

**A Neuroeducational Perspective on
How to Improve the Learning
Efficiency of Japanese University
Students Studying Italian**

March, 2022

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A Neuroeducational Perspective on How to Improve the Learning Efficiency of Japanese University Students Studying Italian

(日本人大学生イタリア語学習者の学習効率
を高める方法に関する神経教育学的視点)

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In memory of Christopher Humphris

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, we present the reasons that prompted us to begin this research project relating to teaching Italian to Japanese university students from a neuroeducational point of view.

Neuroeducation is a new field of teaching and learning that combines neuroscience (which is about the brain and how it works, including memory, learning, etc.), psychology (which is about the mind and behavior, including emotion, behavior, personality, interpersonal relationships, etc.), and education (which is about learning, including methodology, teaching practices, classroom management, planning, assessment, etc.) (Tokuhamma-Espinosa, 2011).

Next, the relevance of this study in the language teaching panorama is highlighted. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of this dissertation.

1.1 Research questions and purposes

Our first experience of university teaching took place in a women's university in Tokyo in the 2007-08 academic year. Although Italian was a secondary and optional subject for the students, we were honored to be able to teach at a university and simultaneously ready to do our best. Our expectations were high because they were linked to an image we had of university teaching and of students that was based on our personal experience as a university student in Italy. We also could not wait to put into practice what we had learned during a two-year professional master course on teaching Italian as a foreign language that we had graduated from in the previous year.

We began teaching at the university after a few years of experience with adult students (in particular, those age 50 and up), which perhaps also conditioned our teaching expectations. The average adult student studied Italian with some interest in Italy, and even if industrious students were few, they seemed to have an average level of motivation. Furthermore, managing classes with these adult students was not very difficult; generally, there were no discipline problems, and the students focused on the lessons.

However, our first teaching problems soon began to emerge, perhaps partly due to the fact that we were only a few years older than our students. Some of them may have undervalued us as a teacher. Students did things other than class work (including sleeping), came late, were absent, and looked bored. Several others could not say even their names in Italian after a few months of study, which was very disappointing. We were desperate and did not know what to do. Not only we did not know how to maintain the interest of these types of students, but we left them free to do what they preferred. They could choose where to sit, and this created many problems. They generally chose to sit next to classmates with whom they could better disturb the lessons. There were generally no seat changes during the activities. If the students did things not related to the lessons, we did not have the courage to stop them. At the time, we wondered whether we had the right to ask the students to do something against their wills, and when in doubt, we let problems go. In short, we were permissive teachers (see 2.4 for more on this teaching style), and we were prey to the wills of the students.

As can be imaged, our lessons did not work, and we realized that what we had learned during the professional master course was not very helpful. In particular, we noticed that the course, which was mainly theoretical rather than practical, did not give us the opportunity to learn how to manage a class, especially one like this.

After following the advice of a more experienced colleague, our educational style passed from permissive to authoritarian (see 2.4 for more on this teaching style). However, the situation only got worse, as this damaged our relationship with the disruptive students, who began to resent us. We then found *Dealing with Difficulties: Solutions, Strategies and Suggestions for Successful*

Teaching (2007) by Clandfield and Prodromou, and we started making some attempts to try to improve the situation. Some things improved, but we were not satisfied, yet.

The situation changed drastically after we attended a training course at Dilit International House in Rome in August 2010. We began using an authoritative style (see 2.4 for more on this teaching style), and this allowed us to keep the students more focused on the lesson. Furthermore, we made the lessons more active and challenging, and therefore the learners became more enthusiastic. Our expectations regarding students changed, and this allowed us to no longer feel frustrated or disappointed with the students. We realized that not everything that is taught will necessarily be learned by the students. In the end, the students were more engaged and learned more, and we improved our class management skills. These skills continue to improve as we gain new experience and deepen our knowledge of language teaching.

After many years, while teaching university students remains challenging, we continue to improve by continuous trial and error. Although the college students with low motivation seemed like a problem at the time, thanks to them we realized that our lessons were boring, and this gave us the opportunity to keep looking for better ways to manage and motivate them. We would have never suspected this when we taught only adults, perhaps because of their higher degree of motivation and greater self-control.

The course at Dilit International House was a general training course, not one aimed at teaching (Japanese) university students only. In addition, neuroscientific research has progressed in recent years, and we were beginning to think that deepening our knowledge of the brains of this specific type of learner was important in order for us to further improve.

For the above reasons, our research questions are as follows:

- a) what factors lead to more effective lessons?
- b) what factors improve student motivation?
- c) what factors draw learner attention more strongly?
- d) what are the neurobiological, behavioral, and cognitive differences between typical university students and adult learners?

Question a) was born from situations like those described earlier, in which students did things not related to the lessons while we lacked the courage to ask them to stop. Our dilemma was whether and when a teacher should comply with student desires and habits. If students are free to do what they want when they want (e.g., using a smartphone for private purposes during an activity), does this positively affect their motivation and, thus their learning, or does it impair learning? If a student prefers to prepare the sentences to use during speaking practice in advance by writing and then reading them instead of speaking *ex abrupto*, will this be useful to develop their speaking skills? If the teacher asks students to stop an action, will this negatively affect the student-teacher relationship, and therefore learning, or will it be positive? In order to answer these questions, understanding how effective learning takes place is crucial.

Question a) is partly related to question b). The large number of students who showed little or no interest in Italian and Italy and the difficulty engaging them in the activities for more than a few minutes were the reasons for our continuous search for better ways to motivate students.

Question c) is closely connected with questions a) and b). To improve student attention, in addition to motivating activities, students must be protected from potentially distracting factors.

Finally, question d) is connected with all of the previous questions, as knowing the neurobiological, behavioral, and cognitive characteristics of university students as compared to adult students is crucial in order to be able to provide more effective, motivating, and attention-grabbing activities and environments, and to give appropriate advice regarding lifestyles that could lead to better academic results.

Based on these questions, we set the following purposes for our research:

- a) find ways to make lessons more interesting and effective;
- b) improve class management in order to foster student attention.

In addition to these main purposes, our research gave us the opportunity to reflect on ways to improve our evaluation system and to conduct the oral exams held at the end of each semester, as well as ideas for ways that publishers can improve textbooks. Finally, we considered the necessity of training those who teach or aspire to teach university students specifically and locally.

1.2 Significance of study

Our study:

- a) describes the degree of development of executive functions (EFs) (see 2.1) of typical university students in general, highlighting the didactic implications of this development;
- b) sheds light on the motivations and lives of university students in Japanese society;
- c) proposes ways to make lessons aimed at Japanese university students in Japan more effective, with the goal of allowing their EFs to work in the most beneficial way possible (in particular, by adapting some activities developed by the Dilit International House language school in Rome that seek to improve oral skills (see chapter 6)).

There are already some studies regarding university students studying Italian, but these studies focus on a second language context, meaning foreign university students studying in an Italian university. The difference between those students and ours is the degree of motivation. For example, Semplici (in Semplici & Tronconi, 2006: 48) writes:

[T]hese are learners who have chosen to study our language and who are motivated to do so for personal interest or to meet specific needs, which can be both immediate, i.e. linked to the academic context, and short-term, i.e. in view of the future profession.¹

Therefore, such studies are likely to focus on content rather than on student learning attitudes.

By contrast, Balboni (2002: 187) describes in different terms the motivation that characterizes students who study Italian as a foreign language presumably in their own countries:

In universities, the immediate need is less felt,² it is often located in the distant future and with imprecise contours; even in many non-humanistic faculties the language course is experienced as an unjustified imposition, especially for a language other than English whose usefulness is instead evident [...].

We often find that in the Department of Italian Linguistics of the university we are teaching in at present (see 3.2 for further details regarding this teaching context)—where although Italian is their major, many students come without having a particular interest but mainly to get a degree—Italian was not their first choice. It is not uncommon to encounter students who would have liked to study at another university but had to settle for this one, as they failed to pass the entrance exams of their preferred schools.

1 All translations are ours.

2 Compared to people who study a language for professional reasons.

What makes our research unique is the interweaving of involved variables: the perspective under which the study was conducted (development of EFs); the motivation and age group of the students (typical university students); their society, culture, and native language (Japanese students); the language they study (Italian); where they study it (in Japan); and the method used by their teacher (that of Dilit International House). This kind of study can be conducted only at the local level. To our knowledge, the number of researchers on teaching Italian in Japan is very limited, and among them no one has used a neuroeducational perspective or the method advocated by Dilit International House.

1.3 Organization of dissertation

After presenting the purposes and significance of the study in the first chapter, in the second chapter, we present an overview of previous studies on the effectiveness of an authoritative style on academic success. This effectiveness is presumed to be due to an enhancement of EFs.

In the third chapter, we focus on our teaching context, moving from the general to the particular. We begin by describing typical university students in Japanese society, using official statistics as evidence. Next, we discuss our teaching context (how our Italian conversation courses fit into the curriculum), the teaching method used, and the activities associated with this teaching method that we use most. Finally, we consider other key features of our course, including pair work, the syllabus, our authoritative style, and our methods of evaluation.

In the fourth chapter, we present, analyze, and discuss the data that we collected. In the fifth chapter, we analyze the features of university student brains and discuss the effects of these features on risk taking, counterfactual thinking, working memory,³ attention, understanding the social meaning of faces, mentalizing, empathy, etc. We follow this with a description of the impact of stress, aerobic exercise, and sleep on these brains.

Based on work in the fourth and fifth chapters, we reflect on some possible improvements in the effectiveness of our lessons in the final chapter. We propose making these improvements by making small changes in the structure and modalities of the four core activities our method uses, in order to not increase the stress levels of students, or by covering topics, especially in *oral free production*, that would allow students to achieve objectives of maturation of their EFs through reflection in addition to the linguistic objectives of the course. We give particular emphasis to the importance of giving students the opportunity to make choices in a variety of ways. We also propose improvements to our assessment policy and way of conducting oral final exams. Proposals addressed to our university and to publishers are also included.

³ Working memory is the kind of memory that is thought to allow one to hold on temporarily to some information in the mind while using it in order to achieve a goal (see also 2.1). In other words, it is like taking notes in the mind. For example, when students listen to a conversation, they need to hold in mind the pieces of information that they have listened to in order to be able to put them together and give a global meaning to the conversation.

2. Encouraging learning by taking care of student executive functions

In this chapter, we discuss the role of EFs in academic achievement and how learning can be encouraged by using constructivism with an emphasis on student interests and needs (a humanistic approach), in combination with an authoritative style of teaching. This results in increased motivation and attention levels of students by creating the conditions for active engagement, sensitivity to error feedback, and learning consolidation. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the opportunity to match learning styles and intelligences.

2.1 The importance of executive functions in learning

EFs are

a set of processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources in order to achieve a goal. It is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills involving mental control and self-regulation. Executive functions are the most advanced of cognitive functions, housed primarily in the frontal lobes [...]. (Neuro Assessment & Development Center, n.d.)

The combination of the three core EFs (inhibition and interference control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility) (Diamond, 2013) is responsible for skills like attention (which allows one to stay focused on an activity until it is completed), shifting (which allows one to adjust to a given situation), emotional control and self-regulation (which allow one to make reason prevail over emotion), initiation (which allows one to begin an activity and to solve problems independently), planning and organization (which allow one to think about the future and to prioritize), organization of materials (which allows one to arrange work in orderly way), self-monitoring (which allows one to monitor and measure one's own performance), communication (which allows one to clearly state their own needs), and accountability (which allows one to take responsibility for their actions) (Neuro Assessment & Development Center, n.d.). For example, inhibitory control needs working memory so that one can focus on a goal and act accordingly (Diamond, 2013).

The relationships between these EFs and the skills they are responsible for suggest that partially developed EFs may be the cause of some problems that we have observed over the years in teaching our classes, inferred from our teacher evaluation questionnaires, or heard from students about their other classes and teachers. Such problems include:

- lack of memory;
- planning and organization problems;
- lack of sleep;
- lack of self-control;
- lack of attention;
- lack of problem solving skills;
- generalization;
- peer pressure;
- communication problems;
- superficiality;
- inability to understand other people's perspectives;
- academic entitlement.

Note that some of these problems are rarer than others, and that not all students exhibit these problems in their behavior. The main cause of the most challenging behaviors resulting from the problems described above is likely the teachers themselves. Experience has taught us that if a teacher is not able to deal properly with some particularly difficult students, maybe because of a lack of confidence, experience, or knowledge, then this could exacerbate these student attitudes.

It should be also pointed out that the above behaviors are not necessarily related to EFs. In order to draw accurate conclusions, students must be observed during each lesson and their contexts must be considered. For example, some students can complete an activity early because the task is too easy and not because their effort was superficial. Similarly, they can take a lot of time to complete a task because the task is particularly difficult and not because they had problems planning the work. They can go to the toilet not to escape from a task that they do not like, but because they really need to go. They can study for only a short time before a test because the test is based on memorization more than on the acquisition of skills. Some other attitudes can be the result of habits, resulting in a lack of practice with a given skill, which could have a cultural origin. For example, if a teacher explains to students how to ask questions and insists that the students do so, little by little they will learn. In the case of this example, the attitude of a teacher towards questions can foster or discourage the formation of the new habit. If a teacher welcomes *any kind* of questions without judging them, then students will probably become more courageous about asking questions in the future.

It is clear that a lack in EFs in students can affect their learning, and therefore a good teacher should take EFs seriously. This means that the role of a teacher cannot be only to provide students with appealing learning opportunities, but must also be to protect students from their own disruptive behaviors through class management and to help students to improve their EFs through both class management and learning activities. Only in this way can students get the most from classroom activities and become responsible citizens. This is especially true with university students, rather than with adult students, because it is thought that the EFs of typical university students are not yet mature, due to both social and educational factors (see 3.1) and age-related neurobiological factors (see chapter 5). In particular, our belief is that in the case of typical university students, if a teacher does not care about factors like student motivation, attention, and emotions, that lack of care could be more devastating than it would be with adult students.

In addition, a link can be seen between EFs and autonomy, EFs and beliefs (e.g., the fixed mindset; see note no. 60), and EFs and motivation. In our view, autonomous students are students who know what they can and cannot do with the language that they are studying; they can concentrate on a task, think and act differently accordingly to the task, make proposals, and ask questions when needed. Furthermore, their behaviors and choices are not influenced by their peers. Motivated students are students who can better concentrate on a goal and act in order to pursue it, such as studying to get a good grade on a test. By contrast, less developed EFs could undermine motivation because of a gap between what students would like to achieve and what they are able to do. Also, poor results despite whatever efforts students have put forward could contribute to the formation of a fixed mindset; students could begin to believe that they have no talent for language learning, and thus stop putting in the necessary effort. Moreover, students with fixed mindsets can refuse to carry on to new and more challenging tasks.

In other words, improving student EFs should result in an increase in student autonomy and motivation, and a shift into a mindset more open to learning opportunities. In turn, this should lead to qualitatively better and more lasting learning.

2.2 The four pillars of learning

In the previous section, we showed examples of possible student attitudes and their relationships to immature EFs. These attitudes can negatively affect what Dehaene (2020) calls the four pillars of learning: attention, active engagement, error feedback, and learning consolidation. Next, we explain how fundamental these four pillars are.

2.2.1 Attention

A lack of attention can lead to cognitive blindness, which means that one cannot see objects and details when one's attention is not oriented toward them (Simons and Chabris, 1999). If there is no attention, there can be no learning (Leong et al., 2017). For example, Fisher et al. (2014) showed that a too heavily decorated classroom can negatively influence student performance; we believe that the same negative influence could be exerted by too heavily decorated teaching materials (e.g., textbooks).

Another factor that can lead to poor performance is the use of electronic devices (like smartphones) in class for non-academic purposes (Glass & Kang, 2018). Even their presence can affect learning, probably because students are led to fantasize about what they would do at a given moment if they had such devices in their hands, thus distracting them from their lessons (Thornton et al., 2014).

2.2.2 Active engagement

Active engagement means making a substantial cognitive effort; if students are not helped by the teacher but are forced to leverage only their own mental strength, they engage more because they are more curious (Bonawitz et al., 2011), and thus learn more. According to Zaromb et al. (2010: 552, abstract), "Making learning conditions more difficult, thus requiring students to engage more cognitive effort, often leads to enhanced retention." Furthermore, a review of studies in undergraduate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses showed that active learning is more effective than lecturing (Freeman et al., 2014). This means that teachers need to believe in the intrinsic learning skills of their students and intervene only when necessary.

Active engagement is the moving spirit of meaningful learning, the type of learning in which, contrary to rote learning, knowledge is fully understood through authentic experiences and by working with peers. Such learning is the basis of constructivism (see Jonassen, 1994). Meaningful learning exhibits seven distinctive qualities: it is active (i.e., learners are responsible for the learning process), constructive (i.e., new knowledge is accommodated into prior knowledge; it is constructed, not reproduced), collaborative (i.e., knowledge is built by social negotiation among learners—there is no competition; the teacher is a coach, not a dispenser of knowledge), intentional (i.e., learners consciously want to achieve a learning objective), conversational (i.e., learning is a dialogical process—a conversation, not a reception), contextualized (i.e., learning tasks are authentic, meaning that they can be found in real life), and reflective (i.e., learners articulate what they learned and reflect on the learning process instead of simply repeating what they have learned; it is a reflection, not a prescription) (Jonassen, 1995).

In order to engage actively, students should be curious to learn. Curiosity can emerge when a task is perceived to not be too simple or too difficult (Kidd et al., 2012; 2014), when the information is surprising (Kang et al., 2009), or when people want to fill the gap between what they know and what they would like to know (Loewenstein, 1994). Thus, activities should be cognitively complex and surprising, and they should give students the possibility to notice what they cannot do yet in order that they can decide whether they would like to be able to do those things.

Considering the behaviors listed in 2.1, we also suggest that the activities are of a duration suited to the level and degree of familiarity of the students. Furthermore, in order for students to engage actively, they should:

- sleep enough;
- be sufficiently relaxed;
- concentrate on the activities and be free from any kind of distraction;
- be advised that if they do not like the current activity, they need to be patient because opportunities will be presented in the future to do activities that they like more.

According to Holdsworth et al. (2017), doing cognitively complex activities, together with working with classmates, doing extracurricular activities, and having a good relationship with a teacher based on trust have one more positive side: they allow students to develop resilience. This is a skill that can be useful in the future, as resilient people are thought to be able to manage stress, which leads to a healthier life. Regarding this point, Holdsworth et al. (2017) state:

The results identified that for students, university education is more than the development of discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Universities also play a central role in the development of resilience. Resilience is recognised by students as a key capability that is critical to their academic success as well as to other spheres of their life. Students acknowledged that within the university context resilience is complex and dynamic, and that development of resilience occurs through an interactive process in which both the learner and the university are central. It is vital that higher education co-evolves with its students, and this requires that their voice is central in relation to their identified needs.

From this viewpoint, students need to acknowledge that errors are positive and inevitable in order to learn. In other words, they should be in a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006/2008).

2.2.3 Error feedback

Rescorla and Wagner (1972: 75) also advocate for the crucial roles of surprise, making errors, and receiving feedback on these errors when they state that “organisms only learn when events violate their expectations.” Of course, error feedback is not just the direct feedback received from a teacher; it can also be indirectly received from the teacher and classmates, or through receptive activities (listening and reading). For example, if a student who is used to using the wrong form “Io ando” to say “I go” in Italian, but they have the chance to listen to someone else using the correct form “Io vado”, they could notice that this form is different from theirs.

In order to increase the possibility of an error being noticed, our four pieces of advice in subsection 2.2.2 is still valid.

2.2.3.1 Grades as an extrinsic motivator

An error feedback function is usually also attributed to grades. Kohn (1999: 201) writes:

Grades are justified as follows:

1. They make students perform better for fear of receiving a bad grade or in the hope of getting a good one.
2. They sort students on the basis of their performance, which is useful for college admission and job placement.

3. They provide feedback to students about how good a job they are doing and where they need improvement.

We also fundamentally agree with Kohn (1999) when he explains that rewards, in our case grades, can have a negative impact. Through their attempts to manipulate behavior, grades can punish students because they are unpleasant, disrespectful, and offensive. They can ruin relationships among students by making them less likely to cooperate, and they can ruin relationships between students and teachers by making students less likely to ask for help. Grades do not indicate the causes of bad performance and therefore do not give the possibility for improvement. Rewards do not promote risk-taking, meaning people will do the bare minimum to get them. Grades can affect intrinsic motivation⁴ and, therefore, learning. Finally, grades create a dependence on the teacher.

We do not believe in the necessity and efficiency of the error feedback function of grades, but we do believe that by using the language during classroom activities, students will learn to evaluate themselves and will develop their self-monitoring skills (see 2.1). However, we also think that the other disadvantages noted by Kohn (1999) emerge mainly when grades are treated as punishments rather than as consequences, and when teachers put excessive emphasis on them. Grades as punishments look like revenge from the teacher, in which consciously or unconsciously the aim is to humiliate students; the teacher does not show empathy. Grades as consequences are the unavoidable result of lack of study; furthermore, the teacher can show empathy (i.e., they can be sorry for a bad result).

If grades are used as punishments, the relationship between students and teachers could be damaged, and students may be less likely to learn from that teacher. By contrast, if grades are consequences, the relationship between students and teachers remains safe, and therefore students are keener to learn that every action has consequences and that changing those consequences is up to them.

In a context where many people come to university not because of a desire to learn but in order to get a degree that hopefully can be useful to get a job, or because nowadays so many people go to university (see 3.1), it is unrealistic for a teacher to assume that they can motivate every student intrinsically (Mariani, 2008). Therefore, in order to increase student attention and active engagement, teachers need to leverage extrinsic motivation in a moderate way.

If a teacher does not put excessive emphasis on grades, students will be more likely to keep cooperating, and problems between students and teachers are more likely to be rare. Likewise, students will be more likely to take risks, especially if teachers will also evaluate their active engagement during the lessons, which can include requests for help when necessary, and not only focusing on tests. Students will understand better the reasons for their grades if evaluation criteria are made clear in advance, if they are requested to engage actively (i.e., to use the language), and if they can ask teachers the reasons for their grades. Furthermore, by emphasizing autonomous work in class, the risk of creating dependence on the teacher can be mitigated.

2.2.4 Learning consolidation

The last pillar is learning consolidation, which comes not only by practicing but also by sleeping. How much and how deeply one sleeps is important. Not only does sleep prevent forgetting what one has learned during the day (Jenkins & Dallenbach, 1924), but it also allows one to learn more than that (Karni et al., 1994; Walker et al., 2003; Huber et al., 2004; Walker & Stickgold,

⁴ Intrinsic motivation is the pleasure of learning itself, while extrinsic motivation is based on rewards, like grades, which are meant to push people to study. It is usually believed that the most effective motivation is intrinsic.

2004; Stickgold, 2005). For these reasons, the quality and length of sleep that students get should be a teacher concern.

2.3 Humanistic approach

In line with the constructivist approach (see 2.2.2) is a humanistic approach. A humanistic approach is centered on humans, and therefore a course that uses this approach should take into account the interests and needs of students. This should be helpful to increase student motivation and, as a result, the attention and active engagement that we discussed earlier in this chapter. Unfortunately, there is usually a gap between what course content covers and what students like:

When students talk about what they want to and are interested and attentive, teachers often feel they are off the subject and must get back to the content. Yet when students *do* talk about what relates to them, there *is* increased attention. [...] Dropouts don't leave school because we didn't give them enough facts, but because they don't find any meaning in them.⁵ (Moskowitz, 1978: 8)

The need to change curricula is clear:

Many students remain disenchanted with school and the subjects they take. Teaching still tends to consist of boring hours of listening and being expected to learn insignificant minutiae. And school has long been a place where many come to have a low regard for themselves as learners and subsequently as human beings. True curriculum reform calls for more than considering the academic side of education and giving lip service to the personal aspect. We must consider that many problems *in* school are caused by the problems *with* school.⁶ (Moskowitz, 1978: 9)

Therefore, students need to be taught in the whole, not just intellectually but also emotionally, and this can be achieved by knowledge construction through student feelings:

Traditionally education has poured the content into the student. Affective education draws it out of the student. It recognizes that anyone who teaches is automatically dealing with students' feelings, which are always present. These are bound to affect learning and should be put to use in teaching. How you feel about what you learn as you learn influences how you learn. Customarily the feelings of students are overlooked or denied in learning. Think how often students are told, "You shouldn't feel that way." (Moskowitz, 1978: 12)

Note that humanistic teaching does not amount to permissiveness, and it is not just about giving students the possibility to talk about their personal lives; it goes deeper:

It goes far beyond studying a unit dealing with the family or the house and then asking such questions as "How many brothers and sisters do *you* have?" or "What furniture is in *your* bedroom?" In a sense, these "personal" questions are impersonal. They share factual, superficial data about students. Affective questions dealing with these same themes might be: How does it feel to be the oldest (youngest, or middle) child? What advantages and disadvantages are there? What special object do you display in your room that gives you pleasant memories? What does it mean to you? What do you think of when you look at it? These kinds of personal questions share the person that really *is*. [...] The foreign language teacher can provide content that *is* truly interesting and meaningful to

5 Italics in the original.

6 Italics in the original.

students—the study of themselves. Talking about their own growth and development, sharing what *is* important to them, and participating in personally reinforcing interaction seldom found in other parts of the curriculum are valued areas of *communication*: the very essence of language learning.⁷ (Moskowitz, 1978: 15-16)

2.4 Teaching styles

Although talent is often thought to be genetic, the main reason for success has been shown to be extended sustained deliberate practice, which relies on motivation, concentration, an optimal learning environment, and quality training (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson et al., 2009). Students need to always be pushed beyond their limits in order for learning to take place:

Merely performing the same practice activities repeatedly on a regular daily schedule will not lead to further change once a physiological and cognitive adaptation to the current demand has been achieved. The central attribute of deliberate practice is that individuals seek out new challenges that demand concentration and effort as long as they want to keep improving their performance beyond its current level. As individuals' level of performance increases, the effort required to improve performance increases as well. Further improvement requires increased challenges and engagement in activities selected to improve current performance—deliberate practice. (Ericsson et al., 2009: 213)

Learning is not just a matter of gaining experience, but also of focusing on the specific aspects one would like to improve and engaging actively in order to achieve these objectives (see also 2.2.2):

[I]t is not simply prolonged engagement in domain-specific activities that is associated with expert performance. Only with full concentration on improving a specific aspect of performance during practice activities would those activities be considered 'deliberate practice.' This type of practice requires intense concentration on improving particular aspects of performance and thus leads to modification of mechanisms responsible for improvement, unlike mere engagement which leads to repeated execution of the performance and development of automaticity [...] or arrested development [...]. (Ericsson & Towne, 2010: 409)

As noted in 2.1, teachers need to choose a teaching style that supports student concentration and active engagement, and that takes care of student emotions in order to improve their cognition (see 2.3).

There are several possible teaching styles; their number, types, and characteristics vary according to different authors. The following table is our personal formulation, and it takes into account the works of Lewin et al. (1939), Baumrind (1966; 1971), Gordon (1991), Rattan et al. (2012) and Bernstein (2013a).

Table 1. Teaching styles.

	Authoritarian	Authoritative	Fixed mindset-permissive	Fearful-permissive
Educational rationale	Students are heads to fill; there is no room for considering	Any student can change. They must be guided so that they can give their best. However, taking their	Students cannot change, either because talent is innate or because they are too old to change. Leaving students in	Students are individuals to be afraid of and not to be trusted. Better

⁷ Italics in the original.

	their opinions and feelings. Achievement is important.	opinions and feelings into consideration is important. Achievement is important.	their comfort zones is the only thing to do.	to indulge them so as not to have problems. The teacher is not interested in student achievement but in having no trouble and keeping their classes (this is especially common for part-time teachers, whose employment contracts may be up for renewal regularly).
Policy and methodology	Determined by the teacher and not justified. No objections are permitted. The teacher is consistent and clear on what students are expected to do. ⁸	Determined by the teacher, but can be modified according to student needs to some extent. Strategies can be used (e.g., Sleight of Mouth patterns) ⁹ to support students who are not very accepting of the policy and methodology. The teacher is consistent and clear on what students are expected to do.	Determined by the teacher but can completely change to please student needs. The teacher is not consistent or clear on what students are expected to do.	There is no clear policy and methodology. The teacher asks students to do only the minimum. The teacher is not consistent or clear on what students are expected to do.
Teacher involvement in teaching	Low.	High.	High.	Low.
Teacher-student relationship	Tense with some students. The teacher especially remembers the names of students who	The teacher is friendly, but does not aim to be considered a friend or a family member. The teacher soon remembers all student names.	The teacher is considered a parent (or an older sibling or grandparent, according to the age) or even a friend. The teacher soon remembers all student	Minimal relationship. The teacher especially remembers the names of the students who

8 Consistency is a good ally for teachers. Kidd et al. (2013) have shown that if a teacher is considered reliable, the possibility that the students will show more self-control increases. The participants of the experiment were children, but the results probably apply to college students as well.

9 Sleight of Mouth patterns are particular uses of language, based on Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which aims to influence the beliefs of people (Dilts, 1999).

	work hard.		names.	disrupt or could cause trouble.
Student learning autonomy	No.	Yes.	No.	No.
Syllabus, activities, and materials	Determined by the teacher <i>a priori</i> and cannot be changed. The lessons are the same every year. Weak students and failures are ignored.	Adjusted periodically, according to student performance, needs, motivations, and beliefs. The activities are challenging, as the teacher always tries to push students beyond their limits to let them go out from their comfort zone. No students are ignored. The high expectations of the teacher usually result in higher student achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).	Adjusted by the teacher to accommodate the students who perform the worst. The activities are not challenging because the teacher thinks some or many students lack the ability to complete them.	Determined by the teacher <i>a priori</i> , but it is ok if students do not learn what they should. The lessons are the same every year.
Type of work	Lectures and maybe individual work, in order not to lose class control.	Pair work, so that the students can make the most of class time. Individual work only in the initial phase of some activities. Group work when needed by the type of activity (a few) or in particular circumstances (e.g., odd-numbered students). Whole class work for some activities.	Lectures and group work. Only the best students work, while others are free to not engage with work.	Lectures. The objective is to show that the teacher did their job.
Support and feedback	No support during activities. All solutions are provided at the end.	Support provided during activities if explicitly requested. At the end of form-focused activities, students can ask a limited number of questions on any aspect, including those that were not the focus of the activity.	Too much support provided, including during activities themselves, even when not explicitly requested.	Support and feedback not necessary.
Praise	Praise related to ability.	Praise related to effort, not ability, and only if	Praise related to effort and ability, even when	Praise avoided.

		deserved. ¹⁰	not deserved. Furthermore, the teacher can unintentionally decrease student motivation with comments like “Don’t worry, not everyone is good at learning foreign languages,” because they think that some students lack the ability.	
Discipline	High. Punishment for those who do not observe the rules or follow the instructions.	High. Consequences (see 2.2.3.1) for those who do not observe the rules or follow the instructions.	Low. No punishment or consequences because the teacher is afraid of stressing the students.	Low. No punishment or consequences because the teacher is scared of possible student reactions.
Exams and Evaluation	The teacher rewards outcome. They are not flexible with submission times. Students must work hard.	The teacher rewards outcome. They are flexible with submission times because they know students work at different speeds. Students must work hard.	The teacher rewards outcome and effort. They offer extra support (like summary tables, lecture notes, etc.), lower standards, extra points, and extra homework in order to try to pass all the students. In the case of failing grades, exams can be repeated. For the same reason, they are flexible with submission times. The teacher can let students choose the type of the test they like best. High grades are frequently awarded.	Regardless of the results, the teacher passes everyone because they does not want to get in trouble. High grades are frequently awarded.

Noted that the table above is purely indicative. Furthermore, teachers often do not follow just one style, and their style can also be influenced by university policies. Such a mix of styles and a lack of uniformity of the styles used by every single teacher of the same institution, faculty, or

¹⁰ In some experiments on children, Muellerer and Dweck (1998: 48) found that “[c]hildren praised for intelligence after success chose problems that allowed them to continue to exhibit good performance (representing a performance goal), whereas children praised for hard work chose problems that promised increased learning.” In other words, if students learn that success is important, they will try to avoid failure by making less effort and trying to avoid mistakes. In a language class, this can mean that students will use the language as little as possible and, consequently, may not learn much.

department can confuse students. Moreover, if most teachers use a permissive style, a teacher who decides to use an authoritative style can have a hard time.

Although fixed mindset-permissive and fearful-permissive styles are used for different reasons, they have in common that chaos will reign in the classroom because the teacher abdicates their duty to maintain discipline by ignoring students who disturb the class or do something else. According to Gordon (1991), in the teacher this can generate a grudge towards students and teaching, causing students to lose respect for their teacher and become dissatisfied because this kind of environment is not suitable for learning.

The authoritarian style is flawed in that it does not allow student freedom and seeks to control student behavior with power. As Gordon (1991) points out, this could generate grudges in the students, dependence on the teacher, or a lack of collaboration with peers.

As shown in Table 1, these three teaching styles (authoritarian, fixed mindset-permissive, and fearful permissive) do not challenge student EFs, and the negative environments that they create increase the levels of student stress, which further inhibits the efficacy of EFs (see 5.3).

The authoritative style is in an intermediate position between the authoritarian style and the two permissive styles. The teacher asks the students to respect the rules but, at the same time, they aim to create a positive relationship with the students based on mutual respect, by taking into account student opinions and needs. All this is necessary to create a fruitful learning environment. Furthermore, the teacher provides challenging activities so that the students can go out of their comfort zones, and therefore have the chance to overcome their limits and learn as much as possible. As Baumrind (1966) states, the decisions of authoritative teachers are not based on student consensus or desires.

As will be discussed in 3.1, in today's society, students are coddled and hyper-protected by family and society, universities included. As such, permissive styles are rampant. According to Bernstein (2013a), the result is that students have "an artificially inflated level of self-esteem, an underdeveloped sense of responsibility, overdeveloped sense of entitlement, minimal respect for authority and a readiness to blame others for their own shortcomings." Society treats students as children, to whom everything has to be explained in detail to let them understand. Some students use this weakness to their advantage. For example, if they receive a failing grade, they can argue that the evaluation criteria were not clear enough or that the teacher was unfair. If they are cunning, they can find excuses by looking for loopholes in the rules regarding what is permissible during exams.

According to Walker (2008), the authoritative style provides "an optimal context for student engagement and learning through its demands for student autonomy, effective classroom management, and responsiveness." Furthermore, when an authoritative style is used, students get ready for life after university (where they will need to adjust to society, not the opposite) and can realize how much they can accomplish by themselves (Bernstein, 2013b).

The authoritative style seems to include all the characteristics that Niemiec and Ryan (2009: 141) believe can lead to remarkable academic achievement: autonomy, competence, and relatedness:

Strategies for enhancing autonomy include providing choice and meaningful rationales for learning activities, acknowledging students' feelings about those topics, and minimizing pressure and control. Strategies for enhancing competence include providing effectance-relevant, as opposed to norm-based evaluative, feedback and optimally challenging tasks. Strategies for enhancing relatedness include conveying warmth, caring, and respect to students.

Challenging students means also believing in their capabilities. The positive expectations of teachers have been shown to increase student success (Becker, 2013).

Considering the present discussion, we believe that a teacher who cares about the growth of their students should use an authoritative style, in order to create the optimal environment in which students can focus on activities and be cognitively challenged. However, the reasons that a teacher could refrain from doing so can be various. One is that a teacher could ignore how much their teaching style can affect their students and, in particular, the poor results that authoritarian and permissive styles can cause (Hutchinson et al., 2016). Another reason, also shown in Table 1, is probably born from the misconception that talent is innate and unchangeable, or that after a certain age, students cannot possibly improve. One more reason could be that an authoritative style requires hard work, not only from students but also from teachers as well. Finally, as we will discuss in the next subsection, teachers may fear being negatively evaluated by students and potentially losing their classes or jobs as a result.

