Teaching English to Refugees in Italy: A Case Study

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Abstract

The story begins with a desire to make a difference in an Italian community by offering English classes to refugees. The intent was to help participants integrate into the local community and increase their chances for success if continuing on to another country. In practice, many of the things teachers thought they knew about teaching, from prior experience, mostly with adults, were based on assumptions that simply were not relevant in this specific context. In short, it quickly became clear that a thorough needs analysis and thoughtful consideration about participant and teacher expectations were essential in order for the course to reach its objectives. In this case, needs analysis was an opportunity for teachers to question and re-examine their teaching styles to better assess and effectively confront the real-life immediate needs of their students and update the course design accordingly. Trial and error and subsequent careful reflection directed teachers to move away from the teacher-centred approach often relied on in the adult English classroom at the Associazione Italo Americana del FVG/American Corner Trieste and instead take a closer look at the success of the children's program to see if the strategies employed there could be adapted for an adult audience with varying levels of ability and prior educational exposure. This led to a shift towards experience-based learning. Unlike the children's program, however, which used STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Math) principles as a general approach, it was hypothesized that teaching so-called Life Skills in English would meet the real-life needs of refugees in their new context and, at the same time, allow all participants to thrive in their own individual way. The change to experience-based learning proved successful in the refugee classroom and was later applied to all adult courses at the Association.

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The ESP – English for Refugees – Life Skills program[1] at the Association produced results that went beyond the original objectives by increasing quality in all adult classes at the school and changing attitudes towards refugees outside the classroom and in the community at large.

1. Background

The Associazione Italo Americana del FVG (Friuli Venezia Giulia region) (also referred to as The Association or AIA) in Trieste, Italy, is a non-profit American library and cultural association established in 1961 through a partnership with the US troops stationed there while Trieste was under Allied Military Government rule (1945–1954). The Association promotes American culture and the English language through cultural initiatives and English language courses. In 2007, the American Embassy in Rome and the American Consulate in Milan gave the library special status as an American Corner—a United States Department of State-sponsored regional initiative for providing information and programs highlighting American culture, history, current events, and government. English classes are complemented by a full calendar of cultural activities and events organized by the American Corner that are free and open to the public.

All language courses at the Association are taught using a communicative, experience-based learning approach based on STEAM (Science, Technology Engineering, Arts, Math) principles. At all levels there is a strong reading component, with children's courses focusing on early literacy. Adult and Business English classes generally take place once per week in the mornings and are repeated in the evenings. There are also intensive weekend options once per month. Groups are roughly divided into four levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (Council of Europe, 2001):

1 The course was made possible by a US Department of State Grant for English Language and Entrepreneurship-focused Outreach for refugees. An additional grant was issued to continue the program in February and again in November, 2017.

absolute beginners (A1) and advanced beginners (A2), intermediate (B1), and upper intermediate/advanced (B2/C1+). Participants determine their own level with guidance from instructors. Courses in the children's program (ages 0–18) take place once per week after school in the afternoons and on Saturdays. It is important to note that, unlike the adult program, children's courses are divided by age rather than ability or level. The fact that teachers are trained to deal with mixed groups made them a source of inspiration for the adult refugee classes once needs analysis determined that the initial approach to refugees was not sustainable.

Course participants are generally Italians interested in learning/perfecting their English language skills for international travel and to improve job prospects. Ongoing needs analyses of students and feedback indicate that conversation is where they feel they can benefit most, as it is their perception that Italian public schools emphasize written production and correct grammar, while large classes make it difficult to offer adequate opportunities for speaking.

1.1 The Refugee Situation in Trieste

The year 2015 showed a sharp increase in requests for Permits of Stay for humanitarian reasons, up from 2,553 in 2014 to 4,217, the largest group being Afghan nationals (41%). The number of asylum seekers in the region doubled over the previous year to reach 2,635. Eight out of ten asylum seekers were under 30 years of age, 97% of them were men, and 74% were unmarried (Friuli Venezia Giulia Region).

Trieste is a welcoming city offering valuable services for refugees; however, work is hard to find, so it is often seen as a temporary stop-off until these people can move on to another country with more work opportunities. For this reason, it was thought that English language skills could benefit asylum seekers no matter where they ended their journey. While asylum seekers are required to take mandatory Italian classes, one of the challenges for refugees

and case workers alike in the Italian context is finding a *lingua franca* to communicate with in the meantime.

1.1.1 English for refugees in Trieste

On a human level, locally, there was a popular perception within the Association that little was being communicated about the refugee situation and there were few opportunities to make contact with these new arrivals who were mainly housed in private apartments and residences. For this reason, it was also hoped that hosting English classes for refugees would offer additional opportunities for contact between local residents and the refugees and therefore foster the idea of international understanding, one of the core values of the Association.

