

The CEL

An overview on Foreign Language Assistants in Italian universities

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Abstract The Foreign Language Assistants is a figure that in Italy is still underrated, although it represents the main source of language for students. The essay reports data that have been collected through the literature on the subject, legal documents and – last but not least – direct experience. In detail, the paper reports characteristics and rules that affect this kind of teacher, plus the main differences that distinguish its role from that of University Professors.

Contents 1. Introduction. — 2. Definition of the Language Assistant: a first attempt. — 3. Italy and the CEL. — 4. Basic differences between university Professors and Language Assistants. — 5. Conclusions.

1 Introduction

This essay is the first part of a more exhaustive work upon Italian Language Assistants in foreign universities. The whole study is based on the observation of a figure that, both in Italy and in other countries, is still up to question. The research has shown that there is no explicit congruence between the place occupied by Foreign Language Assistants in Italy and Italian Language Assistants in other European and Northern American countries.

Assuming that each population has its own laws and habits, the aim of this specific essay is that of reporting the features of Foreign Language Assistants who work in Italian universities so that it will be possible, in next associated papers, to give a general and international definition of the Language Assistant. In other words, the purpose is that of seeing whether our standardized idea of the role of assistants can be spread and taken for granted or not; the reasons of this very last desire are as follows:

- we live in a world in which globalization and new technologies like the Internet allow us to share common purposes;
- Italy (in which this study has been conducted) is part of the European Union, a community in which – according to both who writes and the

Maastricht Treaty¹ – the organization chart could and would be standardized;

- last but not least, language teaching is a fundamental aspect in the situation described by the previous points, yet – as the following pages will demonstrate – a hard job is still to be done.

It has to be taken into account the fact that the whole work is based on the theoretical thought of the language teaching school of Ca' Foscari University and ITALS project, both in Venice (Italy) and directed by Professor Paolo Balboni.

In addition, who writes this paper would like to guarantee that anything that does not refer to a specific written source is not the product of personal conjectures but the fruit of either the experience in the academic field and in language teaching² or the data collected through the surveys that have been conducted.

2 Definition of the Language Assistant: a first attempt

Who is the Language Assistant? At first sight, when this study was still to be planned in depth, the answer seemed to be simple and obvious. According to personal experience, the Language Assistant in universities was the mother tongue language teacher who worked shoulder to shoulder with the language Professor who (generally) is not mother tongue as well. This Language Assistant was considered to be a kind of subordinate character marked by the following features:

- s/he teaches individually and not during Professor's classes (which gives him/her some responsibilities);
- s/he does not plan the syllabus, yet s/he can collaborate in doing it;
- s/he does not decide the materials (schoolbooks) to be used except authentic ones;
- s/he is more a fellow to his/her students rather than a teacher and s/he makes use of informal methods/materials;
- s/he focuses on use and not on grammar;
- s/he sometimes testes on students, yet never without the support and the supervision of the language Professor (shared task).

1 One of its wishes claims that the inhabitants of each country of the EU should be able to speak their own language, plus English and another language of the member states.

2 Who writes this essay has personal experience in both L2 teaching in high school and FL teaching in private courses.

However, shortly after preparatory researches it was clear that nothing was to be taken for granted. Therefore the first step to be taken is that of verifying whether the starting idea of this work is correct or, at least, partially confirmed by the literature on the subject.

Before presenting the results it must be recalled the fact that this study has been carried out in Italy and by an Italian student; in Italy the general term that refers to the mother tongue Language Assistant is *lettore*.

One of the early doubts was whether anybody knew who the *lettore* was. To solve it, a sample of people (not only made up of academic students) has been asked the following question:

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word *lettore*?

