

## **In-service English language training for Italian Primary School Teachers**

### **An experience in syllabus design**

**Barbara Dawes**

English language lecturer  
Università degli Studi di Napoli “Parthenope”  
Centro di Ateneo per i Servizi Linguistici  
dawes@uniparthenope.it

**Maria Luisa Iavarone**

Associate professor  
Università degli Studi di Napoli “Parthenope”  
Dipartimento di Studi delle Istituzioni e dei Sistemi Territoriali  
marialuisa.iavarone@uniparthenope.it

#### **Abstract**

Il presente articolo riferisce su un’esperienza di formazione di docenti della scuola primaria italiana per l’acquisizione di competenze di lingua inglese per l’insegnamento nell’ambito di un progetto ministeriale; l’articolo si concentra, in particolare, sulla prima fase del progetto che prevedeva la ricerca su modelli progettuali di sillabi di lingua inglese e quindi la creazione di un Sillabo originale appositamente costruito. Nelle prime tre parti del testo viene illustrata la struttura progettuale del sillabo mentre l’ultima parte si focalizza sulle possibilità di sfruttare il sillabo quale strumento di sviluppo delle competenze professionali degli insegnanti.

The aim of this paper is to report on an in-service English Language Teacher Training Programme devised for the Government project to equip Italian primary school teachers with the skills to teach English. The paper focuses on the first phase of the project which envisaged research into the best training models and the preparation of appropriate English Language syllabuses. In the first three sections of the paper we report on the experience of designing the language syllabus. In the last section we suggest ways of using the syllabus as a tool for self reflective professional development.

**Parole chiave:** formazione in servizio degli insegnanti, syllabo pedagogico trasmissivo e attivo, apprendimento della lingua straniera, sviluppo di un portfolio di competenze professionali, pratica riflessiva

**Keywords:** in-service teacher training, proactive/reactive pedagogical syllabus, foreign language learning, professional development portfolio, reflective practice

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## **Introduction**

One of the major challenges of the large scale and ambitious project to provide all Italian primary schools with English Language teaching launched in 2005 was to equip in-service primary school generalists with the necessary linguistic competence and methodological skills to teach English in the classroom. This led to the nationwide teacher training project “Sviluppo delle competenze linguistico-comunicative e metodologico-didattiche – lingua inglese – dei docenti di scuola primaria”<sup>1</sup> which brought together experts from the ministries of Education and of Research, various universities and teaching organizations, and AICLU, the national association of university language centres, with the aim to gather various proposals for implementing the training programme in the most effective way. A keystone of the project was the preparation of an appropriate language syllabus which needed to be anchored firmly to the professional profile of the primary language teacher. In this paper we will focus on the experience of designing such a syllabus and suggest ways of using the syllabus as a tool for professional development.

## **1. Language Learning Profile**

### **1.1 The Target Learner**

The research began with the task of defining the learners’ language profile, taking into consideration the European guidelines relating to good practice and innovation with the aim to establish a common profile for language teachers and to build a European infrastructure for training language teachers. Following Bondi’s (1999) recommendation that the teaching of foreign languages to primary school teachers should be considered as a case of languages for special purposes (LSP), designed to meet the special needs of the learner, the specificity of the learners’ profile became immediately apparent and derived from their status of teacher-learner and learner-teacher. This dualism was reflected in the typology of the training scheme which was characterized by elements of both initial training and in-service training and had important implications for how the language training could be best im-

plemented. On the one hand, we were faced with the primary school practitioners' low level of English language proficiency and scarce knowledge of foreign language teaching methodology; on the other hand, we were aware that this initial deficit could be partly compensated for by their general pedagogical expertise and understanding of how L1 is learnt and taught. This was especially important in view of the experiential/experimental approach that was adopted based on the collaborative learning theory and the opportunity for trainees to try out and apply in the primary classroom what they learnt in the course and then provide useful input for establishing principles of good practice to improve and develop the language training scheme. It was also very important for the development of a specific corpus of language in the primary classroom which could be built up with the active collaboration of the practitioners based on the language they use in class.

All this had implications for the LSP model we adopted which was based on a more dynamic and fluid concept of the language learning process in which negotiation plays an important part with learners themselves playing an active part. This added an important component to the training agenda: on the one hand the special competences needed by the primary teacher were related to the kind of teaching and learning that takes place in a primary language class, including both communicative competence, intercultural competence and language awareness; on the other hand provision had to be made for the language needed for autonomous professional development to enable Italian teachers to become active members of the International discourse community made up of primary modern foreign language practitioners, in order to share subject knowledge and pedagogical expertise.

