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Higher Education Reforms : The Italian Case

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Higher Education Reforms: The Italian Case

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1. Introduction

A historical overview of English language education at university level in Italy is not easy to write if one wants to avoid retracing the well-known evolution of language acquisition theories and teaching methodologies (for example, the transition from the traditional grammar-translation method to more recent situational-communicative approaches) and rather focus on practical aspects that affect students' learning outcomes such as the number of hours devoted to teaching English, the textbooks used, and whether Ministerial learning objectives are met by everyday teaching practices.

Historical-oriented ELT (English Language Teaching) research is still at its infancy even though it could well explain why the preference for English as a foreign language of study in Europe is a relatively recent phenomenon. It may also shed light on the reasons why Italian students lag behind the language proficiency of their European mates despite learning English from an early age (at 6, in primary school) and mostly choosing English as a foreign language at the secondary school – a trend that has increased in the last decade, as proved by the *Eurydice*¹ report (see Figure 1). As observed by Luciano Mariani², even if the past must not be interpreted to support present viewpoints, it can help read the present and foresee the future.

¹ *Eurydice* works within the framework of INDIRE, the Italian National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research.

² Mariani's remarks were made during a conference on language teaching in Italy, "Insegnamento delle lingue straniere in Italia tra passato e presente (1970-2015)", organized by CIRSIL (Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca sulla Storia degli Insegnamenti Linguistici), the AILA Research Network for the History of Language Learning and Teaching (HOLLT.net), and AIA (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica) at the University of Milan in 2016. The conference was the first of this kind and is the result of a recent European research interest in the history of language teaching.

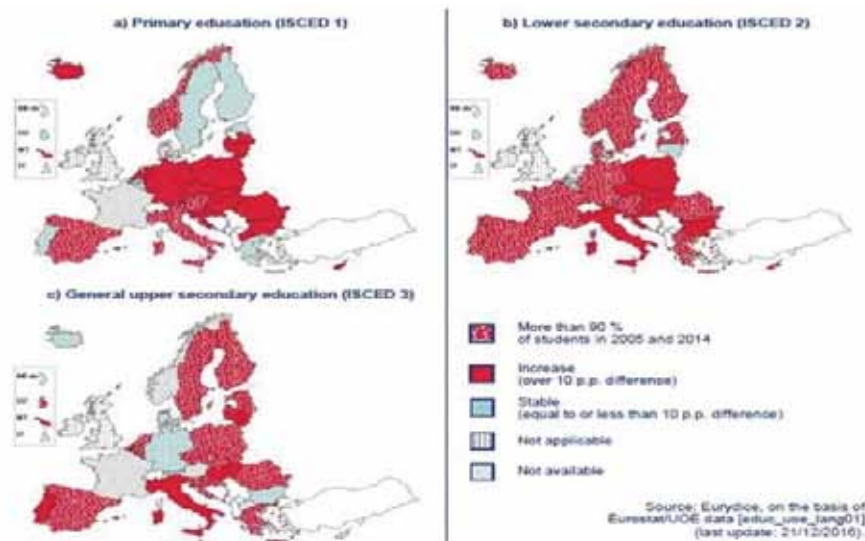


Figure 1. Trends in the proportions of students learning English in primary and general secondary education (ISCED 1-3, 2005-2014)

Today, such a reading is difficult because primary sources are scarce and documentation centers have only recently been instituted³. This paper will try to contribute to the research on English language education by outlining the evolution of the Italian higher education system and reforms concerning the teaching of the foreign language. When necessary, references to primary and secondary education will be made. The latest Italian secondary school reform, known as *La buona scuola* (The good school) (Law 107/2015), and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) implementation in primary and secondary schools will not be mentioned here being the topic of other papers in this collection.

