

Francesca Belloni, Elvio Manganaro
Restarting from language education.
Interview with Silvana Loiero

Abstract

The interview published here started from the letter addressed in September 2020 by Silvana Loiero, with Nicola Grandi and Miriam Voghera, to the then Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the Minister of Education Lucia Azzolina, with the significant title Re-starting from language education. In that letter, the three signatories, members of the national secretariat of GISCEL, stated that “language education does not end with the education of Italian or other languages, but must be referred to language in general”, a semiotic and semantic world that affects every aspect of life and logical thought and not only and consequently permeates the education and teaching of girls and boys. This is what Silvana Loiero, GISCEL national secretary since 2018, school manager in charge of teaching and teacher training, editor of the primary school magazine “La Vita Scolastica” from 2017 to 2020, talks about at length in the interview.

Keywords

Language — Linguistic pedagogy — Learning environment

Francesca Belloni, Elvio Manganaro: *Today the debate on schools is extremely lively. Is language still the terrain on which inclusion from exclusion is measured?*

Silvana Loiero: Yes, language is still a factor of exclusion: this is an age-old question, but also a present-day question. There are Italian-speaking children of all ages, and therefore born and raised in Italy, who, despite speaking Italian, only have an apparent command of the language. In front of a written page or when listening to a lesson they have difficulty in understanding or have expressive skills limited to a single “register”; they are unable to vary the forms through which they can express themselves. To them we must then add their peers who are excluded because they speak a different language.

Don Milani’s words come to mind in this regard: «I call someone a man who is a master of his language». These are words which still resonate strongly today. And at the same time we must note the great relevance of GISCEL’s *Ten Rules for Democratic Language Education*¹, especially where (in Rule VIII) it is recalled that:

«the development and exercise of linguistic skills should never be proposed and pursued as ends in themselves, but as tools for a richer participation in social and intellectual life».

Today, however, compared to the ’60s and ’70s, we have important official documents on schools in Italy which set as the purpose of language education the development of *wide-ranging, confident language skills* and,



as in the case of the National Guidelines², specify that the possession of adequate levels of control and use of the Italian language represents:

«an indispensable condition for the growth of the person and for the full exercise of citizenship, for critical access to all cultural areas and for achieving academic success in every field of study».

The official texts are not sufficient to allow students to travel the road of scholastic and social inclusion with any agility. In fact, much more is needed if, as the statistics tell us, the learning of the Italian language by Italian and foreign children of all ages continues to produce differences and bring to the fore new inequalities.

ISTAT surveys³ have shown us, for example, that in the 2018-2019 school year, 30.4% of second-year students at upper secondary schools had not achieved sufficiency in literacy, as found by INVALSI⁴ using reading comprehension and grammar tests. The variations are large across the country (41.9% in the South and 20.7% in the North) and are also large in terms of gender, social class and citizenship, with 34.4% of insufficient literacy skills among boys against 26.3% among girls; 54.2% among first-generation foreign children, compared to 27.8% among children born in Italy to Italian parents, 46.5% among children belonging to the lowest socio-economic and cultural levels, compared to 19.4% among those living in wealthier families. Furthermore, the percentage of insufficiency is higher among students at vocational institutes (66.7%) than among high school students (16%).

In conclusion: we can say that undoubtedly there is still a problem of exclusion linked to the possession or not of language skills. However, we

must add that today there are other considerations: distance learning in the COVID period has in fact shown us that not having a connection and a PC or another type of technological support available represents a further factor of exclusion. Consequently, the disadvantage of a lack of access to a network or the necessary means, those tools through which language travels, is added to the lack of language skills. These factors are even more exclusive for children who speak another language.

Consequently, Italy still has many steps to take to increase the effectiveness and degree of inclusiveness in its school system.

EM: *does this combination still make sense, beyond the most obvious aspects? In what terms does this relationship stand today? What has changed compared to the years when the thinking was to correct the imbalances in society, also through language education?*

SL: Naturally, the combination still has a very significant meaning today. However, it would be unrealistic to think that the school alone can correct the imbalances in society: the school can only play a part, and in particular it can offer tools for participation in the social and democratic life of a country. In my opinion, the fundamental function of language education today is to train citizens who can consciously participate in the construction of larger and more composite communities, quite apart from the national one. Ensuring proficiency in Italian while giving value to native and EU languages makes the school a privileged place for learning and, at the same time, a space for free and pluralistic confrontation.