## 1.2 The Target Environment

Having defined the target learner in order to complete our profile we needed to consider the target environment. We examined the Italian primary school's English language programme which, apart from broader educational goals of cognitive development, intercultural competence, and the acquiring of a range of foundational language learning skills to reinforce whole curriculum learning, explicitly refers to the development of pupils' communicative competence, defining the specific objectives of foreign language learning (FLL) in the form of language performance indicators. This meant that teachers required a minimum level of linguistic and communicative competence. For the purposes of the present project, the level was identified as B1 which was considered to be realistic in terms of the demands on teacher training but also sufficient for enabling them to operate professionally.

With the focus on communicative competence, two core areas of language use which have been widely acknowledged as important in the primary school context needed to be considered in the training programme: language for classroom management, based on the idea of embedding the foreign language in the performance

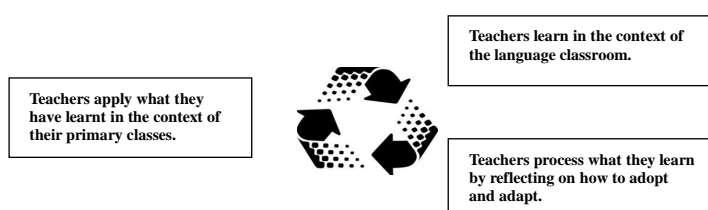
of routines and procedures, and language for teaching other areas of the curriculum. While the former is linguistically less demanding for teachers to use effectively, consisting primarily of the repeated use of standard, formulaic and prefabricated chunks of language, the latter, which is related to the CLIL model of language teaching, is clearly more challenging and requires careful planning and preparation.

Regarding language skills, the emphasis on oracy and on listening skills, especially in the early phases of primary education, had important implications for the programme which needed to give trainees sufficient practice in listening and speaking and interaction skills. This itself posed a challenge and the need to overcome trainees' preconceived ideas that language learning is primarily grammar learning and their natural resistance to speaking the language. In particular, if listening is a priority for children in the early years of language learning, teachers need to develop their speaking skills. Phonetic training is thus of paramount importance since it is vital that children receive a good model of pronunciation from the very beginning of their foreign language experience. At the same time, the programme also had to take account of the progressive introduction of literacy skills and the fact that the primary curriculum allows for children's cognitive development which changes significantly over the five year period and this also has to be accommodated for in foreign language provision. Improvement in language proficiency depends, in fact, on the development of all language and language-related skills, including that of intercultural competence which adds another dimension to the training agenda. Attitudes are conveyed through example and it is therefore of prime importance that teachers also acquire an open-minded view to the language learning and teaching experiment. They should be encouraged to reconsider their own attitudes, abandoning prejudices, avoiding stereotyping and accepting cultural diversity and in this way help to foster empathy towards the target language culture among pupils. Finally, there is the question of metalinguistic and mathetic competence which concerns knowledge about language and language learning skills. Since all primary teaching is aimed at providing foundations to develop in pupils an awareness of roots and origins of words, diversity of linguistic forms, functions and structures of language, experienced primary teachers should already have a repertoire of techniques and should be able to transfer their expertise to the context of the foreign language. What they do need to acquire, though, is a knowledge of the grammatical system of the foreign language and its basic metalinguistic terminology so that they can gradually introduce meta-language in the classroom as a way of reinforcing what has already been learnt in L1, especially through activities like word games and simple cloze activities based on word class. This is a further component which had to be included in the language syllabus.

## 2. The Pedagogical Syllabus

### 2.1 A Proactive and Reactive Model

The aforementioned specifications arising from our language learners' profile led us to propose a pedagogical syllabus that is both "proactive" since it pre-defines contents on the basis of which activities and materials are created, but is also "reactive" since the content is subsequently modified, arising from communicative activities and materials used in class. Our aim was to embed linguistic content with methodological and pedagogical content through the concept of "loop input" as set out in the figure below.



However, the loop-input process does raise methodological issues revolving around learning needs and styles: teaching language to adults differs from teaching to children. Thus adults require explicit teaching of grammar while children do not. At the same time, the priority for oral and aural competence considering the target environment should not preclude activities for teaching reading and writing skills which are usually more accessible to adults whose language learning strategies are often literacy based. All this had implications for the syllabus which needed to accommodate a double agenda, one addressed directly to the adult trainees, the other to the children who are the final recipients of the training programme.

