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Towards social inclusion through a second language. Evidence from an unstructured interview

Gloria Ersilia La Torre

MSc in Science in journalism

Faculty of Mathematical, Physical and Natural Sciences – Sapienza University of Rome

E-mail: glorialatorre20@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the results of an unstructured interview with the didactic coordinator of a school teaching Italian to foreigners. Through the description of the interviewee's experiences, the social value of teaching a second language for the implementation of social inclusion is highlighted. Therefore, this paper intends to shed light on the importance of second language learning for social inclusion.

Keywords – Second Language; Social Inclusion; Unstructured Interview.

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

Sommario

Verso l'inclusione sociale attraverso una seconda lingua. Evidenze da un'intervista non strutturata. – Lo scopo di questo articolo è presentare i risultati di un colloquio non strutturato con il coordinatore didattico di una scuola che insegna la lingua italiana a stranieri. Attraverso la descrizione delle esperienze dell'intervistato viene evidenziato il valore sociale dell'insegnamento di una seconda lingua per l'attuazione dell'inclusione sociale.

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1 Introduction

Globalization, migration processes and new forms of mobility have led to a significant and progressive increase in linguistic diversity and multilingualism (Adamo & Marácz, 2017). Thus, in order to overcome the objective difficulties caused by a lack of proficiency in the national language, learning a second language becomes crucial for those living in a foreign country (Odrowaz-Coates, 2018). A possible link between second language learning and social inclusion emerges, as well as the importance of the presence of organisations providing second language training for foreigners.

The aim of this article is to present the content of an unstructured interview with the didactic coordinator of an organisation offering Italian language courses to foreigners, located in Rome, Italy, to highlight the link between this activity and the possibility of increasing the likelihood of students achieving a satisfactory level of integration and social inclusion through the understanding and use of the national language. The analysis of the content of the interview demonstrated the link between second language learning and social inclusion. The interviewee's assertions confirm what various scholars have shown in their contributions to the relevant literature: The interviewee's assertions confirm what various scholars have shown in their contributions to the relevant literature: the teaching of a second language and the involvement of students in socialisation activities that are complementary to language courses are to be considered fundamental in supporting the process of integration and inclusion of participants in the society of the country of their choice.

2 Literature review

Over the years, several scholars have explored the relationship between second language learning and social inclusion, looking at the issue from both the learner's and the teacher's perspective.

Dunn's (2011) study, for example, highlighted the "social turn" in applied linguistics towards overcoming the formal view of language and the growing interest in the socio-cultural aspect of second language teacher education. In McColl's (2005) contribution, the relationship between learning a foreign language and inclusion is addressed in the context of children's special educational needs in foreign language classes. The author argued for the importance of considering that learning a foreign language only makes sense if contextualized in the social community that uses that language and suggested some measures to implement language courses so that they meet the aforementioned educational needs. Yates (2011), on the other hand, examined the role of social networks as a practical support for the early integration of immigrants. The author showed the importance of this channel both

for the acquisition of foreign language skills and for the creation and development of a socially inclusive community. Using data from a previous study, the author then analysed the opportunities and criticalities of foreign language learning and the implications for social inclusion.

Ortiz and Finardi (2015) proposed a case study referring to the experience of social inclusion of immigrants and refugees in Switzerland. The methodologies employed by the La Roseraie structure for learning French were examined, and highlighted how these methodologies are connected to the social inclusion of the participants. In a further research, a framework was proposed for the collaborative use of the community's linguistic resources to improve second language learning. The framework presented the character of multidimensionality, from learning, to the development of empathy, to the integration of the learner in the reference community, with the ultimate goal of social inclusion (Huang, Cordella, Browning & Baumgartner, 2016).

According to Bacquet (2020), identity, empowerment and investment are the key to successful social inclusion for second language learners. The author linked these dimensions to language learning and provides suggestions for investing in students who intend to improve their sense of empowerment and inclusion. Mirici (2020) considered learning the language of the host country an indispensable requirement for integration and inclusion in the new social community. The author, through the administration of a questionnaire and analyzing the reference literature, demonstrated that learning the national language at a basic level is not sufficient for inclusion in the host society, but advanced teaching programs are necessary, consisting of a mix of classroom lessons and direct experiences of daily life.

St John (2023), on the other hand, analysed the Swedish programme "Swedish for Immigrants", to investigate the role of adult immigrants' first languages by multilingual assistants in the learning of additional languages for the social inclusion of students.

Another study involved a sample of 561 schools and analysed the impact of various group, family and individual characteristics, as well as proficiency in the national language, on inclusion and acceptance among classmates. The results of the analysis showed the positive influence of the density of immigrants in the class on social inclusion; gender seems to have a negative influence on inclusion, while proficiency in the national language seems to be a much stronger determinant of inclusion than other variables related to individual and family characteristics. The analysis also found that this factor holds true for second-generation immigrants (Cavicchiolo et al., 2023).