I have already mentioned the document entitled *National Guidelines* (for primary and lower secondary schools). In it, a close link is established between the idea of *citizenship*, being able to *exercise it fully*, and the acquisition of language skills. To put active citizenship into practice, a fundamental condition is therefore required: the possession of wide-ranging, confident language skills. Skills which represent indispensable tools for citizens to participate in social and political life actively and responsibly, to feel that they fully belong to a community, to have a guaranteed set of rights and at the same time be in a position to fulfil a set of duties. This is why it is important that at school an effective communication climate is created in which boys and girls of all ages learn to dialogue, converse, and discuss things; that is, they are able to express their own opinions, argue, listen to others, and really understand what they are saying. This is the way to exercise the *right to express their ideas by word*, which is an integral part of constitutional and citizenship rights (Article 21 of the Italian Constitution):

«It is through the word [...] that shared meanings are built and work is done to heal differences, to acquire new points of view, to negotiate and give a positive meaning to differences as well as to prevent and regulate conflicts»⁵.

The practice of the *right to express their ideas by word* thus opens the way for dialogue and confrontation, essential elements of democratic processes in today's multicultural societies.

In 2005, the well-known linguist Tullio De Mauro, in officially opening the *Day for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Ten Rules* (De Mauro 2007), underlined that the earnest effort of the *rules* had been to propose a linguistic education that was not only efficient, but democratic, that is, aimed at inclusion, to the “not one less”. For the linguist, and for the GISCEL association



which he founded in the mid-1970s, this was not merely a question of talking about language education: it was in fact necessary to choose «democracy. Trying to make language education work in a democratic sense is something different, additional, compared to the simple linguistic-educational construct». So said De Mauro. And today, fifteen years later, his words ring even truer: it is necessary to achieve equality and democracy and «devote every effort to building that necessary condition of democratic living which is, in fact, democratic language education».

FB: *With regard to language in the proper sense, the central question seems to be teaching and learning not so much (and here I am referring to the words of De Mauro) how we should say something, but rather how we can say that thing and, I would add, to decide and understand why to say it or not. It seems that freedom is still at stake and in ways that are increasingly difficult to pin down. In this sense, what are the specific aspects of the current condition?*

SL: The traditional “linguistic pedagogy”, that of the “theme” and of beautiful writing – so to speak – was prescriptive, it responded to the logic of *how* to say something. But it is easy to explain how to say something, it is more difficult to explain how to say something and what the effects from saying that something in a certain way can generate and determine.

In this regard, I would like to recall the well-known motto of Gianni Rodari: «All uses of the word for everyone», which is well suited to the current zeitgeist, characterized as it is by the presence of numerous varieties in the Italian linguistic repertoire and by constant changes in the uses of the language. We must ensure that children concretely experience the ductility of the language and become able to adapt to the multiple situations in which they use it, exploiting its expressive and communicative potential to make apposite choices. This means giving all the tools to be able to interact on a linguistic level, enabling them to vary their ways of expression to adapt them to the environment, society, contexts, purposes, and interlocutors.

FB: *Speaking of architecture, to what extent can the spatiality of school buildings help define a learning environment? In your opinion, in what ways does physical space affect the development of skills, the acquisition of knowledge, and the enhancement of skills in complex contexts.*

SL: In discourses relating to the educational sciences today we speak of “learning environments”. This term is generally used in the plural to indi-

cate innovative schools and classrooms in terms of their school buildings and furnishings. The expression “new learning environments” is instead increasingly used as a synonym for “digital learning environments”; in this case, the relationship between educational and organizational innovation and digital competence is emphasized.

However, I would like to talk about the learning environment in a broader sense, not only as a physical environment but also as a cultural and mental “space of action”, in which interactions and exchanges take place between students, objects of knowledge, cultural and technical tools, and teachers, and there is the opportunity to have meaningful experiences on cognitive, affective-emotional, interpersonal and social levels. This more complex and multi-faceted meaning is linked to recent research in the psycho-pedagogical field that highlights the importance of school learning not as an individual process separate from the situation in which it occurs but as an intersubjective process which implies collaboration and sharing.

Learning therefore has a strongly social characterization: we learn *from* others and *with* others. The process of building meanings, acquiring new knowledge, developing skills, takes place within the social relations between students and the activities they carry out.

In particular, for the purposes of our discourse, it should be noted that current research has demonstrated the importance of a collective discourse taking place in the classroom, both in the forms of teacher-led discussions and in those of small groups of pupils who work independently and collaborate to solve a problem. It is precisely through collective discourses that meaningful knowledge and socially shared collective ways of arguing and reasoning in specific areas are built up, thus allowing a “sharing of knowledge”. Hence, in this sense, the learning environment qualifies as a “community of discourses” or “of learners” because, in addition to learning knowledge, techniques and procedures, children also learn social procedures and relationships and collaborative practices⁶.