### 2.2 Syllabus Components: Customizing the CEF Descriptors

The first step in designing the syllabus was customizing the general descriptors of competence for the B1 level as set out in the Common European Framework (CEF) to produce specific descriptors based on the learners' profile. The CEF is nowadays widely adopted in syllabus planning across Europe and has enabled teachers and planners to acquire a common language and to standardise and share syllabus design. It does not itself constitute a syllabus but its comprehensive descriptors for competence levels covering the range of skills and relating to the performance of communicative tasks, as well as the use of communicative strategies, have made it a fundamental reference in the planning of any communicative lan-

guage training programme. It is above all useful for 1) establishing the objectives of the syllabus and 2) verifying as to whether the objectives have been met by the learners in testing procedures and final certification. Customizing the descriptors involved selecting those most suited to our profile but also adding new descriptors. For example, while the general competence descriptor relating to the skill "Reading Instructions" is given as *Can understand simple instructions encountered in everyday life*, a specific descriptor for primary school language can be added: *Can understand straightforward instructions for games suitable for language teaching to children*; another general descriptor relating to the skill "Addressing Audiences" which is given as *Can give a short basic presentation on a familiar subject* could be specified as *"Can present and explain basic content from other areas of the primary curriculum which has previously been taught in L1, in a simplified form to the class."*

We then placed these descriptors of language skills within a wider framework of communicative functions, making a distinction between micro-functions relating to language forms and grammar areas (for example *narrating past events*) and macro functions (for example *explaining*), taking into account the trainees' specificity as primary school teachers.

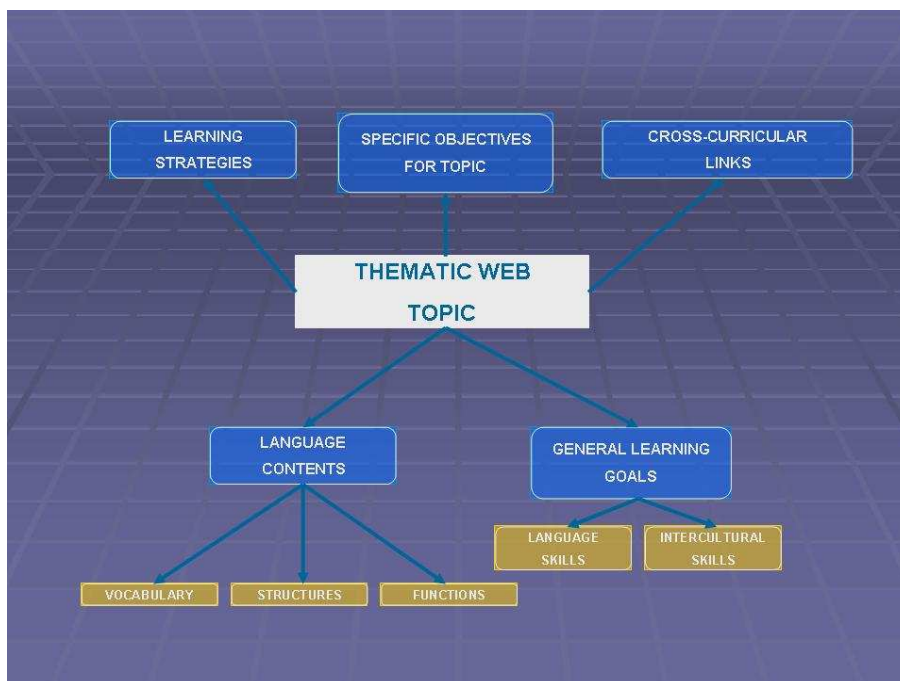
Finally, turning our attention to language learning strategies, we selected a number of communication strategies in relation to the different skills of reception, production and interaction from the CEF, on the basis of their relevance to the context of teaching children (for example, "Interaction: *Can restart using a different tactic when communication breaks down*"), including the identification of general language learning strategies (such as those useful for memorization like the use of actions, rhymes and games).

### **2.3 Organizing Content: The Syllabus Framework**

After having identified the different components of the syllabus in relation to language skills, functions and strategies, the next step was to devise a framework for organizing content. In our case this involved reconciling two very distinct approaches to syllabus design, the one usually adopted for adult learners (based on linguistic linear progression in which learners are introduced to language in what is basically a predetermined sequence of grammatical structures and/or functions) the other suited to children (based on Task Based Teaching around topics), which themselves reflect differences in how children and how adults learn languages according to second language learning theory<sup>1</sup>.

