and inclusive teaching practices can boost not only language skills but also the social abilities of foreign pupils, contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive educational environment.

The study adopts an experimental methodology, applying selected teaching strategies to a group of foreign students from diverse backgrounds. Participants were divided into two groups: an experimental group exposed to a curriculum enriched with multimodal resources and cooperative learning practices, and a control group following a traditional curriculum. The effectiveness of these interventions was assessed using the TILIS test, alongside qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and their families.

In summary, the research aims to demonstrate that the use of tailored, multimodal instructional strategies can play a pivotal role in supporting the language development and school integration of foreign pupils, offering valuable insights for future educational practices and policies.

1. Methods, Tools and Educational Strategies

The study involved a sample of 60 foreign pupils from different countries of the world, aged between 6 and 10, from different Italian primary schools. The pupils were divided into two groups of 30 pupils each: the experimental group, which followed the developed teaching strategies based on multimodal approaches and cooperative learning, and the control group, which followed the traditional curriculum.

The TILIS test is a standardised instrument specifically designed to assess the language competence of foreign students. The test covers different aspects of language competence, including listening comprehension, written and spoken production, and reading comprehension.

It was administered at two different times: at the beginning of the study period, before the sample was divided into two groups, and six months after the two groups had been formed and had started working in the two different programmes (traditional and implemented). The administration was carried out in controlled environments to ensure standardisation of the test conditions.

The following tailor-made teaching strategies have been implemented to improve the foreign pupils' language skills, each designed to achieve specific objectives defined to maximise the effectiveness of the proposals and ensure a significant improvement in the foreign pupils' language skills and school integration.

- Multimodal approach:

Aim: To stimulate different learning channels in order to improve foreign learners' comprehension and language production.

The multimodal approach integrated a variety of teaching materials to stimulate different sensory channels and keep students' attention. During the lessons, the teachers used visual tools such as colourful posters and vivid pictures, audio-visual tools such as educational videos and songs in Italian, and digital tools such as educational apps and interactive games.

This method not only made the lessons more engaging and accessible, but also enabled the students to learn through visual, auditory and tactile modalities, strengthening sensory memory by better supporting comprehension and memorisation of new language vocabulary and grammatical structures.

- Cooperative learning:

Aim: to promote cooperation and mutual support between Italian and foreign students, facilitating integration and language learning.

Cooperative learning was implemented by dividing the students into heterogeneous working groups composed of Italian and foreign students. The group activities they worked on included joint projects, role plays and group discussions. Pupils worked together to solve problems and carry out tasks, and cooperative activities included role-playing in which pupils acted out everyday scenarios, research projects on topics of common interest, and guided discussions on various topics. Through these interactions, foreign students were able to improve their language skills in an inclusive and supportive social and collaborative context, sharing their experiences and promoting peer-to-peer learning where students can learn from each other.

- Language workshops:

Aim: to provide opportunities for intensive and focused practice of the Italian language in an interactive and playful context.

The language workshops were structured in weekly sessions dedicated to intensive practice of the Italian language through practical and interactive activities. The activities included conversation games simulating everyday situations, listening and speaking exercises to improve comprehension and oral processing, guided reading of stories and narratives, and creative writing activities. These workshops were designed to be highly interactive and engaging, encouraging students to use Italian in a spontaneous and natural way, thus increasing their confidence and linguistic competence.

- Tutoring:

Aim: to provide individualised support to foreign pupils, facilitating both language learning and social integration. The tutoring programme involved the assignment of Italian students as tutors to foreign pupils. The tutors provided support in both daily learning and socialisation activities. The tutoring sessions included joint study, where the tutors helped their foreign peers to understand homework and prepare for tests, as well as leisure and play activities to promote socialisation and integration. This support system facilitated peer-to-peer learning and allowed foreign pupils to feel part of the school community and receive personalised and immediate help.

Educational Technologies:

Aim: to ensure accessible and dynamic learning outside the school context.

The use of educational technology was central to this programme. Teachers integrated the use of tablets, computers and interactive whiteboards into their lessons. Students had access to various educational applications designed for learning Italian, including interactive games, quizzes, listening and reading activities. These technologies made learning more dynamic and accessible, allowing students to practise their language skills outside of school hours through fun and stimulating activities.

- Extracurricular activities:

Aim: to implement Italian language learning and socialisation with classmates.