The refugee courses at the Association were originally suggested by a retired American couple who had read about the refugee crisis in Europe and wanted to volunteer at the American Corner to have a direct impact on asylum seekers in the FVG region. Their trip was cancelled, however, due to illness. As contact had already been made with a local association that works with refugees, the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), and response to the courses was overwhelmingly positive, it was decided that classes would be taught as planned, by in-house English instructors. Because of the high number of asylum seekers in Trieste and the lack of space and resources to be able to offer free English classes to everyone, case workers at ICS made the decision to give priority to refugees with the highest probability of integrating into European society.

2. Initial Challenges and Needs Analysis

Teachers who agreed to teach in the program each had roughly 20 years of experience in the immersion foreign language classroom and felt confident about their ability to teach this new group of participants. Because of uncertainty about culture differences, prior English experience, and general participant expectations, doubts emerged about how to accurately divide into

effective working groups, foreshadowing the necessity of updating course design to accommodate learner expectations (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, pp. 154–155). It was thought that a multiple-choice placement test would give teachers enough information to understand if the curriculum that had been drafted would adequately address learner needs at this initial stage.

Twenty-five participants were seated and asked to complete the 50-question test. While self-assessment is a normal part of adult courses at the Association, teachers, who had no idea what to expect on day one, were concerned students would not have the basic language skills in English or Italian to allow them to understand the instructions and descriptors used in the test and therefore to self-assess. It was speculated that an oral assessment would be more appropriate in this case, but there were time restraints with just two teachers present.

The written test as an individual exercise did not go as planned, as participants used their native languages to communicate with others, making it a group exercise. Teachers, understanding that this was a collaboration between stronger students helping others with a history of limited or interrupted schooling, recognized it as a desire to make a good impression on the teachers and changed tactics. The experience highlighted a specific need on the part of the participants to belong to and work within a group. Further course modification would have to take this into consideration.

While needs analysis is a natural part of teaching an ESP class, the initial frustration at how to come up with the *right* strategy cannot be understated, as answers are not always apparent from the beginning; hence the need to regularly question the approach. This frustration, coupled with a lack of resources and time to develop new materials, can lead to teachers falling back on teacher-centered activities (Windle & Miller, 2012, pp. 325–326). In this case, the immediate shortcoming of the first lesson plan was that it operated on the assumption that participants could read the Latin alphabet fairly well and that students would work independently.

2.1 Course Tweaking and Activating Prior Knowledge

Rather than rely on results of the placement test, participants were then asked to self-assess and divide themselves into two levels: *beginner* or *advanced*. Both classes were to be held on the same days, but at different times. Some participants chose the group based on their level, especially those with more experience with the language. Others based their choice on start time and participants in each group. The teachers respected their choices and prepared for groups with vastly mixed levels.

With the negative experience of the placement test in mind, teachers decided to eliminate the first lesson plan and, instead, sit students in a circle and ask them where they were from, what their job was in their native country, how long they had been in Trieste, and what route they used to get there. Conversation proved lively, as the questions allowed participants to access knowledge they had about their own lives and experiences and share them with the group. A participant with particularly strong English skills was chosen to help absolute beginners by translating when necessary.

While this informal conversational turn worked well in the first meeting, it was agreed that there had to be a better plan for subsequent lessons. Over the next few meetings, however, a similar situation was observed. Lessons were planned, but were not perfectly appropriate to these particular groups. The main problem was that the teachers had assumed a base level of literacy that was not guaranteed in either group. This gap in prior knowledge led to more explicit explanations by teachers and thus a teacher-centered classroom. It excluded some participants because their level was too low or too high. It took some time to process the fact that this approach to refugees, and, after more broad analysis, adult learners in general, would have to change.

3. Chocolate Chip Cookies and a Turning Point

In a fit of frustration at yet another lesson plan that didn't work well, teachers decided to give up for that day and go to the kitchen with the participants to

bake chocolate chip cookies together. That experience marked a turning point in the approach used from then on. By taking the focus off the teacher and instead getting together to solve a problem, or, rather, carry out a task, all participants and instructors had a meaningful foreign language, and human, experience. Teachers enjoyed themselves and appreciated the positive atmosphere and spirit of collaboration.

Figure 1 – Making cookies created a group

The cookie experience provided guidance on where to look for a benchmark for a significant change in approach. Going in the kitchen to bake together was a common event at the school for children's classes at the Association. The pre-school and elementary program, which had a relatively short history at the Association compared to the adult program, had become increasingly popular, with families returning year after year. Like the refugee groups, these classes also had participants varying in ability, and yet were quite successful. Making cookies gave a first taste as to why this was the case, as well as inspiration that the same results could be achieved with the refugee classes as well and then perhaps exported across the entire adult program.