Rodríguez-Izquierdo and colleagues (2020) conducted a study on a sample of multicultural schools in Andalusia to examine teachers' beliefs about linguistic diversity and their approaches to teaching Spanish as a second language in the inclusion of immigrant students. The study demonstrated the importance of promoting multilingualism as a fundamental resource for inclusion.

The study by AbuJarour and Krasnova (2017), using information obtained by interviewing a sample of Syrian refugees in Germany, explored the effects of technologies on social inclusion processes. The results of the investigation showed the positive relationship between the use of technologies and social inclusion, especially with reference to the support they can offer in learning a new language. Azimova and Solidjonov (2023) also analysed the role of technology, in particular the use of augmented reality (AR), in teaching English as a second language. Their study showed that the use of augmented reality, by improving pronunciation, grammar, reading and writing in the native language, can improve teaching strategies and provide non-native speakers with an enjoyable and productive learning experience.

Grosso (2015) considered the possible benefits of artistic activities of various kinds (photography, painting, etc.) for the learning of the national language by young immigrants. The contribution by Clyne and colleagues (2013), on the other hand, reports on the results of a pilot project carried out in Australia linking second language learning and social inclusion of older people with a migrant background.

3 Methodology

The aim of this paper was to present the results of an unstructured interview with the teaching coordinator of a school of Italian to foreigners, in order to highlight the social value of second language learning for integration.

The unstructured interview method was used for data collection. The choice of this technique was based on the fact that unstructured interviews allow the positive and negative aspects of the phenomenon under study to be captured in greater depth than semi-structured interviews; moreover, interviewees value unstructured interviews as they are better suited to providing a more accurate description of experiences related to the topic under analysis (Gibson, 1998). In addition, unstructured interviews offer a high degree of flexibility, as there are no guidelines that might limit the boundaries of the topics under study (Mueller & Segal, 2014).

In the present study, the method of reporting the content of unstructured interviews by Burnard (1991) was applied, which not only proposes a method, but also points out the possible criticalities associated with the whole analysis process. One of the educational managers of the *Koinè - ETS Association* in Rome, Italy, was interviewed in June 2024. The interview took place in a single meeting, but prior to the interview the interviewees were contacted to explain the purpose of this paper. A total of 10 open-ended questions were asked with the aim of gathering information about the activity of teaching a second foreign language (Italian) and the purposes assigned to this activity (link with the social inclusion of learners).

The method proposed by Burnard (1991) involves a number of stages:

- preparation of post-interview notes regarding the interview transcript;
- reading the transcripts in order to identify the general themes contained in them;
- open coding stage, in which the transcripts are read a second time and headings are placed to describe various aspects of the interview content;
- analysis of the categories and reduction of their number by grouping those that are similar to each other;
- production of the final list of categories and sub-categories;
- generation of category systems;
- joint reading of transcripts and list of categories and subtitles to confirm consistency;
- coding of transcripts according to categories;
- enucleation of the coded parts from the transcripts;
- cut sections pasted on sheets with titles and subtitles;
- verification of the appropriateness of the category system by selected interviewees;
- filing of all sections to facilitate the writing and results;
- beginning of the writing process;
- linking the data to the literature (at the researcher's discretion).

Therefore, although unstructured interviews are not particularly predictive, they allow us to obtain information based on solid data. The fact that unstructured interviews generate highly contextual responses makes them useful for both qualitative and quantitative research (Bihi, 2020): “[...] Specifically, interviewees’ oral voices can be more meaningful to describe values, feelings and beliefs than meanings in descriptions generated by quantitative measures such as Likert scale and semantic differentials trying to set up best and worst options for respondents to evaluate and discriminate plausible cases from probable distractors through highly structured instruments” (p. 719).

4 Interview contents presentation

This section reports the contents of the unstructured interview with one of the head teachers of a school teaching second language to foreigners, following the methodology proposed by Burnard (1991).

Firstly, the contents of the interview were transcribed. Subsequently, some notes in the margins of the transcription were elaborated. A second reading of the transcript made possible to identify the following general themes:

- characteristics of the organisation;
- type of activity carried out, services offered and recipients of the activity;
- objectives of the organisation;
- link between activities carried out by the organisation and social inclusion.

Table 1 below shows the results of the open coding stage (Burnard, 1991).

Table 1 – Open coding stage

Interview transcript	Open coding
The organisation provides L2 Italian language courses, official examinations to certify knowledge of the Italian language, and cultural and educational activities to promote the integration of learners into the national social context. The organisation operates in the field of vocational education and training with the aim of promoting social inclusion and the knowledge of the Italian language among foreign communities in the national territory. The provision of Italian L2 courses and activities to promote knowledge of Italian culture promotes the social inclusion of all those who have long-term life plans in the national territory. The strengths are the small size of the organisation – which allows all those involved in the training activities (teachers and learners) to get to know each other and establish a relationship of trust – and the careful selection of staff, who must have certain professional qualifications to work in the organisation. The main critical point is undoubtedly the constant difficulty of finding a balance between the economic sustainability of the organisation and the cost of the proposed activities, which must nevertheless remain accessible to as many learners as possible. We are convinced that in order to guarantee real and lasting social inclusion for all, it is necessary to work on linguistic inclusion; only in this way it will be possible to reduce inequalities and problems at the level of employment, to guarantee more equitable relations and thus to favour the achievement of effective social cohesion.	The organisation provides Italian language courses for foreigners alongside other educational and training activities to promote the integration of learners ... the main objective is to promote social inclusion ... the small size of the organisation allows for a more direct relationship between teachers and course participants ... the most critical issue is finding a balance between the economic sustainability of the organisation and the cost of the activities proposed. The main critical issue is to find a balance between the economic sustainability of the organisation and the cost of the proposed activities ... linguistic inclusion is key to achieving social inclusion ...