In addition to classroom activities, extra-curricular activities were organised to promote language learning and cultural integration. These activities included visits to museums, participation in local cultural events, school trips and art workshops. These experiences gave the foreign pupils the opportunity to use the Italian language in real and meaningful contexts, improving their cultural understanding and strengthening their bonds with their classmates. All the teaching strategies used aimed to create an inclusive and stimulating learning environment in which migrant pupils could develop their language skills and successfully integrate into the school community. The use of multimodal and collaborative approaches, supported by educational technology and extra-curricular activities, made it possible to meet the diverse needs of the pupils and to promote more effective and enjoyable learning.

2. Results

1.1 Quantitative Analysis

The TILIS test analysed four specific areas of competence, namely listening comprehension, spoken production, reading comprehension and written production.

- Listening Comprehension

Test description: Students listen to short dialogues and answer comprehension questions.

Results:

- Experimental Group: Initial average score 50/100, final average score 70/100 (+20%).
- Control Group: Initial average score 50/100, final average score 60/100 (+10%).

- Spoken Production

Test description: Students have to describe images and answer open-ended questions. Results:

- Experimental Group: Initial average score 45/100, final average score 70/100 (+25%).
- Control Group: Initial average score 45/100, final average score 57/100 (+12%).

- Reading Comprehension

Test description: Reading of short texts followed by comprehension questions. Results:

- Experimental Group: Initial average score 55/100, final average score 73/100 (+18%).
- Control Group: Initial average score 55/100, final average score 63/100 (+8%).

- Written Production

Test Description: Writing short texts on assigned topics. Results:

- Experimental Group: Initial average score 50/100, final average score 72/100 (+22%).
- Control Group: Initial average score 50/100, final average score 59/100 (+9%).

The results of the TILIS Test showed a significant improvement in the language skills of the experimental group compared to the control group. In particular:

Table 1: Percentage increase in specific areas of language skills

	Experimental Group	Control Group
Listening Comprehension	20%	10%
Spoken Production	25%	12%
Reading Comprehension	18%	8%
Written Production	22%	9%

1.2 Qualitative Analysis

In addition to the quantitative evaluation using the TILIS test, a qualitative analysis was carried out through semi-structured interviews with teachers, pupils and parents. For the teachers, the questions were

1. How do you assess the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used?
2. What were the main challenges in implementing the strategies?
3. What improvements have you noticed in the behaviour and integration of foreign pupils?

The answers to these three questions revealed some important considerations: the teachers unanimously noted a significant improvement in the participation and interest of the migrant pupils. Multimodal strategies and cooperative learning were therefore particularly effective. "Before using the suggested teaching strategies, the pupils hardly interacted with their classmates, whereas now they look for them during breaks", reported one teacher; "the class is much more united and this attitude has a positive effect on the mood of both the foreign and the non-native children", reported another.

Some teachers emphasised that the main challenges were managing linguistic and cultural diversity and the need for additional teaching materials, but all reported greater socialisation and cooperation between Italian and foreign pupils, with a positive impact on the classroom atmosphere.

The students were also asked three questions:

1. Which activities did you find most useful for learning Italian?
2. How do you feel about your ability to communicate in Italian now compared to six months ago?
3. What suggestions do you have to improve the lessons?

The answers to these three questions were positive: the students found interactive activities such as role-plays and language workshops particularly useful. "I didn't think Thomas was so nice," said a classmate who had not previously been able to establish a friendly relationship with Thomas (French nationality). "For the first time, I felt free to say something without being judged or laughed at for my accent or grammatical mistakes," shyly confessed a foreign pupil involved in the project.

Most of the students, according to the interviews, felt more confident and competent in communicating in Italian than at the beginning of the study. Furthermore, the students suggested that more games and practical activities should be included in the lessons, because "it is fun to learn by playing", as many of them reported.

Parents were also involved in this qualitative analysis and the questions administered were:

1. How would you rate your child's progress over the last six months?
2. What aspects of the teaching strategies used have you found most useful?
3. What additional support do you think is needed to further your child's learning?

In response to these three questions, parents expressed satisfaction with their children's language progress, noting greater fluency and confidence in speaking Italian. The teaching strategies most appreciated by the parents were tutoring and cooperative activities, which also promoted the social integration of the children. "Now my son is happy to go to school to see and play with his classmates," reported the mother of a non-Italian child. Parents feel that further support, such as additional language classes and home learning materials, could be helpful.

3. Discussion

The data analysis highlights the strong effectiveness of the personalised and multimodal teaching strategies adopted in the experimental group in enhancing the language competencies of foreign students. The integration of visual, audio-visual, and digital tools within a multimodal framework proved particularly valuable in activating multiple sensory and cognitive channels, thereby increasing student engagement and accessibility. These results align with the perspective of García and Kleifgen (2018), who underscore the benefits of multimodal approaches in supporting language acquisition processes.

Equally significant was the role of cooperative learning in promoting inclusion, peer interaction, and a collaborative classroom atmosphere. By encouraging active participation and mutual support among Italian and foreign pupils, this method helped to foster both social and linguistic integration. As noted by Johnson and Johnson (2009), cooperative activities and

positive group dynamics are fundamental to enhancing communication and interpersonal relationships within diverse educational settings. In the context of this study, students in the experimental group demonstrated noticeable progress in their communication and social abilities as a direct result of these collaborative strategies.

Language workshops conducted on a weekly basis offered students targeted opportunities to practice Italian in an engaging, hands-on, and playful environment. These sessions facilitated interactive learning experiences that encouraged active language use. Fontana (2018) emphasizes the value of such interactive contexts in promoting motivation and the effective development of linguistic skills. Consistent with her view, the results of this study reveal significant improvement in listening, speaking, reading comprehension, and writing among participants involved in the workshops.

Tutoring emerged as another pivotal strategy, whereby Italian students acted as peer tutors to support their foreign classmates. This one-on-one approach enabled personalized guidance and contributed meaningfully to both language learning and social adjustment. Benvenuto and Rossi (2020) identify tutoring as a particularly effective method for offering foreign students not only linguistic input, but also emotional support and positive role models. In our study, participants receiving tutoring reported increased self-esteem and greater confidence in using the Italian language.

Beyond the quantitative outcomes, the qualitative findings drawn from interviews with teachers, students, and parents further validate the success of the instructional strategies applied. Educators noted a rise in motivation and active participation among foreign students, attributing this shift to the multimodal and cooperative methods employed. This observation reflects the insights of Cummins (2000), who highlights the essential role of constructive social interactions in facilitating language development. Nonetheless, teachers also expressed the need for additional educational resources to better address the challenges posed by linguistic and cultural diversity within the classroom.

Interviews with students revealed the interactive and playful activities were particularly appreciated and considered useful for learning Italian. This feedback is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) theories which emphasise the role of social interaction and play in learning. Students also reported feeling more confident and competent in communicating in Italian, highlighting the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used. Parents expressed their satisfaction with their children's linguistic progress, noting greater fluency and confidence in speaking Italian. They particularly appreciated the tutoring and cooperative activities, which not only improved the language skills but also promoted the social integration of the children. This is in line with the observations of McGroarty (1993) who argues that social integration is crucial to the academic success of foreign students.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings of this study confirm that the adoption of targeted and multimodal teaching strategies can significantly enhance both the language development and school integration of migrant students. The methodologies implemented in the experimental group—centered on multimodal instruction, cooperative learning, language workshops, and tutoring—contributed to notable progress in language competencies. This progress was effectively tracked using the TILIS test, which proved to be a reliable tool for assessing language acquisition and provided crucial data for evaluating outcomes.

The quantitative analysis revealed clear improvements in listening comprehension, oral production, reading comprehension, and written expression among students in the experimental group, in contrast to those in the control group. These outcomes suggest that the strategies applied not only supported skill acquisition but also made the learning experience more engaging and accessible for foreign pupils.

Additionally, students involved in cooperative learning activities demonstrated a stronger inclination to collaborate and support one another, which positively influenced classroom dynamics and fostered greater inclusion. This aligns with the broader pedagogical aim of creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

The qualitative interviews conducted with teachers, students, and parents further reinforced the quantitative data, offering meaningful insights into the perceived effectiveness of the implemented strategies. Participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the language improvements observed and appreciated the individualized support provided by the activities.

Nonetheless, the study also brought to light certain challenges, particularly the need for sufficient resources and continuous professional development for educators. As noted by Cummings and Sayers (1995), effective integration requires robust institutional support for schools and teaching staff. They advocate for the implementation of teaching approaches that are flexible, multimodal, and collaborative—particularly at the primary level—to promote language learning, academic success, and the full inclusion of migrant students within the school community.

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