2.4.1 Student evaluation of teaching

Some teachers give high grades and create a low workload in the hope of getting good student evaluations and also to ensure a minimum number of enrolled students. This would avoid the risk for courses being closed. The efficacy of this strategy has been confirmed by some researchers (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997; Johnson, 2002). However, other researchers have come to different conclusions. For example, Marsh and Roche (2000: 226) found that what teachers can do to have good evaluations is not to grade leniently or to have a low workload, but “to provide demanding and challenging materials, to facilitate student efforts to master the materials, and to encourage them to value their learning—in short, to be good teachers.”

In the three studies above, researchers looked for a correlation between grading leniency and low workload against favorable course evaluations. We think that for many students a highly engaging and useful course is more important than grades and workload, but they will probably evaluate less engaging and useful courses that provide good grades and a low workload more highly. The risk that students may evaluate less favorably an engaging and useful course, one which asks them to go beyond their comfort zones and to rethink their beliefs regarding learning, is higher during the first year of study; once they get used to such classes, their evaluations may be more generous.

Uttl et al. (2017: 40) state:

Despite more than 75 years of sustained effort, there is presently no evidence supporting the widespread belief that students learn more from professors who receive higher SET¹¹ ratings. [...] In turn, our findings indicate that depending on their institutional focus, universities and colleges may need to give appropriate weight to SET ratings when evaluating their professors. Universities and colleges focused on student learning may need to give minimal or no weight to SET ratings. In contrast, universities and colleges focused on students' perceptions or satisfaction rather than learning may want to evaluate their faculty's teaching using primarily or exclusively SET ratings, emphasize to their faculty members the need to obtain as high SET ratings as possible (i.e., preferably the perfect ratings), and systematically terminate those faculty members who do not meet the standards.

In order to make teachers care more for the growth of their students than for their course evaluations, universities must not use student evaluations to assess the work of teachers. Love and Kotchen (2010) show that an emphasis on teaching evaluations, as well as on research productivity, can result in grade inflation and a decrease in lesson quality. Furthermore, factors like grade inflation, low workload, ignored discipline problems, etc., may enhance student academic

11 Student evaluation of teaching.

entitlement: the tendency to expect good grades regardless their actual skill and effort. This is probably already high in some students because of pressure from their parents to get better grades than other students, a result which parents often reward. This could emphasize the extrinsic motivation to the study (Greenberger et al., 2008), which could lead to a lower quality of learning.

2.5 Learning styles and intelligence preferences

Other aspects that could affect motivation, and therefore attention and active engagement, are thought to be learning styles and intelligence preferences.

The two concepts are often confused or considered the same. In reality, a learning style relates to *how* a person prefers to learn, while an intelligence is an *aptitude*, which relates to content. For example, someone with a talent in math could not excel in it if it was taught in a way that was different from how they learn best.

Researchers have classified people under various kinds of intelligences and learning styles. The most well-known learning-style model is probably the VAK model. According to this model, students could be visual (preference for learning through images), auditory (preference for learning through sounds) or kinesthetic (preference for learning through body movement) learners (Barbe & Swassing, 1979). Regarding intelligence preferences, the most well-known taxonomy is probably the one proposed in Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983). Gardner (1983) theorizes nine intelligences: linguistic (verbal skills and sensitivity to words), logical-mathematical (logic skills and sensitivity to numbers), spatial (sensitivity to images), kinesthetic bodily (body movement and manual skills), musical (sensitivity to sounds), interpersonal (empathic skills), intrapersonal (self-awareness skills), naturalist (sensitivity to plants, animals, etc.) and existential (sensitivity to human existence).

In a course, some learning styles and intelligences can be addressed more than others because of the content, the methodology, or the teaching style used. Therefore, some students can feel more comfortable than others. For example, in a conversation class, like that discussed in 3.2, auditory and kinesthetic learners are usually more often (or exclusively) addressed than visual learners are.

According to learning style and multiple intelligence theories, students are more motivated and learn better when the teaching they receive matches their ways of learning and talents. However, students can develop learning styles and intelligences in areas in which they are weaker in order to make them better learners and make the most of their lessons (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Matching student learning styles and intelligences can result in an increase in motivation for two reasons: students can feel that the teacher cares about their needs, and they can use the learning mode in which they feel more gifted. These two factors should increase their chances to succeed (Zull, 2002; Putcha & Rinvoluceri, 2005; Rosenberg, 2013).

Agreeing with these authors would seem easy; an increase of motivation, which is the expected result of the two mentioned factors, should lead to more effective learning because of an increase of attention and memory (Duan et al., 2020). However, no reliable scientific evidence has been found for the existence of learning styles (Pashler et al., 2009) or multiple intelligences (Waterhouse, 2006). Although the researchers acknowledge the existence of learning and intelligence preferences, when it comes to connecting a preference for a kind of learning or an intelligence preference with a teaching practice, no evidence has been found that matching those preferences leads to better learning. Despite this lack of evidence and the fact that now many authors classify learning styles and multiple intelligences as neuromyths (e.g., Geake, 2008), 90% of educators around the world still believe that matching student learning styles will result in improvement (Newton & Salvi, 2020).

Because of this lack of evidence, Pashler et al. (2009) suggest that a teaching style should match the subjects that students need to learn rather than their preferred learning style. For example, to learn to speak a foreign language, students need to speak it, not to write it, even though writing is what they may prefer. However, Pashler et al. (2009: 116) continue, this does not rule out “that a particular student will *sometimes*¹² benefit from having a particular kind of course content presented in one way versus another.” Pashler et al. (2009) also highlight that if some procedures enhance the capacity of students to learn something, then those procedures will do it with *all* of the students. Therefore, according to Pashler et al. (2009: 117),

[g]iven the capacity of humans to learn, it seems especially important to keep all avenues, options, and aspirations open for our students, our children, and ourselves. Toward that end, we think the primary focus should be on identifying and introducing the experiences, activities, and challenges that enhance everybody’s learning.

However, our doubt remains: why does an increase of motivation not lead to better learning? One interpretation of Pashler et al. (2009) comes from Tokuhama-Espinosa (2011). Tokuhama-Espinosa (2011) thinks that, although the existence of learning styles could not be shown, this does not mean that they do not exist. According to Tokuhama-Espinosa (2011), teachers can see evidence of these styles in their classes. The undeniability of the existence of different ways of learning based on experience is also supported by Mariani (2010). However, Willingham (2009: 157) suspects that teacher anecdotes could be due to a *confirmation bias*: “Once we believe something, we unconsciously interpret ambiguous situations as being consistent with what we already believe.” In other words, if, after explaining a concept in another way, the student gets it, teachers who believe in learning styles would attribute the reason to learning styles, dismissing other possible explanations. Therefore, saying that an increase in learning is directly dependent on the application of learning style (or multiple intelligence) theory is difficult.

Tokuhama-Espinosa’s (2011) explanation is certainly persuasive. However, we would like to propose a possible alternative. We start from the assumption that the improvement resulting from a learning-style match is not due to the fact that the students can use their preferred learning style (or intelligence), but because they feel addressed, respected by their teacher. This improvement did not occur in the experiments probably because the students knew that the situations were experiments and that the students were not authentically addressed. In short, the key to their success would be the emotional factor. According to this reasoning, though a teacher may not match student learning styles, if they shows respect in other ways (e.g., by adapting the activities when possible or by listening seriously to student concerns), learning should improve.

Other times, updating student belief systems with appropriate strategies is necessary, such as using Sleight of Mouth patterns (see note no. 9). For example, as discussed elsewhere (Diodato, 2017a), students often hold the belief of “doing it perfectly” (see note no. 28). In our opinion, this belief can be traced back to a learning style defined as “analytical,” which is not part of the aforementioned VAK model. Analytic learners are interested in accuracy and details. If we can help students to see a situation from a different point of view, what they initially saw as a failure can be seen as a success. For example, it is necessary to explain to students that in an activity like *authentic listening* (see 3.3.1.1), the aim is not to understand everything. Such understanding is impossible because what they are going to listen to is real language. The aim of the activity is to try to understand more, even just a little more, than they did the first time that they listened to a recording (students usually listen to the same conversation six times). Although at the beginning students can be incredulous because of their previous experiences as language learners, they will usually accept it as a “rule of the game.” Similarly, if at the end of *oral free production* (see 3.3.1.3), the teacher

12 Italics added.

praises the students for the amount of time they kept speaking in the foreign language, progressively the students will understand that *how much* they speak is more important than *how correctly* they do it (Catizone et al., 1997).

All that said, as the research at the moment does not lead to a clear conclusion, teachers would be safer to take into account student learning styles and multiple intelligences when possible. Furthermore, regardless of the veracity of these theories, matching student preferences brings variation in lessons, and this could enhance all student motivation, and consequentially learning, by itself.

Mariani (2010) highlights another advantage of matching presumed student preferences, namely avoiding conflict. Rosenberg (2013: 14), for her part, insists on mediation, too: “Listening to our learners and taking their suggestions on board (*when possible*)¹³ makes them more comfortable in our classroom and gives them the feeling that we also have an interest in seeing them do well.” The clarification from Rosenberg is crucial. She seems to suggest that a teacher should match the preferred mode of learning for students *only if* doing so does not abandon the objectives of an activity. Humphris (2006) is of the same view, suggesting that a teacher should make adaptations (changing what is changeable to meet student needs without giving up on objectives) rather than compromises (finding a middle way that involves the at least partial renunciation of the objectives).¹⁴ This is perhaps the reason that Rosenberg (2013: 10) states: “Sometimes, just adding a short activity to a lesson can broaden the appeal to different learner styles and be an efficient way of increasing the knowledge and motivation of a learner.” After all, the role of a teacher is to try to bring out the best from their students (see 2.4.1), and this entails getting them gradually accustomed to use modalities that they are not used to if these are essential in order to achieve certain objectives. Leamson (1999: 92) also seems to be of this opinion:

Most of us like doing what we do well and can be put out of sorts when asked to do the unfamiliar. But doing the unfamiliar is what learning is. A liberal education, one that liberates through empowerment, cannot consist in accommodating only those interests a student bring to enterprise. My position is that learning styles are themselves learned. And if you can learn one, you can learn two, or seven.

In other words, the effort of a teacher must also be geared towards enabling students to be able to choose the most suitable learning strategies for achieving certain objectives. The formation of random pairs during class activities (regarding pair work, see 3.3.2) could help to achieve this goal. Students can experience satisfaction when matched with other students with similar learning styles or intelligence preferences, while also possibly broadening their skills when they are matched with students with different learning styles or intelligence preferences.

Finally, excessive emphasis on learning styles and multiple intelligences can also be deleterious. Some students (and parents) might attribute poor performance to a poor choice of strategies by a teacher who has chosen those that do not suit their preferences. The risk that students will use strategies that are not effective for achieving the specific goals of an activity, despite the suggestion to do otherwise from a teacher, is also high. One final risk could be that if a teacher gives priority to learning styles and intelligence preferences rather than the goals of activities, their teaching strategies could be not cognitively appropriate in achieving those goals, which would slow down student learning.

2.6 Other factors that could affect learning

¹³ Italics added.

¹⁴ For a discussion on possible adaptations according to student beliefs regarding learning and teaching, see Diodato (2017a).

Other factors could also affect the quality of learning. For example, Wesnes et al. (2003) showed that when students skip breakfast, their degree of attention and their memory suffers.¹⁵ Also, the day of the week can impact performance. Students have been shown to be less capable of concentrating and less motivated on Mondays and Fridays (Wammes et al., 2016; Diodato, 2017b).¹⁶

Note that while student outcomes depend in part on teachers, these outcomes are not just a matter of the skills of teachers. According to Duckworth et al. (2009: 545), student grades may increase depending on teacher grit, meaning their passion and persistence for the job and their life satisfaction: “Teachers higher in life satisfaction may be more adept at engaging their pupils, and their zest and enthusiasm may spread to their students.”

We believe that a good teacher should consider any aspect that can influence student learning, including those aspects of life outside of the classroom.

15 Participants of this study were children.

16 In the study of Wammes et al. (2016), students attended classes only on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

3. Context and methodology

In this chapter, we describe the context of our research (see chapter 4), the teaching method used, and the activities within the teaching method that we use most. First, we shed further light on the peculiarities of our type of learners in relation to contemporary Japanese society, and we describe the learning context within the Department of Italian Linguistics in which we work.

Second, as mentioned in chapter 1, we show how our teaching method largely satisfies the requirements for effective learning that were highlighted in the previous chapter: motivation, attention, active engagement (cognitive complexity), meaningful learning, error feedback, care for student needs and interests, an authoritative style, and care for learning styles and intelligence preferences. The main theories of acquisition of a foreign language on which our method is based are also highlighted.

A special place in most of activities is given to pair work, and therefore we explain the didactic need for using pair work rather than group work or whole class work.

The choice of the activities and the methodology relate to two other important factors: the syllabus and the evaluation of students. We also discuss how these factors can lead to effective learning.

3.1 Japanese university students and contemporary society

Some people criticize young people today as being very different from the young people that they were. They say that this is because society has changed and that parents are more indulgent today than they were in the past.

First, we looked at the characteristics of contemporary society in order to look for an eventual confirmation to this criticism and to find out the causes of the phenomenon. A first clue comes from Caine et al. (2016). Cain et al. (2016) suggest that in the United States, students today have fewer chances to use and then develop their EFs (see 2.1). This is due to the reduced amount of time that parents spend with their children because of an increasing number of families in which both parents work, and possibly due to access to a great amount of information, thanks to modern technologies such as TV, video games, the Internet, movies, etc. In other words, children today have access to more information than children once did, but they have fewer chances to think critically about this information, and therefore to develop their EFs. In the past, parents usually addressed their children's lack of counterfactuality, the ability to think about the consequences of their actions (e.g., parents set goals for their children and made sure that they studied), and they discussed with their children the knowledge that they had acquired. The fact that EFs are not innate, that they need to be practiced (which Caine et al. (2016) seem to suggest), is supported by Welsh et al. (2010).

The hypothesis presented by Caine et al. (2016) is based on statistics concerning families in the United States. In order to verify the plausibility of this hypothesis in our context, we analyzed some statistics concerning Japanese society. Unsurprisingly, we also found that in Japan the number of families with both partners working has consistently increased (Zaimushō, 2015) and most of such families have children (Sōmushō tōkeikyoku, 2018). Furthermore, in families where both parents work, husbands can dedicate only 12 minutes a day to children, while wives can only dedicate 45 minutes (Sōmushō, 2012). In families where only the husband works, husbands can dedicate 19 minutes a day to children, and wives can dedicate 2 hours and 1 minute. In either scenario, the amount of time that wives can dedicate to their children seems small. This is because they dedicate more time to other kinds of housework (5 hours and 42 minutes for wives who do not work versus 4 hours and 8 minutes for those who do) and their leisure time (5 hours and 55 minutes for those who do not work versus 4 hours and 38 minutes for those who do). As also mentioned by Sōmushō (2012), even when wives work, the time that they dedicate to housework is much more

than what husbands do (only 27 minutes). The reason seems to be that husbands work 8 hours and 30 minutes, while wives work 4 hours and 34 minutes.

Almost 40% of families with a child of no more than 6 years old receive help taking care of the child from other people, in most cases members of the family (e.g., grandparents) (Sōmushō, 2012). Although it is not clear from the statistics, we suppose that the most of the remaining 60% prefer to send their children to school.

The statistics mentioned above concern children of no more than 6 years old. However, as Caine et al. (2016) include an increase in the amount of information thanks to the use of technology among the causes of less developed EFs, we suppose that the authors are referring mainly to children above this age, because such children would have more access to modern technology. Therefore, presumably the 60% who spend most of the time at school becomes 100%, and the small amount of time spent with the family, which the authors refer to, is the time before and after school or on days when lessons are not held. At this point, we wonder whether one reason for the less developed EFs in children today could be related to the smaller amounts of time that they spend with their families. After all, they are entrusted to teachers, who are adults like their parents. The answer comes again from Caine et al. (2016: 3):

Unless they are in a close relationship with an adult who engages their minds by questioning their conclusions, who helps them resolve personally relevant issues, or who helps them see the consequences of their adopted beliefs, our students are left with facts that are not tied to real-life experiences or consequences.

Caine et al. (2016: 3) also say that teachers do not fulfill the same roles as parents: “If parents do not engage children in thinking, teachers tell them only facts but don’t tie the facts to the children’s own experiences.” Furthermore, “[e]ducation that still focuses primarily on memorization is terribly inadequate. [...] *Learning that focuses predominately on facts and information must transition into more sophisticated processes that require the use of that information for relevant goals and purposes* (Caine et al., 2016: 4).”¹⁷ This means that

[e]ducators have to understand how to create classroom and process that employ the whole brain, from utilizing creativity, facts, and skills to developing healthy human relationship and working with time lines, logical procedures, and intelligent application. This kind of learning requires the use of higher-order thinking (one’s executive functions). These abilities are not separate in the brain. Neither should they be separate in education. (Caine et al., 2016: 4)

Thus, one reason that young people today have less mature EFs than young people of the past seems to be that, due to changes in society, parents no longer have as much time available as they once did to guide their children. Also, teachers, who are still tied to a traditional view of their role and that of parents find themselves in an era in which their students are inundated with more information than they once were but without the opportunity to think about that information. The invitation of Caine et al. (2016) for educators to aim for meaningful learning (see 2.2.2) at all levels of schooling in order to address this problem seems clear.

Another cause of less developed EFs can be deduced from Milani (2017). Milani (2017) believes that the change in the attitude of new generations is due to a culture of consumerism spread by the media, which has made people want everything immediately. This has led people to fail to manage their purchases (and therefore, to think critically about whether they need an item) and to be impatient. To these young people, time and effort seem to be unknown. Permissiveness is rampant. Parents teach their children that they are free to do anything, and they consult their

17 Italics in the original.

children about every decision instead of guiding them. The concept of democracy is exalted, not taking into account the different levels of knowledge and experience and the different roles each person has. School is no longer considered a place where someone can learn but is instead a place that issues degrees, which can be useful for getting a job. Milani (2017) believes that the reason lies in the pseudoculture. Both parents and children think they know everything just because they have acquired information (even though some of that information may be factually false) through the media. They freely express opinions on social networks without thinking carefully first, even when speaking with an interlocutor who is an expert in a given field or who has studied more than they have.

Although Milani (2017) presumably describes the situation in Italy, once again statistics make us assume that the situation in Japan is not all that different. In Japan, 49.7% of students go to university after high school. This number becomes 54.8% if junior colleges are also included (Monbukagakushō. Sōgō kyōiku seisakukyoku. Chōsa kikakuka, 2019). This means that, compared with students in the past, going to university is seen as normal. Similarly, 57.2% of high school students say that they are thinking of going to university after getting their diplomas (Zenkoku kōtō gakkō PTA rengōkai & Rikurūto māketingu pātonāzu, 2020).

When high school students were asked the reason that they wanted to go to university, the three most common answers were: “I would like to study something useful for my future work” (86.8%); “I want to do specialized research” (77.5%); and “I want to learn many kinds of things” (76.1%). However, the following answers were also chosen by many students: “I’m anxious about working soon” (56.0%); “I want to have free time” (42.2%); and “All the people around me go to university” (41.1%) (Benesse kyōiku sōgō kenkyūjo, 2005). Three important beliefs emerge: 1) a university degree is needed to find a job; 2) university years are a period of relaxation between high school and working life; and 3) as university education is more accessible nowadays, people who decide not to go are viewed in a bad light (peer pressure; see also 2.1 and 5.1.1). This tells a lot about the initial motivations of many university students (see 1.1).

Also interesting are the top three answers from parents about what should be considered when their children choose a university: “There is the faculty, the department or the course that my children would like to attend” (81%); “My children can enhance their interests and possibilities” (61%); and “It is useful to find a job” (54%). Only 31.9% chose “Children can deepen their knowledge of a specialized field”; 25.5% chose “The education contents are of high level”; 18.8% chose “Children can learn” (Zenkoku kōtō gakkō PTA rengōkai & Rikurūto māketingu pātonāzu, 2020). Once more, the degree often seems to be much more important than the skills that will be acquired, and not much concern (or expectation) is given regarding the quality of teaching.

Although 98.2% of high school graduates who were hunting for a job were able to find one (Monbukagakushō, 2019), which is a little higher than for university graduates (97.6%) (Kōsei rōdōshō, 2019), people who graduated university had better wages than people who graduated only from high school (Kōsei rōdōshō, 2018a). However, university graduates potentially have more chances to find jobs, because some companies look only for university graduates. The job types held by members of these groups are also different. The most common field among high school graduates is manufacturing (e.g., foodstuffs, beverages, tobacco, feed) (Kōsei rōdōshō, 2018b), while for university graduates the most common is distribution (e.g., trading companies, department stores, supermarkets, DIY shops) (Rikurūto Wākusū kenkyūjo, 2019). Therefore, better wages and different kinds of jobs, rather than the likelihood of finding a job in the first place, probably motivate many young people to go to university.

As can be seen from the statistics of several universities regarding students who graduate with majors in foreign languages (Kanda Gaiko Daigaku, n.d.; Kansai Daigaku, Gaikokugo gakubu, n.d.; Kyōto Gaikokugo Daigaku, n.d.; Kyōto Sangyō Daigaku, Gaikokugo gakubu, n.d.), which are more interesting for the purposes of this dissertation, future jobs often seem disconnected from

university curricula. This probably emphasizes the perception that study is useless and that the only aim in attending a university is to get a degree. From this perspective, teachers may not be considered valuable, and those who are not permissive can be considered obstacles between students and their future jobs (see also 2.4).

Another reason that teachers are not considered valuable connects Caine et al. (2016) with the perspective from the beginning of this section. Many teachers see their jobs as a mere transmission of notions that usually will be forgotten very soon after a test, but such transmission is an outdated concept. People can now easily find needed information often for free, thanks to the Internet. However, if students become able to do things by themselves and to think critically, they could find solutions to problems that they could face in the future even if such problems cannot be imagined in the present. Furthermore, although the university majors of students could be in different fields from that of their eventual jobs, graduates would still be able to apply their critical thinking skills to these new fields. In other words, teachers must act as *prefrontal cortex*¹⁸ trainers. More specifically, teachers must ensure that students have their EFs challenged (see 2.2.2).

More challenging lessons could also help to solve the problem of university dropouts, at least in part. According to the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (Rōdō seisaku kenkyū kenshū kikō, 2015), in Japan, the top three reasons university students decide to quit school are underachievement and apathy (42.9%), family and economic reasons (19.3%), and career-path changes (15.1%). However, according to a similar study using data from 2012 held by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (Monbukagakushō, 2014), when technical colleges were included, the first three reasons were other reasons (25.3%), economic reasons (20.4%), and change of university (15.4%). Underachievement (without the word “apathy”) was fourth (14.5%). Interesting lessons seem to be important for students. Challenging their critical thinking and knowing more about students should make them more interested. Consequently, their attention and their engagement will increase, together with their degree of achievement.

The desire to be challenged but also guided, which would imply the use of an authoritative style (see 2.4), also results from our own research, in which we asked two classes of students of Italian in the 2015-16 academic year what they would like university teachers to do, in general, to increase their motivation (Diodato, 2017b). Among the elements that emerged were the desire to have more fun lessons, the possibility of participating more actively (instead of just listening to the teacher), and the desire to be protected by teachers from distractions. The example given by a student was that if a teacher does not stop students who are chatting, these students will continue to chat, making concentration on the lesson difficult for the other students.

Knowing the students better means not only knowing what their interests are, but also knowing about their lives outside of the classroom and how these can influence their levels of motivation and the amount of time they can devote to study. This could help teachers to use more specific strategies and have more adequate expectations when it comes to their students. This is especially true for us because we are not only of a different generation than our students, but we are also from another country, and therefore we do not know exactly what being a university student means in Japan.

In order to better understand what being a university student in Japan is like, we analyzed statistics from the Japan Students Service Organization (Nihon gakusei shien kikō, 2020). In 2018, the year that the statistics refer to, 86.1% of university students worked part-time, and this took time away from their studying. By looking for the reasons that pushed students to work part-time, we found that 34.1% of them did so because they needed additional money to pay their university fees or to supplement money that they received from their families for this purpose. For such students,

18 The prefrontal cortex is the front part of the frontal lobes of the brain. It is where EFs are thought to be primarily located (see also 2.1).

although the reasons that they did not receive (enough) financial help from families was not specified, low family income could be one of them.

According to Japan Students Service Organization (Nihon gakusei shien kikō, 2020), most of the Japanese students who lived with their families needed 31-60 minutes to reach their universities, while those who lived in dormitories or rented apartments needed just 0-10 minutes to do so. This could also mean that the time required for traveling is inversely proportional to family income. We deduce that students who live close to their universities can sleep longer, so they can arrive at class more rested, and therefore have increased chances of learning. Furthermore, by having to travel less (or not at all) to get to campus, the stress levels of such students should be lower. Therefore, once again, family income could be a cause of poorer academic results.

As also mentioned by Japan Students Service Organization (Nihon gakusei shien kikō, 2020), regarding the average week of students, most of them declared that they took lessons for 16-20 hours per week and devoted 1-5 hours to homework. More than half took other courses outside of university courses, and most of those who did so devoted 1-5 hours to these other courses. More than half participated in clubs and circles (1-5 hours). Most of those who worked part-time did so for 11-15 hours and earned 9,746 yen. Most of them worked in the food and beverage service industry. They devoted 6-10 hours to amusement and meeting with friends. Furthermore, students in the last years of their degrees wrote dissertations or did research (this is not the case of our students) for 1-5 hours and went job hunting (1-5 hours). As one can see, their lives were very complex and busy and went far beyond lessons and homework. The statistics also showed that most of the students worried about whether they would be able to do the job (or graduate course) they desired after graduating. This could add further anxiety to their already frantic lives, with a possible impact on their learning.

3.2 Teaching context

Although there are normally some little differences in the curriculum from one academic year to another, the following is the current situation as we are writing this dissertation.

Annually, the approximately 25 students in the Department of Italian Linguistics (Faculty of Foreign Studies) can gain at least 50 credits (1 credit = 45 hours) on subjects regarding Italian and Italy out of the 124 credits they need to get their degrees. This is less than half of the total credits needed for graduation. For the so-called practical/experiential subjects, where traditionally students are supposed to practice what they have learned during lectures (that is, the lessons that involve theoretical explanation), students can be awarded 1 credit for lessons that are held once a week. For lectures and seminars, students are awarded 2 credits because students are believed to need to study more at home (Kyōto Sangyō Daigaku, n.d.). Seminars are still practical but are considered “research oriented” (dissertations, presentations, and discussions).¹⁹ The above credit division shows that practice, except for that which is “research oriented,” has a lower status than theory does. However, as described in detail below, it also shows that the study of the structure of a language is considered “practice.” In theory, this could suggest that the traditional explanation of grammar rules is not as desirable as active learning is. However, this is not always what happens in reality.

The academic year is divided into two terms: spring (from April to July) and autumn (from September to January of the following year). In each term, there are 15 weeks of lessons. For most of the courses there is only one lesson a week (1 lesson = 90 minutes), with the exception for

¹⁹ Although universities can decide the number of hours needed to get 1 credit, MEXT (Monbukagakushō, 2012) states that it should be between 15 and 30 hours in the case of lectures and seminars, and between 30 and 45 hours in the case of practical subjects. This means that MEXT, not the university itself, gives less importance to practical subjects than to other ones.

students of the Department of Italian Linguistics of courses in Italian conversation and structures, for which lessons are held twice a week. Therefore, while conversation and structure courses are composed of 30 lessons, the other courses are composed of 15 lessons.

Students in the Department of Italian Linguistics can study everyday Italian language only during the first two years, except for those students who go to study in Italy with our exchange program. This will be the basis of their Italian language knowledge, and it is the most important part of their Italian education because from the third year on, the chances to improve their Italian skills, above all their oral skills, are very limited, and the risk that student language skills may decrease is high. During the first two years, students attend an Italian language lesson every day, from Monday through Friday, during the first or second class period. These Italian lessons are from three different but complementary courses: *Conversation* (mentioned above), taught by a native speaker (us), in which students practice oral skills; *Structures* (also mentioned above), taught by a Japanese teacher, in which students study and practice morphosyntax rules (more morphology than syntax); and *General*, taught by another Japanese teacher, in which students mainly learn vocabulary and language expressions. As each of these courses is considered “practical,” by these lessons students will gain a total of 5 credits for each of the four semesters spent on these courses, which are subdivided as follows: 2 credits for *Conversation* (two lessons a week), 2 credits for *Structures* (two lessons a week) and 1 credit for *General* (one lesson a week).

First year students will also need to complete 4 credits for the course *Introduction to Italian Studies*. Two more credits are needed for the course *Computer Literacy for the Italian Language* (second year). From the second year on, at least 12 credits must be chosen from among *Italian linguistics, Italian literature, Italian culture, etc.* From the third year on, at least 8 credits must be chosen from among Italian language courses centered on travel and tourism, current affairs, food culture, pop culture, or business. From the second year on, 4 credits must come from courses in English regarding Italian society and Italian culture. Furthermore, students need to earn at least 4 credits from the third year on from seminars. Although many students in the Department of Italian Linguistics choose a seminar on Italy or Italian taught by a teacher in the Department, a few students choose seminars on other subjects that are taught by teachers of other departments; this is the reason we did not include these credits in the minimum total of 50 credits.

In addition to the credits of the courses mentioned above, students can obtain credits from other optional courses relating to Italian studies, thus allowing them to further increase the number of credits relating to their major.

Finally, in order to also have a general view of the continent to which the Italian language belongs, at least 4 credits of courses covering Europe are required, to be chosen from European languages, literature, culture, politics and economics, modern and contemporary European history, Latin language and culture, Polish language and culture, Greek language and culture, or intercultural communication.

3.3 Teaching method used

The teaching method we use is based on the particular communicative method developed by Dilit International House, a prestigious language school that mainly provides Italian language courses to foreigners in Rome, Italy and was founded in 1974.²⁰ Their Teacher Training Department, which “has been operating since 1977, a time when communicative teaching began to establish itself” (Dilit Formazione Insegnanti, n.d.b), is accredited by the Italian Ministry of Education. We completed their well-known and valued training course for teachers of Italian as a foreign language

²⁰ Dilit International House “was one of the first language schools in Italy to teach Italian as a Foreign Language” (Dilit International House, n.d.).

in 2010. The diploma that successful participants earn at the end of the course is the oldest qualification in the field (Dilit Formazione Insegnanti, n.d.a).

According to the Dilit International House methodology, learners are *researchers* and should be treated as such (Humphris, 1997). This is in line with the discussion regarding meaningful learning in 2.2.2. One can immediately notice how this methodology contrasts with the pedagogical vision of our university, which we discussed in the previous section. That is, language courses are all considered practical, included those on structures, which would seem to be an innovation. Unlike seminars, however, this methodology is a kind of practice that is not considered to be research-oriented. If language courses are considered practical but not research-oriented, and therefore no discoveries are expected, this would mean that they are courses in which content that students have learned elsewhere (presumably in lectures) will be practiced and applied, which is what happens traditionally. However, what is supposed to be practiced is not clear, because in theory there are not lecture courses among the three language courses mentioned earlier. In reality, to our knowledge, the structures course (and perhaps the general course, too) is disguised as a practical course. Explanation of morphosyntactic rules is involved; they are not discovered by students. The practical part of the structures course is probably that which follows the theoretical explanation. Students are asked to apply what was explained by doing mainly translation exercises. In this context, the suspicion is real that even conversation courses are seen in a veiled manner as an oral, and perhaps freer, application than is already the case in structures and probably also general courses. In other words, this division of the types of courses hides a traditional way of seeing language teaching.

What we are trying to say is that, in line with the methodology of Dilit International House and what we wrote in 2.2.2, all of the language courses should be considered research-oriented, with no distinction between lectures and practical courses. Students learn by doing, not by listening to teacher explanations and then applying them. Therefore, the distinction should be between “meaning-focused” and “form-focused” activities (see 3.3.1). That is, although the focus changes according to the aim of the activities, active student engagement must remain unchanged. Therefore, from this point of view, the lower number of credits for practical courses than for research-oriented courses is unjustified.

Teachers (and universities) need to believe that students are capable of learning by themselves. In other words, teachers cannot make students learn; learning is the responsibility of students. The teacher is the one who shows students the path, who prepares a suitable environment, and who plans activities with the aim of letting students think. Classmates are research collaborators, not rivals.

Although students were born as researchers, they forgot how to do research when they entered the school system (Humphris, 1997). At school, students are usually considered heads to be filled. The Italian word for “to teach” is “*insegnare*,” from the Latin word “*insignāre*,” derived from “*sīgnum*” (“sign”), which literally means “to imprint a sign” (Garzanti Linguistica, n.d.). In the past, student heads were traditionally considered as a “*tabula rasa*,” from the name of a tablet in ancient Rome on which people took notes by imprinting signs in wax with a stick. At school, students learn not to look for what they need by themselves; teachers will show them where to look. For this reason, students have forgotten what being a researcher is, and one of the roles of a teacher should be training students so that they can become researchers again and have a more fruitful learning experience. During such training, teachers can face opposition from the students. As such, taking into account learner beliefs when using an unconventional method like this is very important.²¹

In line with the Dilit International House method, the material used to develop comprehension skills (in our case only oral skills) is authentic (or at least semi-authentic).²² Inauthentic material will result in students studying something useless, an example of language that

21 For a discussion on learner beliefs and a presentation on some techniques useful for dealing with those beliefs, see Diodato (2017a).

they will not find in Italy. After years spent studying on inauthentic materials, if students decide to go to Italy, they will find that they cannot understand native speakers, no matter how hard they studied. Such a realization would be very disappointing. The emphasis on authentic materials presumably comes from Wilkins (1974), one of the scholars on whom the Dilit method seems to be based. Wilkins (1974: 66) states that, as “comprehension can develop ahead of production,” it would be a pity if teachers did not expose their students to uncontrolled language because of the belief that doing so will confuse them. Furthermore, in real life, students can have control only over what they say, not over what they hear. Therefore, the ability to understand more than they are able to express is a necessity. For these reasons, Wilkins (1976: 80) suggests that teachers “introduce learners to authentic materials from the beginning and that this contact will not be deferred until the learner has supposedly mastered all the form that he or she is likely to hear.”

Another scholar esteemed by Dilit International House, Corder (1978), points out another important aspect of uncontrolled material related to interlanguage²³ development. According to Corder (1978), we do not know at what point of their interlanguage development each student is, nor do we know what will come next in such development. While controlled input would not allow the interlanguage development of students who are not yet ready to acquire the linguistic element selected by the teacher, rich input that presents the language in all its variety will permit each student to take what they can and want to from that input.²⁴ Furthermore, Humphris (1990b), who was the head of the Teacher Training Department at Dilit International House for a long time, states that input that is not comprehensible gives students a reason to listen to the recording more times, especially if the teacher creates a situation of divergent interpretations by asking the students to exchange their interpretations in pairs. According to Humphris (1990b), this mental effort to return repeatedly to the text and try to give it meaning would permit students to increase their comprehension, and as a result, their degree of language acquisition²⁵; comprehensibility is not

22 Authentic is understood according to the meaning that Wilkins (1976) gives to the term: a spontaneous text made by native speakers for native speakers. A semi-authentic text is a text that is still made by native speakers for native speakers, but that is created with the aim of being used in language classes. Therefore, although the speakers speak in an artificial situation, they still speak quite naturally, as they do not adapt their language to the potential level of students. In other words, according to Humphris (in Torresan & Derosas, 2009), what is different in authentic recordings, compared to semi-authentic recordings, is that speakers speak because they want to speak, and they talk about things that they care about.

23 Interlanguage is a separate linguistic system that is the product of the interaction between a first language and a target language (Selinker, 1972/1974).