It goes without saying that the spaces and equipment must be geared to the creation of this “community”.

EM: *What could be a way of setting up the relationship between language education and the language of architecture? Today, it seems to me, all efforts are aimed at updating spaces. However, if we look at the winning projects for the construction of new schools, we get the impression that the rhetoric on the educational possibilities of informal relational spaces (corridors, stairways, atria, etc.), compared to the traditional classroom unit, is the mirror precisely of a deliberate resizing of the community and collective dimensions in the education of children.*

SL: The traditional image of the teacher is linked to *giving lessons*, a teaching practice which has always had a central place at school. During a lesson, the teacher *shows, explains, asks questions, gives definitions*, stimulates, prompts... The showing phase is often followed by exercises done by the students, the assignment of homework, subsequent interrogations. Today, however, educational psychology speaks of school learning not as a consequence of a transmission process but as an effect of a constructive process, a dynamic process in which learners, as I have already said, play an active role within contexts in which they interact with peers, adults, and the tools of their own culture.



Hence, for the purposes of interaction and social exchanges, the structure of the classroom needs to be changed. In fact, only a circular arrangement of the desks can effectively allow speaking, listening, participation in debates, collectively building argumentation and reasoning strategies in the various fields of knowledge, and working together in small groups, not only to discuss a problem or a text read previously, but also to write collectively.

However, the structure of the entire school building should also be changed, both to make the spaces more attractive and pleasant and to make them more functional. Classrooms should have French windows which open out onto a lawn (it would thus be a beautiful encounter between culture and nature); they should be adaptable to various functions and equipped with the necessary technological equipment, with sliding doors which, if necessary, can remain open to ensure that the space becomes one with a central meeting space. In addition, room should be found for workshops of various kinds in a school where pupils can work with their hands and mind, experimenting with and manipulating materials to do things and learn to do things, while working with others.

And, in addition to the canteen and the gym, room should be found for a library in a school, as its beating heart. A library which becomes a place not only for lending books and autonomous and collective reading but also for presenting books, and for such promotional activities as exhibitions, workshop activities related to the catalogue raisonné, reviews and bibliographies, multimedia activities, theatrical performances and meetings with experts, debates, meetings with authors, listening to music...

A library which can also become a place for families to participate and therefore a venue for meetings and exchanges between all kinds of people. Libraries represent «a powerful factor for the growth of reading and, therefore, for the overall growth of the nation». This what Tullio De Mauro wrote (2010) and we want to recall it at the end of this chat because we would like the linguist's voice to reach the architects who design schools. If for De Mauro the promotion of reading is a democratic necessity, then a library must be built into every school. Because, as Antonella Agnoli has written:

«The library is the most democratic place that exists, open to all: children and adults, Italians and foreigners, poor and rich. A truly universal place, where it is not necessary to eat or drink something to sit down, it is not necessary to have a computer, or an internet subscription because access to the Net is always possible [...] This is the library: an invention which will still exist when cars are long forgotten, or are locked up in a museum along with Ötzi's mummy» (Agnoli 2009).

Notes

¹ The *Rules*, drawn up by Tullio De Mauro in 1974, were later discussed within the Intervention and Study Group in the Field of Linguistic Education (GISCEL), a group established within the Italian Linguistics Society in 1975. In their current form, the *Rules* are the result of collective work. To be found [in Italian] on the site: www.giscel.it.

² *National Guidelines for Primary and Lower Secondary Schools*, in: http://www.indicazioninazionali.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Indicazioni_Annali_Definitivo.pdf last consulted 05/07/2021.

³ See the report BES 2020: *Il benessere equo e sostenibile in Italia*, in <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/254761> last consulted 05/07/2021

⁴ Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione, in <https://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/index.php> last consulted 05/07/2021. <https://www.invalsiopen.it/> last consulted 05/07/2021.

⁵ *National Guidelines for Primary and Lower Secondary Schools*, in: “Annali di Pubblica Istruzione. Periodico multimediale per la scuola italiana a cura del Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca”, 2012.

⁶ For research on “discourse and learning”, see Pontecorvo C. (edited by) (2005) – *Apprendimento e Discorso*. Carocci, Rome; Pontecorvo C., Ajello A. M., Zucchermaglio C. (2004) – *Discutendo s’impara*. Carocci, Rome.

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