The answers have been of the various types. Those who are involved in foreign language academic studies have all answered that the *lettore* is the mother tongue language teacher. This goes arm-in-arm with the starting point of this study; in fact, in Italian universities the *lettore* is (most of the time) a mother tongue teacher who holds classes in addition to those of the foreign language Professor who is, generally, Italian.³

All the others – who are not academic students or do not study in language departments – have replied that the word *lettore* can be associated either to the one who reads or to a disc driver/player (which, in Italian, is so called); the exception has been represented by a graduate who had never studied in foreign language departments but who has surprisingly given the expected answer. This common unawareness is mainly due to four reasons:

1. the environment in which a person lives and works (which seems quite obvious);
2. the definition of the word given by vocabularies;
3. the ambiguity of the word, which does not help neither a general nor a bibliographical research;
4. the absence, at least in Italy, of a bibliography specifically oriented on this issue.

The second of these statements could be considered quite hasty but it is based on an exhaustive research: the Vocabulary of the Italian Language edited by Garzanti (2011, online version) – which is here used as reference

³ More details on Language Assistants in Italy will be given in the following chapter. However, in this work it is not assumed that the Professor is **always** a non-native speaker because one of the Foreign Language Professors that the writer of this work has had in the University of Trieste was actually mother tongue.

– provides, for the word *lettore* (with regard to the person and not to the device), the following definition:

s. m. [f. -trice]

1 chi legge: *un lettore attento, distratto; un lettore di romanzi gialli; uno scrittore che ha molti lettori*

2 chi legge testi altrui in una trasmissione radiofonica o televisiva, per una registrazione discografica e sim. | chi legge, ed eventualmente valuta o revisiona, testi per una casa editrice

3 (*eccl.*) un tempo, il chierico che aveva ricevuto l'ordine del lettorato; attualmente, il chierico o il laico cui è affidato il ministero liturgico del lettorato | membro di un ordine religioso che insegna nella scuola superiore della sua comunità

4 l'insegnante che svolge i corsi pratici di una lingua straniera nelle università.

Statements number 1 and 2 refer to those who read, number 3 to a religious figure and only the fourth, i.e. the **last**, concerns our object of study. According to this dictionary, the Language Assistant is the teacher who holds practical courses of a foreign language in universities.

The placement of the definition that we are interested in is not unusual; in the seven dictionaries that have been examined it (almost) always occupies an accessory position. In all these vocabularies the first place is occupied by the person who reads, followed by either the clerical teacher or the device. Our *lettore* sometimes precedes one of them but it never occupies the first position and only in one case it is in the second.⁴ In details, it is twice in 3rd position and twice in 4th position. Two dictionaries put it even in 6th position and, interestingly, one of them⁵ adds that it refers to a language collaborator who **used** to work in universities but who does no longer exist.⁶

Apart from this last case, which we live behind,⁷ the *lettore* that we refer to seems to be of interest but not of relevance. If it occupied a higher position in dictionaries (perhaps) it would be easier for the people to know this specific meaning of the word.

Getting back to the actual definition, all these vocabularies agree on the fact that the subject holds practical courses in universities but only one of

4 It is the case in Devoto, Oli 1990.

5 www.dizi.it, an on-line dictionary.

6 The actual sentence is «Nel passato ordinamento universitario, collaboratore linguistico».

7 If we relied on it we should stop going on, yet this research is interested in a figure that is still present in the academic environment.

them⁸ specifies that this teacher is mother tongue. There is not much to say about this omission which, however, seems to be very serious given that there is no university in Italy in which the *lettore* is not a native speaker.

A possible explanation to this omission could be given. In De Felice/Duro (1975) the *lettore* is:

Docente universitario che svolge corsi pratici di una lingua straniera, complementari generalmente al corso di letteratura svolto dal titolare della cattedra.⁹

It seems that modern descriptions in Italian dictionaries are very similar to the latter, apart from the fact that they now realize that we do not deal with Professors anymore, yet with collaborators/assistants. Maybe writers and editors are not aware of Ministerial documents and prefer to make use of a more general definition; if this is the case, this work could be of great value.