24 Furthermore, Wilkins (1974: 67) says that if teachers give students the possibility to participate to a sufficient amount of “receptive activities, not only do [they] ensure that the receptive abilities themselves are better learned, [they] give the learner the opportunity to learn what is not taught. In language learning a rich exposure to language can only be provided through extensive reading and listening. The transfer of linguistic knowledge from receptive to productive repertoires is probably a relatively slow process, but it does take place, as the study of language acquisition shows.”

25 Wilkins (1974: 39) states regarding the importance of meaning: “One of the factors which promotes language learning is the relative meaningfulness of the language being learned. From the linguistic point of view it is essential that the learner should know the meaning of the linguistic forms he is learning. Obviously the semantic system of a language cannot be learned through types of language practice where meaning is absent. This is self-evident where word meaning is concerned, but it applies equally to grammatical meaning. A learner may be required to repeat and manipulate sentences in which he understands every individual lexical item, but he cannot possibly understand the structural relations between those items—one aspect of grammatical meaning—unless the meaning of the sentence as a whole is known to him. From the linguistic point of view, therefore, learning will be incomplete if the contact with the second language is not meaningful. More than this, however, research suggests that learning proceeds more rapidly and what is learned is better retained when the language involved is fully meaningful.” As Wilkins (1974: 5) also says, the role of the grammatical system is “to express the kinds of meanings that we have just mentioned [(e.g., objects’ qualities; relation in time of the events and their spatial and temporal dimension; description of locations, directions and movements)], which are themselves the whole purpose of communication. The grammatical devices of a language are not to be learned as an end in themselves. It is the capacity to express meaning that is the end. The grammatical system provides the necessary means.”

inherent in the input. In other words, the progress of a student in both comprehension and interlanguage development will be faster by using authentic input rather than comprehensible input.²⁶

Also note that authentic (and semi-authentic) material is usually more motivating precisely because students know that it is true language. Furthermore, using such material will lower the fear of the students towards authentic material more broadly and will increase the possibility that students will expose themselves to authentic material outside of lessons.²⁷

For the success and effectiveness of activities, a teacher has to make very clear to students what they are supposed to do, without taking anything for granted (see also 2.5). Because of their previous learning experiences, students can give different meanings to the instructions of the teacher. If the teacher says “listen,” for the students this often means “understand everything,” although the teacher can in fact mean “try to understand as much as possible.” If the teacher says “talk,” students could interpret it as “talk as a native speaker,” but for the teacher it can mean “talk for as long as possible, try to communicate your thoughts with your own words, and do not care about mistakes.”²⁸ In our experience, the cognitively high listening activity proposed by Humphris (1990b) (for further details on this activity, called *authentic listening*, see 3.3.1 and 3.3.1.1) is perhaps the most challenging activity to run. If the teacher is insecure and does not prepare students well psychologically to do it, the students could be very unsatisfied and will build a barrier between themselves and the teacher (see Humphris, 1986).

3.3.1 Activities

The activities related to the Dilit International House methodology can be divided in two macro-categories: meaning-focused activities²⁹ and form-focused activities.³⁰ According to this methodology, working at the same time on meaning and form is not possible. A student who concentrates on conveying meanings will inevitably make mistakes on form. Therefore, teachers must not make corrections in the case of meaning-focused activities, either during the activities or after. If corrected, then students will focus on not making mistakes, and in order to achieve this goal, they will use only the forms that they are sure about, not making any effort to go beyond their current level. This would not allow interlanguage to develop at its best.

The percentage of meaning-focused and form-focused activities depends on teacher beliefs. Although research seems to confirm the need for both kinds of activities, it does not clarify how much time a teacher should devote to one or the other (Pallotti, 2006; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, Lightbown and Spada (2013: 196) suggest:

26 Comprehensible input is input that is slightly above the actual level of students. It is represented by the formula $i + 1$ (Krashen, 1985).

27 Wilkins (1974) states that in authentic language, linguistic structures are potentially infinite, and therefore encountering all such structures in a language course or a textbook is not possible. In order to increase the chance for students to encounter more linguistic structures, language learners need to expose themselves to authentic language through reading and listening. If not, they will never become able to use those structures that native speakers do.

28 As discussed in Diodato (2017a), this kind of attribution of different meanings has to do with the underlying common belief among students about “doing it perfectly.” That said, the attribution of different meanings is not only possible between teachers and students, but also between teachers and teachers. For example, the meaning of “authentic material” could be different, as could be the meaning of “listening activity.” In some cases, teachers and teaching material authors use the expression “listening activity” to refer to the act of students engaged in listening to each other, for example, in an oral production activity.

29 Activities in which students try to understand the meaning of a text or to communicate.

30 Activities in which students focus on morphosyntax, vocabulary, etc.

The right balance is likely to be different according to the characteristics of the learners. The learners' age, metalinguistic sophistication, prior educational experiences, motivation, and goals, as well as the similarity of the target language to a language already known need to be taken into account when decisions are made about the amount and type of form focus to offer.

Humphris (1993) asserts that focus on meaning is more important than focus on form because “our natural language acquisition mechanism works at full speed only when we are focused on the content.” Therefore, Humphris (1993) suggests devoting about 65% of class time to meaning-focused activities and the remaining 35% to form-focused activities. In our course on conversation, accepting this proposal, we carry out one form-focused activity for about every three or four meaning-focused activities.³¹ The suggestion from Lightbown and Spada (2013) makes sense to us because particularly at the beginning of the study of a new language, for some students a focus on form can give security and can act as the “proof” that they are learning, as they can see the new language written down. However, teachers should be careful to not give in too much to student requests because depending on the students, there can be (almost) no room for language use during lessons (probably the most frequent case) or (almost) no room for a focus on form (a rarer case).

Note that students could also express a need for more form-focused activities not because the teacher decided to devote “only” 35% to such activities, but because that 35% can look (almost) like 0% to students if the teacher uses a non-traditional methodology, as in the case with ours. In other words, although students are focused on form, they might not be aware of this focus. In this case, if during the first few times before form-focused activities the teacher announces “Now, let’s do grammar,” students will be progressively aware of it, and thus most of them could be satisfied with that 35%. If they are not satisfied and if the teacher firmly believes that not increasing the percentage of form-focused activities is preferable, they could try some other strategies. One strategy is the use of one of the fourteen Sleight of Mouth patterns, particularly the one called *consequence* (Dilts, 1999). For example, the teacher could say to the students something like: “If I increase the number of grammar activities, I have to decrease the number of practice activities, as the number of lessons cannot be changed. This means that your speaking and listening skills will make less progress than they are doing now.” The aim is to help the students to see the possible consequences in case their wish is granted. The *consequence* pattern is also useful to develop the still immature counterfactual thinking of typical university students (see 5.1.1).

Another strategy that the teacher could try is to express their willingness to answer any grammar question but only outside of the lesson.³² For example, they could invite students to use

31 Note that students also attend a course on structures (see 3.2), although it is not a focus on form, but instead a focus on *forms*, as it used to be called. That is, they study morphosyntax in a traditional fashion (see 3.2). Therefore, we believe that in the *Conversation* courses there must also be some form-focused activities because, as Wilkins (1974: 39) points out, “[e]ven the formal aspects of language themselves are more readily acquired when they occur in a meaningful context. This suggests that types of learning that are devoted exclusively to the learning of formal elements are actually less efficient even in meeting their more limited objectives than those that require the language to be meaningful throughout the learning process” (see also note no. 25). Furthermore, form-focused activities in our *Conversation* courses are also justified because they concern spoken language, which is different from the written (and inauthentic) language they meet in the *Structures* course. In addition, in the *Structures* course, to our knowledge there is no chance to reflect on other important formal aspects, like pronunciation, intonation, coherence, cohesion, expectancy grammar, linguistic functions, register, socio-cultural conventions, etc., all of which are aspects that the activities called *language puzzle* (see 3.3.1.2) and *conversation rebuilding* (see 3.3.1.4) allow students to focus on.

32 We learned this strategy from Carlo Guastalla when we met in Rome, Italy on September 10, 2019. He suggested this strategy regarding the problem that after *authentic listening* (see 3.3.1.1), many students want to know what the conversation was about in order to check whether their suppositions were “right.” Guastalla also suggested that teachers be meticulous in their responses, and therefore make meetings with students last a long time, probably in order to discourage further meetings. We then heard about the same strategy from Lucia Viola when we met in

office hours. By doing so, students cannot complain that the teacher does not want to teach them what they believe to be fundamental for their improvement. However, that the students need to devote extra time outside of class in order to satisfy their requests gives them the opportunity to think more deeply regarding their priorities. Few if any students are likely to show up.³³

The teaching of forms is *integrative* in order to not only make the learning more challenging and memorable, but also to give students the chance to learn how to learn by themselves. Unlike *transmissive* teaching, where the teacher explains and the students listen, students have to struggle to understand how the Italian language works (see 2.2.2). In written form-focused activities, the teacher provides explanations only at the end, when students cannot find them by themselves and only if explicitly requested to do so. As students are researchers (see 3.3), they decide by themselves what they want to know and are able to ask for it (Humphris, 1997). By doing so, students can also develop the communication and accountability skills seen in 2.1.

Of course, students are guided by the teacher in their research. With no guidance, they may fail to select relevant information in order to understand how the language works (Mayer, 2004).

Concerning the skills, one half of the activities we use in our lessons are aimed at developing oral production skills and the other half are aimed at developing oral comprehension skills. On average, in real life, a person who participates to a conversation with another person speaks for half of the time and listens for the other half (Humphris, 1984). Among these activities, *authentic listening* and *oral free production* are meaning-focused, and *language puzzle* activities and *conversation rebuilding* are form-focused. For the activities to be effective, they have to last 30 minutes each on average (see Humphris, 1984), with the time changing according to the level of the students, their motivation, the type of activity, and the familiarity of students with them. The main features of these activities are summarized in the table below (the information in this table was collected from Catizone et al., 1997).

Table 2. Summary of main Dilit International House activities used.

	Listening		Speaking	
	Meaning-focused	Form-focused	Meaning-focused	Form-focused
	<i>Authentic listening</i>	<i>Language puzzle</i>	<i>Oral free production</i>	<i>Conversation rebuilding</i>

Kyoto on November 8, 2019. In that instance, she told us how she solved a problem with a student who wanted to know all the right answers at the end of a form-focused written activity. Viola attributed the change in the student's attitude to a cause other than the one we suggested above. According to her, after the student was able to verify with the teacher the correctness of all her answers, she acquired such confidence that she no longer needed to confirm the correctness of all the answers in the subsequent lessons.

33 We use this strategy for *authentic listening*. If someone does show up, they usually do so just once or even a couple of times in the case of more tenacious students. Also note that, due to a lack of time, our meetings do not last long, contrary to what was suggested by Guastalla in note no. 32. There are also students who periodically insist that they want answers during class time, not during office hours.

Main aims	Development of the ability to understand the oral language; nourishment of the mechanism of subconscious acquisition of language.	Stimulation of reflection on forms; development of the pragmatic grammar of expectations. ³⁴	Development of the ability to produce oral language; development of interlanguage. ³⁵	Stimulation of reflection on forms; development of the pragmatic grammar of expectations.
What students are requested to do	They have to listen to authentic oral texts and try to understand as much as possible.	They have to listen many times to a piece of more than 10 seconds of a text already used in <i>authentic listening</i> and try to transcribe it. Then, they have to reflect on the forms, by taking into consideration the social conventions underlying the text.	They have to speak as much as possible. They are free to choose what to say and how to say it, as happens in a real conversation.	With help from their teacher, they have to orally rebuild a short conversation.
What the teacher does	They create a state of semi-darkness and play relaxing music; they answer	In the first phases, they give instructions and	They give instructions; they answer student questions, if asked.	They convey the context mainly through

34 “A *pragmatic expectancy grammar* is defined as a psychologically real system that sequentially orders linguistic elements in time and in relation to extralinguistic contexts in meaningful ways” (Oller, Jr., 1979: 34) (Italics in the original.). [Two periods needed?]This facilitates comprehension by anticipating what will be said. It happens unconsciously in the case of a first language, but it needs to be learned in the case of a foreign language.

35 Wilkins (1974: 76-77) comments on the need for free production activities in addition to form-focused activities, explaining that “the learner cannot learn how to construct sentences with no external control imposed unless he is given adequate opportunity to try. As with everything else he will only learn what falls within his experience. If all his language production is controlled from outside, he will hardly be competent to control his own language production. He will not be able to transfer his knowledge from a language-learning situation to a language-using situation. There must therefore be provision for freer use of language by the learner, and it must occupy a fairly substantial proportion of the available learning time. We need to provide consistently throughout the language-learning process occasions on which the learner expresses what he himself wants to express through the forms of language that are available to him at his particular stage of language learning. This may be done with difficulty in the earlier stages of language learning, but it becomes progressively easier to accomplish. [...] In language acquisition the child’s own language production plays a significant role. He tries out the inductive generalizations that he has been forming and receives feedback as a consequence of his production. There is no reason to doubt that for the language learner too the free production of language, as well as increasing his fluency and spontaneity in use of the language, actually advances his knowledge of the linguistic system itself. By trying to generalize further the language forms with which he has been made familiar under controlled conditions, as he is bound to do in any freer use of language, he discovers the extent of their generalizability.”

	student questions regarding the meaning of the words, if requested.	play a piece of an oral text as many times as necessary. In the last phase, they investigate student interlanguage through questions and provide students with hints to get them to solve some of the		miming; they involve all of the students and get them reflect on coherence, cohesion, linguistic acts, morphosyntax, lexicon, pronunciation, and intonation in order to improve their hypotheses ³⁶
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36 Corder (1967/1981) states that errors, which are different from mistakes in that the former are systematic, are significant for three reasons. The first is that they give information to the teacher regarding learner progress and then allow the teacher to intervene appropriately. It is possible to see this especially in the activities called *language puzzle* and *conversation rebuilding*. The second is that they give information to the researcher regarding language acquisition. The third and perhaps the most important is that they are useful for learners to make progress because making errors is a strategy they use to test their hypotheses, based on their interlanguage, about how the language they are learning works. If students cannot achieve their communicative intent, they will try to improve their hypotheses. In other words, people learn a language by trying to communicate with other people. Furthermore, Corder (1967/1981: 11) points out that “[m]aking a learner try to discover the right form could often be more instructive to both learner and teacher”, and this is exactly what both *language puzzle* and *conversation rebuilding* activities aim to do. In sum, “[t]he making of errors, in this approach, is seen as an inevitable, indeed a necessary part of the learning process.” (Corder, 1976/1981: 66)

		problems in their transcriptions.		and lead them step by step to the target phrases.
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For the success of all activities, considering that they could be unconventional for most of the students, we agree with the advice from Maley and Duff (2005: 4), although they refer to drama techniques:

[T]eachers themselves need to be convinced that they will work. A class rapidly senses any hesitancy or nervousness, or lack of conviction on the part of the teacher. You are the key to the success of these activities. If you do them reluctantly, or half-heartedly, it is better not to do them at all. [...] How will you convey this commitment? You will show your confidence through your 'open' body language, by the firm yet friendly tone of your voice, by demonstrating that you know what you are doing through being well prepared and organised, by giving helpful, non-threatening feedback, by being good humoured: in short, by creating an atmosphere of relaxed energy in which everyone can experience the 'flow' experience.

The next sections contain a description of how each of the four activities is carried out. This is in part based on Catizone et al. (1997) and in part on what we learned during the teacher training course at Dilit International House. However, there may be variations depending on the teachers and students.

3.3.1.1 *Authentic listening*

In this activity, students listen to authentic or semi-authentic texts (see 3.3). The texts are spontaneous conversations by different kinds of speakers from various Italian regions (and therefore with different accents) in order to expose students to different varieties of Italian.

This is the most important activity of the four,³⁷ but it is also the activity that most makes students stressed due to its complexity (see also 3.3). Therefore, as explained below, it is important to let students relax so that they will be more receptive.

Students sit in a circle because unity is strength and they can work to defeat the common enemy. In this case, the enemy is an audio recording played through a speaker visible to all in the center of the circle, because the speaker is the source of the seemingly incomprehensible sound.³⁸ At the same time, the teacher creates a state of semi-darkness and plays relaxing music. One goal is for students to feel free to use their imaginations without limits; this gives them the confidence to participate without fear of not understanding or of saying nonsense when they exchange opinions with their partners (see below). When they listen, they are not permitted to write notes. This allows them to remain focused on the whole text (Humphris, 1992).

³⁷ *Authentic listening* is the most important activity because of the priority of oral skills over written skills as well as the priority of oral reception skills over oral production skills. These priorities are based on four assumptions. First, when someone goes abroad, in everyday situations they are more likely to get involved in oral language than in written language. Second, oral language is about three times more complicated than written language, and therefore needs to be practiced more (Humphris, 1984). Third, as noted in 3.3, one cannot control the oral production of an interlocutor, and therefore one needs to understand more than one is able to express. Fourth, receptive skills have an important role in nourishing the mechanism of the subconscious acquisition of language (see Table 2 in 3.3.1).

³⁸ However, although students sit in a circle, we use the speakers embedded in the ceiling of our classrooms. In recent times, we have even had to give up having students sit in a circle, for reasons related to COVID-19. In some cases, we have been assigned to classrooms in which rearranging desks and chairs is difficult or impossible because they are too heavy and lack casters or because they are fixed to the floor.

On average, the length of a text recording is about three minutes, but it can change according to the level and motivation of the students. The recording is usually played at least six times.³⁹ After each listening, there is a progressive increase in the percentage of comprehension, although this increase reduces quantitatively between one iteration and another. At least six plays of the recording are used because this number is considered to be tolerable even by students with low motivation, especially if they can exchange ideas with more classmates. The natural divergence of ideas regarding the content of the text constitutes a motivation to listen again.

During the activity, the teacher alternates listening sessions with consultations between pairs of students (see also 3.3.2) regarding what they *think* they understood. The first consultation is usually after the first or second listening, when students are asked to turn their chairs so that they are face-to-face. By doing so, the audio speaker will be to the side of the students, and ignoring one's partner becomes more difficult. Students usually change pairs after two or three consultations with the same partner. During these consultations, students can reorganize their ideas through verbalization, which will help them to understand more during the next listening.⁴⁰

Note that *authentic listening* does not involve traditional pre-listening activities, such as pre-teaching of vocabulary or information on the context. This would allow the students to understand more during the audio playback, but doing so deprives them of the pleasure of listening, which will result in a decrease in the level of energy they put into the activity (Humphris, 1991b). We also think that pre-listening activities could create dependence on the teacher. Students need to become autonomous to learn more effectively and to take advantage of all learning opportunities even outside of classroom. If they learn to listen to authentic material with no pre-listening activities, they are more likely to do so also by themselves because they will not need a teacher who sets up those activities. White (1998: 6) adds that this kind of teacher help before listening “does not give the students much freedom to develop their own strategies for understanding; nor does it develop individual responsibility.”

Authentic listening also does not use comprehension questions, because in real life the selection of information to focus on is subjective and, again, because this fosters student independence.⁴¹ At the end of the activity, the teacher does not provide a script or a translation of the text and does not give information regarding the content. In fact, the teacher does not even ask students what they understood. This lack of support is because:

- comprehension is personal, not objective (Brown (1990) notes that as listener attention is limited, listeners select information to focus on according to their interests and experiences. At the same time, even when listeners select the same information, they can give different meanings to it, according to their beliefs and character.);

39 The importance of repetition to improve listening skills seems to be confirmed by Zull (2002: 122), according to whom “synapses are strengthened by our experiences.”

40 We think that by verbalizing their own understanding, students can notice any gaps or inconsistencies in their interpretations. Then, by knowing what is missing, they will probably focus their attention on those aspects and will try to solve those problems during subsequent plays. This will enhance their ability to understand more.

41 Usually in language teaching, there are two ways of listening (and reading) within a top-down process (see note no. 42): skimming and scanning. Skimming is listening to get a global idea of a text, while scanning is when students look for specific information (e.g., what time a train will leave). We believe that there is no need to separate these two activities, because in real life they are not separated. People use whichever strategy they need to reach their goals. In other words, as Beretta and Gatti (2007) point out, the choice of skimming or scanning depends on the interests of listeners. Therefore, we believe that if there are no questions regarding the content, students will naturally scan for the information that they are particularly interested in, which may or may not be a piece of information that their partner heard. In our opinion, the need to separate skimming and scanning activities was born from the practice of asking questions about the content, which makes students look for specific information to answer those questions.

- if students get used to the idea that knowledge is provisional, they will accept any change in their knowledge when counterevidence shows up, and therefore they will learn faster (Humphris, 1991a);
- if the interpretation of the teacher is much different from the interpretation of the students (which is likely to be the case), students will probably become demotivated, and in the future they will not welcome this activity;
- if students know that they will get a “solution” at the end of the activity, they will be less motivated the next time to find their own interpretation; and
- in real life, no solution is provided.

As a result of the absence of pre-listening activities, discussions regarding the “right” answers, etc., students can dedicate more time to the listening itself (White, 1998), and the chances that their listening skills and their interlanguage develops increase.

Although the difficulty of the recording can change according to teacher beliefs, it is usually much higher than the actual level of the students (see also 3.3). This is because we believe the aim is to create a situation in which students must rely on their top-down skills,⁴² which Brown (1990) refers to as “crucial” in the comprehension process, in order to further develop these skills. If students can understand many words, they tend to rely mainly on their bottom-up skills.⁴³ Brown (1990: 167) believes that students should learn to use contextual information in order to make intelligent guesses, as a native speaker does: “We have to teach the foreign learner to behave with the same confidence—to make a reasonable interpretation even though he has not clearly heard all the information.”

In summary, in this activity, students not only get used to the sounds of the foreign language, but also learn to listen as a native speaker, meaning not in a linear fashion, as students of foreign languages are inclined to do, but by selecting information, making hypotheses, and formulating expectations.⁴⁴

3.3.1.2 *Language puzzle*

As shown in Table 2 in 3.3.1, students work on a recording of more than 10 seconds (length varies according to student level, motivation, and the difficulty of the recording) on a text already used in *authentic listening*. If students already know the context, they can concentrate on the forms. The priority of meaning over details is confirmed by Medina (2014).

During this activity, students sit in a semicircle with an audio speaker in the middle (although this is not our case, as explained in note no. 38).

This activity is complex because it is composed of several stages. The first stage is similar to a dictation exercise, in which students try to transcribe the text, listening to it as many times as necessary. After this, the teacher can ask to copy their text out. In this way students can tidy up their

42 In a top-down process, a listener relies on their previous knowledge of the context, the speaker, the topic, and so on, to try to interpret a text.

43 In a bottom-up process, a listener first recognizes phonemes, then the morphological structure, the word, the sentence, and finally the text. Scrivener (2011) points out that, considering the speed of a spoken language, using this strategy is probably impossible with a whole text. More likely, listeners use it to fill in gaps in their understanding of a text.

44 As Scrivener (2011) states, listeners do not use just one of these two strategies (top-down or bottom-up) to understand a text, but a combination of them both. According to Brown (1990), the bottom-up process is necessary to shape and confirm predictions, by recognizing the acoustic signal. In other words, the ability to recognize phonemes, and then other bits of language, supports the top-down process. This is why a form-focused activity like the *language puzzle*, described in the next subsection, is needed.

texts and their thoughts. Then, students listen again a couple of more times before the second part starts.

From this stage on, students do not have to just listen and transcribe, but they also have to reflect on the forms, taking into consideration various aspects, such as the social conventions underlying the text (see also note no. 34). After a few minutes of individual work, when students can use their dictionaries, grammar books, and anything else they need, they work in pairs (see also 3.3.2). From this point on, the activity alternates between consultations in pairs and listenings, with some changes in the pairs. This guarantees the circulation of ideas.

When consultations no longer allow much progress to be made, a new stage starts. The teacher asks students to circle all of their “problems.” Having students separate their problems instead of putting more problems together in the same circle is important, as this allows students to think more deeply regarding their problems and makes them more receptive to error feedback (see also 2.2.3). An example of a “problem” is a word that students are not sure about or that they did not write at all. After students circle their problems, the activity becomes a whole-class activity. At this final stage, the role of the teacher is to investigate student interlanguage through questions and to lead students step-by-step to the solution.

To do this, the teacher should:

1. ask a student to report a couple of words before and a couple of words after the problem in order to have context for the problem;
2. write the words on the board exactly how the student uttered them, spelling problems included;
3. draw two vertical lines, one after the words that precede the problem and one before the words that follow the problem;
4. ask the same student to report the problem;
5. write the problem between the two vertical lines, exactly how the student uttered it. If the problem is a word that the student could not write, the space between the two vertical lines should be left blank;
6. write *in column* all the possibilities when the student is uncertain between two or more options;
7. invite other students to express their opinions regarding the problem and add their ideas to the board;
8. lead the class to think about the context and grammar after eliciting student interlanguage, in order to be able to make targeted comments. Also, the teacher can give students the possibility to listen to the recording again as many times as necessary. Teacher comments and listening should continue until the class solves the problem.

When a problem is solved, the teacher asks another student to report one of their problems, repeating the above procedure. This is done with student after student until the time is over. Solving all of the problems is not necessary (and perhaps impossible). The process is more important than the product.

According to Corder (1967/1981), those items commonly called errors are here considered necessary hypotheses in order to progressively approach the solution (see also note no. 36). In this way, students feel valued.

3.3.1.3 *Oral free production*

There are two types of oral free production activities. In one called “imaginary,” students pretend that the classroom is something else, for example, a restaurant or a shop, and the students

pretend to be someone other than themselves. Desks and chairs are arranged according to the communicative situation. There are times when students have to talk while standing up. In another variation called “real,” students talk as themselves about their lives, their spare-time activities, and so on. Half of the students are in a semicircle. The other half are also in a semicircle, but they are face-to-face with the students of the first semicircle. We used the “imaginary” type for most of our lessons at the time of the research described in chapter 4.⁴⁵

For the “imaginary” type, Porter Ladousse (1987) notes the main advantages regarding *role playing*:⁴⁶

- students can experience any situation;
- the activity can be a dress rehearsal for real life (see also note no. 45);
- students can improve social skill-related language in order to not appear rude;
- shy students can feel safe, because they do not need to reveal themselves;
- role playing is fun.

Some teachers prefer to give students information about their roles during a role playing activity through the use of role cards. We prefer to not give role cards because, as Heathfield (2005) notes, the cards can make the interaction less spontaneous (see also note no. 47). When we tried using role cards instead of the usual oral instructions, we have encountered two problems. The first problem was the difficulty that students had understanding the language on the cards because it was only written, meaning the students could not rely on our gestures, intonation, or other techniques. This made the initial preparation phase last longer, cutting into the time for the interaction phase. The second problem was that many students felt *tied* to the instructions on the card, which confirms Heathfield’s (2005) point of view.

The oral production is called “free” as students are provided only with a situation and a role or a topic (Humphris, 1981). They can choose what to say and how to say it, and also the topic if they want, as happens in a real conversation. The conversation is a *text* built by two or more people.

45 According to Micarelli (1991), *real oral free production* is used more with more advanced students, while *imaginary oral free production* is more used with beginners. However, some students we asked reported that they found the *imaginary* version to be more difficult than the *real* version because, in addition to the linguistic effort, imaginative effort is also required. In such scenarios, students are sometimes expected to talk as though they were in situations that they have never experienced, even in their first language. This is confirmed by Thornbury (2005), who reported that more familiar topics are easier for students to engage with. In our view, if students are asked to talk about themselves rather than giving opinions regarding facts that they do not know much about, *real oral free production* should be easier for them than *imaginary oral free production*, at least for typical university students. Such students have less experience of everyday life than adults often do, and therefore they will presumably find it more difficult to imagine renting a car, booking a table at a restaurant, booking a room in a hotel, etc. Furthermore, precisely because students have the opportunity to talk about themselves, *real oral free production* should be particularly motivating (see 2.3). We think that the use of *real oral free production* should be encouraged from the earliest level. We also think that *imaginary oral free production* is equally necessary for students in order to anticipate experiencing new situations that, although they may have never experienced them in their country because they still depend in part on their families, they could encounter such situations if they decide to travel or to study in Italy, or even as part of their future lives in Japan.

46 Ladousse’s (1987: 5) definition of role play seems to match with that used in *imaginary oral free production*. “When students assume a ‘role’, they play a part (either their own or somebody else’) in a specific situation. ‘Play’ means that the role is taken on in a safe environment in which students are as inventive and playful as possible. A group of students carrying out a successful role play in a classroom has much in common with a group of children playing school, doctors and nurses, or Star Wars. Both are unselfconsciously creating their own reality and, by doing so, are experimenting with their knowledge of the real world and developing their ability to interact with other people. In this situation there are no spectators and the occasional eavesdropper (a parent or a teacher) may not even be noticed. None of the risks of communication and behaviour in the real world are present. The activity is enjoyable and does not threaten the students’ (or the children’s) personality. This ‘playing’ in role will build up self-confidence rather than damage it.”

What a person says changes according to what the other one says. In the case of the “imaginary” type, the teacher must create an information gap by giving students instructions separately. In real life, there is no need to talk if one student already has the information that the other student has. For the “real” type, the information gap is “natural.”⁴⁷

Students, who usually talk in pairs (see also 3.3.2) and face-to-face (see also 3.3.1.1), have some time to prepare for the communicative situation, but they cannot write down the sentences they are going to use. As in real life, they have to improvise (Humphris, 1981).

The role of the teacher at the beginning of the activity is to give instructions that make students want to communicate (see also note no. 47). In other words, they should inspire the students. Sion (2001: 8) states:

Our task as teachers is to find the key that creates and unlocks the students’ need to communicate. Students who don’t like to be put on the spot will latch on to throwaway comments, apparently irrelevant tasks, puzzles, games, questions and conversation topics if they are carefully introduced and unobtrusively built up. Conversation needs to be drawn out of students rather than pumped into them. We need to balance preparation and spontaneity.

When the conversations begin, the teacher sits on the sidelines for the most of the time, except for when students ask them questions. The teacher does not walk among students to listen to what they are saying or to help them because the teacher needs to communicate their trust in student capacity, which is crucial in order to have engaged students.

In *oral free production*, an activity during which students not only acquire language but also confidence (see also note no. 46), fluency, and spontaneity,⁴⁸ students have the opportunity to be aware of what they can do with the language and what they cannot do yet. Acknowledging their limits will help them to make progress (see note no. 36).

We address the role of free-speaking activities like *oral free production* in language lessons mainly by analyzing two lessons models: the internationally popular PPP model and the GAS model, popular in Italy. In the behaviorist PPP lesson model, the third P, “Production” follows the Ps of “Presentation” (of the rule) and “Practice” (through drills) because freer practice is supposed to be the last stage in order to acquire a language. The GAS model, which Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (Italy) imported from Gestalt psychology, has a similar vision of the production stage. “G” stands for “Globality,” and its focus is on meaning. “A” stands for “Analysis,” which is a focus on form. Finally, “S” stands for “Synthesis,” and this is when the language is first practiced and then produced (Balboni, 2002). Thus, “Synthesis” in the GAS model reflects the last two Ps of the PPP model (Torresan, 2014).

In these two models, the production stage is conceived of as a freer practice of elements previously presented (PPP model) or analyzed (GAS model). We think that the assumption that production is just a freer practice is depreciative. In our view, the *oral free production* used by the Dilit International House method is both practice and learning, in line with what we wrote about error feedback in 2.2.3 and our discussion of Corder’s (1967/1981) vision in note no. 36. While practicing and becoming more fluent, students recognize their limitations and try to make better

47 *Oral free production* incorporates all of the three processes of communication theorized by Morrow (1981): an information gap, choice, and feedback (that is, the reaction to the interlocutor based on what the interlocutor said and what aim speakers are trying to reach with this conversation). These three factors ensure that the activity is communicative and not mechanical. As Wilkins (1974: 38) states: “If the desire to communicate through the language can be created in learners, there is little that could be more motivating and could do more to ensure effective learning.”

48 Heathfield (2005: 8) believes that these three aspects are tightly connected: “Without confidence, learners’ progress will be limited. Without spontaneity, interaction will feel less natural. Without either of these, fluency will take longer to achieve.”

hypotheses. Furthermore, they can learn something new from their peers or the teacher. In this view, the rigid position of a free-speaking activity that emphasizes its practice role, as it is in the above two models, is not justified, because if the teacher asks students to reuse specific forms, the production is not free anymore, becoming more mechanical (see note no. 47). In true free production, students could even choose to use forms that they have learned in other lessons or outside of the classroom, rather than those presented or analyzed in *that* lesson. In addition, the connection among the different stages of the models, and therefore among the activities proposed and the topic covered, could result in a demotivating lesson due to its lack of variety, especially when, as in our context, the average motivation is not high (see 1.1 and 3.1) and student self-control is limited (see 2.1 and 5.1.1).

Oral free production should also be done with absolute beginners. In this case, the activity would have a mere *psychological* role, as students would communicate mainly through gestures, drawings, or *realia*. The linguistic content would be almost absent, although students can use dictionaries or ask the teacher for some words. As lessons progress, students can feel that trying to communicate in a new language is not that frightful after all.

In this activity, the fact that students are able to communicate with their partners for several minutes almost exclusively with their own knowledge can contribute to increasing their motivation (Diodato, 2017b).

Finally, *oral free production* also has a key role in creating rapport and cohesiveness between students (see also note no. 53).

3.3.1.4 *Conversation rebuilding*

In our experience, this is probably the activity that students like best. In this case, the teacher does not sit on the sidelines but instead leads the activity (as happens in the final stage of the *language puzzle* activity), as can be understood from the position of the teacher. The teacher stands in the center of the class, with the students seated in semicircle around them.

In this group activity, with the help of the teacher, students have to orally rebuild a short conversation extracted from an authentic or semi-authentic interaction between native speakers. The conversation rebuilt must be exactly like the original.

Referring to the context provided by the teacher mainly through miming, students make hypotheses on possible sentences uttered by the characters of the conversation. The role of the teacher is to involve all the students. After a student makes a hypothesis regarding the first linguistic act, the teacher asks this student to repeat it twice.⁴⁹ Then, the teacher asks a couple of other students to also repeat it. After this, the teacher comments on the hypothesis step by step. If there are errors or if the hypothesis is different from the original, students must try to improve the hypothesis. With this activity, students must reflect on coherence, cohesion, linguistic acts, morphosyntax, lexicon, pronunciation, and intonation.

Hands are one of the main tools used by the teacher to lead students to reflect on the forms. The teacher has to speak as little as possible to ensure greater student concentration. The hands are like a blackboard, where students *write* and *read* words or syllables. Every finger corresponds to a word and each knuckle to a syllable.

To get as close as possible to the language of a native speaker, students need to exercise linguistic muscles they usually do not use in their first language. This is the main reason that they need to repeat words and sentences several times, as well as in pairs.

49 We believe that the two repetitions of the first student can decrease the possibility of mistakes rather than errors. Mistakes happen also to first language speakers, as they “are due to memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness, and psychological conditions such as strong emotion.” (Corder, 1967/1981: 10) See also note no. 36.

3.3.2 Pair work

Most of the activities used by Dilit International House will work in pairs⁵⁰ (if there is an odd number, the teacher can form a group of three). The main advantages of pair work (compared to group work or whole class work) are listed below, divided by type.

Behavior

1. The possibility that less motivated students will disrupt class is lower.

Self-monitoring

2. Students can understand their level as compared to those of other students (see also 2.1).

Inclusiveness

3. There is no risk of being excluded by the other members of the group.
4. Students can appreciate different learning styles and intelligences (see 2.5).
5. Students can appreciate different points of view.

Self-confidence

6. Students can develop autonomy.
7. Shy students can find participation easier.

Efficacy

8. There is more time for speaking practice.⁵¹

As will be seen in 5.1.1, in addition to these advantages, the significance of social evaluation and a lack of empathy and prosocial behavior on the part of typical university or younger students make pair work particularly suitable for them.