The solution was to adopt a model in which the language aims are embedded within a thematic framework in which topics naturally generate language content relevant to the programme's objectives, links to subjects in the primary curriculum and activities suited to the primary classroom. In this respect, we considered the

fact that the trainees themselves (just as their young learners) should experience the language in a way that encourages them to process language for meaning. This theme-based model is actually more “content related” than “content based” and has a strong language-oriented projection which allows for flexibility in selecting content and is easier to implement:



Using this model we created ten thematic modules in which a number of macro themes (for example Nature and the Environment) generate related micro topics (Geographical Features, Climate, Animals and Pets). These themes then served as a means for organizing the other components of the syllabus: linguistic items covering grammar, vocabulary, phonology, functions and skills with related metalanguage and pedagogical/methodological aspects regarding CLIL/cross curricular links as well as a repertoire of teaching strategies/techniques and related linguistic repertoires. Here is an example of a module/learning unit:

MODULE: STORYTELLING Topics: Fairy Tales, Fables	
SYLLABUS AREA	SYLLABUS AREA FOCUS
Grammar	Narrative tenses Direct and indirect speech Simple linking devices Intensifiers and extreme adjectives Adverbs
Lexis	Fairy tales Words for describing physical appearance
Phonology	Pronouncing auxiliary verbs Sounds: /i:/ and /i/ Sounds: /e/ and /ei/ Pronunciation of –ed
Functions	Describing physical appearance Linking and sequencing events Narrating past events
Language skills	Reading: understanding a fairy tale Speaking: telling a simple story and dramatization Writing a storyboard
CLIL indications	History: narrative structure of a story Music: rhymes, non-sense, fairy tales
Classroom language and interaction	Everybody sit in a circle, I'm going to tell you a story Listen to the story about... Once upon a time What is going to happen next?
Learning Strategies	Using rhythmic and repetitive patterns of language to aid recall



Trainees, as primary school teachers are course familiar and comfortable with the thematic approach. On the other hand, to ensure that the specific language objectives are pursued, a process of careful matching was carried out to link the objectives to themes as well as to match, where possible, all the syllabus components to one another. Such matching is on the whole fairly logical and self-evident: for example, in the module on story-telling the grammatical structures of the past tenses are matched to the function of narrating a past event, the language skills include “Write a storyboard”, the lexical items cover the vocabulary of physical description and fairy tales and phonology includes the pronunciation of *-ed* in the past tense of regular verbs.

However, matching syllabus components is not always so straightforward: this is particularly the case with phonetic and phonological items the selection of which may appear to be somewhat arbitrary and random in some modules. In actual fact, English phonemes constitute a mini-syllabus within a syllabus and the main criterion we followed was that of selecting items on the basis of contrastive linguistics – that is to say, identifying the sounds and patterns which are most difficult for Italian learners because of the differences between the two languages, as in the short and long vowels /ɪ/ and /i:/, the fricative consonant /θ/. Frequency of occurrence is another important criterion so the most common English vowel sound, the “schwa”, should be introduced early on in the course.

#### 2.4 Linguistic Repertoires

A distinctive feature of our syllabus was the inclusion of linguistic repertoires which trainees can learn to use comfortably and effectively. The repertoires were taken from a corpus of classroom language which we are still developing and which represents the most innovative part of the project involving cooperation with a local primary school. Since the school is an international institution, the context is especially appropriate for our purposes: the teachers are English native speakers and the curriculum is British and American but most of the pupils are of mixed nationalities and English is their second or foreign language which means that teachers have to pay special attention to their pupils’ language needs. We recorded a sequence of Social Studies lessons and analyzed the teacher’s discourse with the aim to identify key language functions and recurring patterns of language use, both in relation to general classroom management and to the specific subject. For example, among discourse functions we noticed the frequency of *comparing* and *emphasizing*, while the intentional future with *going to* and the request/command form using *will you* emerged as recurrent grammatical structures. The idea is to offer trainees samples of actual teacher discourse which they can practise firstly in the language course and then try out in their own classrooms.

### **3. The Syllabus as a self reflective tool for professional development**

The aim of this final section is to suggest ways of using the syllabus as a tool for developing professional competence so that trainees themselves can be brought to reflect on strategic aspects of the syllabus, viewing them in terms of constraints and opportunities.

