

# ICT Based Foreign Language Learning in the “Intercultura” Lab

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As the most innovative and challenging strategies in foreign language learning, digital tools play a strategic role, in particular for English as a foreign language as all the basic vocabulary related to ICT is English language based. Therefore, innovative approaches promoting the use of digital tools are essential in implementing language skills. In the Foreign Language Intercultura Lab of the Comprehensive School, the author personally runs this input was thoroughly promoted encouraging both autonomy and teamwork in students. The Lab, provided of laptop stations for each student, all connected to the central teacher station enhanced the acquisition of digital skills using language as a tool and the acquisition of “other” competences through language and digital tools. All the subjects in the school curricular educational program concurred to create a portfolio of knowledge for each student built up in foreign language. Using digital and multimedia instruments, virtual platforms, students have been leaded to create their own materials in a flipped classroom asset, working in a flexible set-up. In this way, digital learning and foreign language learning are thoroughly involved and combined together in order to produce “something”, to do “something”. Motivation in learning and consequently an increased school success have been achieved so far in these years. The intent is to provide the most effective and innovative teaching-learning practices to increase opportunities for our students in terms of their future social and working life.

*Keywords:* language skills, innovation in learning-teaching methodologies

## Introduction

Acquisition of a proper level of second language competences, in particularly English, is one of the most relevant issues education has to face in Europe as well as worldwide. This is due to the fact that job careers and job opportunities are specifically grounded on it. Regarding this point, education to the second language starts really soon in most educational system, in Italy as well. Despite of that Italy is one of the latest in the European framework for level of good foreign language users (English specifically) and particularly, Sicily is the second to last in the Italian context. Actually, although some improvement has been achieved in the last three years according to the Italian Ministry of Education, the survey conducted in 2017 by EF (one of the oldest and more accredited language certification centres) stated in the EPI (English Proficiency Index) report, suggests that “in particular ...in Italy it would be really useful to adopt in public education the most practical communicative aspects of English language, including specific language lessons in all degree programs and helping adults to develop specific language job competences”. It is required a constant update in teaching methodologies and styles to promote success in every foreign language learning process. Certainly the acquisition of a good level of

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only one second language, in particular English, cannot be satisfactory in an ever-changing world in which the national borders open up and close following the stream of the political issues but this could be a starting point for all multilingual education too. A good basic assumption is to choose tools and methodologies that can be flexible and near to the daily life of the students to acquire competences and reuse them in an optic of Long Life Learning.

### **The “Intercultura” Lab**

This was the hint given to the building up of a laboratorial space for second language learning in our school, the Istituto Comprensivo Laura Lanza Baronessa di Carini, a school located in a social and economical disadvantaged area close to Sicily’s chief town Palermo. The Lab was planned in 2009 as a learning space to promote a better level of acquisition of skills in foreign language. Its asset grounded on the framework of our school academic plan based on beauty and innovation. Sense of beauty and innovation are the keys of a new educational program focused on advanced and experimental strategies for disadvantaged students, coming from the lowest social level families. The main goal is how to ensure even to youngsters with fewer social and cultural opportunities a way, through education, to get a concrete better future.

It has been conceived as an open and multidisciplinary lab in which CLIL (Content and Integrated Language Learning), PBL (Project Based Learning), and ICT combine together in the process of learning, fostering autonomy and skills within both school and homework. Students and teachers are free to explore within and without the limit of an educational standard curriculum a field which is not specifically related to teaching a foreign language. In particular this lab has been equipped with laptops, a network managed by the teacher, headsets, projectors, screens, interactive boards, and a working table to realize also handcrafts as outputs of PBL paths. That implies that digital tools are complementary to other kind of instruments, which in a PBL approach are required as well, such as writing, drawing to create posters, cards or leaflets, cutting and assembling to realize, for instance, plastic models. The benefit of digital tools lies also in the basic English vocabulary they rely upon and in the easy access to info through the web.

### **Digital Tools in Foreign Language Learning**

The effective use of ICT tools can offer better learning opportunities to disadvantaged students and is able to open the territory borders through virtual online education. Digital devices, kept inside the school, bring the educational action beyond its contingency. In this sense ICT are basic to the intercultura lab. They allow a daily exchange among students belonging to different countries in a peer education asset through the net, so that learning a second language can be detached from a formal approach and be enriched in a practical way, a way that definitely is more appealing and interesting. The best contribute is setting aside the role of the teacher on behalf of the role of the student as a learner. Each teacher becomes a facilitator of learning and is not a lecturer any longer; his/her task is only to check the right direction the students’ autonomy tends to. In this way, ICT tools are considered a learning transversal instrument of acquisition of languages and different transversal contents as well. The use of laptops is associated with the use of a specific software not only to write and to listen to real materials in foreign languages, as YouTube videos or movies in original languages, but also to produce new contents. Different tools are exploited also to facilitate learning processes and to adjust or adapt contents. Software to build up mind maps (*Mindmup, Mindomo, Coggle* etc.), online Quizzes and questionnaires (*Kahoot, Learning Apps,*

*Edmodo* tests) as well as virtual classroom platforms engage both students and teachers in researching, exploring, developing, sharing, and creating new contents related to different topics, topics linked to the whole Educational Curricula (Science, History, Geography, Literature, Arts, Technology). The use of virtual classrooms, therefore, facilitates the exchange of information, a closer relation and feedback by the teachers, a follow up at home which becomes meaningful in a context where home support in learning processes is very poor. Allowing moreover the students to employ their mobiles (BYOD) for educational purposes, next to a laptop or a personal computer, affords this generation of digital “touchists” (users of digital “touch” dispositive), to compare the use of the same software on different devices and to realize similarities and differences acquiring wider competences, such as typing on a keyboard, saving files, and creating folders, competences which become meaningful in their future job field, whatever it could be.

In this way they also reflect on the practical use of a vocabulary they already know without being aware, the one related to digital devices, adapting it to a context other than usual: For instance words such as files, upload, download etc., which previously have been unconsciously used are properly comprehended. The contents the students face cross most disciplines, are exploited and remastered through these tools, promoting the acquisition of a specific vocabulary. Most of the tools are visual, like Multimedia Presentations or Videos, since building up both images and texts makes learning foreign language and contents easier; a brainstorming at the beginning of a new project to carry on can be discussed and then realized, for instance, with *Mentimeter*, another software giving immediate visual feedback and collecting results of polls and ideas. Uploading images and files, mp3 allows the students to feel confident with both language and ICT tools. All this increases interest and motivation as it is not for its own sake. All the subjects in the school curricular educational program contribute to create a portfolio of knowledge for each student in foreign language.

In order to enhance writing and reading skills, the use of writing software has proven to be very useful, also to cope with writing or reading difficulties more disadvantaged students can have. The employ of the spell checker matches the correct spelling and the correct phoneme, improving in a much affordable way the quality of written skills.



Figure 1. Students working in the lab using laptops.

### Conclusions

Despite the disadvantaged context, in around nine years of experimentation and implementation of innovative methodologies based on ICT, the level of acquisition of foreign languages, in particular English, has sensibly increased among our students in Laura Lanza School. At the same time the level of interest and motivation in learning foreign languages, in particular English has been improved. A survey carried out in our school in 2016 promoted by the Italian Ministry of Education together with Cambridge English Language Assessment using CBT has given a positive feedback in comparison to the national benchmark in terms of proper standard level of English as a second language at the end of low secondary school in Italy. This means that this is the path to follow, the direction we have to pursue further on.

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