In order to help students to enjoy pair work, the teacher should create a friendly atmosphere from the first lesson by their smile and kind attitude and by giving the students the possibility to know each other through icebreakers (see also note no. 53).

Pairs can be fixed or flexible (Byrne, 1987). In the first case, partners do not change during the same activity. In the second case, they do. For *oral free production* (see 3.3.1.3), pairs will usually be fixed. Speaking for the entire activity with the same partner gives students the possibility to deepen their discussion of the topic, which in turn can challenge student interlanguage. However, in classes of beginners, because of their limited language skills, using flexible pairs is advisable to give students the possibility to practice the “same” conversation more times with other partners (alternatively, students could report the information they received from their first partner to a

50 Students who are not used to working in pairs could find this sudden autonomy to be disruptive. This is another reason to keep the activities short initially (see also 3.3.1). Also, in order to help students to concentrate, the teacher should give clear instructions and be firm in case of disruptions.

51 In Japan, many language schools claim that one-to-one lessons are more effective than group lessons because there is more time to practice speaking. Some schools also claim that in private lessons there is no need to be worried about speaking in front of classmates. Clearly, these statements originate from a teacher-centered vision of teaching, where pair work is not contemplated. The above list shows that the advantages of group lessons compared to one-to-one lessons are considerable.

second partner) in order to gain “confidence.”⁵² Students would be bored by repeating the same conversation with the same partner. Flexible pairs are suitable for all of the other activities for which the exchange of opinions is important (*authentic listening*, *language puzzle*, and possibly also with *conversation rebuilding* when students repeat the conversation in pairs, although opinions are not exchanged).

The teacher should also randomly change the partners after each activity (and lesson) for the following reasons:

- to create a cohesive class;⁵³
- to enhance motivation and interest;
- to avoid disruptive behaviors;
- to avoid creating a dependence on the part of weaker students toward stronger ones; and
- to make students aware of their errors.⁵⁴

However, the teacher should be careful to not pair students who dislike each other or those who are good friends if this could result in disruptive behaviors.

Classes with heterogeneous mixes of students are the norm. According to the task and the class, teachers should decide whether to pair students with similar or different abilities, degrees of motivation, interests, or learning styles, or whether to create more versions of the same task in order to improve student motivation, confidence, and language skills.

52 Gass et al. (1999: 573) found that task repetitions result “in improvement in overall proficiency, selected morphosyntax, and lexical sophistication.” Although the improvement should be seen at virtually any linguistic level, generally speaking we suggest repeating the same task only with beginners. Because of their limited resources, even talking for just a few minutes is tiring and the conversation is fragmentary. For the reasons explained in 5.1, the ease of getting tired could also be partly dictated by a limited ability to concentrate. In the case of higher level students, stopping the activity prematurely will be necessary in order to allow students to repeat the task. By doing this, these students are deprived of the opportunity to further challenge their interlanguage, which is presumably more of a priority than repeating the task. Indeed, Corder (1976/1981: 78) states: “The progressive elaboration of the interlanguage system of the learner is a response to his developing need to handle even more complex communicative tasks. If we can control the level of these correctly, the grammar will look after itself. Instead, then, of grading the linguistic material that we expose the learner to, we should consider grading the communicative demands we make on him, thereby gently leading him to elaborate his approximative system.” We also believe that one element to make communicative tasks more demanding is progressively increasing their length (see also 3.3.1).

53 Learning in a cohesive class is supposed to be more effective because it satisfies our presumed tribal instincts, shaped during the most of the last 100,000 years, when humans lived in small tribes and cooperated with each other for the survival of the community (Cozolino, 2013). For a smoother and more effective carrying out of future activities, the teacher must devote time at the beginning of the first lesson of a newly formed class to an icebreaker activity. Rinvoluceri (2002: 11) highlights the importance of this kind of activity: “Time and again I have finished a course and felt that I should have done a lot more warm-up and group formation activity on the first day or two. With hindsight, I can see just how much time would have been saved by warming the students up better at the start of the course. I have often been over-eager to get into ‘proper language content’. Musicians tune their instruments up, athletes never sprint until their bodies are prepared, people in a choir do vocal exercises before singing. Our students, too, need to warm into both the target language and being in their group. A brief investment here brings huge dividends in terms of energy released, anxiety calmed and the linguistic unconscious opened up and made ready to go.” Similarly, Frank and Rinvoluceri (1991: 9) argue: “The aim of such exercises is to get people to learn each other’s names and become aware of each other as people. Well-chosen ice-breakers help to relax people, get them to unfold their arms, to smile and to laugh. Name learning does not happen automatically among students [...]. Ice-breakers, though, do a lot more than teach names. They get the students looking at each other (they may well come with the expectation that they will only have to look at the teacher), wondering about each other, helping each other and laughing together. In doing these exercises people learn a little about other group members consciously and a vast amount unconsciously.”

54 If the partner is the same, students could get used to the errors that partner produces and begin to understand them although their language is incorrect. This will result in fewer chances to test their own hypotheses (see note no. 36).

On one hand, heterogeneous student pairs can lead to the acquisition of new language skills, interests, or learning styles. This is true even for stronger students, as they need to adapt and reformulate to let weaker students understand.⁵⁵ When a task allows it, the teacher could give a less challenging role to a weaker student. On the other hand, some stronger students could feel frustrated as they cannot speak freely at their level because of the low language skills of their partners. Considering that there are pros and cons in both heterogeneous and homogeneous pairs, as well as the importance of class cohesiveness, we think that a random pairing system would be the best solution in most cases.⁵⁶

3.3.3 Syllabus

The syllabus is the learning support plan that all university teachers in Japan are required to write months before the beginning of the academic year for each course they have been assigned, and they are expected to follow it during lessons.

According to MEXT (Monbukagakushō, n.d.b), a syllabus should meet several criteria:

Pay attention to the following points in order to make the syllabus accepted internationally.

- Clearly describe the achievement goals of each subject and the content of the lessons
- Write concretely what students have to study before coming to each lesson
- Specify evaluation's methods and criteria
- Make sure that the syllabus does not look just like a document with an overview of lessons' contents (course catalog)

The aim of the syllabus should be as follows (Monbukagakushō, n.d.a):

Together with providing appropriate teaching, it is necessary to create a suitable syllabus and to teach according to the lesson plan, and to take sufficient measures oriented to activate learning, like deciding lessons' forms⁵⁷ and types,⁵⁸ in order to promote students' motivation for studying.

To summarize, the teacher should clarify contents, achievement goals, etc., in as much detail as possible, because doing so would enhance student motivation. The belief seems to be that by doing so, the teacher, the course, and the university will look more reliable. These seem to be well-

55 For example, years ago in an adult class we taught, a stronger student who could also speak Spanish told us that she benefited a lot from being paired with a specific (much) weaker student. Every time the latter could not understand, she communicated so very clearly with facial expressions. This allowed the stronger student to rethink what she had just said, often realizing that the reason her weaker interlocutor could not understand was that the stronger student was using some Spanish words without being aware of it. If the interlocutor had been a stronger student, perhaps they would have understood from the context and due to the similarity between Spanish and Italian, and as such would have ignored the fact that the words used were not Italian, but Spanish.

56 We previously used a random pairing system, but some students wrote to us in a questionnaire that they felt frustrated when working with students with low motivation and language skills because they did not participate actively in pair work. As a result, we tried a homogeneous pairing system, and this time some (probably different) students wrote that as they usually worked with the same small number of students, they preferred to work with more students, even those of a different level, because variation between speaking partners enhanced their motivation. In the same vein, we noticed that the lessons generally became less lively, and therefore we chose to use the random pairing system again.

57 Forms can be online or face-to-face. This clarification became necessary for responding to Covid-19.

58 For example, lecture, practical lesson, active learning, group work, presentations, discussions, flipped classroom, use of ICT, and so on.

founded considerations, but we think that they send two messages that do not take into due consideration the real needs of students.

First, the personal (and dynamic) interests of students seem to have nothing to do with motivation. Our opinion is that if students learn about what they care about, they will be happier, will do their best, and presumably will learn more and better (see 2.3). In order to achieve this, abandoning the use of textbooks (at least in part) would probably be necessary, because they cannot respond to the specific needs of the students in class (regarding textbooks, see also 6.21). Furthermore, the possibility that students will not know what they will do in the next class can increase their motivation (Diodato, 2017b).

Second, the MEXT ideology would seem to be that if students study, the output will inevitably correspond to the input. If not, then the students did not work hard or were not intelligent enough, or the teacher did not do their job well. The underlying belief here is probably that to learn anything, all that is needed is to memorize information by repeating it many times (“rote learning”) (see also 2.2.2). In reality, what students actually learn and how much they learn is unpredictable. Students learn what they are ready to learn (see 3.3) because, as Dakin (1973) clarifies, they have internal syllabi.⁵⁹ According to Dakin (1973), if a student has not yet come to the point to learn a specific language structure, not even intense drills can cause them to do so. The period of time needed to learn a given structure will be different from student to student (Corder, 1976/1981). As Corder (1967/1981: 9) says,

[t]he simple fact of presenting a certain linguistic form to a learner in the classroom does not necessarily qualify it for the status of input, for the reason that input is ‘what goes in’ not what is *available* for going in, and we may reasonably suppose that it is the learner who controls this input, or more properly his intake. This may well be determined by the characteristics of his language acquisition mechanism and not by those of the syllabus. After all, in the mother tongue learning situation the data available as input is relatively vast, but it is the child who selects what shall be input.

Teachers and students need to know that the relationship between input and output is not linear. False expectations can generate frustration (see 1.1), which can in turn have a negative influence on the lessons and on the relationship between teachers and students.

Considering the discussion above, Corder’s (1976/1981: 77) advice is that, “[e]fficient language teaching must work with, rather than against, natural processes, facilitate and expedite rather than impede learning. Teachers and teaching materials must adapt to the learner rather than vice versa.” The subjectivity of acquisition emerges again from Corder (1978: 78): “There is a multiplicity of environmental and personal factors in the learning situation that can affect to some degree both the course and the speed of learning.” These are the reasons that we decided to write the following sentence at the beginning of each course plan, borrowed from the syllabi of a former colleague: “The progress of the lessons depends on the number of students in the class, the learning progress, and students’ needs.”

Finally, we believe that a course should be built together with the students. During lessons, the teacher receives feedback in some way from their students and should use it to adapt the course to their needs. This is what makes teaching motivating. As Davis et al. (1998: 7) state: “Teaching language or any subject can fast get boring – teaching people never can.”

3.3.4 Authoritative style

59 When Corder (1967/1981) started to conjecture the existence of internal syllabi in 1967, he called them “built-in syllabuses.”

In 2.4, we proposed a classification of teaching styles and discussed the results of some research that supported the use of an authoritative style in order to enhance learning. This is the style that we have been trying to use at the time of our research, although it is probably mixed with an authoritarian or permissive style at times.

By using an authoritative style, we aim to ensure an optimal but informal teaching environment. The following are some of the strategies that we use that, in our opinion, characterize this kind of style:

- learning student first names as fast as possible and using them;
- asking students to call us by our first name;
- making explicit how students will be evaluated, and then what the rules are, in the first lesson (e.g., coming on time);
- similarly, making explicit how rule violations will result in consequences;
- waiting for all students to calm down before starting a lesson, and staring kindly at students who are still chatting or doing something else until they stop;
- stopping when a student starts chatting or doing something else and staring at them or, as appropriate, telling the student what they should do (e.g., “Please put your smartphone away.”);
- changing student seats according to the situation, and trying to avoid pairs who do not work well together (see also 3.3.2);
- talking privately with students who keep disrupting class;
- avoiding downtime;
- being fair;
- being respectful;
- taking attendance and taking note of student tardiness.

3.4 Evaluation

When we started working at our current university during the 2015-16 school year, one of our colleagues decided the evaluation breakdown: 30-40% for assignments, 30-40% for class performance, and 30-40% for the oral final exam. The next year, when we could choose independently, we opted for 70% for class performance and 30% for the oral final exam. We would have preferred to use 100% for class performance because of our belief that continuous evaluation of student performance based on classroom observation is a more reliable way to assess students than a brief exam. However, we were not confident regarding the applicability of this evaluation style in classes in which the average student motivation was low.

That year, a couple of students among those who failed claimed that our evaluation was unfair because they had actually done well (regarding young people and sensitivity to unfairness, see 5.1.2). In order to demonstrate to students their poor performance when necessary, the same colleague suggested giving students tests going forward and assigning a low percentage to class performance, assuming we were planning to continue using it at all. In the end, our colleague and us decided to ask students to take a written test at the beginning of every lesson (15%), to fill in a reflection form regarding the lesson just concluded at the end of every lesson (15%), to evaluate class performance (20%), and to take an oral final exam (50%), which we planned to record in order to have further proof in case students disputed their grades.

The first two assessment tools mentioned were based on what our colleague did in his classes, in which the objectives were the memorization of morphosyntactic rules and elements of the Italian lexicon. The tools had to be used in every lesson, increasing our workload considerably, in the hope of motivating students to come to class on time and to participate actively to the lessons,

especially those students who complained about our evaluation, as they had a defiant attitude and did not accomplish much. We were skeptical from the beginning because these tools did not match the oral objectives of our courses, and we did not believe (and still do not) that having good results is possible with such a great emphasis on extrinsic motivation (see 2.2.3.1). Unfortunately, we did not see any valid alternatives. For example, if tests should have been taken during each lesson, asking students to take listening tests suitable for the objectives of the course would not have been possible, because an improvement in listening skills can hardly be measured after only a few days. For the same reason, as well as the substantial amount of time necessary considering the number of students, oral tests could not be given every time either.

As expected, those two ways of assessing the students did not give us reliable information on their skills, and students with low motivation still had low motivation. Furthermore, a couple of students (we do not know whether they were the same one from the previous year) said that our evaluation was not fair. They referred in particular to the oral final exam, which now had a greater weight on the final evaluation. They claimed that even though they performed very poorly, which we could verify because we had recorded the oral exam as proof. Someone also claimed that we asked them questions that were more difficult than the questions we had asked other students. The exam was taken individually, but they claimed that they knew their questions were more difficult because they had asked classmates what kind of questions we had asked them.

We talked again with our experienced colleague regarding our dissatisfaction with the evaluation method, and following his new suggestions, we changed it again the following year: 20% for active participation (with the name changed in order to emphasize that attendance alone was not enough, as some students seemed to believe, but that engaging in the activities was necessary (see also 2.4.1 regarding academic entitlement)), 30% for listening tests (three tests each semester, spaced about a month apart from each other), and 50% for the oral final exam. Furthermore, in order to avoid being accused of asking more difficult questions to certain students, going forward we began to write each question for the oral final exam on a piece of paper. Then, we folded all the pieces and put them in an envelope. When a student came to take the exam, we asked them to draw a paper from the envelope and to give it to us without reading it, as we also wanted to evaluate their comprehension skills and their ability to negotiate meanings. If students wished, they could ask us to show the topic written on the piece of the paper at the end of the exam (only a couple of students asked to do so).

This system was a little time consuming, and occasionally there was still someone who claimed that we asked them more difficult questions. However, in this situation their claim was not because we chose such questions on purpose. Instead, the difficulty level of the questions was unequal, and therefore unfair. In addition, some students still did not agree with our evaluation, particularly regarding the oral final exam. Again following the suggestions of our colleague, we created some evaluation criteria grids that we handed out to students at the beginning of every semester. Since then, no student has said that our evaluation is unfair, but occasionally there has been someone who has claimed that the difficulty level of the questions in the oral final exam is not the same for all students, that evaluation criteria are not clear, or even that the listening test is too difficult.⁶⁰

60 In addition to a possible actual problem related to the content of some questions (see also chapter 4), in our opinion there are also two more explanations for why a student could claim that the oral exam or the listening test was difficult. One is a lack of accountability, as mentioned in 2.1, meaning the attitude of taking responsibility away. Teachers should help students to improve this skill, as by attributing the cause of their failures to others, students will not try to improve their language skills. The other possible explanation is what Dweck (2006/2008: 6) calls a fixed mindset, which is “[b]elieving that your qualities are carved in stone”. Students in this mindset always want to succeed, because of the belief that “[s]mart people should always succeed.” (Dweck, 2006/2008: 17) With this in mind, students do not try to make efforts in order to improve, but instead try to avoid challenges (see also 2.1). They do this instead of trying to stretch themselves, which is what students with a growth mindset do (see also 2.2.2

At present, we continue to slightly change the evaluation criteria when we feel that doing so is necessary, but we are still not satisfied. Occasionally students who did well in class can have grades that don't reflect this because of the listening tests or the oral final exam.

One of the causes of these bad results could be an improper way of conducting the oral exams. The method we use is called "interview," defined by Underhill (1987: 54) as "the most common of all oral tests." In order to not compromise the activity, we ask different questions to each student. Doing so takes a lot of time to prepare. The first question (which we write on the pieces of paper) is only the initial prompt. Further questions are formulated according to student answers in order to avoid turning the interview into an interrogation, rather than a conversation. In addition, we avoid asking questions about topics we already know the answer to in order to make the conversation as natural as possible (see also note no. 47). The hope is that the exam will be more motivating and less frightening, in order to give the students the opportunity to do their best within the limits of the exam.

At the beginning of such interviews, we think that the teacher should ask questions for which only aim is to relax the students, as is usually suggested to the proctors of exams for official language certifications. Unfortunately, despite the 50% weight placed on the final exam, each interview often lasts only about 3-4 minutes, depending on the number of the students. This time constraint means that the exam is held during the last two lessons of each semester in order to avoid taking time away from other lessons.

and note no. 10). Avoiding challenges is exactly the opposite of what is needed to develop interlanguage (see note no. 36). This attitude of students who would rather remain in their comfort zones can generate a wrong reaction in teachers (and parents) that only makes things worse: "Many educators think that lowering their standards will give students success experiences, boost their self-esteem, and raise their achievement. It comes from the same philosophy as the overpraising of students' intelligence. Well, it doesn't work. Lowering standards just leads to poorly educated students who feel entitled to easy work and lavish praise." (Dweck, 2006/2008: 193) (see also Table 1 in 2.4 regarding the fixed-permissive teaching style). Therefore, according to Dweck (2006/2008: 196), "[g]reat teachers set high standards for all their students, not just the ones who are already achieving." (see also Table 1 in 2.4 regarding the authoritative teaching style). Dweck (2006/2008) argues that setting high standards is not enough. The teacher should support the students so that they can reach these standards.

4. Research

In this chapter, we discuss in detail our longitudinal quantitative research: participants, instruments, data collection procedure, data analysis and analysis procedure. The data analyzed were recordings of student oral final exams. Our aim was to know whether the lessons and the conducting of the exam need to be improved.

4.1 Research design

The aim of this research was to verify whether there was a progressive improvement in the average ability of students in their spoken Italian during the two years that they attended the conversation courses at our university, and therefore whether the teaching method we used was effective for these kinds of students, whether there are areas that can still be improved, whether our oral final exam was reliable, and how we could improve it if necessary.

4.1.1 Participants

The participants in the research were students who attended the conversation courses from the 2017-18 academic year (*Conversation I* and *II*) as first-year students through the 2018-19 academic year (*Conversation III* and *IV*) as second-year students. We excluded remedial students from the research, because despite attending the same courses, they were from different cohorts of students. After excluding remedial students, twenty one students were enrolled in *Conversation I, II, and III*. Only eleven students were enrolled in *Conversation IV*, because some students went to Italy as exchange students, others decided to not attend and preferred to focus on classes of the previous level that they had failed (see also 6.20), and others had poor attendance, etc. As we wanted to analyze how the Italian oral skills of the students changed over the two years, we decided to analyze only the data collected from these eleven students.

4.1.2 Instruments and data collection procedure

Data were collected by a recorder during the oral final exams. They were collected for two years, once at the end of each semester. Thus for each of the eleven students we have four recordings.

The length of the recordings varied, depending mainly on the number of students who took the exams, including those not included in this research. Although there were differences in the lengths of the recordings according to the needs of the moment, generally for *Conversation I* the length was about five minutes. For *Conversation II*, it was about four minutes and thirty seconds. For *Conversation III*, it was about five minutes. For *Conversation IV*, it was about six minutes.

We decided to make the collection of research data coincide with the oral final exam because getting students to participate in the research outside of class time was difficult, both because they were busy with other lessons, homework, part-time jobs, etc., and because we could not financially compensate the relatively large number of students needed for research of this kind. Note that the needs for data collection and oral examination are considerably different. The former requires a greater homogeneity in the format in order to obtain easily comparable results. The latter needs flexibility in order to get as close as possible to a spontaneous and non-mechanical conversation. We had to give priority to spontaneous conversation, as this was the goal of the conversation courses. Although we did our best to be able to draw conclusions, the difficulty of comparing these data cannot be denied because: the questions were not the same for all participants and for each exam; in spite of an initial prompt, the course of the conversation changed according to

the responses of students; there were interruptions on our part, and students could ask for clarification when needed, two elements that, together with the variability of the duration of the answers, contributed to the fragmentation of the answers and made quantitative analysis difficult; students were free to use the words and morphosyntactic structures they wanted, making it difficult to know if all students were able to use, for example, the perfect past tense.

4.2 Data analysis

Because of the limitations explained above, the first problem we encountered was deciding what to analyze in order to have as much similar information as possible for all of the students and for each exam, which is necessary to determine how student language skills evolved. Deciding what to analyze took a great amount of time, as it required us to listen several times to all of the recordings in order to find some common points among the recordings. After long and careful reflection, we focused on four aspects: vocabulary extension, morphology, fluency, and response time.

Note that due to the fragmentation mentioned in the previous section, our analysis is based on a very small pool of data, which does not allow us to draw many conclusions, but still allows us to raise some doubts. This fragmentation is also because some students found understanding the questions to be difficult, especially on the first exam, and hence their speech was extremely limited. In other words, although we had several minutes of recordings for each student during each exam, we could only use a small part of each recording. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the data did not allow us to analyze the same piece of speech for all of the four selected parameters. Instead, different parts of each recording were used to analyze different parameters. Keeping this in mind was important during our data analysis, as we tried to look for correlations among the results of the four parameters. Considering these problems, we decided to analyze the four aspects as follows.

In order to be able to measure vocabulary extension for all of the students and for all of the four exams, we looked at the minimum number of words available in most of the recordings: 13. We analyzed the *first* 13 words in cases in which students used more than 13 words. We counted how many words among those 13 were used only once. For example, if a student used the Italian word for “table” two times, their vocabulary extension was 12 words. The higher the number, the higher the lexical knowledge of the student should have been. However, especially in so small a sample, this number could have changed because of other factors. A higher number could also mean that the students were able to or attempted to use pronouns, or that they were able to construct more complex and longer sentences. By contrast, a wider vocabulary could also mean that while the structure of a sentence that a student uttered was very simple, the student had instead made a list of words (see Student 1 in 4.3) without connecting them syntactically. Also, sometimes students had to repeat one or more words in certain situations.

For this research, we decided to count only nouns (except for proper nouns), adjectives, and verbs, excluding adverbs, articles, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, and interjections. We did not count words that students used but learned from us during the exam (e.g., words that we used in our questions for which the students then asked their meanings). We did not count words that were clearly used with a wrong meaning or words that were in a sentence that was not related to the question (that is, when the meaning of the question was misunderstood). We did not count words contained in sentences and expressions that students learned as a whole in class (e.g., the questions used to ask for clarifications, like “What does it mean?”, or words that were reformulations). We did not count as different words those whose masculine and feminine versions are just changes of endings (e.g., “nonno” and “nonna” for “grandfather” and “grandmother”), however we did count as different those words whose masculine and feminine versions are completely different words (e.g., “padre” and “madre” for “mother” and “father”). Auxiliary and related verbs were counted as

one word. We did not count the adjectives “vicino” (“near”) and “lontano” (“far”) when they were part of prepositional phrases (“far from...”, “near to...”). We did not count Japanese words that are used in Italian (e.g., “manga”). Furthermore, we did not count English words that are used in both Italian and Japanese.

Regarding morphology, we decided to analyze whether simple present verbs correctly agreed with their subjects (in Italian, endings change according to the subject). This morphological element was the most used by students, and therefore this is probably the one that allows for a longitudinal comparison of morphology. We analyzed the agreement of the first three simple present verbs used by the students, because three was the minimum number of simple present verbs used by most of students.

We did not consider doubtful cases, such when students used the infinitive of a verb to make it agree with a subject, perhaps because the student meant to omit the modal verb already used in the previous sentence (in Italian, the verb after a modal verb is used in its infinitive form), or when the subject was a word of foreign origin (such as “film” or “manga”). The endings of Italian nouns change according to their number (singular or plural), but in the case of most foreign words the endings do not change. Therefore, knowing if a student used such a word as singular or plural is impossible, and consequentially, judging whether the agreement of the verb with the subject was correct is also impossible. We did not consider reflexive verbs because their agreement is more complex (and only a few students used them). We did not count agreements that students were able to fix by themselves to be wrong.

In such a small sample, we think that a low number of errors can mean various things. First, note that as data were recorded during exams, students were probably more careful of their forms than they would otherwise be (see also 6.19). Furthermore, a low number of errors could be due to the use of simple language and a narrow vocabulary. Some mistakes could be due to the student not being aware of the number of the subject. Others could be due to a temporary state of agitation on the part of a student.

Fluency was measured by counting the number of syllables spoken over 12 seconds. This is a very limited amount of time, but it was the only length of speech that ensured that all students could talk without interruptions (ours with further questions, or theirs with clarification questions). The low reliability of this syllable count is not just due to the short length of time, but also to the fact that some students spoke much faster or slower in other points of the recordings. The ideal would have been to average the number of syllables taken from multiple sections of the recording. Unfortunately, only a few students spoke for 12 seconds without interruption even in at least one other section.

The number of syllables were counted in two ways: unpruned (which included syllables of repetitions, self-corrections, and false starts) and pruned (in which syllables of repetitions, self-corrections, and false starts were not counted). These two methods of counting allow us to know if a change in the number of syllables was due to a change in the number of hesitations made.

The last parameter analyzed was response time, meaning how long the students took to answer our questions after they *seemed* to have understood them (e.g., after a request of clarification or after an exclamation like “Ah!”). We did not measure the response times of questions that were answered with just “yes” or “no” without any further information, because we could not be sure that the students understood such questions. Also, we did not measure the response times of answers that showed a clear misinterpretation of the question. By doing so, we aimed to measure how long students took in order to formulate an answer, not the time that they needed to understand a question. This is based on the fact that with increased speaking practice, working memory should react more quickly. However, the data analyzed showed separating comprehension and speaking in response time is not possible. Some students who had response times of .00 seconds started to answer *before* we had ended a question. This means that their pragmatic expectancy grammar (see

note no. 34) had improved. In addition, we think that response time changes could have changed according to various other factors, like the type of question asked, the degree of attention that students were paying, or their moods. Therefore, the data analyzed cannot necessarily indicate an improvement in speaking skills.

On several occasions, some of the students waited for a while after we had asked our questions before asking for clarifications, and thus measuring the response time soon after we had asked the questions was impossible.

Also note that we did not measure the response time of answers that started with a Japanese word or with proper nouns. We considered responses also from false starts and words that were later reformulated, but we did not consider responses that started with a request for a word.

When measuring response times, the instrumentation available (*Audacity*) and our limited measurement expertise did not allow us to do so in a very precise way, although we did our best. Therefore, some slight variations could be possible. However, the data are sufficient to determine whether there was meaningful improvement in student response times.

4.3 Analysis results

In this section, we analyze and discuss the data we collected. From the position that each student is a separate case, with different needs and interests, we decided to analyze and discuss the results of each student individually. This analysis was also done with the aim of determining any critical issues in conducting the oral exam. When possible, we have tried to find correlations between the type of topic addressed by a student and their performance. Finally, we averaged the results to look for general trends and to be able to judge whether there has been significant student improvement over the two years of data collection.

Student 1					
Term		July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019
Topic		Shoes	A recipe	Presents you would like to receive	What did you do on New Year's Day?
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words		11	7	9	11
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject		3	3	3	2
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	14	9	16	24
	Pruned	13	6	13	19
	Difference	1	3	3	5
Response time (seconds)					
First question		2.60	2.91	13.52	3.71
Second question		8.08	1.67	2.08	.84
Third question		2.79	3.25	2.79	1.68

Fourth question	7.90	2.51	3.69	.00
Average	5.34	2.59	5.52	1.56

The vocabulary extension of Student 1 progressively increased. In July 2017, their vocabulary was as extended as it was in January 2019. However, the reason is probably that the question in July 2017 was regarding shoes and the student made a list of colors, which we counted. This is also perhaps the reason that fluency was as much higher on the first exam as it was on the third exam. Apart from this exception, their fluency progressively improved. However, the progressive increase in the difference between unpruned and pruned utterances should also be noted. In other words, although their fluency increased, things like repetitions, self-correction, and false starts also increased. The increase of these kinds of hesitations can also be interpreted as a complexification of their language, which would require a greater amount of energy for them to organize thoughts, together with greater attention of the student to form, perhaps due to special needs. Since the increase was progressive, an increase due to agitation from the examination should be excluded. A decrease in their morphology can be seen on the fourth exam. Response time also progressively improved, except for on the third exam. The table above shows that the response to the first questions required a big amount of time, perhaps because at the beginning the student needed more time to collect their thoughts in order to talk regarding this topic as they probably never thought about what kind of presents they would like to receive.

Student 2					
Term		July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019
Topic		Your friends	A book you have read	Relationship of young people and reading	Money
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words		8	9	9	10
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject		3	1	0	2
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	9	22	14	26
	Pruned	6	12	9	26
	Difference	3	10	5	0
Response time (seconds)					
First question		4.58	7.71	10.93	5.24
Second question		.89	6.21	.75	1.21
Third question		1.52	5.10	.73	.47
Fourth question		-	2.91	-	.93
Average		-	5.48	-	1.96

Student 2 showed clear discomfort with the topics of the second and third exams, declaring that they did not read much. The table above shows their progressive increase in vocabulary extension, with a period of stagnation between the second and third exams, when the topics of the exams were similar. Perhaps the topic was the cause of the much lower score in morphology. Their fluency was affected in two different ways. In the second exam, their hesitations increased, as shown by the difference between the unpruned and pruned utterances. In the third exam, the number of pruned syllables decreased compared to that of the previous exam. However, the number increased compared to the number from the first exam. We have incomplete data regarding the response time as the number of responses obtained was not sufficient in the first and third exams. However, a noticeable improvement can be seen between the second and fourth exams.

Student 3					
Term		July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019
Topic		Study of foreign languages	A dream you had	A trip you would like to take	Kyoto
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words		6	10	8	8
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject		2	3	3	3
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	9	9	15	22
	Pruned	5	6	15	17
	Difference	4	3	0	5
Response time (seconds)					
First question		1.23	2.94	1.53	2.44
Second question		4.91	.39	.00	2.09
Third question		1.77	2.21	.00	.66
Fourth question		6.04	2.38	1.53	.00
Average		3.49	1.98	.77	1.30

The table above shows that the vocabulary extension of Student 3 was stable between the third and the fourth exams, but it decreased compared to the second exam. An increase can be seen compared to the first exam. In other words, the vocabulary extension of Student 3 did not improve. Their morphology improved from the second exam and remained stable. Their fluency also progressively improved. However, there was an unusual increase in the number of hesitations on the fourth exam, after a progressive decrease over the first three exams. A comparable phenomenon can also be seen with their response time. The student may have been troubled for some reason (perhaps because it was last exam and they wanted to show their best work).

Student 4

Term	July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019	
Topic	Weather forecast	Describe this drawing	A bad thing that happened to you	Eating in Kyoto	
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words	11	11	10	9	
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject	2	2	1	2	
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	13	15	16	21
	Pruned	11	12	11	21
	Difference	2	3	5	0
Response time (seconds)					
First question	1.87	5.71	1.95	.39	
Second question	2.77	1.44	.47	2.74	
Third question	4.29	1.17	3.25	.30	
Fourth question	2.59	1.81	.18	.93	
Average	2.88	2.53	1.46	1.09	

The vocabulary extension of Student 4 progressively decreased after a stable stage between the first and second exams. Determining the causes at this point is not easy. Their morphology also decreased on the third exam, which could be also explained by the topic. We asked the student to talk about a negative thing. The student could have been emotionally overwhelmed by the topic, affecting their morphology in a particular way. This could also explain the lower number of pruned syllables in fluency compared to that of the previous exam, and the increase in hesitations. Note that the increase in hesitations was progressive, except for the fourth exam. However, the improvement in response time was progressive, and nothing would suggest a worsening due to the type of topic.

Student 5				
Term	July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019
Topic	TV	Your family	Your experience in Italy	An experience abroad
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)				
Number of different words	11	9	7	12
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)				
Correct agreement with subject	3	3	2	2
Fluency (over 12 seconds)				

Number of syllables	Unpruned	13	13	21	20
	Pruned	5	13	14	11
	Difference	8	0	7	9
Response time (seconds)					
First question		3.25	4.37	1.59	3.02
Second question		1.21	3.63	1.22	2.44
Third question		.65	1.26	2.53	1.24
Fourth question		.56	1.78	.38	1.87
Average		1.42	2.76	5.72	2.14

Student 5, after a progressive worsening in vocabulary extension, improved on the fourth exam. However, this improvement did not correspond to an improvement in their fluency, as the number of pruned syllables was worse even than that on the second exam, due to a peak in the number of hesitations. This could mean that concentration on using the right words affected their fluency during the fourth exam. However, a response time trajectory that was similar to that on the extension of vocabulary can be seen.

Student 6					
Term		July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019
Topic		How do you spend summer?	Your hobbies	A book you have read ⁶¹	Jobs of the future
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words		9	9	10	8
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject		3	3	2	2
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	13	24	17	30
	Pruned	9	21	5	30
	Difference	4	3	12	0
Response time (seconds)					
First question		2.11	5.90	9.00	3.73
Second question		16.78	6.87	2.14	3.77
Third question		2.16	3.79	3.29	2.24
Fourth question		.35	2.13	1.66	-
Average		5.35	4.67	4.02	-

⁶¹ The student asked us whether we would consider manga to be books, because they did not read books. After a few moments of uncertainty, they talked about manga, although they did not seem to be any more comfortable with this topic than they were with the original.

Student 6 improved in vocabulary extension on the third exam. However, the topic did not seem to be among their favorites. By contrast, their fluency seemed to be affected. The number of pruned syllables dramatically decreased compared to that of the second exam and was even less than that of the first exam. The number of hesitations also dramatically increased, breaking the trend of progressive decrease that continued on the fourth exam. Also, their morphology seemed slightly affected. This was also the case on the fourth exam, together with their vocabulary extension. The topic was another one for which the student did not have much to say. However, in this case their fluency was not affected. The student progressively improved in response time until the third exam. For the fourth exam, we do not have comparable data as the number of questions was less, mainly because of the difficulty that the students had talking about this topic.

Student 7					
Term	July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019	
Topic	Daily purchases	Foods you don't like	Do you often go to restaurants?	Smartphones	
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words	10	-	13	12	
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject	3	3	2	3	
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	12	9	13	10
	Pruned	11	9	13	7
	Difference	1	0	0	3
Response time (seconds)					
First question	6.92	3.59	.00	5.82	
Second question	4.07	.71	.84	1.72	
Third question	1.95	10.42	2.22	8.86	
Fourth question	6.50	3.45	.31	1.44	
Average	4.86	4.54	0.84	4.46	

The vocabulary extension, fluency, and response time of Student 7 got worse on the fourth exam. We thought that the topic “smartphone” would be familiar to young students, so saying whether this worsening was due to the topic or other factors is difficult. Note that their vocabulary extension decreased only compared to that of the third exam, but increased compared to that of the first. We cannot compare it with the second exam because there are no data available due to the low number of words used by the student. The second exam did not go well either, as shown by the low number of words uttered and the decrease in fluency, although the number of hesitations was 0. Their response time did not seem to have been affected.