2. The Italian School and University System: A Brief History

The inspiring principles of the Italian educational system, and in particular of Italy's higher education are defined in article 33 and 34 of the Italian Constitution, adopted in 1947. Article 33 states that “The Republic guarantees the freedom of the arts and sciences, which may be freely taught; The Republic lays down general rules for education and establishes state schools of all types and levels; Entities and

³ The AILA Network was only launched in 2015; the corresponding Italian university network, CIRLIS, which promoted the institution of HOLLT.net, was set up in 2001. Since its initial institution at the University of Bologna, it has had the objective of studying the history of language teaching from a multilingual and multidisciplinary perspective; it has published research articles on the topic in its journal (*Quaderni*) since 2002. Coverage of ELT history in Italy is still random.

private persons have the right to establish schools and institutions at no cost to the State”. Acknowledging academic freedom, the article also states, “Higher education institutions, universities and academies, have the right to establish their own regulations within the limits set by national legislation.” Furthermore, Article 34 opens educational institutions to everyone and establishes the principle of the right of “capable and deserving” individual citizens to higher education: “All those who can prove the necessary competency and commitment have a right to attain the highest levels of education.” To guarantee such a right, the Republic ensures “scholarships, allowances to families and other benefits, which shall be assigned through competitive examination.”

If the modern founding principles date back to the 20th century, the foundations of the university system can be found in the Middle Ages: as for many Western universities, they can be seen in the 11th and 12th century *universitates studiorum*⁴, which developed in centers of cultural debate, study and research - such as *Alma Mater Studiorum* in Bologna (1088) and the University of Padua (1222). In time, others were opened by kings and emperors - such as the University of Naples, founded by Frederick II of Sweden and King of Naples in 1224, and by popes, such as the *Siciliae Studium Generale, Siculorum Gymnasium*, authorized by Pope Eugene IV in 1444.

During the following centuries, the universities of the many states which existed in the Italian peninsula were gradually turned into state institutions under the control of the local public authorities; therefore, in 1861 the new unified Italian State inherited quite heterogeneous institutions⁵, which it tried to homogenize by extending the application of the legislation already existent in the pre-unitary Kingdom of Sardinia. This had already issued the first organic, secular and centralist law reform in matters of higher studies with the Royal Decree of 4

⁴ These were preceded by the Medical School in Salerno (IX-X century) and the Law School in Parma (962).

⁵ The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies had the University of Naples and the universities of Messina, Palermo and Catania. The Grand Duchy of Tuscany had the universities of Siena, Pisa, and the Institute of Higher and Advanced Studies in Florence. Lombardy had the University of Pavia; the Kingdom of Sardinia had the universities of Turin, Genoa, Cagliari and Sassari. The annexation of much of the Papal States brought the universities of Bologna, Ferrara, Urbino, Perugia, Macerata and Camerino. In 1866 and in 1870 were added respectively the University of Padua and the University of Rome. Cfr. “History of Higher Education in Italy”, available at the site: <https://www.k12academics.com>.

October 1848 n. 818 (called the Boncompagni law by the promoter, Carlo Boncompagni di Mombello), which provided for a governmental control of schools of all levels through a Higher Council of Education, being responsible for the organization of studies, teaching plans, the approval of course programs, books and treaties adopted⁶.

A first attempt at reorganizing Italian higher education in an orderly and concerted way was made with the Casati law of 1859 (“Law on the reorganization of public education” by the Italian Minister of Education Gabrio Casati). Enacted by Royal Decree no. 3725 on 13th November 1859, at the unification of the Italian Kingdom, it was initially only applied in the former Kingdom of Sardinia, in Lombardy and, with some adjustments, in Sicily; it was not in force in Tuscany, which had a very unusual Institute of Superior Studies, nor in the free universities of the papal state.

The core of the law consisted of regulations concerning the university system: “All’istruzione superiore viene assegnato il fine di indirizzare la gioventù, già fornita delle necessarie cognizioni generali, nelle carriere sì pubbliche che private”⁷.

The law centralized ministerial control in educational matters (it introduced compulsory education for the first two years of primary school) and guaranteed a state monopoly over higher education institutions (private universities were not permitted), providing direct appointment of full professors and definition of the commissions for their examination. This centralization was mitigated by margins of academic freedom both in the organization of teaching and in students’ choice of “the order of studies” and exams. In this regard, an attempt to improve the law was made in 1861 by Senator Carlo Matteucci (who became Minister of Education one year later) with a bill he presented to the Senate to reduce the number of Italian universities, by closing those which were less qualified, less organized and which had fewer students, hence creating centers of excellence, and to deprive local teachers of control over university degrees by entrusting the Academic Council, a collegial body composed of the rector and the faculty deans, with the administrative

⁶ These councils were abolished by a law of 22nd June 1857, which entrusted their tasks to rectors. *Ivi*.