On the whole, however, there are two (actually three) key words in all the manuals that have been investigated, and they are «practical course» and «universities». The latter requires only a few words; it is clear that we are dealing with teachers who work in the academic field and not in either primary/secondary or high schools, which seems to agree with what is intended in this study with the term Language Assistant.¹⁰

The former opens a wider issue: should the Language Assistant hold just practical courses? What is the case of Italy? This aspect goes hand-in-hand with the purposes of this study, yet much is still to be said and we will discuss it and delve into the situation in the following chapters.

Concerning the ambiguity of the word *lettore*, an explanation could be given through an example; if we search for the word on Google, the results that come out concern either the person who reads or the device. On the contrary, if we insert *lettore universitario* (University Language Assistant) things get easier; not only does this discovery help us understand that we are (again) dealing with the academic environment but also a new door is opened. In fact one of the first suggestions given by the research engine – in relation to what is being looked for – is *collaboratore linguistico*, i.e. what in Italy is called CEL.

8 Surprisingly, this definition is in the on-line dictionary of «Corriere della Sera», a newspaper.

9 «University Professor who holds practical courses of a foreign language that are generally complementary to the literature course assigned to who holds the professorship».

10 This statement perfectly matches the Italian situation but it will be clarified in the following essay about both Italy and other countries. By now it can be said that, for instance, in England the Language Assistant is present in the whole school system and that in foreign universities s/he often does not exist.

On the other hand, things are less complex if we look for the general definition that we assign in this study to what in Italy is called *lettore*, namely 'language assistant'.

However, the most relevant difficulty in carrying on this research has been represented by the fact that bibliographical researches turned out to be a challenge because of both the ambiguity discussed above and the fact that it seems that not many books relating specifically to this subject exist.

This is confirmed by Balboni (1998) who states that the literature on foreign mother tongue teachers is very poor and almost totally absent in Italy.¹¹ In any case, there are certainly two peculiar characteristics that are typical of all foreign *lettori* in Italian universities:¹²

- they are mother tongue;
- the language that they teach is a Foreign Language (FL) and not a Second Language (SL or L2), i.e. it is not spoken in the country at issue.

(Cf. Balboni 1998).

This very last statement has helped to solve a personal doubt that arose during the preparatory stages of this inquiry; it was not clear, in fact, whether the Language Assistant could be considered as a language facilitator. These facilitators are those who take care of the teaching of a SL in linguistic laboratories; moreover they plan intercultural educational paths and administer the CAD (cf. D'Annunzio, in Serragiotto 2009).¹³ The fact that they are involved in SL (and not FL) teaching implies that Language Assistants are not language facilitators.

Besides, what do we mean when we refer to a native speaker? It can already be affirmed that the place of birth is not so relevant; in fact it is not where you were born yet where you grow that matters, i.e. family and school (cf. Balboni 1998).¹⁴

Medgyes (1994) has tried to solve this problem talking about near-native speakers, yet the panorama in which the study – from which this essay is taken – has been conducted demonstrates that both in Italy and in other countries Language Assistants had spent their lives in their own country until (at least) the end of pre-university studies; this means that no doubts can arise concerning the proficiency of these people in the language they teach.

In concluding this section it is useful to report what Peter Paschke (2003,

11 That is why one of the aims of this work is to provide useful guidelines on the issue.

12 These characteristics can be considered as the core of the whole study.

13 For further information on the CAD, cf. Caon 2008.

14 Although sometimes, to apply for the job, the required place of birth has to be in a country where the mother tongue is spoken.

in Melero 2010, p. 104) said about the difference between Language Assistants and Professors:¹⁵

L'insegnamento dei lettori è rivolto all'uso della lingua come mezzo di comunicazione, all'obiettivo della padronanza effettiva della lingua straniera orale e scritta, che comprende ricezione, interazione e produzione [...], quindi mira ad un *savoir-faire*. Il professore universitario, per contro, [...] si occupa del sapere sulla lingua straniera, della riflessione meta-linguistica, cioè della linguistica.¹⁶

In next chapter *lettori* in Italy are discussed; the analysis provides a general overview and lays the foundations of the comparison - between them and Italian native teachers who work in foreign universities - that will be reported in the following essay.