Student 8				
Term	July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019

Topic	Do you often go to the cinema?	Describe your room	How many times have you flown on an airplane?	Living with other people	
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words	10	9	10	8	
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject	3	3	-	3	
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	13	17	13	16
	Pruned	7	13	11	8
	Difference	6	4	2	8
Response time (seconds)					
First question	2.58	2.59	4.31	.81	
Second question	.58	.37	4.14	1.83	
Third question	4.73	.74	3.62	.00	
Fourth question	-	3.53	2.77	1.02	
Average	-	1.81	3.71	.92	

In spite of fluctuating vocabulary extension, the data on morphology for Student 8 shows good results. Both vocabulary extension and pruned fluency got low scores on the fourth exam, because of a greater number of hesitations. The reasons for the lower scores on the fourth exam are unclear. We do not have data available regarding response time for the first exam because of an insufficient number of questions due mainly to the time needed by the student in order to answer the questions. Note the worsening on the third exam response time.

Student 9					
Term	July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019	
Topic	Cars	A funny episode from your childhood	Do you play sports?	Your favorite sport	
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words	12	10	10	11	
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject	3	-	2	3	
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number	Unpruned	7	11	7	25

of syllables	Pruned	7	11	7	21
	Difference	0	0	0	4
Response time (seconds)					
First question		.00	5.94	1.12	.10
Second question		.00	.54	.30	.00
Third question		2.23	10.32	3.90	.55
Fourth question		1.39	.00	.00	.84
Average		0.91	4.20	1.33	0.37

Student 9 had mixed results regarding vocabulary extension, morphology, and especially fluency. However, on the fourth exam, the results of both fluency and response time improved, perhaps because of a greater effort by the student due to it being the last exam.

Student 10					
Term		July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019
Topic		Your family	Last weekend	What do you think about marriage?	Do you like animals?
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words		9	11	11	10
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject		3	-	3	2
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	12	15	15	19
	Pruned	10	15	15	18
	Difference	2	0	0	1
	Response time (seconds)				
First question		.95	2.01	2.92	.00
Second question		2.49	1.26	4.60	2.06
Third question		-	.40	.78	.00
Fourth question		-	.13	1.33	2.16
Average		-	.95	2.41	1.06

For Student 10, despite good results in fluency, with a lack of change between the second and third exams, their vocabulary extension and morphology decreased slightly. As the decrease was slight, the cause could be random. However, the topic could have played a role. Although the student told us that they liked animals, they explained that they did not want to have a dog since their dog had died years ago. Perhaps the negative emotions that the topic raised contributed to the lower performance. However, the results on the third exam were not as bad (except for the response time) despite that the student did not seem to know much about the topic. However, note that the vocabulary extension and fluency remained unchanged between the second and third exams,

meaning that they did not get worse, but they did not get better either. This could be justified by the kind of topic. Alternatively, the performance of the student on the third exam could be less important than that on the second exam, perhaps because on the second exam the student did too well because the topic was related to the everyday life of the student.

Student 11					
Term	July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019	
Topic	Do you often go to cafes?	Describe this drawing	The city where you live	When you were a child	
Vocabulary extension (over 13 words)					
Number of different words	10	11	8	10	
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs)					
Correct agreement with subject	2	3	2	3	
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	11	12	18	15
	Pruned	6	8	15	11
	Difference	5	4	3	4
Response time (seconds)					
First question	.00	13.43	3.67	4.84	
Second question	1.48	.68	6.85	3.66	
Third question	3.09	1.26	2.30	3.26	
Fourth question	9.68	7.69	.18	5.77	
Average	3.56	5.77	3.25	4.38	

Student 11 had swings in their vocabulary extension, response time, and morphology accuracy. Their fluency peaked on the third exam. Their fluency on the fourth exam, although lower than the third, was higher than that on the second. Determining the cause of this change is difficult. Perhaps the scores could have to do with the introverted character of the student. The morphology accuracy in January 2018 was their highest possible. As they were asked to describe a drawing, they could have had more time to think of their answers than had they been participating in a normal interaction. However, this was not confirmed by the performance of Student 4, who was also asked to describe a drawing.

In the table below, we summarize the average points of the eleven students above. Note that some students on some exams had score lowers than those needed for some of the parameters. For this reason, we did not include them in the average. In the table, we clarify which students were excluded. This means that the averages are not based on the same students for each parameter, and therefore correlating the results of these parameters is not possible. The only parameter that is based on the average on all 11 students is fluency.

Student Averages				
Term	July 2017	January 2018	July 2018	January 2019

Vocabulary extension (over 13 words) (Student 7 not included)					
Number of different words		9.70	9.60	9.20	9.70
Morphology (simple present) (over 3 verbs) (Students 8, 9, and 10 not included)					
Correct agreement with the subject		2.63	2.63	1.88	2.38
Fluency (over 12 seconds)					
Number of syllables	Unpruned	11.45	14.18	15.00	20.73
	Pruned	8.18	11.45	11.64	17.18
	Difference	3.27	2.73	3.36	3.55
Response time (seconds) (Students 2, 6, 8, and 10 not included)					
First question		2.27	5.97	3.34	2.90
Second question		2.05	1.29	1.68	1.93
Third question		2.40	4.27	2.43	2.36
Fourth question		4.95	2.80	0.90	1.55
Average		2.92	3.58	2.09	2.19

Although the sample is small, and therefore we should be very careful to draw conclusions, the table above shows a progressive increase in fluency. This should be not surprising, as students generally talked a lot in Italian, not only during *oral free production* activities, but also in the other activities that required them to work in pair by exchanging ideas.

The results regarding vocabulary extension were different, perhaps because the factors involved are in part different from those involved in fluency. There was a progressive decrease from the first to the third exams, with a new increase in the fourth exam, in which, the score was the same as that of the first exam. Morphology shows a comparable trend, with a greater decrease on the third exam, followed by an increase on the fourth exam. Also, response time did not present much clear data, with an increase between the first and second exams, a large decrease on the third exam, and a slight increase on the fourth exam.

The decrease on the third exam and increase on the fourth exam in morphology could be explained by the necessity of many students to cognitively restructure their Italian knowledge. Lightbown and Spada (2013: 56) explain the phenomenon through the theory of interlanguage:

[I]t is important to emphasize that developmental stages are not like closed rooms. Learners do not leave one behind when they enter another. In examining a language sample from an individual learner, one should not expect to find behaviours from only one stage. On the contrary, at a given point in time, learners may use sentences typical of several different stages. It is perhaps better to think of a stage as being characterized by the emergence and increasing frequency of new forms rather than by the complete disappearance of earlier ones. Even when a more advanced stage comes to dominate in a learner's speech, conditions of stress or complexity in a communicative interaction can cause the learner to slip back to an earlier stage. In addition, [...] progress to a higher stage does not always mean fewer errors. For example, a learner may produce correct questions at Stage 1 or Stage 3, but those correct forms are not necessarily based on underlying knowledge of subject-verb inversion. That is, correct questions at Stage 1 are formulaic chunks, not sentences that have been constructed from the words that make

them up. At Stage 2, learners have advanced, in the sense that they are forming original questions, but the word order of those questions is not grammatical in the target language. At Stage 3, questions are formed by placing a question form (most often a *wh*-⁶² word or a form of the verb ‘do’) at the beginning of a sentence with declarative word order. This may result in questions such as ‘Do you want to go?’ that conform to English patterns. However, when the learner asks a question such as ‘Do you can help me?’ we can see that the learner’s interlanguage rule really is something like ‘Put a question word at the beginning of the sentence.’

The discussion from Lightbown and Spada (2013) concerns morphosyntax, not vocabulary. As the change in vocabulary extension is very slight compared to that of morphology, it could be attributed to randomness. However, we think that it could be also explained by a process similar to the one on morphosyntax explained above. In particular, we think that after accumulating a big amount of vocabulary during the first year, student brains probably needed to have more room for new information, and therefore prune the less used, less important vocabulary. This would also explain the new increase on the fourth exam.

The response time is probably the most difficult to explain because, as discussed in 4.2, it could be affected by several factors. For example, during the analysis, we noticed that some responses took longer when the student did not know a word that they wanted to use, did not know much about the topic, needed to think a little more about the content of the answer, tried to recall a word or a piece of information (e.g., from the past), were (presumably) shy, or were surprised by the ease of questions and could not figure out where our conversation was going (e.g., in January 2019, in order to choose a city to ask Student 3 to talk about, we first asked them where they lived and whether they were originally from there). In other words, a longer response time could be a sign of a more complex answer, meaning an answer that needs more reasoning, like calculation (as in questions like “How many...?”). It could also depend on the strategies used by the students. When some of them needed more time to think, they would start to say the first few words of a sentence and then pause to think about the answer. This taught us that being flexible with the duration of the oral exam is necessary if possible, as different students require different amounts of time to recall information. Response time is not just about language skills.

To summarize, we noticed that the topic could influence several aspects of speaking performance if it arouses negative emotions or is detached from student interests. In the case of negative emotions, the explanation could be that the prefrontal cortex is not able to keep the amygdala under control (see 5.3), especially in immature brains like those of typical university students. We also believe that performance could be affected in that asking students to describe drawings could be easier than the tasks we gave to other students.

Overall, our analysis showed that the students improved, especially regarding fluency, and therefore confirms that the lessons were effective. However, the improvement was not as significant as we had hoped. In part, this could be due to the small sample size and difficulty comparing the data, but we believe it is also because we need to adapt our methodology more to the needs of the students. In order to understand more regarding these needs, in chapter 5 we analyze them from a scientific point of view. Then, in chapter 6, we make suggestions on how to improve our lessons.

62 Italics in the original.

5. Neurobiological, behavioral, and cognitive characteristics of typical university students

In this chapter, we will show how some behavior and actions of students, like those described in 2.1, are thought to have a neurobiological origin and how these behaviors and actions are related to the age of typical university students. This is important because the factors described in this chapter could be an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives defined by the four pillars of learning described in chapter 2 if the teacher does not implement appropriate strategies. Therefore, these factors should be considered together with the other more general factors described in chapter 2 that can affect learning (a humanistic approach, teaching styles, learning styles, intelligence preferences, etc.). We also believe that by understanding the causes of these factors, a teacher can see these factors from an educational perspective. In other words, teachers should acknowledge those attitudes as characteristic of some students and should understand that taking care of those attitudes is an integral part of their job. In our view, this is for two reasons. The first is that the role of a teacher is not merely to teach a subject but also to train citizens through the teaching of that subject. The second is that by taking into account student needs as much as possible, learning will be enhanced.

This chapter, together with chapter 2, suggests ways to improve lessons, which will be described in chapter 6. Although the teaching method as analyzed in chapter 3 showed all the general characteristics for effective learning, the results of our research in chapter 4 suggest that there is still room for improvement. We believe that the main reason has to do with the characteristics of our teaching context, as summarized in 1.2. As stated in 1.2, the training course we attended at Dilit International House was a general course, in which the general principles of the method are learned. Teachers must adapt these principles to their specific context through experience and rigorous investigation, as we aim to do in this dissertation. Some of the considerations in this chapter also indicate that these principles can be applied not only to lessons but also to tests and exams (see also 3.4).

While the research in chapter 4 showed that some negative results with the oral exam were probably tied to how the exams were conducted, as this chapter will show, teachers should take these problems into account and to do their best to solve them because if left unaddressed these problems can lead to moodiness and ruined relationships with students and teachers (e.g., see 3.4) and perhaps also among students. In particular, students of this age could show a higher degree of sensitivity to unfairness (see 5.1.2) and have more difficulty managing their stress (see 5.3). These factors could affect future learning in a negative way by significantly lowering levels of student motivation.

5.1 Brain maturity

In 3.1, we discussed one possible influence of the environment, the kind of nurturing received, on the development of EFs. A change in society would have shaped more immature brains, which is why the behaviors that we described are more likely to be observed today than before. Today one would become an adult later in life. However, the environment is not the only factor that influences the behavior of students. Genetics seems to be another factor. Stiles and Jernigan (2010: 345-346) state:

[T]he processes that underlie and guide brain development involve the ongoing interplay of genetic and environmental factors. Brains do not develop normally in the absence of critical genetic signaling *and* they do not develop normally in the absence of essential environmental input. Rather, at each point in development, organism intrinsic and

environmental factors interact to support the increasingly complex and elaborate structures and functions of the brain. [...] Although nothing in neural development appears to be “predetermined”, the process of development is nonetheless orderly and follows very regular patterns over time. The regularity of developmental process arises from constraints imposed by both genetic and environmental factors. Genes provide the templates for creating particular proteins that are essentials to the developmental process; the environment provides essential input that shapes and influences the direction of the emerging neural networks. [...] The integrity of developmental process depends absolutely upon the availability of the right neural elements appearing at the appropriate moment in developmental time.

This would mean that EFs need be practiced in order to develop, but the degree of development is limited by the degree of neurobiological maturation.

One possible piece of evidence that nurturing cannot be the only factor to shape the brain, and therefore EFs, comes also from a study on sensation seeking and self-regulation by Steinberg et al. Steinberg et al. (2017) found that young people from various parts of the world showed similar behaviors, regardless of the different cultural and economic contexts from which they came:

Generally speaking, self-regulation develops linearly and gradually over the course of adolescence, reaching a plateau somewhere during the mid-20s, whereas reward seeking follows an inverted U-shaped pattern, increasing between preadolescence and late adolescence, peaking at around age 19, and then declining as individuals move into and through their 20s. Although there are minor variations in these patterns across countries, the similarities between the observed age trends are far more striking than the differences.

Although the involvement of genetics is plausible, another possibility is also a lack of experience. Regardless the country, young people usually have less experience than older people.

According to some researchers, despite the size of the brain, which is about the same among adults at the age of university students, it is still developing, and this could be one reason for some behaviors often associated with young people (Somerville, 2016).

In order to judge whether a brain is mature, one must first decide which parameters are to be considered, because the inside of the brain changes throughout life (Somerville, 2016). Depending on the parameters and the kinds of measurements carried out, the results can change substantially. This, together with individual factors, makes having an indisputable assessment impossible.

After the *what* and the *how* are chosen, an age must be found at which there is a *plateau* of these parameters (Somerville, 2016). From a neurobiological perspective, only if a plateau is found is adolescence said to end and adulthood, the age of full maturity, to start. If these two stages of life can be found at a neurobiological level, hypothesizing different behavioral and cognitive characteristics for each of these two stages is easier. Otherwise, the lack of a plateau would mean that the brain matures throughout life and, therefore, there are not particular neurobiological events related to adolescence.

The research discussed here mainly used as a parameter the measure of gray matter and white matter volumes, which seem to be related, as the pioneering study by Giedd et al. (1999) showed. The researchers found that during adolescence, gray matter volume decreases while white matter volume increases. As with other researchers who followed them, Giedd et al. used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans for their analysis, which allows for detailed images of the brain.

A decrease in gray matter is usually associated with cognitive decline, which contrasts with the fact that during adolescence some cognitive skills reach their maximum potential. However, Westyle et al. (2010) found that the decrease in gray matter during adolescence is a different process from the decrease in gray matter associated with a cognitive decline. The latter takes place later during adulthood.

An important study to determine the age at which the brain reaches maturity was conducted by Gogtay et al. (2004). The oldest people whose brains the researchers analyzed were 21 years old. At that age, the brain is still a work in progress. Therefore, this study could not tell whether and when the maturation process ends. Gogtay et al. (2004) also found that the brain matures from the back to the front, and that among those regions of the brain that they selected for their study that, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, where EFs are thought to be located (see also 2.1), matures last. Unsurprisingly, the areas that mature later are more cognitively complex.

According to Gogtay et al. (2004), the decrease of gray matter and the increase of white matter could be mainly explained by synaptic pruning and myelination, respectively. By pruning, the brain probably remove synapses, that is neural connections, that seem to not be necessary because they have remained unused. This would improve brain performance. Myelination is a process by which a white substance called myelin covers the axons of neurons. As it prevents the electrical impulse dispersion of neurons, connections between different areas of the brain become faster (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010). For example, the prefrontal cortex can respond faster when the amygdala, the region of the brain that processes emotions, sends a signal of fear or danger. The result is that people can control their negative emotions before those emotions take over (see also 2.1).

There are various results regarding the presumed age of a plateau of gray matter decrease and white matter increase, perhaps also because of the kind of measurements used. Bartzokis et al. (2001) found a white matter peak at age 44 in the frontal lobe, and at age 47 in the temporal lobe, the only two regions they observed. After that age, the white matter decreases, presumably from a degeneration process. However, no plateau was found between the increasing and decreasing stages. Thus, the maturation of the brain is continuous. Sowell et al. (2003) also could not find a plateau. According to their study, the brain begins to decline after age 40. According to Westlye et al. (2009), the plateau is reached in the early thirties, although there are increases in white matter volume until the fifties. Lebel and Beaulieu (2011) found that at 32 years old, the maximum age of the participants in their research, white matter volume continued to increase with a comparable gray matter decrease in many of them. Therefore, this research also cannot conclude when these changes level off. However, Mills et al. (2016) found a plateau of cortical gray matter volume and a comparable plateau in white matter volume between the mid-twenties and thirties. As shown, determining with certainty whether a neurobiological adolescence exists, and if so when it ends, is difficult. It seems safer to state that if an age of brain maturity exists, for many people it should be by their forties.

In the next subsections, we discuss some behaviors and actions whose causes, according to some researchers, are attributed at least in part to an immature prefrontal cortex, which university students seem to have. Note that possible correlations do not necessarily imply that an immature brain causes those behaviors. The opposite could be also true, that those behaviors (and therefore the culture and the society that foster them and the quality and the quantity of experiences) shape the brain. In any case, determining causes and effects is not relevant here. Knowing these behaviors, which at most could represent a tendency typical of a certain category of students and not a general rule, and then applying useful strategies in order to improve the learning of students who exhibit these behaviors is what matters most to us.

5.1.1 Risk-taking: lack of self-control, reward-seeking, peer influence, sensitivity to novelties, counterfactual thinking, working memory

There are several behaviors that seem to change with the age. One of these is risk-taking. Research seems to confirm that in some situations involving risk younger people exhibit less mature behavior than adults, and this seems to correlate with brain maturity. For example, Qu et al. (2015)

found a correlation between a less activated ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, with a correspondent less activated medial prefrontal cortex, and exhibiting a decrease of risky behavior with age (the participants of the study were adolescents). This suggests a decrease in the need to control ventral striatum.⁶³ This would mean that as people get older, making more informed decisions becomes easier.

Galvan et al. (2006) found that in adolescents the nucleus accumbens⁶⁴ was more active than the prefrontal cortex was, as compared to both children and adults,⁶⁵ because it matures earlier than the prefrontal cortex does. The researchers suggest that this may be the reason that adolescents take more risks. Similarly, Steinberg (2010) found the correlation between an increase in risk-taking in adolescence⁶⁶ and the fact that the impulses of the already mature limbic system⁶⁷ cannot be inhibited by the prefrontal cortex because it is not mature yet. In other words, the cause of risk-taking would be a developmental mismatch between the emotional part of the brain and the rational part. As Steinberg (2010: 216) says:

According to this dual systems model, adolescent risk-taking is hypothesized to be stimulated by a rapid and dramatic increase in dopaminergic activity within the socioemotional system around the time of puberty, which is presumed to lead to increases in reward-seeking. However, this increase in reward-seeking precedes the structural maturation of the cognitive control system and its connections to areas of the socioemotional system, a maturational process that is gradual, unfolds over the course of adolescence, and permits more advanced self regulation and impulse control.

However, in a subsequent study, Mills et al. (2014: 158) found that although in many individuals the amygdala and/or the nucleus accumbens develop earlier than the prefrontal cortex, a relationship with more risky behavior could not be found:

The results of the present study support the idea that the amygdala matures before the PFC,⁶⁸ as the amygdala stabilizes in volume in mid-to-late adolescence, whereas the PFC continues to change in volume until at least the mid-twenties. The results are more ambiguous regarding the NAcc.⁶⁹ We did not find a relationship between individual patterns of brain development and adolescent risk-taking or sensation-seeking behaviors based on the smaller subset of self-report data.

This study also shows a variety of development trajectories in individuals. Some differences could be due to sex. For example, female brains seem to mature earlier than male brains do (Lenroot & Giedd, 2010), their sensation-seeking behavior declines earlier, impulse control is higher and sensation seeking is lower than that of males (Shulman et al., 2014). Other differences could be due to nurturing and experiences (see also 5.1).

Several researchers have highlighted that young people are not always risk-takers, contrary to what is commonly believed. Young people, who seek independence from their parents and adults

63 The ventral striatum belongs to the limbic system, and it is thought to be involved in decision-making and reward-seeking.

64 The nucleus accumbens is a component of the ventral striatum (see note no. 63).

65 In this study, children were aged 7-11, adolescents were 13-17, and adults were 23-29. The study does not cover people of the typical age of university students, but we hypothesize that in university students the prefrontal cortex is less active than in adolescents but more active than in adults.

66 The study shows that people become progressively less impulsive through all of the age ranges of the study (until 30 years old).

67 The limbic system, to which the amygdala belongs, is involved in emotional processes.

68 Prefrontal cortex.

69 The nucleus accumbens. The researchers found that “the developmental mismatch [is] more prevalent between the amygdala and the PCF than between the NAcc and the PCF.” (Mills et al., 2014: 155)

in general, seem to be bigger risk-takers than adults when stimuli are appetitive (Somerville et al., 2011), when they are advised by peers (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005), or when they are just observed by peers (Chein et al., 2011).⁷⁰ Chein et al. (2011) explain: “[O]ur key finding is that this age difference in reward system activity was dependent on social context, consistent with the hypothesis that the presence of peers differentially sensitizes adolescents to the reward value of risky choices.” In other words, they take risky actions if they find them motivating and if they are encouraged to do so by their environment (i.e., peer pressure).

Somerville et al. (2011: 2132) explain that their findings are not just due to a lack of self-control, but also to an increased motivation of adolescents towards rewarding experiences due to greater freedom:

Although immature cognitive control capacity has often been considered a sufficient explanation for adolescents’ influx in risky behavior, there is a growing body of evidence including the current findings implicating biased motivational drives in adolescence, both at the behavioral and neurobiological level. Indeed, the relatively greater freedom experienced during this time may support stronger motivational drives, as independence also facilitates opportunity to seek out potentially rewarding experiences.

Therefore, their findings are compatible with the dual system model supported by Steinberg (2010).

What emerges from the studies of Gardner and Steinberg (2005), and Chein et al. (2011) is the need for acceptance by peers. This is what would make young people take more risks than adults. Young people focus more on the benefits than the costs of their choices. The need for acceptance is also shown by the facts that for young people social evaluation is very important (Somerville, 2013) and that they are more sensitive to peer rejections than adults are (Sebastian et al., 2010). This could suggest that some students would do anything to not lose face if reprimanded in front of the class. Therefore, a teacher should avoid this kind of situation.

In addition, Steinberg and Monahan (2007) suggest that resistance to peer influence depends on gender (with girls more able to resist—confirming the findings of Lenroot and Giedd (2010) mentioned above), ethnicity, and social class. This suggests that in the case of disruptive students, pairing them with non-disruptive females when possible could be useful.

The findings of Chambers et al. (2003) are similar to those of Somerville et al. (2011). According to Chambers et al. (2003:1048), the reason for risky behavior is an increase in motivation for novelties due to brain changes, coupled with a lower ability to self-control:

Adolescent neurodevelopment involves changes in brain organization and function characterized by relatively greater influence of promotional motivation substrates in the setting of immature inhibitory substrates. Greater motivational drives for novel experiences, coupled with an immature inhibitory control system, could predispose to performance of impulsive actions and risky behaviors, including experimentation with and abusive use of addictive drugs.

70 In reality, although we can hypothesize that younger adults are more risk-takers than older adults, these researchers do not always tell us whether people of the age of university students are more risk-takers than older people, too. The reason is that in the study of Somerville et al. (2016), were considered “adults” people between 18 and 29 years old. Compared to them, adolescents, who were between 13 and 17 years old, resulted to be more risk-takers. In the study of Gardner and Steinberg (2005) the division was still different: adolescents (13-16 years old), youths (18-22) and adults (24 and older). The researchers found that risk taking decreases with age and, therefore, adolescents and youths are more risk-takers than adults. In the study of Chein et al. (2011), adolescents were between 14 and 18, young adults between 19 and 22, and adults between 24 and 29. A significantly increase in take risking of young adults (and adults) when observed by peers could not be found. It concerned adolescents and this means that this could be especially the case of first year university students (18 years old).

Steinberg et al. (2017) confirm that sensation-seeking, the search for novelty (which could push young people to take risky actions), and self-regulation, the ability to manage emotions, mature during the mid-20s.

The above research on the self-control of young people could be summarized by Casey and Caudle (2013: 86):

Our findings suggest that adolescents can show remarkable restraint in controlling habitual responses, but tend to fail when attempting to control habitual responses to salient positive cues in the environment. Specifically, we showed that adolescents have impulse control that is comparable to or even better than that of some adults in neutral contexts. [...] However, in emotional contexts, adolescents' impulse-control ability is severely taxed relative to that of children and adults [...]. This behavioral pattern is paralleled by exaggerated responses in reward-related circuitry that presumably are difficult to regulate because of less top-down control from still-developing prefrontal connections in teenagers. This tension between motivational and control processes during adolescence can vary by individual, leading to enhanced or diminished self-control.

Romer et al. (2017) propose an alternative hypothesis to that of developmental mismatch. According to their hypothesis, young people are just curious to learn new things. They do risky things simply because they do not know that they are risky due to a lack of experience. This is very plausible, as adolescence is a period in the lives of young people during which they are struggling to get their independence from adults. In order to do this and get ready for adulthood, they try new things and have a lot of new experiences, and this would lead them to take more risks.

Other researchers reached a conclusion similar to that of Romer et al. (2017), taking into account the role of experience. What would influence decision making is counterfactual thinking, the capacity to anticipate (and avoid) the negative emotions that could result from an action, which improves with age. Baird and Fugelsang (2004: 1800) describe the reasons people develop this skill gradually, which seems to also have to do with a larger amount of experience and a more mature brain:

Greater experience, and an improved system for organizing and retrieving the memories of experience, enables the adolescent to recall and apply a greater number of previous experiences to new situations. Additionally, an increased ability to abstract and generalize may allow an adolescent to reason about a situation that they have not directly experienced. Improvement in executive function are largely the result of the synergistic maturation in working memory capacity, selective attention, error detection and inhibition, all of which have been shown to improve with maturational changes in brain structure and function.

However, according to Cohen et al. (2010), rather than an inability to figure out possible negative consequences, young people are motivated to take risks because they overestimate the rewards of doing so.

Burnett et al. (2010) suggest that higher counterfactually mediated emotions (relief and regret) could have a role in making risky decisions.⁷¹ In young adolescents (12-15), risk-taking behaviors would decrease compared to those in children (9-11) because this kind of emotion becomes stronger (especially relief). Furthermore, after 15 years old, the degree of counterfactually mediated emotions does not seem to change. In this eventuality, a lack of counterfactual thinking cannot be responsible for behavior in university students. However, the study of Burnett et al. (2010) does not take into consideration other variables that Baird and Fugelsang (2004) state

⁷¹ For example, young people could take risks because they would feel bad if they did not try something that was later revealed to be successful.

contribute to the formation of counterfactual thinking, like working memory. Huizinga et al. (2006) showed that at 21 years old, the age of their oldest participants, working memory was still improving. Crone et al. (2006) showed that participants aged 18-25 had a better working memory than younger participants, which confirms that working memory is a factor that can improve with age. In other words, although there would be no increase in relief and regret emotions, an increase in working memory should also result in an increase in counterfactual thinking. Therefore, counterfactual thinking is probably still developing during university years.

By contrast, Cauffman et al. (2010) found that young people (14-21) preferred high rewards although they knew their negative consequences. This means that young people are more sensitive to emotional contexts than consequences, and would in turn mean that a teacher should not only use a system of consequences (see also 2.2.3.1), but should also protect students from what they could find rewarding (see also 2.2.1). Furthermore, the younger one is, the more one seems to prefer smaller but immediate rewards rather than larger but delayed ones (Christakou et al., 2011). This suggests a result similar to Cauffman et al.'s (2010) research, which is that perhaps young people prefer to use their smartphones today rather than have a good mark tomorrow.

5.1.2 Sensitivity to unfairness, mentalizing, empathy, prosocial behavior, and choice

The need young people have for autonomy, which was mentioned in 5.1.1, has been confirmed by Daddis (2011). Daddis (2011) also showed that the desire of autonomy decreases with age.⁷² This probably would mean that the desire for autonomy is higher when opportunities for autonomy are fewer, and therefore the efforts of younger people to show that they are adults are greater.

Another similar phenomenon is that young people usually believe themselves to already be full adults, and therefore they want to be respected and treated as peers by adults. Perhaps this is why they are particularly sensitive to presumed unfairness by adults, teachers included. For example, occasionally a student will ask why they failed when another student did not. Students need transparent and convincing explanations.

Another reason for the sensitivity to unfairness could be difficulty in taking the perspective of others. Mentalizing, or theory of mind, is the ability to understand the intentions of other people, and it affects empathy, the capacity to understand the emotions of other people, which implies prosocial behavior, meaning helping other people, also develops with age (Decety, 2010; Dumontheil et al., 2010; Mills et al., 2012). All of this would mean that young people are often concentrating on themselves and have difficulty understanding the reasons that lead others to particular decisions, as well as the needs of other people, on their own.

The need to be treated as peers discussed above could also result in a desire to participate in class decisions, learning activities included. If a teacher takes care of student opinions and gives students the opportunity to make choices in class as much as possible, this inclusivity will probably contribute to lowering student stress levels (see also 5.3).

5.1.3 Attention and multitasking

Researchers have also found attention problems with young people. Monk et al. (2003) showed that young people can lose attention more easily in the presence of a stimulus in the environment.⁷³ Fair et al. (2007) confirmed that attention control is age-related and is also related to

⁷² In this case, the subjects were adolescents. Therefore, we presume that the desire for autonomy in university students is lower than that in adolescents.

⁷³ The adolescent participants were 9-17 years old, while the adults participants were 25-36 years old. Although this study did not take into consideration people of the age of typical university students, such people may have been more easily distracted than the adults.

greater experience.⁷⁴ Therefore, teachers must protect students from distractions because, as Naveh-Benjamin et al. (2006) also found, distractions negatively influence the capacity to memorize (see also 2.2.1 and 5.1.1).

Because of a lack of multitasking skills, adolescents aged 11-17 can find focusing on non-social information difficult during social situations. From Mills et al. (2015):

In this study, participants kept track of either one or three pieces of non-social information while also performing a referential communication task with a computer avatar. This task is akin to having a conversation with someone while in the middle of an unrelated task—such as programming an experiment or doing a classroom assignment—in which one must keep track of information not relevant to the current social interaction.

Considering the studies on brain maturity discussed in 5.1, we hypothesize that typical university students could also find focusing on non-social information difficult during social situations, as compared to older people.

The conclusions of Mills et al. (2015) are as follow:

These results might have implications for how adults work with adolescents (e.g., teacher and mentors) structure activities with adolescents. For example, in-class group work might be particularly difficult for adolescents who are already struggling with the assignment topic.

We do not think that the problem is pair or group work itself, but is instead a failure to use an authoritative style. If the teacher takes appropriate measures, like asking students to focus on the activity when they are not doing so and telling students in advance that the quality of their interactions is also being evaluated, problems of attention and multitasking should get better (see also 2.2.3.1).

Covid-19 gave us the possibility to get greater awareness of the importance of protecting students from distractions and temptations, as all of our courses during the first term of the 2020-21 academic year were completely online. The fact that the teacher and also the other students⁷⁵ were not physically present was a problem, particularly for first-year students. For example, despite repeated requests to put away dictionaries and books, students did not and were very dependent on them during *oral free production*. The result was that they did not improve much. In a virtual environment, hiding such books from the teacher is easy, as the teacher cannot see what is on student tables if their webcams are carefully positioned.

5.1.4 Understanding the social meaning of faces

Young people seem to have more difficulty understanding the social meaning of faces because of the ongoing development of the brain. The development of this skill possibly extends beyond adolescence (Cohen Kadosh et al., 2013). Furthermore, the difficulty of properly understanding facial expressions could be also cultural (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Jack et al., 2012). This implies that university students could misunderstand the facial expressions of teachers, especially if a teacher is from another cultural background, as in our case. Such misunderstandings could even compromise teacher-student rapport.

⁷⁴ In their research, there were three group of participants: children (7-9 years old), adolescents (10-15 years old), and adults (20-31). Therefore, one cannot tell for certain from this study whether at the age of university students attention control improves.

⁷⁵ Students usually fulfill teachers' requests in class, probably because they can see that their peers do the same (i.e., peer pressure). The students want to be accepted by each other (see 5.1.1).

5.2 Identification

Young people can also be positively influenced by people of similar age, with whom they can more easily identify. For example, anti-smoking advertising campaigns aimed at young people are more successful if young spokespeople are used (Pechmann and Reibling, 2000). This could mean that the motivation of young people can increase if they can identify themselves in a given situation.

5.3 Stress

Hare et al. (2008) found that if adolescents (13-18) are shown frightening pictures, their amygdala activation is higher than that of children (7-12) and adults (19-32) shown the same pictures. This could be interpreted as a greater predisposition to stress.⁷⁶ The reason could be the fact that, as shown by Deng et al. (2019), adolescents have more difficulty in regulating their emotions than adults do, especially if those emotions are negative. We hypothesize that this could also in part be true for university students. In addition, we suspect that these results could also have to do with the permissive parenting style that is widespread today. Children are never criticized in order to safeguard their self-esteem.

Although the research that will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs mainly concerns children and their families, we presume that the factors addressed can also be useful also for giving direction to teachers of university students in order to create a more suitable learning environment. In addition, these studies can help parents and, therefore, teachers, leading to a more favorable class environment if students have been adequately educated by their families.

Factors such as stress, sadness, loneliness, lack of sleep, and lack of physical health or fitness have been shown to have a negative impact on people's performance (Diamond, 2013). In particular, studies have found high levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, in children who live in problematic environments. This resulted in poorer EFs and working memory (Blair et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2015; da Rosa Piccolo et al., 2016). However, the impact of potentially stressful factors on EFs is unclear and may depend on the temperament of the people concerned (Raver et al., 2013).

Studies have shown that stress can result in behavioral changes, memory loss, reduced decision-making, inhibition, planning, coding, task management, reasoning, self-control, flexibility, and attention problems (Sänger et al., 2014; Starcke et al., 2016; Cibrian-Llanderal et al., 2018). Thus, teachers (or parents) must make lowering stress levels for students a priority. However, the aim should not be the full elimination of stress, because stress can help learning if it is moderate and controllable (Schwabe et al., 2008; Henderson et al., 2012; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). This could also affect online lessons (see also 5.1.3). Many students are probably more relaxed when they are online, usually from home, and cannot feel the small amount of stress that is needed to learn.

In order to lower stress levels, in addition improving self-control strategies (Cibrian-Llanderal et al., 2018), reducing the factors that negatively influence EFs and increasing those that positively influence them would be helpful (Diamond & Ling, 2016).

5.4 Aerobic exercise

⁷⁶ In this study, the only people who could be typical first year university students are in the group of adolescents. Although this study does not thoroughly look at the age group covering typical university students, we expect that in younger adults (those with ages typical for second to fourth year university students), amygdala activation may be higher than in older subjects.

Some evidence suggests that task switching, selective attention, inhibitory control, working memory, and reading comprehension in young adults can benefit from aerobic exercise (Guiney & Machado, 2013; Tine, 2014). Teachers should take this evidence in account in their classrooms.