While pre-kindergarten and elementary programs at the Association are based on the STEAM approach (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Math), the refugee classes would have to be different. Based on information gained from participants themselves during the process of getting to know them better, it was determined that what participants wanted and needed was tools for coping with their new surroundings and real-life practical strategies for navigating everyday life. Rather than accuracy in language production, the

new focus would be problem-solving. Each lesson would be a specific problem to solve: baking something in the kitchen, going to the doctor's office, etc.

Figure 2 – Coffee in Italy is a life skill!

Lessons became hands-on and project-based with a focus on life skills. Each lesson had to be conceived so that it could stand on its own in case participants were unable to attend class because of job interviews or meetings with case workers. Each lesson would have a beginning, a middle and an end. Attending lessons would give value, missing them would not be an obstacle for progression. The more lessons participants attended, the more experience they would gain. Classes became more student-centered and provided concrete opportunities for students to become teachers and teachers to learn from students.

The classroom started looking different, too. Preparation took more time, but gave more satisfaction. Games became an integral part of the lessons, as participants truly enjoyed playing and laughing together in English.

Figure 3 – Food props and a picnic in the classroom

In the children's program at the Association, children are grouped by age rather than ability; therefore teachers were familiar with strategies for helping students of all backgrounds progress in the language in spite of these differ-ences and were accustomed to using an innovative hands-on approach to teaching. Although the *one-room schoolhouse* concept was a point of pride in that context, it had never truly been applied successfully to the adult class-room. Hindsight suggests this was a result of our fear of either failing to meet adult student expectations or insulting participants by doing things that could be misinterpreted as childish. In this case, the teacher-centred or traditional approach did not work well in this non-traditional classroom, while crafts and art projects and the use of props were readily accepted by the adult learners.

Modeling the refugee program on what was being used successfully in the children's program made classes more fun for participants and more interesting to teach for the instructors as well. Further, there was an added perception that they ran more smoothly, and more learning happened. It was noted that participants created lasting and meaningful relationships with the language, and with each other, through these stand-alone lessons and the approach that allowed everyone to contribute in their own meaningful way.

3.1 Moments of Pride

Activating prior knowledge proved a winning strategy for getting students to open up and share what they knew (Windle & Miller, 2012, p. 320). Art projects with simple directions and strict, short time-limits (e.g., "use watercolors to paint what home looks like to you in ten minutes or less") followed by a group art *critique* with (only) positive reinforcement from classmates (learning how to make compliments) and individuals explaining their idea of home (public speaking skills) were moments of creativity and pride.

Figure 4 – Art projects get participants talking about home

One of the best examples of the effectiveness of the new approach was when a group sewing lesson put participants who were tailors in their home country in the position of sharing their prior knowledge with their classmates and instructors.

Figure 5 – Instructors learn how to sew from the experts

4. Outcomes: Progress in English and Italian

One of the surprising outcomes of the Life Skills program was seeing how attitudes towards learning the Italian language shifted as participants progressed in their English learning. While participants overwhelmingly regarded Italian as "less important than English" or "not at all important" or even a "waste of time and energy" at the beginning of the program, the instructors, Americans living in Trieste who also spoke fluent Italian, gave participants the tools required to go to the doctor in English, for example, but also navigate the situation in Italian. It was noted that participants put increasing effort into learning Italian as the English classes continued and were eager to use Italian with instructors both inside and outside of the classroom, along with their English.

The obvious explanation for the rapid acquisition of Italian could be that participants were living in Italy and thus in contact with the language on a daily basis. However, this explanation does not reveal the full picture, as some participants had already lived in Italy for an extended period and had put forth little effort to learning the language previously, instead choosing to stay in groups with people who spoke their native language.

One hypothesis for the change in attitude was that giving Italian equivalents when requested gave participants the confidence necessary to see Italian as more "useful" than previously thought. The change in attitude may also have been due to the fact that the information in Italian was coming from foreigners who had previously gone through the same language acquisition process that participants were currently going through. Informal feedback from participants was that Italian instruction provided by outside sources was teacher-centered, "boring," and lacked a friendly connection between students and teachers, while the student-centered approach at the Association gave them new strategies for developing their language skills on their own outside the classroom as well as during lessons. Thus, one of the most important life skills offered by the course was the development of specific learning strategies.

5. Conclusion

Since the original refugee courses began, course design has evolved to reflect past successes gained through applying an experience-based approach to teaching English to adults in the refugee program. Eventually the entire adult program at the Association made the same shift with encouraging results. As for the impact on refugees and beyond, many of the refugees who participated in the initial experience now hold jobs in the Trieste area and come back to visit and volunteer when possible to share their expertise in sewing and baking and to lend a hand with new groups of asylum seekers taking English at the Association. Our alumni share their experiences with current Association students in both the children and adult programs. Every course culminates with a very special multi-ethnic potluck dinner and always finishes with tea, and, of course, chocolate chip cookies.

Figure 6 – Participants serving the food they had prepared

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