Self reflection is a crucial aspect of training programmes and refers to the adoption of procedures that verify their effectiveness, efficacy and quality (Iavarone, 2006, 2009, 2010). The methodology used here to develop our proposal is based on the "reflective practice model of professional educational development" (Walters, 1991).

In the case under study, the aims of this phase of the project are to verify the acceptability and sustainability of the syllabus as the basis for structuring and organizing the whole training project to develop the teachers' professional competences. The participants in the training course are in fact primary school teachers whose goal is not only to improve their foreign language skills but also to improve their teaching practices through experimentation using an original, purpose built syllabus which was the main focus of the research project.

In our proposal the syllabus components are to be seen as initial constraints which can then be transformed into opportunities for building up the trainees' portfolio of professional competences. The portfolio itself then becomes a useful tool for developing guidelines for professional development based on good practice, self-evaluation and self-reflection (Schön, 1983).

In the following table the components of the syllabus, set out in the left column, are to be used as a reflective device for developing the portfolio made up of the trainees' professional skills, or abilities, which are set out in the right column. For example, the need to customize the general descriptors of competence for the B1 level in relation to the language contents of the syllabus (grammatical structures, vocabulary, language functions) may lead trainees, on the one hand, to reflect on the development of communicative skills for the primary school classroom and on the other to raise their language awareness and metalinguistic competence; the need to embed linguistic content with methodological and pedagogical content should help trainees reflect on planning issues and on selecting appropriate materials and tasks.

<b>SYLLABUS CONSTRAINTS</b>	<b>OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP TEACHERS PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES (PORTFOLIO)</b>
<p><b>language contents: vocabulary, structures, functions</b>                      customizing the general descriptors of competence for the B1 level</p>	<p>ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop communicative competence by using language appropriately according to the context enhance language awareness related to the acquisition of metalinguistic and metacognitive knowledge</li> <li>• manipulate various aspects language concepts, structures and systems.</li> <li>• use language for intercultural communication</li> </ul>
<p><b>thematic web</b>                      embedding linguistic content with methodological and pedagogical content</p>	<p>ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• plan effectively and to balance various components of the language syllabus</li> <li>• plan effectively a teaching-learning unit select and design appropriate materials and tasks</li> </ul>
<p><b>general learning goals</b></p>	<p>ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• define coherent and feasible objectives for the teaching unit</li> <li>• vary and adapt teaching styles and procedures</li> </ul>
<p><b>specific objectives for topic</b></p>	<p>ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adopt appropriate methodologies for teaching children (TPR, focus on oracy)</li> <li>• put into practice a range of classroom management techniques</li> <li>• designing tasks and game to show relations between linguistic and metalinguistic aspects</li> </ul>

<b>cross-curricular links</b>	ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• establish connections across the primary curriculum transfer competences and knowledge from one area of the curriculum to another link macro and micro themes</li> </ul>
<b>collaborative learning and good practice</b>	ability to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evaluate own abilities and performance realistically develop cooperative and transformative learning strategies (Mezirow, 2000)</li> <li>• accept criticisms in a positive way provide the right professional image organize own work in an efficient manner</li> </ul>

In conclusion, this proposal helps us to identify the behavioural traits that should form the objectives of a professional, experienced and reflective teacher (Schon, 1983, 1987). The methodological option for an “opportunities-constraints” model enabled us, on the one hand, to maintain and enhance the specificity of subjective paths of growth and professional training, and on the other, to verify the validity of the learning process for the achievement all of the minimum goals on the part of all participants.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Progetto di ricerca nell’ambito del piano di formazione linguistica e metodologica in lingua inglese per i docenti di scuola primaria ex Comunicazione di Servizio Ministeriale n.1446 of 29th July 2005.

<sup>2</sup> While the impact of the age factor in successful language learning continues to be a subject of debate in the literature on second language acquisition theory (for a discussion of recent theories see Lightbrown, Spada, (2009)), there is general agreement that adults and children learn languages differently and that such differences must be taken account of in language programmes. In particular, Saunders Semonksy, Spielberger (2004) notice that “adults are cognitively able to analyze abstract rules and benefit from rule-focused instruction while children should be engaged in activities that hold their interest and appropriate for both their cognitive level and their language level”. For an overview of theory and research relevant to children’s language learning see Cameron (2001).

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