5.5 Sleep

A lack of sleep could have negative effects on behavior, mood, and academic performance (Wolfson & Carskadon, 1998; Trockel et al., 2000) (see also 2.2.4). We hypothesize this is because a lack of sleep hinders the proper functioning of EFs. In our first period classes, we regularly see sleepy students who have difficulty in actively participating in lessons, especially those who live far from the university as well as during the winter. According to Ohayon et al. (2004), young people around 20 years old should sleep for about 7 hours and 30 minutes nightly on average. According to Hirshkowitz et al. (2015), the recommended sleep duration for people ages 18-25 is 7-9 hours, although as few as 6 hours or as many as 10-11 hours may be appropriate for some people. Sleeping less than 6 hours or more than 11 hours was not recommended.

Sleep statistics for young Japanese people (Kōsei rōdōshō, 2017) show that many of them do not sleep enough. The most common answer among Japanese males aged 20-29 years old about their average daily amount of sleep was “more than 6 and less than 7 hours” (38.6%), followed by “more than 5 and less than 6 hours” (36.7%), “more than 7 and less than 8 hours” (15.1%), “less than 5 hours” (5.4%), “more than 8 and less than 9 hours” (3.5%), and “9 hours or more” (0.8%). Japanese females of the same age range declared that they sleep “more than 5 and less than 6 hours” (35.4%), “more than 6 and less than 7 hours” (34.2%), “more than 7 and less than 8 hours” (19.0%), “less than 5 hours” (5.9%), “more than 8 and less than 9 hours” (4.6%) and “9 hours or more” (0.8%).

People around this age not only have a problem with their sleep duration, but also with a delay in their circadian sleep phase (Hagenauer et al., 2009). Young students perform better later in the day than earlier in the morning. The greatest sleep delay seems to be between 15 and 21 years old, which includes the ages of our students. In other words, the reason that young people begin sleep late at night and wake up late in the morning seems to be mainly biological. However, according to Dewald-Kaufmann et al. (2013), their sleep schedules depend on sleeping habits rather than biological factors, and therefore getting people used to sleeping earlier and waking up earlier is possible.

Delaying the start of lessons seems to decrease tardiness and absences, to increase student GPAs, and to make students less depressed and more motivated to participate in activities (Wahlstrom, 2002; Owens et al., 2010; Adolescent Sleep Working Group et al., 2014; Wahlstrom et al., 2014). In our classes, there are usually more late or absent students in the first period than in the second.

In order to encourage earlier sleeping and waking times, and therefore to avoid poor academic performance, students are recommended to avoid smartphones, computers, and television immediately before bedtime (Cain & Gradisar, 2010; Wood et al., 2013; Gamble et al., 2014).

6. Conclusions

In this chapter, after describing the strengths of the methodology we use, in the light of the research described in chapters 2 and 5, we make concrete proposals in order to obtain better results than those analyzed and discussed in chapter 4. These proposals are based on the research discussed in chapters 2 and 5, too.

Note that most of these proposals are well known to most language teachers (especially those who teach English), and we already use them in a random fashion. Therefore, the activities themselves are not novel. What we want to emphasize instead is that knowing how certain activities can help deal with the issues discussed in this dissertation is crucial for making informed choices about how to use these activities. Only if teachers know why they have decided to do activity X instead of activity Y can their choices lead to a noticeable improvement in student skills as compared to an uninformed use of these activities.

The main aims of the proposals in the following sections are to enhance student motivation and engagement by complying with their needs and interests when possible, and to keep their stress levels under control (two goals that we believe to be related). Although the sections are divided into categories of intervention, individual activities can sometimes be used for several purposes, as noted. Furthermore, in our opinion, all of the activities chosen are in line with the main principles of Dilit International House. For example, we do not propose activities that use inauthentic texts, a passive student role, or pre-listening tasks, even though such activities could lower student anxiety levels. The only aspects that we have changed are the ways to achieve the set objectives, taking into consideration the needs of students. In addition to the objectives, other factors have also been taken into account so as to make useful adaptations, like the number or typology of students. For example, we exclude activities based on team games because the large number of participants on each team would not permit all of the students to work actively, and the risk of disruption, which is already high in group work, would be higher.

6.1 Confirmation of the effectiveness of the method used

As mentioned in chapter 3, the method used by Dilit International House is in tune with the four pillars of learning discussed in chapter 2.

With the attention to detail that characterizes this method, the teacher is asked to take all possible precautions so that students can concentrate on activities.⁷⁷ For example, in our conversation classroom, the wall at the back is made of glass, and therefore people walking or standing outside can be seen. This is a potential distraction for some students, and for this reason, before the lesson starts, we ask students to lower the blinds. We also ask students to silence their smartphones and to put them out of sight (see also 2.2.1). We ask them to do the same with pens, books, or any other objects during activities for which the highest level of concentration is needed, as is the case with *authentic listening* and *conversation rebuilding*. During *oral free production*, we ask all of the students to put their dictionaries on a desk near us (we learned this strategy from Catizone and Humphris (1999) regarding an activity called *written free production*). Students can use their dictionaries when they want (and they are probably happy because they feel that they can choose to do so), but can only use them at that desk. This helps the students to think more carefully about whether they need to look up a word, and as a result decreases the number of times they do so. This permits the activity to run more smoothly, especially when students are beginners, and it makes them rely more on their personal resources (see also 2.2.2). They can also ask us questions,

⁷⁷ Making the students more responsible and able to protect themselves from distractions would probably be a more educative aim (see also 5.3). However, doing so is a long process that will not immediately solve problems that need a quick fix in the classroom.

but the number of questions that they can ask is limited. These practices also indirectly suggest strategies that students can use when studying at home. This supports the first pillar, attention. Help from teachers in sustaining student attention is particularly important in our case, as the research discussed in 5.1.3 indicated that young people have difficulty concentrating. Thus, teachers cannot leave students free to follow their own impulses because these impulses could result in poor learning. This means that the teacher should use an authoritative teaching style, like the one inherent in the method used by Dilit International House (see 3.3.4). This style would also support the development of counterfactual skills by the students because of its emphasis on the system of consequences rather than a punishment system (see Table 1 in 2.4).

The second pillar, active engagement, focuses on the autonomy of learners by assigning them the role of researchers and using authentic (or semi-authentic) materials in class. In this case, the cognitive effort required of students is high and the role of the teacher is marginal. Teachers just give instructions, answer questions, etc. The high active engagement is also due to the eclecticism of the method, which can satisfy many disparate needs, allowing students to keep their stress levels under control (see also 5.3). For example, although most of the work is done in pairs, in some cases students can work individually or with the whole class.

Considering activities from the perspective of the VAK model (see 2.5), several connections can be noted. In *language puzzle* activities, auditory (listening), kinesthetic motoric (writing and exchanging partners), visual (reading), and kinesthetic emotional (exchanging ideas with a partner) styles are taken into account.⁷⁸ In *conversation rebuilding*, kinesthetic motoric (watching the miming of the teacher and in some cases using gestures by the students; watching the teacher using their hands like a board; exchanging partners, when needed), auditory (talking and listening), and kinesthetic emotional (repeating the conversation with a partner) styles are taken into account. In *authentic listening*, auditory (listening and exchanging ideas with a partner), kinesthetic motoric (exchanging partners), and kinesthetic emotional (exchanging ideas with a partner) styles are taken into account. In *oral free production*, auditory (talking and listening with a partner), kinesthetic motoric (talking while using gestures, drawing, moving around the room, looking up words in the dictionary, etc.) and kinesthetic emotional (interaction with a partner) styles are taken into account.

Error feedback, the third pillar, is addressed in different ways according to each activity and its aims. In *authentic listening*, the feedback comes from the recording, but also from the peers with whom students exchange ideas regarding what they *thought* that they understood. The teacher's marginal role is crucial for students to make progress. In the case of *oral free production*, the main source of error feedback is from peers with whom the students talk. The teacher only intervenes when they are asked questions. Once again, the marginal role of the teacher is functional to the purpose of the activity. In *language puzzle* activities, the feedback comes from the recording, peers, and the teacher. Such feedback also comes from peers and the teacher in *conversation rebuilding*. In these last two activities, the teacher investigates student interlanguage starting from their errors in order to intervene appropriately (see also note no. 36). As they are form-focused activities, the emphasis on error feedback is greater.

The fourth pillar, learning consolidation, is addressed in part by the continuous and extensive practice that is done in the classroom.

Students are actively engaged in the activities, and the activities are always challenging, which in part fulfills the desire to take risks that was discussed in 5.1.1, although this is *protected* risk-taking. The activities are carried out in the classroom under the supervision of the teacher in a friendly environment, in which the students help each other and can ask the teacher for help when they need it. Therefore, it is a less stressful environment and in this sense more suitable for learning (see below) than real life in a foreign country would be. In addition, students should also find the activities appetitive because of their content and their modalities. We enacted this in a limited way

78 Kinesthetic emotional styles focus on feelings, while kinesthetic motoric styles focus on movement.

in our own classrooms, as we based our actions only on student reactions to the activities we observed in class, without asking students directly what their interests were. Satisfying student requests as often as possible, or listening to them more attentively, can improve the level of active engagement, and therefore the final result. This reasoning is compatible with the studies on stress discussed in 5.3 as well. Excessive student frustration resulting from a lack of consideration of their needs could lead to a decrease in motivation and inefficiency of learning.

Similar frustration due to a negative learning environment is possible. The risk that a toxic environment could harm the already immature EFs has been shown in 5.3. Therefore, we strive to create an informal climate in our classrooms. In addition to the factors already mentioned earlier regarding an authoritative style (see 3.3.4), the particular arrangement of furniture should be emphasized, with variations depending on the activities involved. We ask students to sit in a semicircle at the beginning of each lesson. In addition to the other advantages of this arrangement (better view, more class cohesion, etc.) as pointed out by Diodato (2018), the traditional arrangement of chairs and desks could remind students of stressful situations experienced in traditional and usually authoritarian settings.⁷⁹

Although as shown, we were already trying to create a welcoming environment in our classrooms, perhaps for reasons dictated by our education and our discreet nature, we probably did not always succeed at creating our ideal class environment. More attention in this regard is certainly needed. In particular, we must be careful that our authoritative style does become authoritarian, a problem already highlighted in 3.3.4.

Overall, the key to effective teaching is to find what is motivating for students. This confirms what Corder (1967/1981: 8) stated decades ago: “[G]iven motivation,⁸⁰ it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data.” Moreover, if this axiom is true for the input, it is also true for the output. However, as Tokuhama-Espinosa (2011: 150) points out, “[m]otivating factors are regulated in a highly individualized fashion; what is motivating to one individual may not be motivating to another.” For example, the following is a summary of the motivating factors that students from the 2015-16 academic year highlighted regarding our lessons (Diodato, 2017b):

- **fun:** activity variety, partner variety, surprise effect (e.g., because there is no textbook to follow), feeling of success, extensive use of cognitive skills;
- **usefulness:** modality of the activities, content of the activities, almost exclusive use of Italian by the teacher, authentic materials, prioritizing use of the language (compared to theoretical knowledge), student levels of awareness, improvement awareness, gap awareness (that is, awareness of what they are not still able to do with the language), autonomy development, self-confidence improvement;
- **learning environment:** informal, cheerful, cohesive, not stressful;
- **teacher:** cheerful, smiling, easy to understand, fun, effective, joyful, kind, answers any question, explanations in Japanese included, enthusiastic (see also 2.6).

An element that emerges from the list above is the satisfaction resulting from the completion of the activities and the consequent perception of having achieved a goal (i.e., a feeling of success). This means that although the activities should be demanding in order to challenge the cognitive skills of students, they should also be *possible* in order to look appetitive. In addition, the

79 LeDoux (1998: 239) argues: “[W]hen stimuli that were present during the initial trauma are later encountered, each system can potentially retrieve its memories. In the case of the amygdala system, retrieval results in expression of bodily responses that prepare for danger, and in the case of the hippocampal system, conscious remembrances occur.”

80 Italics in the original.

activities should be useful, allowing students to learn real language as well as how to learn it. However, the usefulness of the activities is also tightly connected to the already mentioned necessity to match them with student needs and interests when possible.

In 5.1.1, we discussed that being accepted and recognized by peers can still be important at the age of our students. In addition to the advantages discussed in 3.3.2, pair work can allow students to achieve this goal, and therefore we think it is usually appreciated by students of this age group. Also, pair work should be useful to improve mentalizing, empathy, and prosocial behavior (see 5.1.2). The use of clear evaluation criteria (see 3.4) should also improve these skills and prevent problems that could derive from sensitivity to fairness or lack of working memory.

The more limited working memory of students in this age group (see 5.1.1), together with difficulties due to their limited Italian skills, seems to support our practice of giving instructions for the activities by using the fewest words possible, together with gestures, drawings or pictures, and modulating the tone of our voice to emphasize particular words. All of the four activities, though in particular *authentic listening*, *oral free production*, and *language puzzle* activities, are also useful for improving the capacity of student working memory. An increase in working memory capacity not only results in improved language skills but also in a greater capacity to respect class rules, which are also intended to positively affect student language skills. When students are engaged in the activities, they need a sufficient working memory capacity to hold in mind what the rules are. Therefore, one of the reasons that occasionally some students use smartphones in the middle of an activity for personal reasons could be that they forgot that they are not allowed to use their smartphones at that time.

Our practice of telling students how many minutes they have to engage in *oral free production* or how an activity is structured (at least during the first lessons) should in part address their limited self-control (see 5.1.1). For example, in *authentic listening*, we explain that they will listen to a text six times, that they will change partners two times, etc. In addition, we usually graphically represent the number of times that they will listen with lines or dots on the board and then erase them one by one as the activity progresses (we learned this technique from teachers who were using it at Dilit International House). By helping students to improve their working memory, we help also their self-control (see also 2.1).

The benefits of aerobic exercise were shown in 5.4. We use movement in a number of activities, which is similar to aerobic exercise, though most likely not of the same level of vigor. For example, in *imaginary oral free production*, giving instruction to different groups of students separately is necessary in order to create an information gap between them (see 3.3.1.3). In this situation, some students need to go out of the classroom, adding an element of movement. In addition, when they talk, they sometimes need to stand. Although students do not need to move too much, any movement is probably better than sitting for the entire class. Also, as mentioned above, students often need to move in order to look up words in the dictionary at the front of the room. Finally, in some activities, students need to change their seats, creating another opportunity to move. Knowing now the importance of aerobics exercise, we plan to incorporate more motion into our classroom activities.

In 5.1.2, we discussed the possible need of university students to be in control. As described in 3.3.1.3, in *oral free production* students are free to choose what to say and how to say it, and therefore their desire to choose is fulfilled in part. As we now consider this a very important aspect of our classroom activities in the light of the research discussed, we plan to find further ways to satisfy this student desire as much as possible.

As discussed in 5.1.1, counterfactual thinking and the related working memory should be fostered by the system of consequences system that we use (see 2.2.3.1 and Table 1 in 2.4).

Also in 5.1.1, we discussed sensitivity to novelties. Although we use a relatively limited set of activities (see Table 2 in 3.3.1), many students write in the final evaluation questionnaires that

they very much appreciate the variety of the lessons. This variety creates a sense of expectation, and they never get bored (see also Diodato, 2017b). This apparent contradiction between the limited set of activities used and the perception of variety is clarified by Pollard et al. (2016: xvi-xvii), who refer to the recurring set of activities as “routines” and also explain why they are necessary:

A “routine,” as we use the word, is an activity so effective, so flexible, that we find ourselves using it again and again, varying the content and level⁸¹ but keeping the basic structure of the activity intact. We think of a routine as a cooking pot. You can use a pot for the preparation of all kinds of wonderful dishes, but you do need the pot, and the pot always remains the same. Students, especially beginners, love routines because they feel they are on a familiar ground: “I know how to do this!” Relieved of the need to figure out what they’re supposed to do, they can plunge right in, giving all their attention to using their new language to do the job at hand. And routines don’t become boring because they are easy to vary in content, in level, and in the details of how we structure the activity. An old routine filled with new content offers both the kind of challenge and the kind of confidence beginning students need to move from the well-known to the unknown.

As Pollard et al. (2016) indicate, a teacher who uses routines is a teacher who cares about the need for familiarity of their students, which lowers their stress levels (see 5.3). In addition, routines save time for the teacher, who does not need to explain in detail how an activity should be carried out each time. Time subtracted from giving instructions is time added to carrying out activities.

6.2 Suggestions for addressing sensitivity to novelty through activities

In this section, we propose ways to vary the activities in order to bring novelty to the class. In the previous section, we discussed how doing the same activities with different variations is not considered boring by students. Some advantages of this practice were also highlighted. We also examined the list from Pollard et al. (2016) of reasons for variation in content, level, and structure of activities. Although we have already made variations in our activities related to the content and also the level of the students, we were not used to making many variations based on the structure of activities. Therefore, in the hope that the activities could be even more motivating and therefore more effective, in the first subsection here we propose some changes in the structure of the activities. Although the changes are slight, they permit the activities to look a little bit different to students.

In the second subsection, we propose some activities that do not belong to the methodology of Dilit International House but that can be used to further boost student motivation. We believe that doing these activities occasionally should positively impact not only the lessons in which they are done but also subsequent lessons. Note that there is no need to use different types of activities every time. In fact, we believe that these kinds of activities should only be used occasionally. First, using these variations only occasionally avoids habituation to novelty (not to the activity), and this could increase student expectation. Students can never know when the teacher will introduce a new activity. Second, and more importantly, the activities in the second subsection should be used only occasionally because they are cognitively less powerful, and therefore less effective (meaning the language acquisition process would be slower) as compared to the activities we regularly use. We believe that the regular activities permit students to fully achieve the set goals and to learn more in the same amount of time as compared to other activities, like those commonly seen in textbooks, as explained in the previous section and in 3.3.1. Therefore, although we think that a boost in motivation can be important, this boost cannot justify a total abandonment or drastic limitation of more cognitively engaging activities.

81 And also the interlocutor. See 3.3.2.

Although we recognize the possibility of occasionally using less cognitively engaging activities, we believe that they should be in tune with lesson objectives and teaching philosophy, based on the beliefs of the teacher on how languages are learned (research has not yet provided a definite answer about this). Regarding methods, Scrivener (2011: 31) writes:

A method is a way of teaching. Your choice of method is dependent on your approach, ie what you believe about:

- what language is;
- how people learn;
- how teaching helps people learn.

Based on such beliefs, you will then make methodological decisions about:

- the aims of a course;
- what to teach;
- teaching techniques;
- activity types;
- ways of relating with students;
- ways of assessing.

A teacher who uses activities that conflict with each other is a less reliable one, and they could create confusion among their students. Therefore, we share the point of view proposed by Weideman (2001: 11): “To teach in a way that is not consistent with what one deeply believes in, must be unpleasant not only for the ones who do the teaching, but also for the recipients of their teaching.” Weideman (2001: 5) also warns teachers to not mix up methods that are contradictory:

Mixing all manner of methods and approaches may result in gathering in one’s teaching arsenal such a mixed bag that all kinds of conflicts might arise. Or, to use another analogy, a mixed brew may sometimes be sweet to the taste, but it can just as easily upset one’s stomach! Indeed, if there are **conflicting**⁸² approaches in one’s instructional techniques, one may have contrary results to those one is striving for.

We agree with Weideman (2001) regarding the desirability of a *principled* eclecticism. Contrary to a non-principled eclecticism, teachers analyze the rationale of the activities and decide whether to adopt them based on their teaching philosophy. An eclecticism in which teachers mix activities randomly is destined to fail. Therefore, eclecticism should not

become a mere excuse for either passively accepting anything that comes along, or making compromises with the traditional simply because it is the way of least resistance. [...] To sum up: if one can employ a number of methods deliberately to achieve language teaching and learning goals, such an approach may yield a professionally stimulating experience. But if, on the other hand, one uses an eclectic argument merely for the sake of avoiding commitment and playing it safe, never coming to an understanding of the roots of the techniques that one adopts, the only consequence it may have is to dilute the effect of the new. (Weideman, 2001: 7-8)

Thus, choosing the right activities and materials is very important for the effectiveness of learning:

82 Bold in the original.

Learners may be exposed to a wealth of interesting materials and an attractive variety of exercises, but might never learn anything through them. How do these materials make it easier for learners to develop? What is the underlying rationale for using this or that set of exercises? Learners may therefore often remember merely the personalities of their lively language teacher, but may not recognise how their success or failure at learning the target language relates to the teaching methods employed. (Weideman, 2001: 10)

6.2.1 Breaking routines

As already discussed, in this subsection we propose some possible changes to the structure of the regular activities. One more general and simple way to break routines can be also variation of the order of the activities (see also Humphris, 1984). As the two activities we use most are *oral free production* and *authentic listening*, we believe that we should sometimes start lessons with one and sometimes with the other.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Authentic listening*

Variation: The teacher asks students to exchange opinions and to change partners after different numbers of listenings. This can also lead to a different number of partners. In some lessons, the teacher can ask students to exchange ideas after the first listening. In this case, students will change partners after every two listenings. As the usual total number of listenings is six, this would mean that each student will have three different partners. In other lessons, the teacher can ask students to exchange opinions after the second listening and change partners only after the third listening. In this case, each student will work with two different partners.⁸³

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Language puzzle*

Variation: Similar to proposal no. 1, the teacher asks students to change partners after one or two listenings, change partners more or less often, etc.

Proposal no. 3

Activity: *Oral free production*

Variation: In addition to choosing between *real* or *imaginary oral free production* (see also note no. 45), other slight changes are possible. For example, in *real oral free production*, one day the teacher could prepare the students for the activity through brainstorming, while on another day they could do so by first talking about their experiences (both possibilities are already taken into consideration by Catizone et al., 1997). On another day, the teacher could use induction techniques⁸⁴. On another day, the teacher could use a list of words or show a video or a picture as a prompt. Occasionally, the teacher could create groups of three instead of the usual pairs, although

83 The teacher could also opt for the latter version when the previous activity took too much time. In this way, the number of listenings, which is more important than the number of partners, will probably remain unchanged.

84 The teacher dedicates the first 3-4 minutes of the activity to capturing the attention of students and leveraging their emotions (Humphris, 2008). To achieve this goal, they stimulate multiple senses (e.g., lowering the lights and having students close their eyes, playing relaxing music, lighting incense, etc.). While making the students relax by using a calm voice and inserting pauses if necessary, the teacher gives suggestions on things that could be said about the chosen topic.

doing so could be less effective (see 3.3.2).⁸⁵ This change in the number of participants could also be done in *imaginary oral free production*. Another variation already implicit in the *imaginary* type is related to the arrangement of furniture, as this will change according to the situation (see 3.3.1.3). *Realia* (e.g., clothes to display if they are pretending to be in a clothing shop) could be also used, but as we have large classes,⁸⁶ bringing a sufficient amount of *realia* for all students would be difficult. For some situations, the teacher could ask students to prepare something written, for example a list of prices for hotel rooms or the menu of a restaurant at which they will pretend to work. Finally, in order to create an information gap (see 3.3.1.3), the teacher should not always ask the same students to go out of the room, but should vary which ones briefly leave.

Proposal no. 4

Activity: *Conversation rebuilding*

Variation: Although the teacher usually presents the context using mainly but not exclusively by miming, they can sometimes use other techniques (pictures, videos, drawings, etc.). Also, when students repeat the conversation in pairs, the teacher could occasionally change the composition of the pairs within the same lesson.

6.2.2 Other kinds of activities

In this subsection, we propose two activities that do not belong to the set of activities used by Dilit International House. Their number is limited because, as discussed in 6.2, we only chose activities that we think are in line with the method used by Dilit International House and with the objectives of the course, in this case developing student oral skills.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Dictation*

Details: Saying that dictation is absent in the Dilit International House method is not completely correct. As explained in 3.3.1.2, the first stage of a *language puzzle* is dictation. However, as the language is authentic, the speaking speed of the people who participate in the conversation is natural. In addition, the dictation stage is only one stage of a *language puzzle*, which overall requires higher cognitive skills than mere dictation. Therefore, a *language puzzle* allows students to learn much more than a classic dictation activity. This is presumably the reason that an activity called *dictation* is absent from the set of activities used by Dilit International House, as their method aims at maximum cognitive engagement of students. There are many ways to make the dictation more fun and challenging than the traditional method, as demonstrated by Davis and Rinvoluceri (1988).

Proposal no. 2

85 This variation could be especially useful when students are asked to make a decision regarding something. A triad can have a majority, unlike a pair.

86 Here, we mean classes with twenty five or more students. We have indicated this number because twenty five is more or less the minimum number of students possible at our university. However, classes are almost always larger, due to the presence of remedial students. For our university, such classes are considered small. The meaning of “large class” is very subjective, as explained by Hess (2001: 1): “There are, of course, many very different notions of what constitutes such a class. In the language institute where I taught for many years, twenty was considered a large class. [...] Chinese colleagues have told me that they taught groups of sixty or more students, [...] and that such a situation was not at all unusual for them. A colleague from Pakistan tells me that she teaches classes of over one hundred [...]”

Activity: *Word bingo*⁸⁷

Procedure: As this activity is aimed at selective listening, it should be done after *authentic listening* (possibly on another day, for motivational reasons), as an alternative to a *language puzzle*. If done on a day other than that of an *authentic listening* activity, the teacher can let the students listen again to a conversation in order to recall its contents. Then, the teacher asks the students to write nine words (nouns, adjectives, or verbs) that they think could be related to the topic (not words that they actually heard in the activity). The words need to be generated by the students in order for them to develop autonomy. This will also help students to develop their ability to make inferences about an oral text based on their knowledge of the world. Then, the teacher plays the conversation again (and will do so until the students will ask them to stop) and the students circle all of the words that they think that they heard. The winner is the first student who circles all of the words or the one who circles the most words.

6.3 Suggestions for keeping stress levels under control through activities

The adaptations of the activities used by Dilit International House that we propose in this section aim to keep student stress levels under control. Some potentially stressful factors are in the activities themselves, and therefore we slightly change their procedures. Other stressful elements are not inside the activities but are related to aspects of student lives. To address these, we do not change the structure of the activities but instead propose topics that aim to relieve students from their worries.

The adaptations presented in this section take into consideration the research discussed in 5.3 regarding the difficulty for young people of controlling their stress levels and the negative consequences that this can have on learning.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Authentic listening*

Procedure: During the fifth listening, the teacher gives students the opportunity to stop the recording for a maximum of five times in order to ask a question of the teacher. The next and last listening is normally conducted without interruptions in order for students to have a final global view.⁸⁸ This adaptation could be used as an intermediate stage between another adaptation called *treasure hunt*⁸⁹ and the usual way to conduct the task.

87 Adapted from White (1998).

88 This version is adapted from Humphris (2006). In his adaptation, for some reason the activity ends with this opportunity to ask questions, while here we propose a final listening with no interruptions. In the class in which Humphris tested this adaptation, there were only two students, so during one listening, he gave one student the opportunity to ask questions. During the next listening, he gave the same opportunity to the other student. Although this was the first lesson (a trial lesson), we think these characteristics made the students less ashamed to ask questions as compared to our adaptation.

89 In the adaptation called *treasure hunt*, proposed by Humphris (1990a), for the first four or five times that this activity is done, instead of listening and then discussing their interpretations with a partner, students write at least one word (they usually write more than that) after each listening. Then they compare their list with a partner and add to their list the words that the partner wrote but that they did not. We think that the rationale of this adaptation is to avoid having absolute beginners feel overwhelmed by trying to globally understand an oral text. They probably would not know how to deal with such a text in order to not “drown” during this “language shower.” Asking them to write at least one word of an oral text that is a couple of minutes long will make the task feel much easier. This is perhaps also a trick that assures the teacher that students are listening and not withdrawing because of the difficulty of the task. Students need to pay much attention to the input in order for learning to take place. In addition, the request to write down words should be especially welcomed by some learners, like those who prefer a so-called “visual” learning style (see 2.5). As writing words down is not a very challenging task, after some lessons the teacher can ask the students to not write them down, so that students can pay full attention to the oral text.

Possible problems: Students could feel embarrassed by asking questions in front of the class, especially because this adaptation might be used at the beginning of a course, when the sense of a safe environment has yet to be established. However, the fact that students know that if they want they can use this opportunity can make them feel that the task is easier. In other words, some students can feel that the task is easy even they do not ask any questions, simply because they feel that they have the situation under control. Alternatively, one or two students could be chosen who would be responsible for asking questions if they wish. If two students are chosen, they would ask questions in two different listenings (see note no. 88). If the teacher chooses the students, these students will probably feel entitled, making it easier for them to ask questions.

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: Some students could prefer to have written words even when they have to practice oral skills. This could be the case for visual learners, for students who hold the belief that if the teacher does not give something written then they are not learning, or for students who lack in self-confidence. While allowing learners to prepare the sentences they will use in advance could make them feel that the task is easier, doing so will not help them to improve their speaking skills. For example, one possibility could be to include activities for which students need to write a menu or a list of items sold in a shop, such as in an *imaginary oral free production* activity. In a *real oral free production* activity, students could discuss the order of importance of some categories represented by the words in a list, for example the importance of the jobs presented in a list (see Appendix A for an example in English). These are the so-called *ranking exercises*, described by Klippel (1984).

Proposal no. 3

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: Students write five things that are stressful for them, in order of importance. Then, they discuss the lists in pairs and think about ways to deal with them.⁹⁰ The fact that a classmate listens carefully to their problems, and that maybe these problems are common to other students, could make students feel understood and that they are not alone. If students did not have a chance to share their stressful situations with others before, then this could be a very stress-relieving opportunity.

Proposal no. 4

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The teacher hands out a few short jokes (keep them short so they does not take too long to read and students can focus more on speaking) (see Appendix B for an example in English) and ask students to try to figure out individually why Italians usually think these jokes are funny (they can use a dictionary or ask the teacher in order to solve lexical problems). At the end of the activity, which will need some exchanges with partners, the teacher can resolve any remaining doubts about the meanings of the jokes. This activity is also suitable for students who prefer to have something written and for those who prefer to work individually. By reflecting on the jokes, depending on which ones the teacher chooses, students can also reflect on some cultural aspects of Italy and on phenomena like paronomasia (as in the case of puns).⁹¹ This adaptation is not an *oral free production* activity in the strict sense, because this kind of pair work and the change of partners is more reminiscent of form-focused activities such as *authentic listening*.

90 Adapted from the activity *These stressful things* by Davis et al. (1998).

91 Activities based on humor, such as jokes, can be found in Medgyes (2002).

Proposal no. 5

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: When the oral final exam is near, some students begin to worry, especially during the first semester of the first year, as this may be their first oral exam in a foreign language (or even the first oral exam in their lives, as in Japan tests are usually written), causing students to wonder about the structure of the exam. Explaining this structure is one solution, but giving them the opportunity to experience it is even better. Therefore, the teacher can give students the opportunity to practice in pairs. One student is the examiner and the other is the examinee. In order to keep the stress levels of weaker students under control, they could preferably become the examiners. This is both for a psychological reason (they are usually, but not necessarily, the students who are most afraid of the exams, and so a change of perspective could be beneficial), and because the teacher can allow them to write some questions in advance. The other questions should be generated orally during the speaking practice because they should be based on the answers received. Alternatively, if the teacher wants to make the activity more difficult for the examiners, instead of writing the questions during the preparation phase, the teacher could ask them to write only a list of topics that they would like to discuss. In this case, the examiners will need to orally formulate the questions during the speaking practice. Another alternative is to give students a list with some possible topics. Students will need to choose items from it or add to it.⁹² This activity could be *imaginary* or *semi-imaginary*. In the latter case, the situation is imaginary, as is the role of the students who will ask questions. However, the examinee could be themselves if they want when answering personal questions. The activity could be also a *real oral free production* activity. In this case, students will not pretend to be examiners and examinees, but they will share their anxiety regarding an upcoming exam with other students. By doing so, they can become aware that there are other students who share the same worries. This could be done with an exam on any subject, not necessarily the Italian oral final exam. However, regardless of the subject, they should express themselves in Italian.⁹³

Proposal no. 6

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: Some topics could hurt student feelings because they may remind them of difficulties that they are experiencing at that moment and that they do not want to disclose. At this age, one of these delicate topics could be family (e.g., if the parents of some students are recently divorced or prematurely deceased). However, family is a topic that is often encountered during language lessons or exams. The teacher has two options: either avoiding dealing with potentially risky topics or dealing with them but in an *imaginary oral free production* activity. In an imaginary setting, students can talk about a family that is not their own. Another possibility is giving students the opportunity to choose whether to talk about their real family or an imaginary family (recall the power that this could have on motivation; see 6.7).

6.4 Suggestions for addressing enhanced risk-taking through activities

The adaptations in this section focus on risk-taking. As discussed in 5.1.1, in the presence of an appetitive stimulus, young people can exhibit higher than average risk-taking behavior. Although risk-taking can be dangerous in some situations, like when driving a car, in a safe environment like a classroom risk-taking can be beneficial for teachers. The activities used by Dilit International

⁹² Adapted from the activity *The oral language exam* by Mazza and Montali (1999).

⁹³ Adapted from the activity *Exam worry* by Davis et al. (1998).

House are challenging, and therefore they already address student risk-taking (see 6.1), however there are perhaps ways to spice up these activities further.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The teacher gives a riddle, puzzle, or other kind of problem for students to solve (see Appendix C for an example in English). We suggest using short texts so that the first phase does not take too long. After students work individually (at which time they can use a dictionary or ask the teacher in order to solve lexical problems), they exchange opinions. At the end of the activity, which will need some changes in partners, the teacher can resolve any remaining doubts about the meaning of the materials.⁹⁴ This is similar to proposal no. 4 in 6.3, and therefore it is also suitable for students who prefer to have something written and for those who prefer to work individually. It could also be suitable for people who have an intelligence preference different from the linguistic one (see 2.5). For example, in order to address students with a preference for logical-mathematical intelligence, they could be asked to solve a math problem.

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The teacher hands out two different sheets to the members of each pair of students. Two similar but different drawings are depicted on the sheets. Students talk without showing their drawings to their partners in order to spot the differences between the drawings. The task becomes harder if students are sitting shoulder-to-shoulder. By doing so, they cannot use non-verbal language. If requested, at the end the teacher can give the solutions. This kind of activity is described by Ur (1981), who also gives practical suggestions on how to change the particulars of a drawing in an analog way in order to create an alternate version by just using a black fiber-tip pen for additions or white correcting fluid for erasures. When the altered version is ready, the teacher can photocopy it. This activity is also suitable for students with a visual learning style or a spatial intelligence preference.

6.5 Suggestions for increasing self-control through activities

Another type of adaptation focuses on ways to increase student self-control (see 5.1.1). From the belief that students learn more when they can think deeply about problems by themselves than when they are told to do so by others, self-control-related problems can also be the topic of a speaking activity. By doing so, students not only practice the spoken language, but they can also become aware of some self-control problems. This is the first step towards an improvement that in future lessons could make the lives of teachers easier and the lessons more effective.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The teacher hands out a list with possible actions related to lack of self-control (see Appendix D for an example in English). Here we have made wider use of the expression “lack of control.” This also includes strategies that may be unrelated to the purpose of studying Italian but that address actions students continue to use out of habit, laziness, or other reasons. The teacher

⁹⁴ Numerous ideas regarding puzzles and problems can be found in Maley and Grellet (1981), and in Frank et al. (2008). Some guessing games and problem-solving activities can also be found in Klippel (1984).

asks students to read the list (they can use a dictionary or ask the teacher to solve problems related to meaning) and to add other possible reasons. Finally, the students choose the actions that they actually do from the list. When the students are ready, they talk in pairs regarding the actions they chose, explaining why they did them and how they could refrain from doing them going forward.⁹⁵ This activity could also be welcomed by students who prefer to have something written.