Source: Author's elaboration from Burnard, 1991

At the end of the open coding phase, the categories with their subtitles were formed and the transcript of the interview was coded (Table 2).

Table 2 – Transcription coding stage

Interview transcript	Categories
Interviewer: <i>What is the name of the organisation?</i>	Name of the organization
Interviewee: <i>Koinè Association - ETS</i>	
Interviewer: <i>What type of organisation is it?</i>	Type of organization
Interviewee: <i>Third sector organisation</i>	
Interviewer: <i>How many members are there in the organisation?</i>	Members of the organization
Interviewee: <i>The organisation has between 7 and 10 employees, depending on seasonal needs.</i>	
Interviewer: <i>What is your role in the organisation?</i>	Role of respondent in the organization
Interviewee: <i>Didactics coordinator</i>	
Interviewer: <i>Which services does the organisation offer?</i>	Services provided by the organisation
Interviewee: <i>Italian L2 courses; official examinations certifying knowledge of the Italian language; cultural and educational activities to foster the integration of learners into the national social context.</i>	
Interviewer: <i>How does the organisation provide services?</i>	The way in which the organisation provides its services
Interviewee: <i>Group courses; individual lessons; preparation courses for certification exams; organisation of extracurricular activities aimed at getting to know Italian culture (e.g. guided historical-archaeological tours, tastings, cooking lessons, etc.).</i>	
Interviewer: <i>What are the organisation's objectives?</i>	Objectives of the organization
Interviewee: <i>The organisation operates in the field of vocational education and training with the aim of fostering social inclusion and promoting knowledge of the Italian language among foreign communities in the country.</i>	
Interviewer: <i>Do you think that the organisation's activities have a social sustainability purpose? If yes, please specify in what way.</i>	Linkage between the organisation's objectives and social inclusion objectives
Interviewee: <i>Yes, because the provision of Italian L2 courses and activities that promote knowledge of Italian culture favours the social inclusion of all those who have long-term life plans in Italy.</i>	
Interviewer: <i>What are the strengths of the organisation, what are the main weaknesses?</i>	Organisational strengths and shortcomings
Interviewee: <i>The strengths are the small size of the organisation – which allows all those involved in the training activities (teachers and learners) to get to know each other and establish a relationship of trust – and the careful selection of staff, who must have certain professional qualifications to work in the organisation. The main critical point is undoubtedly the constant difficulty of finding a balance between the</i>	

economic sustainability of the organisation and the cost of the proposed activities, which must nevertheless remain accessible to as many learners as possible.

Interviewer: *Do you think that the organisation's objectives include following the principles of social sustainability? If so, please explain how.*

Linkage between organisational and social sustainability objectives

Interviewee: *Yes, because we are convinced that in order to guarantee real and lasting social inclusion for all, it is necessary to work on linguistic inclusion; only in this way it will be possible to reduce inequalities and problems at the level of employment, guarantee more equitable relations and thus favour the realisation of effective social cohesion.*

Source: Author's elaboration from Burnard, 1991

The verification of the consistency of the categories was carried out independently by the author of this article, as were the other activities in stages 7-13 of Burnard's (1991) method. With regard to the relationship between the data obtained from the unstructured interview and the literature, it should be noted that the results of the present paper are consistent with the findings of previous studies linking second language learning and teaching with social inclusion (see Section 2 of this paper).

5 Conclusions

This paper presented the content of an unstructured interview with the teaching director of an organisation providing Italian language courses for foreigners. The aim of the interview was to highlight the link between second language learning and social inclusion, which has already been demonstrated by many contributions in the reference literature. The interviewee explained that the social integration of the course participants is the ultimate objective of the activity carried out by the provider organisation and in fact the language classes are accompanied by numerous socialisation activities (guided tours of the city, social experiments in pubs, cinemas, theatres, etc.).

This work seeks to contribute to the dissemination of the importance of supporting people in a foreign country, first and foremost by teaching them the national language, in order to increase their chances of integration and social inclusion, as this link is now recognised both by the academic world and by the organisations that provide this important service on a daily basis.

The implications of this work are both theoretical and practical. On one hand, it contributes to the field of research on the relationship between second language learning and social inclusion; on the other, by reporting on the direct experience of an operational reality active in the world of teaching

languages to foreigners, it aims to draw attention to the importance of learning the language of the host country, both through lectures and through activities based on real situations in a foreign country.

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