⁷ “Higher education is given the task of leading youth towards careers in the public and private sector” (Translation mine).

and disciplinary management⁸.

The law envisaged 6 faculties - Theology (abolished in 1872); Law; Mathematics, Physics and Natural Sciences, Medicine, and Lettere (Literature & Philology) and Philosophy, with fixed study programs defined by a central body, a Superior Council of Public Education, and decided to standardize tuition fees of the different universities existing in the country. Faculties were engaged both in training and research and their activities were organized through institutes (Istituti), basic academic units led by professors, helped by subordinates, assistants and researchers.

As to secondary school (lasting 3 years), it was divided in *Licei* (whose subjects were Italian Literature, Greek Literature, Latin Literature, Philosophy, Mathematics, Physics, Natural Science, Chemistry, and History) and *Istituti Tecnici* (whose subjects were Italian language, French language, Arithmetic and Accounting, Algebra and Geometry, Drawing, Calligraphy, Geography and History, Natural and physical-chemical history, Civics). The law also envisaged *Istituti Tecnici* with the teaching of English and German for towns with growing commerce and industrial sites.

Matteucci was against private institutions being entrusted to the initiative of municipalities, provinces and private associations, since he was convinced that universities needed state intervention to overcome economic difficulties and to achieve the goal of forming a modern, efficient and uniform ruling elite. Matteucci's project paved the way for a distinction between "first class" universities, receiving full government funding, (in his view only the 6 universities of Bologna, Naples, Palermo, Pavia, Pisa and Turin), and minor, incomplete universities, bound to decay.

The distinction among universities was not new: it was already foreseen in Terenzo Mamiani's reform "Principi direttivi sulla nuova legge per la pubblica istruzione"⁹, which, in view of an administrative decentralization process, entrusted regions with the management of universities, and the state with the management of three major

⁸ For a full account of Matteucci's proposal and the partial enactment of his bill via regulations, see Porciani (1994), pp. 135- 184.

⁹ Mamiani was Minister of Public Education in the last government of the Kingdom of Sardinia and in the first of the new Kingdom of Italy.

higher education institutions - those of Turin, Pisa and Naples.

Gentile's reform, pursuant to RD (Royal Decree) of September 30, 1923, No. 2102, of 1923, made the distinction between "first" and "second class" universities blatant. It introduced a sort of hierarchy among Italian universities, dividing them on the basis of three different types: *A* universities (Bologna, Cagliari, Genoa, Naples, Padua, Palermo, Pisa, Rome and Turin) were complete with all the Faculties and had access to state funding both for research and professors' and staff's salaries; *B* universities (Bari, Florence and Milan) could receive only a partial contribution from the State and, therefore, needed the support of appropriate financial agreements between the government and local authorities; *C* universities, the so called "free universities", did not receive any state financial support and, according to art. 112 of R.D. 30 September 1923, could be suppressed if "the teaching given in them didn't respect the institutions and principles that govern the state social order"¹⁰.

As to secondary school, Gentile's reform mostly relied on the *gymnasium*, which prepared for all the secondary education levels, among which the classical high school stood out, providing the widest general culture, and allowing access to all the university faculties. Clearly, his reform was inspired by an elitist vision of higher education and university, accompanied by contempt for the small provincial universities considered a burden for the Italian University system. The reform aimed to reduce the negative consequences of the traditional polycentric structure of the national university system; in fact, it urged minor universities to develop their own «specialization» in relation to the specific needs of their area and to offer the cultural activities liked by the local elites, in order to successfully fundraise and survive.

Gentile's reform affected the entire educational system: Royal Decree n. 1054 of 6th May 1923 regulated the functioning of the secondary school and Royal Decree n. 2185 of the 1st October 1923 concerned elementary schools reorganized in 3 periods (*preparatorio, inferiore and superiore*): a preparatory school of 3 years; a lower secondary school of 3 years, and an upper secondary school of 2 years, (the last two periods conceived as preparing to professional activities). Interestingly,

¹⁰ Cfr. Pomante & Sani (2016) for a detailed discussion of this reform.

one of the activities to be performed in the lower schools was “oral translation from dialects” - it gives us an insight into the linguistic problems of post-unitary Italy, more interested in spreading literacy in the mother tongue than in fostering foreign language acquisition. The Elementary school was followed by a three-year middle school, preparatory to *Licei*. A foreign language was taught in the so called *Scuole Complementari*, which followed the elementary school and did not lead to high school studies; it was also taught from the second year of *Ginnasi* (leading to university studies) and in *Istituti tecnici* (vocational schools). In particular, *Istituti tecnici* offering preparatory education “all’esercizio di uffici amministrativi e commerciali” (to professions in trade and administrative offices) had a second foreign language as a subject of study¹¹.

A foreign language was also taught in *Istituti magistrali* (lasting 7 years and preparing teachers-to be); two foreign languages (one of which was an option rather than a core subject) were taught in *Licei Femminili*, schools for girls not interested in continuing their studies at university. Finally, a subject named “Foreign language and literature” was included in the program of study of *Licei Scientifici*, preparing students for university studies in the field of science and medicine.

The economic growth and the social changes occurring in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s (the so called “economic miracle”) put this educational frame to the test especially because of the rising demand for mass higher education¹². Political parties and Parliament promoted some investigations and the Minister of Education Luigi Gui presented the results of the inquiries in 1963 and a reform proposal in 1965. Finding inspiration in the American university model, he proposed to diversify university degrees into a *diploma* (a short-cycle degree), a *laurea* (the

¹¹ English became a compulsory subject to be taught in the primary school (for pupils between the age of 6 and 7), starting from the first year of the primary, with Law 53/2003, which complied with the aim agreed upon at the Barcelona European Council in June 2002 and consisting in fostering the acquisition of at least two foreign languages at an early age. Some attempts at teaching foreign languages at primary level had already started in the late 70s and 80s, especially in the autonomous provinces of Northern Italy, and already Law 148 of the 5th of June 1990 made the teaching of a foreign language compulsory in elementary schools, granting the school administration a free choice among English, Spanish, French and German. Today, a second foreign language is compulsory from the first year of the lower secondary school. The level of foreign language proficiency required for students who finish secondary schools is a B2 (for the first foreign language studied at school).

¹² Cfr. Rostan (2014), p. 93.

traditional long-cycle degree) and a *dottorato di ricerca* (the doctoral degree). For different reasons, including a strong political and academic opposition and students' protests, the reform was not approved and only a few piecemeal modifications were implemented via some later "urgent" measures: Law n. 910/1969 introduced an "open door" policy widening access to university and allowing the personalization of study programs; Law n. 766/1973 started a massive recruitment of academic tenured and non-tenured staff through a set of competitive and noncompetitive procedures¹³. Despite the creation of new universities, faculties and study programs, and despite the expansion of academic positions in order to meet the increased demand of lecturing and tutoring, universities were unable to provide adequate teaching for an enlarged and highly diversified student body. The low levels of class attendance, the number of students taking longer than the expected time to graduate, the high dropout levels, and the overcrowding of universities in large cities finally led to a new university reform in 1980.

The reform, approved by Law n. 28/1980 and D.P.R. n. 382/1980, consisted of two main measures: 1) restructuring of the academic profession, with the clearly defined and permanent positions of *ordinario* (full professor), *associato* (associate professor) and *ricercatore* (researcher), to be selected by public competitions or by administrative acts based on internal assessment of personnel already working in the university sector; 2) reorganization of the didactics and internal structure, by setting a limit on the number of new academic recruits, fixing precise workloads and minimum teaching hours, and allowing short-term contracts with non-academic professionals providing teaching and technical services¹⁴. Resuming previous proposals, the Law established a new academic and organizational unit, namely, the *dipartimento* (department), aimed at replacing *istituti* (institutes) and *cattedre* (chairs) as research units and belonging to one or more *facoltà* (faculties); it also introduced the doctoral degree and provided new means to coordinate didactical activities within *corsi di laurea* (study programs). The coexistence of departments and faculties lasted until Gelmini's Law 240/2010, which assigned teaching, research and administrative functions to departments.

¹³ This led, according to Rostan, to the saturation of the academic ranks, rendering access to the profession practically impossible for the following 10–15 years, hindering generational turnover and aging the Italian academy.

¹⁴ Rostan, op. cit. *Ibidem*.

In the 30 years that preceded Gelmini's reform, several policy initiatives impacted the structure of the Italian academic personnel contributing to the creation of a more demanding but also more unstable higher education system:

- Law n 168/1989 set up a new Ministry of University and Scientific and Technological Research (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica - Murst), independent from the Ministry of Education (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione - MPI), which until then had been responsible for all educational levels from primary to tertiary, and started the process of university "autonomisation" by asserting the principle of university autonomy in management, financial and budgetary issues, teaching (organization of degree courses along with all related teaching/ learning services) and research. The law also linked public funding to accountability and quality assessment by assigning university internal evaluation to *nuclei interni di valutazione* (local committees) and entrusting national agencies with system evaluation¹⁵.
- Law n. 341/1990 introduced short vocational university programs lasting 2 or 3 years, the *Diploma Universitario* (University Diploma). It marked the beginning of the reorganization of study programs which was accomplished by Minister Berlinguer's Reform in 1999.
- Law n. 236/1995, sect. 6. and Law n. 210/1998 demanded that universities issue their statutes and regulations and manage their recruitment procedures.
- Inspired by the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) on the harmonization of the architecture of the European Higher Education and the Bologna Declaration (1999) on the adoption of a common framework of readable and comparable degrees (*Diploma Supplements*) and credit systems (ECTS), the Ministry of University Decree n. 509/1999 restructured university study programs. It established the average workload per university credit (25 hours) and the average annual learning workload of a full-time university student (60 credits), hence setting the minimum

¹⁵ Student evaluation of teachers and teaching activities was introduced 10 years later with Law n. 370/1999.

number of credits to obtain the different degrees¹⁶ – to which certified professional knowledge and abilities can also be compared and acknowledged as equivalent (subsection 7). It also replaced the long-established national framework of one long-cycle (*corsi di laurea*), lasting 4-6 years, with two cycles of study (*laurea* and *laurea specialistica*, later called *laurea magistrale* by Ministry of University Decree 2070/2004), and provided a general framework for the implementation of didactic autonomy.

Art. 3 of the Law establishes the types of degrees and qualifications that universities are allowed to award:

1. Universities confer the following first and second cycle qualifications:
 - a) first degree (*Laurea*)
 - b) second degree (*Laurea Specialistica*).
2. Universities may also confer a specialization degree (*Diploma di Specializzazione*) and a research doctorate (*Dottorato di Ricerca*).

Subsection 4 and 5 of article 3 state that:

4. The first degree program is aimed at guaranteeing the student an adequate command of general scientific methods and contents as well as specific professional skills.
5. The second degree program is aimed at providing the student with an advanced level of education for exercising a highly qualified activity in specific areas.

Subsection 9 allows Italian universities to confer compliant qualifications in conjunction with other Italian or foreign universities and explicitly mentions as a requirement for the completion of the course of study the compulsory knowledge of a language of the European Union other than Italian, whose acquisition must be tested “with reference to the level required for each language”, which hints at the

¹⁶ According to art. 7, 180 ECTS are necessary to obtain a first degree, whose length is set in 3 years, 300 ECTS to obtain a second degree, whose duration is a further 2 years after the first degree, a number between 300 and 350 ECTS, depending on the program, to obtain a specialization. Master’s programs must envisage at least 60 ECTS more than those acquired to earn a 1st and 2nd level degree.

language levels certified internationally and in compliance with the Common European Framework adopted in 1995¹⁷.

The reform's main objective is the implementation of teaching autonomy: universities can lay down the regulations for their degree courses, establishing their names and learning outcomes, the general framework for different teaching/learning activities to be included in the curriculum, the credits allocated to each subject course and the type of final exam to obtain the qualification. The second objective is to bring the Italian Higher Education System in line with the European two-tier university model as established in the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations in order to enhance student mobility and competitiveness in the job market and pursue the goals of the European Higher Educational Area. The third objective is to make the Italian university system more student-centered by introducing the credit system, consequently reducing the length and workload of the programs, and by incentivizing newer, more effective teaching methodologies.

In the years following the reform, more changes were introduced by subsequent decrees – the Ministry of University Decree n. 270/2004 introduced some adjustments while maintaining the main guidelines of the reform: a common first year for the first-cycle program of degrees belonging to same class or similar groups; Decree n. 17/2010 made the requirements to be met stricter and more demanding in order to reduce their proliferation and the fragmentation of curricula and courses; Law n. 240/2010 (the so called “Gelmini reform”) besides giving departments research, teaching and service functions, targeted academic recruitment and status by dismissing the full-time position of *ricercatore* and replacing it with a tenure track path. This latest reform has also had the merit of promoting EMI (English-mediated instruction), which is English-taught programs implemented in various non-linguistic university disciplines, by fostering

¹⁷ The CEFR defines six levels of proficiency A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 (where A corresponds to a ‘basic user’, B to an ‘independent user’ and C to a ‘proficient user’), enabling the progress of foreign language learners to be measured. A subsequent law (Ministerial Decree of August 4, 2000), which groups university degrees in classes (47 for the 1st degree and 109 for the 2nd, with all classes belonging to one of the five subject areas – engineering and architecture, health, humanities, science and technology, law and economics), also emphasized the importance of foreign language competence as a tool of professional communication for graduates.

internationalization.¹⁸

3. The effect of reforms on ELT

The teaching of Classics has always been a dominant element in the Italian educational system: indeed, Latin is still abundantly taught at *licei*. In Italy, as in the rest of Europe, English and other modern languages first appeared in the school programs of commercial and technical schools and educational institutions for women, being considered a practical subject, which did not require the learning efforts of proper classic disciplines¹⁹. These were believed to develop scholarly intellect and considered necessary to biblical, legal and medical studies. Only later, modern languages were included, as elective subjects, in the study program of *licei* and universities. Until Gentile's reform, the Ministry of Education tried to meet the needs of a changing society with minor legislative measures: it introduced French in *gymnasiums* as an optional subject in 1889 (R.D. 24.9. 1889); it made it compulsory in the last 3 years of the gymnasium in 1892 (R.D. 25.2.1892); it added English and German as electives in some high school programs in 1898 (R.D.

¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that the law does not make any explicit reference to degree programs to be taught in English. It rather responds to the internationalization mandate reiterated in documents such as the Sorbonne Agreement (1998), the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the Lisbon Strategy (2000) by allowing Italian universities to hire foreign scholars and professionals on short-term contracts to perform activities related to the dissemination of the language and culture of their country of origin, to promote international cooperation among universities and staff mobility programs in international contexts. Nonetheless, it has boosted EMI especially at graduate levels to the point of inducing Milan Polytechnic University to try to implement graduate programs entirely held in English – a case that ended in Court and contributed to stir the controversial discussion in Italy too on the “European paradox” (Phillipson 2006: 72) and the dispute between advocates of the preservation of national language and cultural diversity against the “Anglicization” of university contents, and supporters of ELF seen as a *lingua nullius* resulting from and benefitting globalization. For a state-of-the art of research on EMI in Italian higher education, see Campagna (2017).

¹⁹ The first Italian-English Grammar books published between 1700-1800 reproduce the structure of Anglo-French grammars, which had been inspired by Greek and Latin grammar books, where rules were derived from the observation of the written literary language. They are practical manuals usually consisting of two macro-sections, a descriptive grammar dedicated to the parts of the speech and a more or less extensive section dedicated to a bilingual dictionary (often arranged semantically as in Latin *Nominalia*), dialogues (imitating Latin *Colloquia*), common use phraseology and/or to letter writing. See on this Vicentini (2004) and Ricucci (2014).

3.11.1898)²⁰.

The language textbooks used at the time had titles that display their teaching approach, such as the very famous *Corso pratico, analitico, teorico e sintetico della lingua francese* (Chollet 1845),²¹ and adapted to the teaching of English Anglo-French manuals inspired by the teaching methods used for Greek and Latin. They were generally based on the traditional grammar-translation method, over time renovated to include the more practical uses suggested by Ahn's and Ollendorff's books. Ministerial programs of the time recommend contrastive analysis so that foreign language teaching could also benefit Italian language acquisition²², proving that the Italian "language question" was a major concern.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the development of Phonetics as a discipline, the popularity of Viëtor's theory of language teaching starting with phonetics, and of Sweet's book, *The Practical Study of Languages*, also aroused interest in the direct method in Italy. In 1901, the Ministry of Education set up a Royal Commission to study a secondary school reform that could modernize the Italian educational system and attribute an equal status to all the disciplines: it proposed a lower secondary school without Latin and the institution of a modern *lyceum* with two foreign languages, which, however, had a short life and was only resurrected by Gentile's reform. More importantly, the Commission recommended a "practical and direct" method in foreign language teaching, focused on oral conversation. Four years later, the Minister of Education, Bianchi, sent a Circular to all foreign language school teachers recommending the use of an "intuitive", "practical and direct" method, especially in the first period of the course. This marks the beginning of the publication of language books with explicatory pictures and

²⁰ The late development of a need for learning English to be used in commercial and diplomatic relations can be explained by: 1) the widespread use of Italian vernaculars, especially Tuscan and Venetian, as a commercial language in Europe in late Medieval times and the Renaissance, due to the international activities of Italian traveler merchants and bankers; 2) the political presence of French kings in the south of Italy in the 13th and 14th century and, later on, of Napoleon's domination, which imposed French as the language of official documents and as a compulsory subject in *licei* and female boarding schools, and prompted the Italian publication of 117 French manuals from 1796 to 1814 (Cfr. Vicentini: 2004); 3) the use of French as the language of diplomacy until the Versailles treaty in 1919, and the use of French and German as the only EU official working languages until the UK, Ireland and Denmark joined the EEC in 1973.

²¹ *A practical, analytic, theoretical and synthetic course of French*. Cfr. Vicentini (2004), p. 81.

²² *Ivi*, p. 97.

notions of “civilization”, the culture of the foreign language.

Gentile’s reform did not impact university studies as much as it benefited secondary education in terms of language teaching. It had the merit of considering modern languages as “formative disciplines” and not merely as practical subjects; hence, they were to be taught in all lower secondary schools for three-four hours a week and for seven hours a week in upper secondary schools (*licei* and *istituti tecnici*). Ministerial programs did not include teaching recommendations but illustrated final exam contents – translation, dictation, reading and discussion, conversation on “civilization” topics and/or commercial or literary subjects depending on the school specialization²³, which can help us infer preferred language teaching methods.

It is too early to assess the effects of Gelmini’s reform on students’ acquisition of the English language. So far, as to the “internationalization” process, EMI research in Italy has addressed the “internationalist-culturalist” debate and the worries of lecturers (many of whom are non-native speakers of English) teaching non-language disciplines in the foreign language, preoccupied by the lack of training courses, the inadequacy of students’ language skills and the risk of content pauperization²⁴. It is also too early to assess the effects of CLIL on University students’ improvement of their entry level of English and/or other communicative skills.

Therefore, it can only be concluded that the educational system reform that has had a major impact on foreign language teaching at university level is Berlinguer’s (Ministry of Education Decree n. 509 /1999). It provided for the split in the new degree offering of *Modern Language and Culture* between the taught courses of *Foreign/English language and translation* and courses of *Foreign/English Literature*, which until then had constituted a single discipline in the Faculties of

²³ Cfr. Mandich (2002) in Vicentini (2004), p. 117.

²⁴ There is however a study conducted by Gotti in 2016 on cooperative strategies (accommodation and language regulation) enacted by both lecturers and students using ELF in “internationalized” classes.

Foreign Languages and Literatures²⁵.

The division has produced some fruitful results: on the one side, the courses of foreign literature have been able to focus on literary and esthetic criticism being franchised from only marginal reflections on language and, on the other, the courses of foreign language and translation have acquired a discipline status, encompassing the teaching of and research on language structure, usage and functions, phonology, morphology, lexicology, pragmatics, linguistic and language acquisition theories, inter-connections with and between cultures and communities of practice, register, textual genre, academic language, micro-language (necessary to perform the different professions and, therefore, relevant to the different faculties/degree courses) and translation practice, also of literary texts. As a consequence, the distribution of teaching hours (and corresponding student workload) between courses of language and courses of literature, while remaining unvaried in some degree courses, as *Modern Language and Culture*, has been balanced in favor of the foreign language (generally English) and LSP (especially ESP) in courses as *Linguistic Mediation*, *Foreign Language for International Communication*, *Tourism*. However, in degree courses not specializing in modern languages, English has become either an exam with few credits or a mere pass/fail test, the teaching of which is mainly conducted through content-based learning, often times in blended environments or completely online, with a consequential negative impact on learning outcomes²⁶.

Twenty years after the reform, linguists 'euphoria' for the acquired autonomy from Literary studies, which has implied serious commitment to and responsibility for the reorganization of study programs, the redefinition of the relationship with *lettori madre lingua* (foreign language readers transformed into CEL – *Collaboratori ed esperti linguistici* – Linguistic collaborators and experts), and the creation and management of CLA (university language centers), has diminished

²⁵ As Silvana Ferreri observes in her 2008 article, the fact that in the aftermath of the reform most university teachers opted for the teaching of Foreign Literature, rather than Foreign Language, proves that academic research and academic career progression was traditionally made in the field of literature studies. Indeed, before the reform, the teaching of communicative competences (especially oral and written skills) was (contemptuously?) delegated to foreign language readers (mother-tongue speakers, usually with no academic profile) while the teaching of literature was the prerogative of tenured professors.

²⁶ For further research on this topic, see Evangelisti (2002), pp. 99-130.

and new concerns are emerging towards an excessive, unjustified disdain for translation-based language teaching methods²⁷, unrealistic and anachronistic ENL (English as a Native Language) expected proficiency in a world requiring ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) and cross-cultural communication competence²⁸, and an excessively rigid separation between language and literature, which is undeniably the best or at least the most tangible cultural expression of any language. A clear example is the latest call for papers of the 29th AIA conference “Thinking out of the Box in Language, Literature, Cultural and Translation Studies: Questioning Assumptions, Debunking Myths, Trespassing Boundaries”, held in Padua last September:

“Thinking out of the Box” is a powerful metaphor, one that challenges us to consider possibilities previously not even imagined, and to extend our vision- of the world and ourselves – to include alternative, complementary, or even contrasting perspectives. [...] It does not mean being innovative at all costs or for its own sake – in fact, it may mean going back to old practices.

Despite the constant efforts made by the ELT industry to be on the lookout for the new teaching ‘technique’ and the academic interest in ‘new’ approaches (such as CLIL) and the possible impact of cutting-edge technological advances on language acquisition (such as MALL), H.H. Stern’s remark “language teaching theory has a short memory” is still valid. One can only add that teaching practice is forgetful too²⁹.

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²⁷ On “pedagogic translation”, the use of translation activities to teach a foreign language and especially micro-languages, see Calvi (2003), available at the site: https://www.ledonline.it/ledonline/tradurrespagnolo/tradurrespagnolo_02_calvi.pdf. It is also worth mentioning here that the new CEFR includes “mediation (interpreting and translating)” among language activities such as production and reception.

²⁸ In particular, on ELF competence see Kohn (2014) and Di Scala (2017), and for an overview of competence development in university courses and curricula design in line with the Bologna Process, see Zaggia (2008).

²⁹ Stern (1983), p. 76.

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Abstract

The paper will provide an outline of the Italian educational system, described from a diachronic perspective, with a focus on higher education reforms and their effect on the teaching of English as a foreign language at tertiary level. Since present day Italian University English language teaching and learning cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration students' foreign language entry level competence, school reforms will also be briefly mentioned.

Keywords: Italian secondary and tertiary education history, ESL, ESP, Curriculum planning