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The students discuss their opinions regarding moral values and the reasons that they agree with them or not (see Appendix E for an example in English).⁹⁶

6.6 Suggestions for addressing the enhanced need of being accepted by peers through activities

The activities in this section have been chosen to respond to the need of young people to be accepted by their peers (see 5.1.1).

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Language puzzle*

Procedure: The teacher prepares three written versions of the same task according to the degree of student listening skills. What can change is the number of words that the teacher will reveal to the students in the text they will try to complete.⁹⁷ The strongest students will have only the first and last words of a text in order to give them context. This is what happens in the usual version, but this time the teacher writes the words on the sheet, not on the board. The fact that students have a text with more words puts them in a position to be able to actively contribute to the discussion in pair work even when one partner is of a higher level than the other. This could make these activities more welcome in the eyes of higher level students, as they can still get help even when working with weaker students. The teacher asks students to choose the right version for themselves. As discussed in 5.1.2, the choice should further enhance motivation. In addition, this scenario will avoid letting some students feel hurt by the choice of the teacher. However, in order to encourage students to make the best choice, the teacher could remind them that for this task to be effective, their selection should not be of a lower, similar, or even much higher level than their own, but of a slightly higher level. If students keep choosing a version of an inadequate level out of laziness, in the future the teacher could decide which version to give to each student.

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: Teachers ask students to think of a problem, a situation, etc., on which to ask a classmate for advice. Then, the students talk in pairs. Asking someone for help should increase the level of acceptance by the person whose help is asked for.⁹⁸

95 Adapted from the activity *Refusing to Learn* by Sion (2001).

96 Based on the section *Values clarification techniques* by Klippel (1984) and the activities *Bad Behaviour* and *Family Values* by Sion (2001).

97 Adapted from the activity *Multilevel dictation* described by Hess (2001).

98 Books that deal with classroom management often suggest that the teacher ask students for help or advice regarding something the teacher cannot do but that students can. This would help to create rapport between teachers and students (e.g., Plevin, 2018). If this concept is true for teachers and students, it should also be true among students themselves.

6.7 Suggestions for addressing the enhanced need of being in control through activities

In 5.1.2, we discussed the possibility that young people will be more satisfied if they are given the opportunity to have a say or to make choices. Simply put, they would like to be in control of the situation. Therefore, the adaptations in this section aim to address this need in order to enhance motivation and learning quality.

However, teachers should also be aware that the focus on choice is not only about a greater freedom in the choices of topics⁹⁹ and partners, which the following adaptations are about. The teacher could occasionally give students the opportunity to choose the type of the activity. As our class is a conversation course with a priority on meaning-focused activities, doing so is not possible for much of the activities used, and therefore choice will be very limited. Therefore, choice could be between a form-focused and a meaning-focused activity. In this case, students should have the chance to choose only occasionally, because, for example, the excessive use of form-focused activities would inevitably affect their listening and speaking skills. Another opportunity to choose could be between *real* or *imaginary oral free production*. For instance, in *real oral free production*, the teacher could ask the students whether they prefer to express opinions, to talk about past experiences, to solve a riddle, puzzle, or problem, to discuss a joke, and so on. In *imaginary oral free production*, the choice can be among the conversational situations (e.g., restaurant, airport, etc.).

Note that if the teacher gives students the opportunity to choose between two or more activities, this means that the teacher will need to prepare more activities for the same lesson. Doing so could be very time consuming, however the teacher could recycle the activities that were not chosen to be used in future lessons.

Also, students could choose the order of the activities (see also 6.2.1).

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: Students choose from a range of topics. In *real oral free production*, the choice can be done as pairs (e.g., if each pair chooses a topic from a list, different pairs can end up talking about different topics) or by the whole class (meaning all pairs would talk about the same topic). Ideally choices would be limited to two or three topics, allowing the decision to be made quickly without taking too much time away from the activity. In *imaginary oral free production*, as the teacher needs to give students the instructions separately, the choice can be done only at the whole class level; giving different instructions to many different students who chose different situations would be difficult and time consuming.

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: In *imaginary oral free production*, the teacher could sometimes let the students who receive the instructions outside of the classroom choose a partner among those who received the

⁹⁹ Asking students to choose a topic is not always possible. For example, in an activity like *authentic listening*, in which students try to make hypotheses regarding a topic, the activity would be ruined by letting students choose the topic.

instruction inside the classroom. Usually we decided which students talk with each other to avoid pairs that do not work well together¹⁰⁰ or because the last student to be chosen may feel bad.¹⁰¹

Proposal no. 3

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The teacher hands out a sheet with a board for the game *Noughts and crosses* (or *Tic Tack Toe* in American English). Each square on the board has a topic in it. Students, in turn, choose a square. To put their sign on it (an X or an O), they have to talk with their partner regarding the topic written in the square for a certain amount of time (e.g., 5 minutes on each topic for about a 30-minute game). The time could be shortened if the teacher would prefer that students repeat the activity with other students. If time is not given, students may talk little and instead focus on completing the game more than speaking. The teacher can keep track of the time so that students can concentrate on the activity. By doing so, there is no risk that some pairs may finish earlier than others because of problems connected to time keeping. The winners are the students who can complete three topics horizontally, vertically, or diagonally (see Appendix F for an example in English).¹⁰² Unfortunately, this game does not let students talk for a long time and then deepen their conversation on the same topic (see also 3.3.2). A way to bypass the problem, especially with students who are not beginners anymore, is to have student choices not concern the topic (which will be chosen by the teacher), but which aspects of the topic to talk about (see Appendix G for an example in English). Another possible variation could be to ask the students to fill in an empty board with topics or various aspects of a topic for a freer choice, but doing so would take time away from the activity.

6.8 Suggestions for increasing counterfactual skills through activities

In 5.1.1, we discussed the lack of counterfactual skills in young people. The proposal in this section aims to enhance these skills, which should result in more active student engagement in class.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The teacher asks students to talk about the possible consequences of some events or stories, for example, asking “What do you think will happen and *why*?” or “How do you think the story will continue and *why*?” Alternatively, pictures could also be used as a prompt. Another alternative is that the teacher could ask students to write a list of pros and cons for an action and then discuss their lists in pairs. This version is probably preferred by students who prefer to have something written.¹⁰³

6.9 Suggestions for increasing understanding of the social meaning of faces through activities

100 This can be partially remedied by having students who potentially do not work well together playing the same role so they cannot constitute a pair.

101 This problem could be solved by putting the less popular or more sensitive students in the position to choose rather than to be chosen.

102 Adapted from the activities *Noughts and crosses* by Delle Donne (1996) and *Noughts or crosses?* by Anelli (2007), neither of which are speaking activities.

103 Adapted from the activity *Consequences* by Klippel (1984).

As discussed in 5.1.4, understanding the social meaning of faces is a skill that needs to be developed. This skill is important so that students can have better comprehension based on this kind of non-verbal language, which would also decrease the risk of misunderstandings between classmates and, above all, between students and foreign teachers. Proposal no. 1 could be still considered an adaptation of *authentic listening*, as the only difference is the medium used. By contrast, proposal no. 2, although an analytic activity like a *language puzzle*, uses a very different procedure.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Authentic vision*

Procedure: The teacher uses authentic or semi-authentic videos instead of the usual audio recordings in order to get students progressively used to faces in general and to Italian faces in particular. Students should unconsciously learn the social meaning of these faces in the same way that they unconsciously learn Italian through extensive listening. We do not think that video activities should completely replace audio activities, because students still need to practice listening for situations like making telephone calls and understanding radio programs. This activity should be particularly welcome as young people are used to watching videos, albeit in their first language. Knowing that they can do the same in Italian should enhance their motivation and the possibility that they will watch such videos by themselves outside of class. Furthermore, some students have reported to us that they prefer videos to audio recordings because they can check through the images to see whether their hypotheses on the content were right. There are many ways to use videos for these activities. For example, some teachers prefer to play a video with no sound the first time it is shown. In this way, students can concentrate on the images, and based on them will make predictions regarding the content. This technique is similar to that of pre-listening tasks, and therefore it is a modality that we avoid for the reasons discussed in 3.3.1.1. In addition, playing video and audio from the initial playback will make students concentrate more on the video than on the audio because 83% of information reaches the brain through eyesight, illustrating that this is the sense that prevails over the others (Celentin, 2007). Under this video and audio first scenario, the improvement of student listening skills will be more limited. The solution is to play only the sound first. The video could be added at the end, for example during the last two playbacks.¹⁰⁴

Possible problems: As Diadori (2001) points out, in a video, image and sound do not always match. Not only do the images not always connect to the audio content (in this case the video cannot be used like feedback by the students), but in some cases, the images convey a message contrary to that of the sound, which could be confusing. However, note that native speakers watch these kinds of videos. If teachers want the skills of their students to be as close as possible to those of native speakers, they must also subject their students to these types of videos instead of avoiding them.

Proposal no 2

Activity: *Analytic vision*

How: This activity should be done after *authentic vision* (see proposal no. 1 in this section). This time students watch the same video but with no sound, in order to focus on facial expressions (and also gestures and other non-verbal aspects of communication, like the frequency of eye contact, proxemics, and skinship). Then, the teacher hands out a sheet with some questions related to the kind of video. In the example in English in Appendix H, there is a table with some adjectives that

¹⁰⁴ This structure and the name of the activity were suggested to us by Christopher Humphris in a personal e-mail on 8 July, 2016.

describe moods. The teacher stops the video at each facial expression that they want the students to analyze. For each of them (indicated with a number in the table), the students think of the adjectives that describe that expression. Students can watch the video as many times as they want.¹⁰⁵ As the linguistic content of this activity is meagre and considering the limited number of lessons that make up the course, it should only be done occasionally.

6.10 Suggestions for addressing the lack of mentalizing and empathy through activities

Limited skills in mentalizing and empathy can result in people who are more focused on themselves than on others. The activities described here take into account the research discussed in 5.1.2, together with the principles of the humanistic approach described in 2.3.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: The teacher asks students to choose pictures that they took with their smartphones on a special day or a day that they enjoyed. In pairs, students talk about the day that they took the pictures (e.g., why they chose that picture, what the weather was like, where they were, why they were there, with whom, why they took that picture at that time, etc.). By talking about themselves without being forced to say what they do not want to say, student learning becomes more relevant and the probability that their interlanguage develops should be higher. This activity also allows the students to use their smartphones, which they are very comfortable using outside the classroom. Using them inside the classroom should make this a welcome activity.¹⁰⁶

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: Students share some memories related to their hair (e.g., how their hair was in the past (length, color, etc.), whether they had problems in their family or elsewhere when they chose a particular color or hairstyle, what they want to communicate through their hair, how important their hair is for them, how they feel about their hair, etc.). They can use their smartphones to show pictures of their hair.¹⁰⁷

6.11 Suggestions for addressing sensitivity to identification through activities

In 5.2, we discussed the positive influence of identification on young people. Including this element in Italian conversation classes should also be helpful.

Regarding *oral free production*, the activities described in 6.10 could also be useful for this section. As students can listen to peers talking about their private lives, identifying with them should become easier, because they probably have various points in common, given their similar ages and the fact they are all students.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Authentic listening*

105 Adapted from the activities *Attitudes* by White (1998) and *Native speaker watching* by Revell and Norman (1999).

106 Adapted from the activity *Snapshots* by Meddings and Thornbury (2015).

107 Adapted from the activity *Hair! Hair!* by Moskowitz (1978).

Procedure: When possible, the teacher should select conversations between people of about the same ages as the students.

6.12 Suggestions for including aerobic exercise in activities

As discussed in 5.4, aerobic exercise can positively affect learning. In this section we present some proposals of possible activities that incorporate such exercises.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Authentic listening*

Procedure: Students walk in circle inside the classroom while listening. Outside, on campus, microphone and earphone sets like those used by tour guides would be necessary.¹⁰⁸

Possible problems: Obviously, students cannot close their eyes to relax, and therefore they could be distracted by objects or other students. Furthermore, they need to pay attention while walking in order to not crash into other students. In other words, students would be less focused on listening, and therefore the activity could be less effective than a stationary version, despite the addition of movement.

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Procedure: For *real oral free production*, the students talk while walking in pairs in a circle, like in proposal no. 1 in this section. This could also be done on campus, a novelty that presumably would enhance student motivation, but keeping students focused and managing them could be more difficult than with an indoor version.¹⁰⁹ Alternatively, in both *real* and *imaginary oral free production*, students could interview several classmates¹¹⁰ one-by-one. However, in order to reach the interviewees, the interviewers would need to walk through the classroom while their classmates wait at different points.

6.13 Suggestions for keeping students awake through activities

As shown in 2.2.4, sleep is important for learning, but, as shown in 5.5, young people do not sleep enough because they usually sleep later than older people. If they do not sleep enough, no adaptation can restore lost sleep to them. However, some precautions can be taken so that at least less sleepy students do not fall asleep in class.

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Authentic listening*

Procedure: The teacher should avoid starting the lesson with *authentic listening*, especially during the first period of the day. We noticed that this kind of activity is conducive for students to sleep who did not sleep enough, in part probably because of the relaxation stage and in part because when students listen, their bodies are not active. Starting with a livelier activity, like *oral free production*, should be better.

108 Adapted from the activity *Walk-talk* by Murphey (in Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

109 Also adapted from *Walk-talk* by Murphey (in Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

110 Examples of interviews can be found in Klippel (1984).

6.14 Suggestions for addressing various student learning styles and intelligence preferences

The following are more specific examples of activities that also focus on learning styles different from the auditory (which is the most addressed in a language course focused on oral skills) and intelligences different from the linguistic one (which is usually the most addressed in a language course) (see 2.5). However, some of the activities described in the previous sections could also be used to address specific learning styles and intelligences. Proposals regarding learning styles and intelligences will be described in two different subsections below.

6.14.1 Learning styles

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Oral free production*

Learning styles addressed: Kinesthetic emotional (finding an emotional connection to an object and working with a partner), auditory (talking).

Procedure: Each student thinks about an object important for them, and in pairs they discuss these objects.¹¹¹

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Learning styles addressed: Kinesthetic emotional (telling each other's fortunes), auditory (talking), kinesthetic motoric (manipulating cards, if used).

Procedure: Half of the students go to fortune tellers (who are portrayed by the other half of the students) to have their futures predicted.¹¹²

Proposal no. 3

Activity: *Oral free production*

Learning style: Kinesthetic emotional (planning a trip together), auditory (talking), kinesthetic motoric (talking about activities to do during the trip, if any).

Procedure: In pairs, students plan a one-week trip to Italy in detail.¹¹³

6.14.2 Intelligence preferences

Proposal no. 1

Activity: *Authentic listening*

Intelligences addressed: Various

Procedure: The topic can change according to the intelligence to be addressed. For example, if the teacher decides to address students with a preference for spatial intelligence, the recording chosen could be the description of a house. If the teacher decides to address students with a preference for musical intelligence, the recording could describe a concert. However, in a single conversation different kinds of intelligences can be stimulated simultaneously. For example, when talking about a

¹¹¹ Adapted from the activity *Emotional objects* by Rosenberg (2013).

¹¹² Adapted from the activities *At the fortune teller's* by Catizone et al. (1997) and *It's in the cards* by Rosenberg (2013).

¹¹³ Adapted from the activities *Organizing a vacation* by Catizone et al. (1997) and *Planning a trip* by Rosenberg (2013).

concert, people will probably talk not only about the music, but also about the venue (thus addressing spatial intelligence). The information that each student can catch will depend on their preferred intelligence (see also 3.3.1.1). Therefore, exchanging ideas with more students will be useful to put together the various pieces of the recording. Also, regardless the topic of the recording, the teacher could teach students different strategies depending on their preferred intelligences. For example, students with more developed spatial intelligence could try to visualize what they listen to.

Proposal no. 2

Activity: *Oral free production*

Intelligences addressed: Logical-mathematical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal

Procedure: After writing a number on the board, the teacher asks the students to guess why that number is important for the teacher. After this phase, which lasts a few minutes, the teacher asks the students to think about an important number in their lives. Then, in pairs, students discuss their important numbers.¹¹⁴

Proposal no. 3

Activity: *Oral free production*

Intelligences addressed: Musical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal

Procedure: The teacher talks about a song related to an important experience in their life (e.g., a song they listened to in a coffee shop in a city they were traveling in). Then, they ask the students to think about a song that reminds them of a special moment in their lives. When they are ready, the students talk in pairs about their songs.¹¹⁵

Proposal no. 4

Activity: *Oral free production*

Intelligence addressed: Spatial

Procedure: The teacher gives a drawing to half of the students (alternatively, the teacher can use a projector if available). The other half of the students is back-to-back with the first half in pairs. Each student who can see the drawing describes it to their partner, who tries to draw it as accurately as possible without seeing the original, while asking questions to request clarification and further details. When the activity has finished, students compare the drawings with the original. The students can change roles and repeat the activity with another drawing.¹¹⁶

6.15 Keeping student stress levels under control through the use of their first language

Another aspect that could help to decrease student stress levels is the use of their first language. While the more Italian is used in class, the more students learn it, in light of the research discussed in 5.3, we now think that we should change our priorities. If after several repetitions of the same concept, the exclusive use of the target language causes the student to withdraw or become more confused, resorting to their first language should be helpful. This should allow us to build a better relationship with our students and would have a positive effect on subsequent lessons as well.

The use of student first languages could also be advisable to explain concepts that would require a conspicuous expenditure of time and energy if Italian was used instead, like evaluation

114 Adapted from the activity *Numbers that are mine* by Putcha and Rinvoluceri (2005).

115 Adapted from the activity *Musical experiences* by Putcha and Rinvoluceri (2005).

116 Adapted from the activity *Dictated drawing* by Mazza and Montali (1999).

criteria, comments about opinions that students have expressed on evaluation questionnaires, instructions for particularly complex activities or for those done by the students for the first time, etc. In these situations, the ability of the teacher to speak the first language of the students should be seen as an advantage.

The first language of students could also be a learning tool that permits students to reflect further on the target language (e.g., translation exercises in classes focused on written language).¹¹⁷ Contrary to the common thinking that the first languages of students should be banned from a foreign language class, Deller and Rinvolutri (2002: 10) recognize

that **mother**¹¹⁸ tongue (MT), is indeed the mother of the second, third and fourth languages. It is from this womb that the new languages are born in the student's mind, so to exclude MT from the English classroom is like trying to wean a baby on day one of their life.

In other words, without losing sight of the purpose of foreign language lessons, more flexibility regarding the use of the first languages of students should be helpful.

6.16 Keeping student stress levels under control by taking into account their interests and needs

In 3.3.3, we discussed the importance of adapting the syllabus to student needs. This would also keep student stress levels under control (see 5.3), and motivation and learning should increase. However, until recently, we made these adaptations based only on the reactions of students to the activities, not based on knowledge of their interests. Their reactions permitted us to know if they enjoyed the content.

In order to select topics in a more targeted and effective way, a form that would allow us to better know our students is useful (see Appendix I for an example in English). This form should be administered periodically (e.g., at the beginning of each year) because student interests are dynamic. This kind of form also has one more important aim: to create a rapport with the students. The teacher could also use this information in small private talks with students so that they can feel recognized as human beings.

Another tool that allows teachers to know more about student needs is the Professor-Student Dialogue Sheet. In our university, a few weeks after the beginning of each semester, teachers are required to hand out this sheet to students. It is an informal questionnaire that is useful for teachers to know whether everything is going well with the lessons or whether some problems need to be addressed. Teachers can use the form provided by the university, a form created by themselves, or can even inquire with students orally. After collecting student opinions, the teacher needs to comment on them with their students so that the students can feel that their comments have been addressed. We think that this is a very valuable tool because it permits to the teacher to take action before doing so is too late. In all of the universities and schools that we have taught at before, no tools such as this were used. A questionnaire was given only at the end of a course, when it was too late to change things and when students who had experienced problems (e.g., due to their beliefs about learning and teaching) had usually already withdrawn. If we could go back to these previous teaching experiences, we would use a form like the Professor-Student Dialogue Sheet ourselves even though doing so was not requested by the institutions at the time.

When surveying students, we have always used a form created by ourselves, because we think that a questionnaire should be in line with our teaching philosophy, and we update our form

¹¹⁷ Balboni (2010) points out that translation is useful if it is not considered as a way to practice or to test the morphosyntax and lexicon knowledge (as it is in the grammar-translation method), but as a way to reflect on the use of the foreign language. In this view, translation is not language production, but language analysis.

¹¹⁸ Bold in the original.

every time we find problems with it (see Appendix J for the current version translated into English).¹¹⁹ To increase the likelihood that students are detailed in their answers, we think that using a limited number of questions is better. Therefore, the current version has only three questions. Another issue to be considered is whether to allow students to answer anonymously (see Diodato, 2017a). In the current version, we require student names because in the past, we did not know how to address specific problems that students described in the dialogue sheet as we were uncertain who had experienced them. While some students may not be sincere if they need to write their names, in most cases student answers look frank enough, judging by the opinions expressed. This frankness is probably due to the positive classroom climate. Many students may feel that they can be honest without worrying because they know that there will be no retaliation and that they are valued. They probably also know that we do our best in order to improve lessons as much as possible, and that for this reason all of their opinions are welcome.

In 2.3, we also discussed the importance of paying attention to student lives and emotions. These are some further ways to do this. The first is to include some small talk in the first minutes of the lessons. This could also be done before the lessons start in order to not take time away from the lessons, but there are some disadvantages of doing so.

At the beginning of lessons, we often see some students who seem to enjoy chatting with their classmates (probably about their private lives), while other students seem to enjoy being on their own (usually using their smartphones). If we interrupt this time, we would deprive the former group of students of the pleasure of socializing and the latter group of students of the pleasure of spending time on their own before the lessons start, when interaction with other students is essential. Some other students prefer to spend time outside the classroom. They come inside a moment before the bell rings and would not be available for small talk in the classroom.

A second possible way to create rapport with students is the use of an instant communication app called Line, which is very popular in Japan and is also used by other teachers. This app is very helpful because considering the large number of students as well as the other possible commitments of students and teachers, talking directly after lessons can be difficult. Although direct conversation would be much better, this app helps teachers to stay in touch with students after class as needed. Furthermore, students are probably happy if teachers use an app that they are usually already using regularly themselves.

Finally, we believe that a good rapport with students could help to counterbalance requests to work hard and behave properly that, as discussed in 5.3, students who come from difficult environments, and therefore have higher cortisol levels than other students, could find more difficult to tolerate. In these cases, the common sense of the teacher could also help.

6.17 Dealing with problems related to lack of sleep, counterfactual thinking, self-control, active engagement, and stress

In the previous sections of this chapter, we proposed activities to address some of the problems that we discussed in chapter 5. In this section, we propose further ways to increase the active engagement of students.

In 6.13, we proposed a way to stem the consequences of lack of sleep in students. This is just a quick fix and does not solve the problem. In this section, we propose to resolve the cause of this lack of sleep, at least in part.

In 3.2, we mentioned that as a rule, language classes have to be held in the morning. However, in the mornings at our university there are two class periods. First-year students have conversation lessons during the second period, while second-year students do so during the first period. We could perceive the difference between these groups of students in terms of their levels of

¹¹⁹ For an earlier version translated into Italian, see Appendice A in Diodato, 2017b.

energy. The second-year students found actively participating in the lessons to be difficult. Furthermore, we had been doing *authentic listening* in the first half of the lesson, because we were worried that if we started with *oral free production* and this took too much time, we would not be able to let the students listen a given conversation 6 times. However, this probably made the sleep-related issues worse (see also 6.13). In addition, the lessons were on Mondays and Fridays, days when students are less focused (see 2.6). If at least one of the two days of the week could be changed, perhaps to a Wednesday, the students should improve.

There are at least two ways to deal with students suffering from lack of sleep. The first is to divide the first and second periods equally between classes for first- and second-year students. In such a scenario, once a week the students have lessons in the first period and once in the second. By doing so, the situation should be more bearable for them. This would allow teachers to conduct listening tests only during the second period, which should improve student grades.

The other way to deal with this problem is to inform students of the importance of sleep, together with some other items that we believe to be important. This should not be done orally, both because the students may not be paying attention and because they may soon forget (see also 2.1 and 6.1), but instead in writing, so that the information is always available to them. Therefore, an attendance guide like the one translated in English in Appendix K, can be useful. This guide is mainly based on the research discussed in this dissertation.

Next, we will analyze some parts of this guide. After informing students about the average sleep time of people of their age, we give a practical example in order to help them figure out what time they should go to sleep. Based on the research in chapter 5, we think that doing this is important because of the lower counterfactual skills of students. Also, we explain the need to take into account any unforeseen events.

For example, suppose your morning class starts at 9 o'clock. Suppose that it takes 1 hour and 30 minutes to prepare before that (change your clothes, eat breakfast, etc.) and to go to school. However, if you increase this time by one hour in order to not be late even if something unexpected happens (such as a train delay), the total becomes 2 hours and 30 minutes. In addition, in order to arrive in the classroom 10 minutes before the class starts, so that it can start smoothly, you will have to wake up at 6:20. Then, those of you who need to sleep for 7 hours and 30 minutes, you should get to sleep by 22:50 the night before.

In the guide we also give some advice on how to facilitate sleep, like switching off smartphones several hours before sleeping (see also 5.5).

In addition to sleep, we give information on the importance of eating breakfast (see also 2.6), aerobic exercise (see also 5.4), precautions concerning food and drink, and other kinds of information, such as what office hours are for, some useful websites for increasing student motivation in learning about Italy and Italian, etc.

Taking into account the problems of self-control that young students could experience (see 5.1.1), in the guide we also give some advice on how to create a learning-friendly environment at home. In particular, we inform students of the importance of limiting their smartphone use, which is based on the research discussed in 2.2.1. In other words, we explain to students how they can protect themselves from their natural tendencies.

It is also important to protect yourself from distraction when studying. For example, turn off your smartphone and put it in a place where you cannot see it.

The guide also includes an explanation about what studying means according to us, based on the discussion in 2.2.2. In our experience, many students prefer to stay in their comfort zones, as

discussed in note no. 60. However, there could be an alternate explanation for their attitude. Probably their hesitancy is not just a matter of comfort zones, but also a matter of beliefs about what a lesson is. They are probably used to lessons aimed at passing tests rather than at actual learning, and many students could think that learning takes place at home, while in class they need to show how much they have learned. With such a mindset, for them a “learning activity” is synonymous with a “test” (see 3.3 for a discussion about how different people give different meanings to words), and consequently they believe that the level of difficulty of an activity should not be higher than their supposed current level, as they cannot show that they have learned something that they did not learn yet. Because of this possibility, we wrote the following explanation in the guide, with the aim of preventing frequent objections to difficult activities by students, which could in turn affect their motivation.

One of the proofs that the study method you are using is really useful is that you feel that it is “tiring” or “difficult.” If you don’t feel that way, you are not learning.

Again, with the aim of not damaging their motivation, by helping students to see learning from a different perspective and teaching them that asking questions is a good thing (we continuously encourage questions in class; see also 2.1), we have included the following explanation in the guide.

Another important thing is to not to be afraid of making mistakes when talking. On the contrary, if you make a lot of mistakes, you will improve faster.

Even when listening, if you want to understand everything, you will feel nervous and you won’t improve. This shows that perfectionists and fussy people are slow to improve. If you think about it, no one can use language perfectly even in their native language, and therefore there is nothing to worry about.

It is also important to ask a lot of questions to the teacher and classmates so that you can improve quickly.

This should help to keep student stress levels under control (see 5.3).

6.18 Proposals to improve the oral final exam

Data analysis in chapter 4 seems to confirm in various cases some student opinions regarding the uneven difficulty of the questions in the oral final exam (see 3.4). We hypothesize that questions could affect student performance if they were not related to student interests or if they raised negative emotions. We also hypothesize that uneven questions could affect student motivation and effort during lessons and could increase their stress levels in the subsequent exams.

Thornbury (2005) indicates that among the factors that can determine the difficulty of a task for someone are their degree of familiarity with the topic and their feelings towards that topic and the interlocutor. However, he also adds that these factors should not be considered independently, but in association with personality (e.g., extrovert or introvert) and physiological factors (e.g., tiredness). For example, according to Thornbury (2005), a more extroverted student could respond positively while in the presence of potentially negative factors. To address this, more open questions would probably help. Instead of saying to students “Tell me about a movie you saw recently,” one could say “Tell me about your relationship with movies,” or even better, ask “What are your hobbies?” However, in large classes such as ours, finding a different open topic for each student is

difficult (which we do in order to avoid questions being leaked). For this reason, we end up creating narrower questions (e.g., “Do you read books?”) inspired by wider questions (e.g., “What are your hobbies?”).

In order to resolve the problem of needing to prepare a large amount of questions, instead of interviewing students individually, the teacher could ask two students to interact with each other. In this way, the number of topics that the teacher would need to prepare would be the half as many. However, by doing so, the exam could be more time consuming, and the most introverted or weakest students could speak less or not speak at all because of being dominated by more extroverted or stronger students (which sometimes happens in classroom activities). On the other hand, talking with classmates instead of the teacher could be easier because, according to Thornbury (2005), students should have more common knowledge between them. In addition, as already mentioned, as student performance could be influenced also by their feelings towards the interlocutor, finding the right interlocutor for each student would be difficult.

The data analyzed in chapter 4 also shows that the students who experienced issues because of the content of the questions were not able to argue *why* they were not interested in the topic, and they were not able to connect it with another topic that was in some way related (e.g., “I don’t read books, *but* I watch movies.”). Overall, we noticed a lack of flexibility, perhaps due to the fact that usually during the exams students are requested to answer questions exactly. Perhaps in the future we should emphasize this when giving students instructions on how the exam will be held. However, the problem could also be due to the reasons explained in 5.3, in particular that the subject is frightened by a question that does not suit them. In this situation, the amygdala takes over and stress levels increase. The immature brain does not allow the prefrontal cortex to tame these negative feelings and cope with such situations in a rational way. However, students who experience this problem are often those who do not do well in class in the first place.

Another way to solve the problem of students who claim that their poor performance is due to the kinds of questions asked could be to let them choose the questions. To our knowledge, this opportunity is usually given during exams for obtaining of a language certification. However, in this case, preventing students from sharing the questions with each other would be impossible (we give exams by ourself).

Another strategy for dealing with this problem and which does not increase teacher workload further (which is not a benefit to be underestimated) is to give students the opportunity to choose among three or four questions, each of which are the result of a combination of questions that will be shown to other students but will be combined in different ways for each of them. For example, if there are 30 students, we prepare 30 questions as usual. However, while one student could be shown questions 3, 11, 19, and 22, another student could be shown 7, 9, 11 (again), and 27, and so on. On each sheet with the questions that we show the students, there should be at least one question that we did not show to any other student. This could be also a way to let students pay less attention to the fact that some questions have already been used. Furthermore, the combination of questions for students who take the exam chronologically close to each other will be very different from each other in order to make noticing that some questions have been recycled more difficult. Also note that each question is only an initial prompt. Subsequent questions will be related to student answers, and therefore there should still be some variation between students even if the initial prompt is the same. However, the first students who take the exams must have brand new questions. If they notice that the questions of later students have been recycled, they could claim that those students did better because they expected those questions and got ready by practicing beforehand. The safest strategy is probably one that a colleague suggested to us. In this case, we give a list with all possible questions to all of the students in advance and tell them that they will be asked one of the questions of the list. In this way, if someone claims that a question was difficult, the teacher could give fault to this student because they did not sufficiently get ready for the exam.

However, this approach does not match our teaching philosophy. As with the speaking activities in class, the exam should be a free production activity, not a rehearsal. What is important for us is to know how students could do with the language in a real-life context. Normally, knowing beforehand what one will be asked, and therefore how one will answer, is impossible.

One more possibility could be that the teacher knows their students well enough to choose the right question for each student. However, this solution has three problems of its own. The first is that there are often too many students to know all of them well. The second is that if we ask only questions related to their declared interests each semester, over the course of four semesters we will probably ask the same questions multiple times (although student interests could change). If students realize that, they will probably memorize what to say during the exam, and therefore what we would be evaluating would be not a spontaneous production, at least for what concerns the initial prompt. The third problem is that there are various students with the same interests, and this means asking multiple students the same questions. The interests themselves depend in part on trends (e.g., now many students are interested in k-pop) and in part on the language that students study (e.g., some students study Italian because they like soccer). Therefore, rather than asking questions about what students like, avoiding questions that we are sure are very far from their interests when possible would be better.

Because spontaneous speech is a priority for us, probably the safest way to conduct these exams is the one we are using at the moment: one question for each student, without giving them the possibility to choose, but trying when possible to avoid questions for which they could have little to talk about. This would mean avoiding the system in which students draw questions from an envelope (see 3.4).

Another mistake that we noticed during the data analysis in chapter 4 was that two students were asked to describe a drawing instead of answering questions like the other students did. We think that this kind of oral exam probably gave an advantage to these students in the form of conceptual planning, the first phase of oral production according to Marini (2008). These particular students did not need to select and extract personal information or opinions from their long-term declarative memory, as happens in real interviews. They had all the information they needed in the drawing, and therefore the effort was only linguistic.

To allow the teacher to evaluate students in a more efficient way, we created a grid on which the teacher can tick squares corresponding to student performance (see Appendix L for a version in English). This grid is quicker and less confusing than the previous method used, which was to take notes directly about the total grade after calculating it mentally while consulting our rubric. We used as few descriptors as possible in order to facilitate the work of evaluation.

6.19 Suggestions to improve student assessment

In the previous section, we discussed problems regarding conducting the oral final exam. Next, we will discuss the advisability of evaluating students by exams (in particular listening tests and the oral final exam) and the weight exams should have on final grades.

The information we get from exams is very limited and is based on how students performed in a specific moment, independent of how they performed throughout the semester. Nevertheless, that brief moment in which the exam is taken could be influenced by many psychological and physical factors that could in turn affect student performance. As such, a 100% continuous assessment based exclusively on class observation would seem the optimal solution.

In order to have a clearer picture of the differences between the two types of evaluation, we have summarized their pros and cons in the following table.

Table 3. Pros and cons of formal exams and continuous assessment based on class observation.

Formal exams		Continuous assessment based on class observation	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons
The teacher can have a clear idea of student language skills <i>at the moment</i> of the exam.	Some students can feel stressed, especially during the oral exam, probably because they are not used to it. This could influence their results.	This method allows the teacher to assess other important criteria that cannot be assessed by formal exams: the maturation of EFs (persistence, attitude, effort, self-responsibility, initiative, attention, self-control, sociability, communicative skills, flexibility, etc.), needs, strengths, areas for growth, motivation, etc.	The larger the class is, the less accurate is the evaluation.
The teacher can keep evidence of student skills and can use this in case there are complaints about the evaluation.	The larger the class is, the less accurate is oral exam evaluation (because the individual evaluation time will be shorter). Therefore, teachers can misunderstand students oral abilities.	Students are assessed while practicing the language usually in pairs, and therefore the degree and quality of their interactions can also be assessed.	The teacher cannot get an accurate idea of the quality of student skills because, during pair work, listening to individual students is difficult. ¹²⁰ Furthermore, listening to students, especially by walking around the class, is inadvisable because it can interfere with their work quality.
Because of the lower degree of counterfactual skills these students show (see 5.1.1), intermediate tests could be helpful to show them the consequences of their study attitudes. ¹²¹	Only language skills can be assessed.	This method is economical. Evaluation and learning are not separated, and therefore there is no need to dedicate some lessons to the exams (those lessons can be used to further improve student	The teacher cannot demonstrate student skills in case of complaints about evaluations. ¹²²

¹²⁰ This is only partially true. The teacher could gain information on language quality from the questions students ask, their comprehension of the instructions, small talk between the teacher and students, etc. Also, *how* students perform an activity gives the teacher some indication of their language skills: the degree of confidence in performing the task; task engagement; the number of times they use a dictionary; the promptness of their response to a partner; signs of non-comprehension in facial expressions; glances at classmates in search for help; glances at the teacher to check whether the teacher is observing them (this usually means that the students are not working); the amount of gestures, drawings, etc. that they use to communicate (this is usually a sign of a lack of vocabulary); etc.

		language skills) or to ask students to come in on days when classes are not in session in order to take an exam. This is especially important in large classes like ours.	
Some students practice at home but do not actively participate in class work, maybe because they do not like to work with other students or because they are distracted by them. Therefore, their skills could be measured only by formal exams.	The teacher has no valuable information on their own performance. Possible negative results in exams are not necessarily the result of poor teacher performance.	This method is less stressful because, as students are engaged in the activities, they probably forget that they are also being evaluated if the teacher can take notes discreetly and does not put much emphasis on assessment. Therefore, students can show their best work.	Because of the lower degree of counterfactuality skills these students show, the absence of intermediate tests could fail to make some students aware of the consequences of their study attitudes.
Some students give their best work under the pressure of exams.	The time needed for the exams is taken away from other activities.	This method is more reliable because students can be assessed more times and for an extended amount of time each time.	Some students study at home but do not actively participate in class work, maybe because they do not like to work with other students or because they are distracted by other students. Therefore, class observation could not measure their actual skills.
	Giving the wrong questions to the wrong students could affect the results of the oral exam (see 6.18).	This kind of assessment also works like a teacher assessment. The teacher can realize whether there are problems as they come up. This gives them the opportunity to promptly adjust the lessons.	

