

“LE LINGUE STRANIERE IN ITALIA” AN ONGOING DEBATE

Nickolas D.G. Komninou

In his article, “Le lingue straniere in Italia”, in the January 2006 edition of *LANG Matters*, Prof. John Dodds eloquently and concisely presents the situation faced by university students in Italy regarding the EU language policy for graduates. He correctly identifies two areas that need attention: the need to substitute the students’ notion of luck with regard to reaching sought-after language competence levels with the idea that the dedicated application of a studied methodology and student motivation can and will bring the student to those levels. The second area is the need for a national policy that would apply a studied methodology supporting the teaching of foreign languages from kindergarten all the way up to the second university cycle.

Prof. Dodds also correctly states that the university system would work better if the schools took responsibility for bringing the students up to a B1/2 level. However, this line of argument attributes an unfair share of responsibility for the present state of foreign language teaching in Italian universities to pre-university education. This certainly plays a significant role in poor linguistic performance by university students, but there are a number of factors at university level that in my experience are important contributory causes.

In Italian universities the teaching and assessment of foreign languages, especially outside the language faculties, are often perceived by students and non-language teaching staff alike as an unwelcome obstacle to the completion of the study course, to be disposed of as quickly and painlessly as possible, with the consequence that it has not received the attention it deserves. I would like to take as an example the teaching of maths and English in Trieste University where I teach in the faculties of Engineering, Architecture, Science and Pharmacy. There is a marked difference in the importance assigned to maths, both by the students and the university policy makers (heads of department, heads of faculties, directors of studies etc.), compared to foreign languages. Why should this be so? At first glance, in the technical faculties (science, engineering, pharmacy, economics and architecture) maths would indeed seem to be more important than English or French. However, should the policy maker consider that a large percentage of the key texts in the courses are in English, that the international journals are predominantly in English or French, and that an increasingly globalised labour market means that work after graduation is ever more likely to be at an international level, then the importance of foreign

languages as a subject to be taught and learnt in every faculty would become more apparent to him. Furthermore, the learning of foreign languages can be a demonstration of open-mindedness, tolerance, inquisitiveness, precision and memory which are all qualities of the utmost importance when studying and looking for a job. At least this is the opinion of the European education policy makers, since they have made languages and not maths (or any other subject for that matter) compulsory at all universities and in every university faculty.

Primarily it is the university's attitude to foreign language teaching which shapes the students' attitude and motivation. Many non-language faculties have opted to place foreign languages in credit category F and to have them taught only in the first, introductory year of study in the first cycle. The credit categories are A (foundation), B (core), C (related subjects) D (optional) E (final exam) F (other). This F categorisation also emphasizes the non-academic, practical aspect of foreign language teaching, since the other ways of obtaining category F credits are through work-experience, attendance at conferences and seminars and/or group project work. Another aspect of importance is the character of the category F exam. It is that it is not given a mark, it is a pass/fail exam, whereas 'academic' subjects are given a mark out of 30, which counts towards the final degree mark. This automatically de-motivates the student from achieving better results and following a more complete preparation for foreign languages, as there is no recognition between a bare pass and a distinction pass which clearly puts foreign languages at a disadvantage compared to other first-year subjects.

We must remember that the first cycle at university lasts three years and with the second cycle another two are added. This is a five year period of study in which significant achievements could be made in a foreign language. By limiting foreign language teaching to the first year the faculties communicate their lack of interest in any serious attempt to develop language skills. It takes on average about 150-200 hours' study to get from one level of the CEF to another, so students who are not already prepared need around 400 to 600 hours to reach B1 or B2. Undoubtedly, if, as Prof. Dodds states, the students were to come from school with a B1/B2 level, this situation would not present itself and the universities could then use the foreign language courses to bring students up to the top levels, C1/2, or to focus on the specialist language of their discipline. But problems would remain: on the one hand, if language teaching continued to be restricted to the first year, with category F credits and mere pass/fail marks, there would still be too little time, and not enough motivation, to bring the students up from B to C; on the other, research has shown (Clapham IELTS research) that there is little value in providing field specific language classes or assessment for first year university students who probably do not have the conceptual or linguistic knowledge in their mother tongues for that level of

specialisation. Furthermore, students coming from other systems might not yet have reached B1/2 in their schools, like those Italian students who start university having finished school before the mid 1990's.

As things stand, there are a few practical solutions which might go some way to improving the present situation. Since the 1970's the Italian universities have been investing in language centres, language laboratories, independent learner technologies, self-access software, self-assessment testing, etc. This is in line with EU language policies that have researched, developed and produced tools like Dialang and the European Language Portfolio. In Trieste, for instance, there are two new language laboratories with 50 computers installed with costly FirstClass, Perception and Tell Me More software. Language teachers could promote the students' study in the same way that the Italian university system promotes other subjects, by emphasising independent learning. Through an orientation meeting the students could be introduced to all the tools the university has at its disposal for language development i.e. the language labs, audio/video/DVD libraries, computer aided learning, independent learning technologies, Dialang, ELP, self-assessment strategies, teaching etc. In this way all students would have the chance to reach a realistic target of a field specific B2/C1 in 3 years, within the period of the university degree, and in line with EU policy.

A change in attitude by the university policy makers towards foreign language teaching might manifest itself in one or more of the following ways: by creating a compulsory foreign language university entrance exam which would ensure that all students who start university are at a B1 level; by making foreign languages a category A, B, C, D or E credit course and placing the final exam in the third year with a mark out of 30, which would count towards the final degree assessment; by offering timetabled lessons in all three years of the first cycle, with the first two years devoted to bringing the student to a general English level of B2/C1 (depending on the students' entrance level), and the third year devoted to field specific language preparation; by developing recognised assessment methods with certification (if necessary in collaboration with already existing examination bodies) so students can leave university with valid and internationally recognised documentation testifying to their linguistic competence in a specific field.

There would of course be the need to increase the number of credits and the number of teaching hours, as well as their distribution and organisation, with university teachers working with the students over a 3-year period and not the six to nine months they presently have. Secondary school teachers would have to bring their leavers to a B1+ level in all the four skills. The real increase in investment by the universities would be in the field of assessment. There would be the need to develop entrance exams, placement tests and field specific

assessment. This final field specific assessment needs to be backed up by certification that would be recognised outside the Italian university system. In this area universities would need to train personnel and get the necessary recognition through affiliation with already existing examination bodies or through the process of official recognition. This process has already been initiated in some universities, as can be seen with the conditional affiliation of Venice University with the Trinity examination board, and the development of the computerised Cerclu exam by a group of Italian universities. Universities should also learn from the experience of the University of Siena, which found that simply using Cambridge exams was too costly. This policy must not be isolated to individual faculties in some universities but must be adopted on a national level, as Prof. Dodds highlights in his article: “The real challenge for the teaching of foreign languages in Italy is the need to learn how to apply a system ...”

With this approach Italian secondary schools would still be required to prepare their students to the B1+ level that Prof. Dodds requests of them, adhering to a national policy that would span the whole education programme. The advantage of this approach would be that it would also help define the aims and importance of foreign languages at university level. In this way it would have a far more positive influence on pre-university preparation with an eye to what would be expected at university. It would also eliminate the problem of overseas or mature students finding themselves at university needing to achieve 400 hours of language competence in only 6 to 9 months. Students would also graduate in a more advantageous position on the job market as they would have not only an increased foreign language competence in their discipline, but also recognised certification to prove it. Only by creating the right policy and context for the teaching of one foreign language at university can we begin to deal with the prospect of teaching two foreign languages. The positive aspect is that the second language should be much easier to deal with due to the experience gained and structures already created originating from the first.