3 Italy and the CEL

[...] pochissimi [studenti di lingue] sanno cosa è un CEL, per loro [...] è un insegnante, non un docente, ma un insegnante sì. Quando vengono a sapere che il CEL viene inquadrato nella categoria del P.T.A. e che lo stipendio è di € 1.000,00 al mese [...] non riescono a crederci¹⁷ [Melero 2010, p. 101].

This statement perfectly agrees with the opinion of the writer of this study and can be considered as the spark that started this research on the conditions of foreign teachers in Italian universities.¹⁸

To begin with, the personal experience in the academic environment should be reminded in order to make the reasons of this inquiry understandable. In fact, there is no shame in saying that the proficiency in foreign languages achieved by who writes this work during the academic

15 For further information, cf. Melero 2010.

16 «The teaching of the *lettore* is towards the use of the language as a mean of communication, towards the purpose of the effective command of the foreign language (written and oral), which comprehends reception, interaction and production [...], therefore it aims at a *savoir-faire*. On the other hand, the university Professor [...] takes care of the knowledge on the foreign language, on meta-linguistic thinking, i.e. linguistics».

17 «Only a few students of foreign languages know who the CEL is; they think s/he is a teacher, not a Professor but still a teacher. When they come to know that the CEL is enlisted in the technical staff of the university and that his/her salary is of € 1,000 a month they can't believe it».

18 This chapter owes much to Doctor Carlos Melero, Ph.D., student and teacher of Spanish Language at Ca' Foscari University (Venice - Italy). His written works and personal help have been fundamental to clarify the 'shady areas' encountered during the inquiry into the Italian panorama.

years is mainly grateful to Language Assistants instead of language Professors.

Between the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures (Bachelor's Degree in Trieste) and that of Language Sciences (MA Degree in Venice), the writer of this study has totally dealt with 9 Language Assistants, so distributed:

- 5 English (3 in Trieste, 2 in Venice);
- 3 French (in Trieste);
- 1 Spanish (in Trieste).

The methods that they utilized and the roles they had were of the various types. In Trieste two out of the three Language Assistants taught with the support of specific course books which were related to Cambridge's CAE (Certificate in Advanced English); these lessons turned out to be more about grammar instead of conversation or what so ever. The other assistant focused her lessons on translation. These methods, although functional, do not **exactly** represent the «practical courses» that have been previously mentioned, in which **all** practical activities should be taken into consideration. Obviously there is a reason behind; exams in Trieste were mainly based on translation and on Cambridge Certificate exams, so Language Assistants' job was that of preparing students with a view to the final test which was usually related to the language Professor's materials.

They undoubtedly applied authentic materials too and their classes were interactive, but they were seen more as Professors rather than assistants (in fact half of the exam was to be taken with them).

Different, in Trieste, was the case of both French and Spanish assistants; they all used authentic materials and their lessons were mainly based on conversation, dictation, listening, etc. Curious was the case of one of the French assistants who based almost all his lessons on dictations given that his duty was probably that of helping students in getting used to recognize words in a language so characterized by *liaisons*.

In Venice, the two Language Assistants of English had (and probably still have) different tasks: one focused on conversation and writing, the other on grammar and translation. However, both used authentic materials and both (more precisely, either one or the other) were part of the examining body.

What has emerged, on the whole, is that - in any case - these lessons have always been culturally connoted, and this (as reported in §3) is a fundamental factor. What is more, personal experience has always demonstrated that the teaching carried on by assistants was always based on the use (cf. §1).

It is clear that the situation is very heterogeneous and of course doubts about the role of the *lettore* arise year after year. Hence, who is the *let-*

tore? What should s/he teach? What is his/her role in the university? What kind of materials should s/he apply?

In Italy the Language assistant is called CEL, acronym that stands for *Collaboratore ed Esperto Linguistico* (Language Collaborator and Expert). This, in a way, explains why it becomes hard to find any information about this kind of teacher when we look for the word *lettore*. The CEL is the mother tongue teacher who supports the foreign language Professor who – in Italy – is generally Italian (as it has already been said); the latter is bureaucratically called IULS (*Insegnante Universitario di Lingua Straniera* – University Foreign Language Teacher).

The term *Language Assistant* that is here generally assigned to mother tongue teachers is somehow inadequate in Italy as – according to Italian Act no. 382 of 1980 – the *lettore* is not considered as an assistant.¹⁹ This Act deprived mother tongue teachers from a series of rights that have driven to charges against universities that, in turn, have become the reason of the birth of the official CEL that occurred in 1995 with Act no. 236 (cf. Melero 2010). Despite this, the situation has not changed yet and *lettori* keep on charging universities.

Institutionally speaking they first appeared in the Collective Labour Agreement in 1994; here it is claimed that their job is intended to collaborate in student's learning and to provide updated teaching materials, all as agreed with those who are responsible for the language centres and for language education. At first sight this statement goes (more or less) hand in hand with our theoretical basis, yet it seems that nothing has been done in Italy in order to guarantee the presence of – and the rights to – Language Assistants. This is not the place for a detailed report of neither the contracts nor the charges that affected *lettori* in Italy during these years, yet according to both the legal papers that have been analysed²⁰ and Melero (2010) it is clear that this subject have always been (and still is) denigrated. And we are not only talking about underpayments and temporary employments.

We particularly refer to the actual role that CELs have in Italian universities; as a matter of fact, they are not considered as Professors because if they did they should be **treated** as Professors (for instance, according to universities they do not really hold classes).

It has already been pointed out that the *lettore* can be considered the main source of language for students, and Melero (2010) confirms this assuming that – in universities – they are the real responsible for language teaching giving that they hold 80% of foreign language classes.

He also agrees with another statement of this study, i.e. the fact that not

19 This role is in fact assigned to researchers.

20 For a list of the documents that have been reviewed, see bibliography.

so many know who the CEL is. Melero (2010) calls him/her an ‘unknown’, not only for students but also for many Professors, for administrations and – strikingly – for assistants themselves.

There is, however, something that contrasts with what has been said so far. According to Melero (2010) the law does not talk about the CEL and there is a preference for the use of inadmissible definitions such as ‘language exercises’ and ‘support in language lab’. Unfortunately this, in a way, perfectly matches what is here regarded as a Language Assistant. It seems that – in Italy – the Language Assistant **is** the person that we want to deal with in this study but that, at the same time, Italian law does not give credence to him/her. This explains why every time a CEL charges his/her university for salary/contract/role reasons s/he wins the lawsuit.

The question is: how can a foreign teacher desire to become a Language Assistant in Italian universities when s/he is aware of the position that the CEL has in Italy?

4 Basic differences between university Professors and Language Assistants

What has been said so far concerns the bureaucratic status of Italy and it is mainly based on realia. However it is helpful to show the theoretical bases that distinguish a Professor of foreign languages from a Language Assistant.

Now that the premises have been enlisted it is possible to see how the latter – as far as the role in the actual teaching is concerned – is seen in Italy.

Paolo Balboni, in his essay called *Differenza tra l'azione didattica dei docenti e dei CEL* (awaiting publication), clearly defines the aspects that distinguish Professors and assistants (or CEL).

Interesting – in the perspective of this research – is the fact that Balboni states that both Professors and assistants teach, therefore they are both teachers. The scholar rightly insists on the fact that the two characters that appear in the title of this chapter are of the same value; this perfectly agrees with what has been said by Melero and unfairly clashes with Italian law.

Nevertheless it has to be pointed out, as he does, that differences stands in the target, i.e. knowledge on the language (which has more to do with linguistics) against general proficiency in the foreign language (i.e. communicative competence). This confirms what has been assumed at the beginning of §1 (assistants focus on use and not on grammar).

In Italy this is the case, indeed, where Language Assistants (should) work on the use. However there are some hints that lead to think that the Language Assistant, and not the language Professor, is closer to the desirable idea of the language teaching school of Venice according to

which teachers should be ‘protestant pastors’ rather than ‘catholic priests’. The latter represent figures who do nothing except providing information which has to be taken as correct, whereas the former are kind of tutors who guide students into knowledge and who help them in getting out of difficulties (cf. Balboni 2008a).

It seems that Professors do not focus on all the Gestalt principles that, in language teaching field, have been translated into globality-analysis-synthesis.²¹ The three terms refer to the desirable order that should be followed while teaching a language.²²

On the actual role of Language Assistants it seems that there is a discrepancy between what has been proposed by Melero and what is noticed by Balboni, although there probably is a shared intent impeded by reasons which have nothing to do with the actual teaching. The former has expressed a kind of protest because assistants are included in the technical staff whereas the latter highlights the bases of this distinction, which can be summed up as follows:

- assistants teaches not only language but also culture;
- assistants are locally selected according to operative skills and not to their research activities;
- assistants focus on a practical and **technical** science which aims are language acquisition²³ and use.

The most important aspect of the Language Assistant revealed by Balboni is the fact that this character is the one who deals with **all** the structural aspects and all the conditions of use of the language in accordance with the levels of the Common European Framework (or other frameworks). This passage can explain the methods applied by English Language Assistants in Trieste that we have alluded to and lays the foundations of the evolution that some foreign university systems have undergone.

Apart from reminding that the main difference between Professors and Language Assistants is that of being or not mother tongue and that their skills are based on experience instead of research activities, Balboni pays attention to materials. In Italy Professors usually apply their own materi-

21 Professors are exclusively associated to analysis; this means that foreign language Professors teach only the rules of a language, without presenting the cultural context (globality) and without testing the proficiency reached by students (synthesis). It has to be pointed out that **testing** does not mean giving a mark.

22 For further information, cf. Balboni 2008a.

23 The term ‘acquisition’ in opposition to ‘learning’ has been first introduced by Stephen Krashen and it is inspired by the distinction previously made by Noam Chomsky between ‘knowing’ and ‘cognising’. With ‘acquisition’ he intends what remains in the long-term memory whereas ‘learning’ concerns what remains in the short-term memory.

als, which are focused on the study of the language whereas assistants use stuff addressed to practising and produced by scholars; in addition, it is the Professor the one who decides what must be done by the assistant, how to do it and how to value students.

In other words, Balboni confirms the idea of the writer of this work according to which the CEL in Italy is a sort of subordinate figure.

5 Conclusions

This essay has tried to give a brief overview on foreign Language Assistants who work in Italian universities and to outline their aims with regard to the term that in Italy is assigned to this character, i.e. CEL (or *lettore*).

It has been found out that this subject is not very well-known because of both the ambiguity of the Italian word (which has different meanings) and the poor literature on it.

However, previous studies on this issue have confirmed that there are some things that cannot be put in doubt, and these are:

- Language Assistants are mother tongue;
- the language taught in universities is a Foreign Language (FL) and not a Second Language (SL or L2), i.e. it is not spoken in the country at issue;
- in Italy, Language Assistants are denigrated by both the law and universities;
- they focus their teaching on the use and on the acquisition of the language;
- they are the main source of language for students;
- they teach, i.e. they are teachers of the same value of language Professors;
- they deal with all the structural aspects and all the conditions of use of the target language;
- they are not selected according to their research activities;
- they use materials addressed to practising and the language Professor decides what materials they have (or can) apply;
- they are a kind of subordinate figures.

Following essays will use these data in order to verify whether these theoretical statements are adaptable to the condition of the Italian mother tongue teacher in foreign universities.

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