As shown in Table 3, in our context, using a 100% continuous assessment based exclusively on class observation would seem risky, as would using a 100% exam-based assessment. A

121 Another way to address student counterfactuality skills could be to occasionally remind them of how many lessons are left until the oral final exam.

122 However, according to Plevin (2018), *specific* notes taken by the teacher could be helpful.

combination of the two systems would seem to be the best solution. However, the weight that each part has on the whole evaluation should be taken into consideration. Currently, grade components are weighted at 20% for active participation, 30% for listening tests, and 50% for the oral final exam. We have already expressed our doubts about the weight given to oral production, and the fact that the exam lasts a few minutes (see 3.4), two factors that could further increase student anxiety. Students cannot be put at ease through small talk that precedes the actual exam. Although, as above, using an evaluation method that is 100% based on class observation would be ideal, we believe that the weight of such observation should be increased from what it is now, considering that the most important part of the learning process is all of the work that students do during the semester. If we exclude the last two lessons (which are used for oral exams) and the first lesson (which is used largely to orient students to the course), evaluation could be based on the 27 remaining lessons, although it is only possible to carefully observe a few students per lesson because of the large classes.

Another factor, listening, should also be considered. Listening, which has less weight than the oral exam, is assessed three times each semester, while oral production is assessed just once. This means that the less reliable part of the evaluation is the one with a heavier weight. Also note that students speak more than they listen. They do not speak Italian only during *oral free production*, but during all of the activities, *authentic listening* included, when they exchange ideas with partners. However, listening skills usually seem to develop faster than speaking skills (see 3.3).

The listening tests during the first semester of the first year can also be problematic. At the beginning of class, we use the *treasure hunt* activity, an adaptation of *authentic listening* (see note no. 89). At that time, students do not have much time to practice globally interpreting an oral text before their first listening test. Such students are usually particularly anxious regarding the oral final exam because it is their very first time to take such an exam. The possibility that anxiety could lead to negative results is higher, and therefore the weight of the oral final exam should be lower for first year students.

Unfortunately, evaluation based on class observation cannot be increased too much. If such evaluation is weighted heavily, any unsuccessful student could argue that the evaluation was not fair, and proving otherwise would be difficult. Despite teachers having notes, students could argue that what is written does not correspond to the truth. Furthermore, as can be seen from Table 3, this method of evaluation is not highly reliable because the relatively high number of students does not allow us to carefully observe each of them frequently.

Thus, considering the issues discussed above, the best solution we can come up with at the moment is 30% for active participation, 40% for listening tests (still three tests, but their weight is increased), and 30% for the oral final exam. This would be a starting solution, and we hope to upgrade it by further increasing active participation after experimenting and observing student reactions.

As we discussed in 3.4, the use of evaluation grids has helped to silence accusations that our assessments were not fair. This situation was surprising for us because when we were a university student in Italy, to our knowledge no students among those who took exams with us complained that the teacher failed them despite having done well. These teachers did not use any evaluation grids, nor did they explain orally what they would evaluate. At that time, we understood that, as a given exam was an oral exam, if we did not say much or did not speak in a comprehensible way, then the exam would not go well for us.

While we may have been lucky to have never seen complaining students in Italy, we think that one reason that some of our students complained is that, although they knew that they did not perform well, they probably thought that we would have been willing to overlook many problematic aspects of their production. In other words, the problem was not that they did not understand *how much* they did. The problem was that they did not understand *what* aspects of their oral production

were important to the teacher. There are two possible causes for this: being used to a more permissive type of teacher, one who is ready to give good grades despite poor performance (regarding academic entitlement, see 2.4.1), and/or being used to written rather than oral exams. The latter could be connected with another issue—it is easier for less honest students to complain because mistakes are not in writing.

Although evaluation grids seem to be necessary in this context, in reality we have some concerns for using this kind of tool. If students know that formal aspects of the language are being evaluated, the language used during the exam could be less spontaneous and less fluent due to students trying to monitor their output. However, this risk can be partially mitigated if the teacher explains that fluency and the ability to convey content have a greater weight than form.

6.20 What our university could do to enhance lesson effectiveness

In this section, we discuss some possible changes to improve lesson effectiveness that do not depend on teachers but instead on university philosophy.

The first suggestion is to decrease the number of students per class, because this would permit a decrease in student heterogeneity (of learning styles, language skills, motivation, etc.) and would lower the risk that some students exert negative influence on each other because of peer pressure (see 5.1.1). Furthermore, creating a rapport with fewer students would be easier, and this should decrease the number of failing students.

A smaller number of students would also allow teachers to more easily create a sufficiently large number of questions for oral exams, it would give additional time to the teacher to make students feel at ease before the exams, and it would allow for more precise class observation-based assessment (see 6.18 and 6.19).

Another issue is that at our university, students can attend an Italian class of the next level even though they have failed the previous level (e.g., attending *Conversation II* after having failed *Conversation I*). We suspect that this is a strategy to enhance the likelihood that students graduate within four years. However, students who did not pass a previous class often cannot pass the class of the next level either, because of the gap between their ability in Italian and the average level of the class. This could also enhance level problems in class during activities, which would probably increase stress levels for both remedial students and their classmates who will interact with them.¹²³ However, one positive factor is that by letting students attend the next class in a sequence, they will not have blank spots in their schedules for a whole semester while they wait to retake a failed class. Our alternative idea would be to organize make up classes for students who show problems before it becomes too late in order to help them get promoted. Note that despite their attendance to make-up classes, if their level of motivation is unchanged, then their results will not be positive (see 6.1). However, the limited number of participants in this kind of make-up class would probably increase the possibility of success (see above) and consequently would avoid the risk that some students might feel ashamed to take the same class again the following year with younger students.

With the current system, if students fail during the first year, then the following year they need to attend two similar classes at different levels (e.g., taking *Conversation I* and *Conversation III* in the same semester). Although doing this is probably harder when attending two conversation classes, according to some students in this situation, re-taking a class that they have failed helps them to do better in the more advanced class because of the increased amount of time they spend practicing Italian during the semester. Note that this depends on student motivation levels and effort.

¹²³ That said, we think that giving remedial students only the opportunity to interact with other remedial students could damage the class climate.

Some students who have failed one class can pass the next level class because they have made a great effort to catch up. However, even in this case, the following year these students have to attend the class that they failed. If they could pass the next class, this means that their level is now higher than that of the class that they failed, and therefore, in our opinion, retaking the failed class should not be necessary. This level skipping is possible with the language exams designed to get a certification based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (see Council of Europe, 2001). We think that giving students the opportunity to skip levels, and therefore allowing them to get credit for those skipped levels, would have positive consequences on their motivation. Furthermore, it would allow students to graduate in four years despite having failed some classes.

The existing policy presumably hides a linear view of learning, which corresponds to the way many degree programs likely proceed at universities. According to this view, learning means accumulating notions; what you learn in course I will not be learned in course II, and therefore a student who succeeds in II but skips or fails I does not know anything regarding the content of I. However, if learning is seen as a series of experiences, and if students are seen as unique human beings who learn only what they want to learn and what they are ready to learn (and not what teachers want them to learn), then this linear system is no longer satisfactory (see 3.3.3). Thus, we think that the priority should not be what students *know about* a language, but instead how much they *can do with* a language (see Council of Europe, 2001).

If admissions tests are required by a university, they should provide useful information in order for teachers to organize the classes instead of just choosing which students to admit based on their current knowledge, which generally has nothing to do with what they will study at the university. This is why we suggest testing EFs during admissions tests rather than knowledge on specific subjects.¹²⁴ In each class, if only a few students have less developed EFs, they could be positively influenced by peers with more developed EFs. By contrast, if most of the students have less developed EFs, they could exert a negative influence on the whole class. Also, having more females than males in the classroom could be also helpful because, as discussed in 5.1.1, girls are less influenced than males by their peers. Often this ratio happens naturally, but it can vary from year to year.

In the classrooms that we use, chairs and desks have casters. This furniture was probably chosen to make rearranging the classroom easier in order to enhance pair or group work. However, as the casters have no locks (although if they had them, getting the students to use them would be a hassle), and maybe because of a lack of self-control (5.1.1), some students move their chairs during activities while they are sitting by pushing them back and fourth with their feet. This probably makes concentrating on their work more difficult for them (see 5.1.3). In addition, the desks, which are not useful in some activities (e.g., *authentic listening*), take up too much room, although both chairs and desks can be folded. If desks are used, some students can feel “protected” from observation by the teacher, and this could increase disruptive behaviors (e.g., using a smartphone under the desk) because of the mentioned lack of self-control. Ideally the classrooms would use light folding tablet arm chairs.

All of the lessons should start later in the day, no earlier than the current second period (see Diodato, 2017b). By doing so, student EFs will benefit from students getting more sleep hours, and the lessons can be more effective (see 5.5). Delaying the start of classes can be especially useful for students who live far away and cannot afford to rent a room near the university (see 3.1). Later start times can also be an encouragement to apply to this university rather than another.

¹²⁴ We do not deny that there may be some relationship between admissions test scores and maturation of EFs. For example, if students are able to protect themselves from distractions, they should be able to concentrate more on exam preparation, and therefore have better scores. However, the factors involved can be many, and therefore we would prefer *specific* tests to measure the degree of maturity of the EFs of the candidates.

The university should require all students to attend practical courses on the authoritative parenting/teaching style, regardless of their majors. Everyone will benefit from such courses, not only those who will become parents, but also those who will become teachers, or those who will have subordinates at work. In different contexts, most of the students will find themselves teaching someone one day, and they should do so in the best way that they can. This kind of teaching is for the improvement of everyone who will benefit from these teachings, and therefore all of society. As discussed in 2.4, parenting/teaching style can influence the development of the EFs of children. Students who will become parents someday should know that their attitude is associated with student achievements. Parents with high academic expectations, who talk with their children about school and are able to develop reading habits in them, raise children with more opportunities to succeed (Castro et al., 2015). By contrast, parents with fixed mindsets raise children with fixed mindsets (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016).

6.21 Analysis of Italian language textbooks for university students

The considerations regarding university students discussed in this dissertation could be also useful for improving textbooks intended for this category of students in order to make them more appealing and useful. First, we will analyze some of the textbooks published in Japan. Then, we will do the same with some of the textbooks published in Italy.

The textbooks published in Japan that we considered for our analysis are, in chronological order by publication year, *Allegro vivace* (Nannini & Tsutsumi, 1999), *Nuovo passo a passo* (Akiyama et al., 2004), *Ciao! Ciao! Ciao!* (Kyōto et al., 2008); *Biglie* (Mizuno & Zamborlin, 2009), *La mia Italia* (Ichinose et al., 2016), *Novissimo A zonzo* (Ichinose, 2013); *Corso elementare d'italiano* (Sugimoto, 2014); and *Italiano Italiano* (Castagna & Yoshitomi, 2015), which are all mainly intended for university students.

The first point to note is their compact size (B5, from 72 to 132 pages), which make them easy to carry. Most of the textbooks have two colors; only two textbooks have four colors (but not for all of the pages): *La mia Italia* and *Italiano Italiano*. The publishing house for these two books would seem to have invested in graphics in the last decade. Although we do not know of any research that indicates that full-colored textbooks are more motivating or more effective, we think that they are.

The main reason that these textbooks are intended for university students is that (as often they declare) the content of the books can be studied in one or two years, which is the usual length of Italian courses in Japanese universities.

Each unit of most of these textbooks starts with a brief non-authentic dialogue, usually recorded on a CD. The voices who *read* the dialogues are in most cases the same two voices for each dialogue, although the characters can change. Therefore, learners are not exposed to different accents on these recordings. The typical characteristics of oral language are missing, including false starts, overlapped voices, etc. It is written language disguised as oral language. One of the two voices is male and the other is female, perhaps to allow students to easily distinguish the characters. However, if a dialogue has three characters, one of the two actors will play two different characters, but not always sufficiently disguising their voice. This could generate some confusion during a listening activity but not create serious problems, except for motivational ones due to the artificial dialogue from several points of view, assuming that the CD is used as a tool while looking at a text. In the texts that correspond to these dialogues, the names of the characters are clearly shown before each utterance. The main aim of the dialogues is to present new morphological rules and lexicon, which are explained soon after the dialogue in a deductive fashion.

The characters in *Biglie*, which is the only textbook to come with a DVD in addition to a CD, are four Italian university students who talk about their everyday lives, allowing Japanese

students to more easily identify themselves with the characters (see 5.2), which is positive from a motivational perspective. This process of identification is further increased by a Japanization of the characters, as declared by the authors, by transplanting some Japanese cultural characteristics into Italian society (e.g., university circles). Some Japanese students who speak Italian appear in the DVD. The authors Mizuno and Zamborlin (2009: Preface) explain the necessity to personalize the topics in order to motivate students, in line with what we have written in 2.3:

In many years of teaching in Japan, we have noticed that the most effective way to motivate young beginners to talk to the teacher or communicate with each other in Italian appears to be to encourage them to *personalize*¹²⁵ the topics as much as possible, making them talk about themselves, their character, their origin, their study, their job, their daily experiences, their projects, their hobbies, their world in short.

In *Novissimo A zonzo*, an attempt is also made to make students identify themselves with a character in the text. The main character is Aya, a Japanese university student studying Italian in Italy on an exchange program. She becomes friends with an Italian university student studying Japanese literature. In the textbook, the author addresses the readers, writing (Ichinose, 2013: Preface written in 2002 for the first edition): “It would be great if you could study while enjoying the life in Italy, by imaging that you are Aya.” The identification attempt is very clear.

A more modest attempt at identification can also be found in *La mia Italia*. The main character is a 20-year-old Japanese girl who is traveling in Italy. The dialogues in the textbook do not make clear whether she is a student, but her age is that of a typical university student.

Some Japanese characters are also present in *Allegro vivace*, but their ages and occupations are unknown. However, one Italian character identifies as a university student. Readers cannot be certain if the Japanese characters in *Nuovo passo a passo* are young Japanese students either. In *Ciao! Ciao! Ciao!*, some of the Japanese characters are clearly university students. In *Italiano Italiano*, there are occasional references to Japanese people, but whether they are university students is unclear. Finally, in *Corso elementare d’italiano*, there are no Japanese characters, but a dialogue is held in a university.

Next, we will summarize the topics and situations covered in these textbooks, subdivided by category:

Private life

Presentations, families, studying, jobs, origins, dwelling places, hobbies, habits, plans, experiences, birthday parties, weekends, concerts, opera, health, universities

Everyday life

Cafés, hotels, restaurants, banks, vacations, shops

From this list, which is not exhaustive, we find confirmation of the words of Mizuno and Zamborlin (2009) mentioned above. Generally, the authors of textbooks in Japan seem to be aware of the importance of topics concerning the private spheres of students, without leaving aside topics about everyday life, which could be useful for possible travel to Italy.

Next, we will analyze the characteristics of some textbooks published in Italy. The fact that the target students are university students is clear from the titles: *Uni.Italia* (B1-B2; Fragai et al., 2010); *L’italiano all’università 1* (A1-A2; La Grassa, 2013) and *2* (B1-B2; La Grassa et al., 2013);

125 Italics in the original.

UniversItalia 2.0 1 (A1-A2; Piotti et al., 2018a) and 2 (B1-B2; Piotti et al., 2018b). The first one has only two colors, but the other two have very colorful pages.

Regarding the size of the textbooks, there are some little differences but they tend to be around A4, as often happens for textbooks for students of Italian as a foreign language that are published in Italy. The number of pages is from 216 and 324, which makes them bulky and heavy, and therefore more difficult to carry. They follow an inductive method, and therefore students are expected to have more active roles and the activities are more challenging.

The following are the declared aims of *UniversItalia 2.0*, for both volumes:

The purpose of **UniversItalia 2.0**¹²⁶ is to ensure that students are able to communicate correctly in Italian in a short time and to be understood in everyday situations in different communicative contexts. In addition, the manual, thanks to the content targeted by themes and topics, prepares to exams, stays abroad and internships in Italy. (Piotti et al. 2018a; 2018b: 3)

Most of the voices on the CD that accompanies this textbook are characterized by various young people, so that students can identify themselves with the characters. This book seems to be for students who study (or would like to study) in an Italian university, and therefore we are skeptical about the degree of identification for Japanese university students who might use this textbook. The number of those who will go to study in Italy is very small.

No particular attention is paid to the need for student identification in the two volumes of *L'italiano all'università* and in *Uni.Italia*.

What the three textbooks published in Italy have in common is a focus on the presumed communicative needs of university students of Italian.

Overall, these textbooks are more challenging, as well as more motivating and graphically interesting than those published in Japan. We are concerned regarding the topics covered at the B1-B2 level, as students would need a very deep interest in Italian society to appreciate them. The textbooks published in Japan provide the highest level of identification as they are written for a Japanese audience. However, this often seems to decrease the degree of authenticity. A Japanese student who is studying Italian and speaks Italian well with an Italian accent, while a good role model for the users of the textbook, is not realistic. Thus, an increase in identification corresponds to a decrease in authenticity and motivation. This means that the best way for students to identify themselves with the characters in a textbook is for most of characters in the book to be people of a similar age with similar lives (particularly if they are also university students), but such characters should also be native speakers of Italian. In addition, the voices recorded in associated CDs should be of actual young people.

Next, we will summarize the topics and situations covered in the textbooks published in Italy, subdivided by level and category. The size and greater level of in-depth analysis of the topics dealt with, especially at the B1-B2 level, as compared to the books published in Japan, make this categorization more complicated. Some themes can fall into several categories depending on the point of view. Therefore, the categorization should be understood as purely indicative.

A1-A2

Private life

Presentations, jobs, studying, dwelling places, weather, weekends, habits, free time, cities, experiences abroad

126 Bold in the original.

Everyday life

Cafés, shops, house renting, public means, fashion

B1-B2

Private life

Health, vacations, families, jobs, movies, fashion, health, values, internships, school, countries, places, concerts, books, diet

Everyday life

Cooking

Culture

Gastronomy, language learning, art, literature, science, history

Society

Facilities, divorce, emigration, superstitions, stereotypes, technology, separate waste collection, economics, ecology, medicines, constitutions, psychological problems, media, architecture, engineering

The topics at the A1-A2 level look similar to those of the textbooks published in Japan. However, what is different is the level of in-depth analysis. While the textbooks published in Italy are communicative-oriented, the textbooks published in Japan have a greater focus on morphology. At the B1-B2 level, social problems seem to have a great importance, but private life is not neglected. Such social themes do not appear in Japanese textbooks. This confirms what we wrote in 1.2 regarding the different degree of motivation of the students who study (or would like to study) Italian in Italy (at least at a higher level, as B1-B2 is) compared with those who study it in Japan.

At the first lesson of the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, we asked first-year and second-year students to fill in the previously mentioned form regarding their interests (see Appendix I). Note the gap between what our current students like and the topics that the authors of the above textbooks chose to address for university students like them.

First-year students

Playing an instrument (guitar, electric guitar, cello), soccer (playing, watching), futsal, dancing, watching movies (science fiction, action), watching anime, eating (Italian food, ramen, rice bowls topped with seafood), camping, listening to music (rock, J-pop, K-pop, hip-hop, classic, western, idol), cycling, reading (manga, novels, history, European), playing video games, walking, watching Korean dramas, spending time with family, cooking, watching TikTok, watching YouTube, drawing, collecting (clothes, shoes, airplane goods), exercising, clothes shopping, fishing, moving the body

Second-year students

Listening to music (K-pop, Italian, rock, western, J-pop, idol), watching dramas, boxing (watching), going to concerts, traveling, cooking, watching YouTube, walking, watching movies (western, fantasy, romance, action, musical, human stories, science fiction, suspense), playing an instrument (piano, drums, guitar), soccer (watching, playing), reading (manga, novels), dancing (hip hop), eating, singing (J-pop), looking at clothes, telling fortunes using tarot cards, baseball (watching), sleeping, futsal (playing), baking cakes, cookies, etc., going to cafes, playing with dogs, scuba diving, making fashion accessories, driving, basketball

Between the two years, students have many similarities but also many differences. Looking again at the topics covered by the textbooks mentioned earlier, those that match student interests in a broad way are: health, vacations, families, movies, cafés, cooking, restaurants, literature, art, and music. However, when looking in detail, many differences can be found in each category. It is impossible to foresee what our students will be interested in. Furthermore, interests change depending on trends, and input about authenticity is not authentic anymore if it is printed in a book. This is one of the reasons that we prefer not using textbooks. Updated authentic materials and activities that are not necessarily dependent on each other, unlike those commonly found in textbooks (see also 3.3.1.3 regarding the PPP and GAS models), are the best choices. Binders with photocopiable activities from which to choose freely according to the needs of students would be better than textbooks.

Also, the choice of textbook is relatively limited. Different teachers and students use the same textbooks, meaning there is not much diversity, which would be particularly important for private teachers and private schools. The main reason that students choose one school or teacher rather than another is probably the price or the location, unless a given school or teacher has a very good reputation. Selecting materials and activities from various sources could make a difference, because students can feel that a lesson was prepared just for them. With a different class of the same level, the materials will be different, at least in part. Quasha (2015: 39) seems to be of a similar opinion: “Uniqueness is one of the most significant factors that lead consumers to develop a sense of a brand’s identity. For the language teacher, one key area that can create uniqueness is the use of authentic materials.”

In addition, although some students may feel more confident by using a textbook, not using any textbook will enhance student motivation because the next lesson will be a surprise (as it is for the teacher), and because they will appreciate the effort by the teacher to create a lesson just for them. Students can also feel that they can influence the syllabus with their interests and needs because there is no dependence on a textbook, and they can choose what comes next to some degree (see 5.1.2).

Many teachers and institutions use a textbook probably because doing so does not take much time to prepare the lessons, especially if they have been using the same textbooks for years, as they are not confident regarding their ability to create lessons, and because they hope to look more reliable to their students. Furthermore, in some institutions, all teachers have to use the same textbook and follow the same syllabus for courses that are nominally the same (which implies that they started at the same time), probably because, according to them, this should simplify a possible reformation of the classes. In other words, a student should be easily able to be inserted into a course that is nominally the same, and therefore student skills in that course should also be the same. Once again, this practice obviously arises from the belief that the same input corresponds the same output, contrary to what we stated in 3.3.3.

Note that the almost exclusive use of a textbook could create in students the belief that a language can only be learned by using a textbook (Torresan, 2007). This means that students will not seize all of the important opportunities to use the language that the world offers them today, mainly thanks to the Internet.

6.22 Suggestions for teacher development

To our knowledge, in courses regarding the teaching of Italian to foreigners in Italy, there is no room for teachers to focus on specific types of learners.¹²⁷ We hypothesize that this could be due to the length of the training course (dealing with various kinds of learners would take too much time); the fact that learning profiles are probably countless; or the fact that training courses regarding the teaching of Italian are often held in Italy, and therefore the content is more general, both to please the participants who come from all over the world and because the experience of the trainers themselves is often limited to certain types of learners or particular second language¹²⁸ contexts.

For these reasons, we would like to see an increase in the number of training courses for teachers of Italian that are held abroad by local trainers with long experience and deep knowledge of specific learner profiles on which the courses that they will teach focus. However, contrary to note no. 127, learning profiles are not clearly defined. They are fusions of characteristics. For example, the focus of this dissertation was not just on university students but on Japanese university students who study Italian in Japan.¹²⁹ This is a fusion of three different profiles (Japanese students, university students, and students of Italian as a foreign language), which must all be taken into consideration by a teacher, together with many other factors, when making methodological choices in order to succeed.

127 However, note that the certification in teaching Italian to foreigners *1st level DITALS*, organized by the University for Foreigners of Siena (Italy), is focused on specific types of learners, and therefore students there can attend related preparatory courses. Candidates can choose from among the following profiles: children, adolescents, adults and seniors, immigrants, university students, learners of Italian origin, touristic-hotel operators, Catholic religious learners, opera singers, university students in study abroad programs, Chinese students, Arabic students, Japanese students, Russian students, and German students (Università per Stranieri di Siena, n.d.b). A specific bibliography for each type of learner is available on their website (Università per Stranieri di Siena, n.d.a).

128 A second language (SL) is a language learned by non-native speakers in the country where that language is spoken. This is as opposed to a foreign language (FL), which is a language learned by non-native speakers in a country where that language is not widely spoken.

129 This is still a simplification. There are different types of Japanese students studying in Japan, and therefore a teacher should not just learn some general characteristics or trends of a specific learner profile, but should also be able to recognize the differences within the same learning profile and deal with them by adapting according to the needs of their students. Not even excellent courses and books can foresee all cases. In other words, in addition to attending specific local training courses and studying related bibliography, teachers should be encouraged to carry out research on their own.

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Appendix A^{130,131}

actor
clerk
cook
dentist
engineer
farmer
football player
journalist
lawyer
nurse
policeman
postman
singer
taxi driver
truck driver
university professor
veterinarian
waiter

130 Adapted from Klippel (1984).

131 We have put these jobs in alphabetical order in order to avoid the perception that the list could represent in an unconscious way our personal beliefs about the prestige of the jobs, even in part. Our beliefs can influence those of our students. Noting that the words are in alphabetical order, students automatically understand that this order does not reflect the values of the teacher.

Appendix B¹³²

1. What do a TV and an ant have in common? The antennas!
2. What is the favorite city of spiders? Moscow!¹³³
3. What is a chicken's favorite country? PortuGAL!¹³⁴
4. A strange day today. First I found a hat full of money and then a guy with a guitar followed me all day.
5. At the bar: "What do you get?" "What you get." "Two coffees, please." "Then two to me too..."
6. Among men: "My wife is an angel!" "Blessed are you, mine is still alive."

132 These jokes can be found on multiple websites, so attributing authorship is difficult.

133 "Mosca" means "Moscow" and "fly" in Italian.

134 "Portogallo" in Italian means "Portugal," but the second part of the word, "gallo," means "rooster."

Appendix C

If the only sister of your mother's only brother has an only child, what is the relationship of that child to you?^{135,136}

135 We found this guessing game in Maley and Grellet (1981: 46).
136 The solution is "It's me."

Appendix D¹³⁷

- do not practice outside of class
- continuously translate into Japanese
- don't ask questions when you don't understand
- surrender in the face of difficulty
- be apathetic
- look up everything in the dictionary
- do not look up anything in the dictionary
- do not get enough sleep
- be a perfectionist
- be uncooperative
- be afraid of making mistakes
- _____
- _____
- _____

137 Adapted from Sion (2001).

Appendix E

Values	I agree	I do not agree
Be kind to animals.		
Don't despise people less fortunate than you.		
Respect the elderly.		
Boys do not cry.		
Always say please and thank you.		
A promise is a promise.		
Be loyal.		
Don't be ungrateful.		
Be nice to everyone.		
Forgive your enemies.		
Don't waste food.		
Never borrow or lend anything.		
Don't waste your money.		

Appendix F

Photography	Clothes	Traveling
Animals	Music	Reading
Sports	Movies	Cooking

Appendix G

Your last vacation

Where	Clothes worn	Food
When	Means of transport	Feelings
With whom	Accommodations	Weather

Appendix H¹³⁸

	1	2	3	4	5	6
disappointed						
angry						
surprised						
enthusiastic						

138 Adapted from White (1998).

Appendix I¹³⁹

Profile

Please write in as much details as possible.

Name and surname:	Foreign languages you can speak:
----------------------------	--

Hobbies:
--

Special skills:

Main experiences (living abroad, studying abroad, travel, club activities, competitions, concerts, etc.):

Dream(s) for the future:

Why you want to learn Italian:

¹³⁹ Based on the idea of a “record card questionnaire” found in Plevin (2018).

.....

What the teacher needs to know about you in order to prepare the lessons:

.....
.....
.....

Appendix J¹⁴⁰

Professor-Student Dialogue Sheet

Rest assured that the answer will not affect your grades at all.

Name and surname: _____

Subject: _____

Date: _____

a. How is this course going for you?

b. Do you have any problems in this class?

c. Do you have any requests for the class?

Thank you for your help.

¹⁴⁰ The three questions we used in this form are adapted from Mele (2000). She asked her students to write her a letter in which they could tell her about these three points.

Appendix K

Italian intensive course (Conversation)

Attendance guide



1. Effective study methods



To be able to speak a foreign language, you must first have a high level of motivation for that language. No matter how great your study method is, it won't work unless you are highly motivated. Therefore, if your motivation is low, it is necessary to make efforts to raise it.

It is also important to protect yourself from distraction when studying. For example, turn off your smartphone and put it in a place where you cannot see it.

In order to learn a foreign language effectively, it is important to “use” the foreign language from day one. Of course, you can look up words in the dictionary.

One of the proofs that the study method you are using is really useful is that you feel that studying is “tiring” or “difficult.” If you don't feel that way, you are not learning.

Ideally, you should use Italian all day long, but this may not be realistic. So, practice as much as you can every day, including during your time to school. We recommend practicing for at least 30 minutes each day. If you only practice shortly before tests and exams, you will not suddenly be able to listen and speak Italian.

Another important thing is not to be afraid of making mistakes when talking. On the contrary, if you make a lot of mistakes, you will improve faster.

Even when listening, if you want to understand everything, you will feel nervous and you won't improve. This shows that perfectionists and fussy people are slow to improve. If you think about it, no one can use language perfectly even in their native language, and therefore there is nothing to worry about.

It is also important to ask a lot of questions to the teacher and classmates so that you can improve quickly.

2. Sleep



It is important to study and sleep properly. There are individual differences, but people around the age of 20 need to sleep for about 7 hours and 30 minutes each night. If you don't sleep enough, you may feel sick, be unable to concentrate, or unable to remember. In other words, studying will become impossible.

For example, suppose your morning class starts at 9 o'clock. Suppose that it takes 1 hour and 30 minutes to prepare before that (change your clothes, eat breakfast, etc.) and to go to school. However, if you increase this time by one hour in order to not be late even if something unexpected happens (such as a train delay), the total becomes 2 hours and 30 minutes. In addition, in order to arrive in the classroom 10 minutes before the class starts, so that it can start smoothly, you will have to wake up at 6:20. Then, those of you who need to sleep for 7 hours and 30 minutes, you should get to sleep by 22:50 the night before.

However, some people cannot sleep easily. In order for such people to sleep properly, we recommend eating meals no more than 3 hours before bedtime, using smartphones, TVs, computers, etc. no more than 3 hours before bedtime, not having caffeinated or sugary food and drinks (coffee, tea, soft drinks, energy drinks, chocolate, etc.) more than 6 hours before bedtime, writing down your worries and things that you need to do, and exercising for about 40 minutes every day (walking, etc.).

If you still cannot sleep, we recommend going to the “Student Counseling Room” (<https://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/campuslife/soudan.html>).

3. Other lifestyle issues

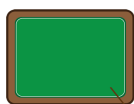


Your lifestyle also affects your learning.

We recommend to eating breakfast every day, eating small meals in multiple portions, eating lots of fruits and vegetables, drinking lots of water, exercising, etc.

Avoid alcohol and tobacco at all, and avoid fatty foods (fried foods, red meat, butter, snacks, cakes, cookies, etc.) as much as possible. Be careful not to drink too many caffeinated drinks.

4. Office hours



Please use this time for communication between students and faculty member.

We can talk about how to study, how to raise motivation, worries (classes, student life, etc.), living in Italy, Italian language, Italian culture, studying in Italy, etc.

5. Pre-learning (listening)



It is especially important to listen to a lot of Italian in order to be able to learn Italian. “Listen” does not mean “understand,” but “try to understand.” If you are a complete beginner, listen to Italian as if you were listening to music.

Choose your favorite track or video and listen for about 3 minutes (if it exceeds 3 minutes, listen only for the first 3 minutes until the last sentence is completed). If you are a complete beginner in Italian, about 2 minutes is enough. As your listening skills improve, listen to something longer little by little. Listen to the same recording at least 6 times. While listening, it is effective to not stop, playback, take notes, or look up words in the dictionary. You can use the dictionary after you have listened. After each listening, talking (with someone or alone) or writing about what you think you understood can help you to understand more in the next listening.

You should listen to authentic language, meaning the language of Italians who speak to other Italians. In addition, in the case of videos, there should be not subtitles.

By practicing a lot of listening, you will be able to understand more little by little.

To practice listening, we recommend the following:

- a. *Ci vuole orecchio 1, 2, 3* (Alma Edizioni) (available at Global Commons)

b. <http://learnitalianvideos.impariamoitaliano.com>

c. YouTube (enter keywords in Italian regarding the topic you are interested in and search for videos)

6. Post-learning (speaking)



Feel free to talk about your favorite topic for at least 30 minutes each time. It doesn't matter if your Italian is broken. If you are a complete beginner in Italian, you can start talking for about 10 minutes. As your speaking ability improves, talk for a little longer. It's better to have someone to talk to, but if you don't, talk alone.

At first, there will be only few words you know, so please communicate mainly with gestures and drawings. As you will know more words, gradually reduce the amount of gestures and drawings.

By practicing a lot of speaking, you will be able to speak more, little by little.

You don't need any specific teaching materials, but if you can't think of a topic to talk about, please refer to the following textbook.

La Prova Orale 1, 2 (Edizioni Edilingua) (available at Global Commons)

7. Italian media



If you want to know more about Italy, we recommend the following media. Many things are free to enjoy on the internet.

TV news

Rainews24 (<https://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/live/ContentItem-3156f2f2-dc70-4953-8e2f-70d7489d4ce9.html>)

Radio station links

<http://www.1eradio.com>

The list includes the following radio stations, which are the most listened to in Italy (in descending order of the number of listeners).

a. *RTL 102.5* (<https://www.rtl.it>)

When you enter the HP, there are two buttons, "RADIO" and "RADIOVISIONE." You can listen to the radio normally by clicking "RADIO," but you can also watch by clicking "RADIOVISIONE."

b. *RDS* (<https://www.rds.it>)

Newspaper links

<https://www.quotidiani.net>

The list includes the following newspapers, which are the most read in Italy (in descending order of the number of readers).

a. *Corriere della Sera* (<https://www.corriere.it>)

b. *La Repubblica* (<https://www.repubblica.it>)

Appendix L

Evaluation grid for oral production exam

Italian intensive course (Conversation) _____

Date: _____

Name and surname: _____

	5	4	3	2	1	0
Communicative effectiveness						
Interaction						
Lexicon						
Morphosyntax						

Total: ____/20 x 2,5 = ____/50

Remarks:
