

## TESOL Italy: Position Statement on Early Foreign Language Learning

November 2011

The trend to introduce early foreign language learning in primary schools has been followed internationally including in Europe. As a consequence of that, lively debates have focused on which foreign language to teach as well as the teacher's profile and the training required. Globalization and the widespread use of the Internet has predominantly led to the acceptance of English as the language for international communication. Indeed, the choice of English as the only foreign language (L2) to be taught in primary school was strongly requested by Italian families which coincided with the choices made by most other European countries. However, that decision actually went against an earlier recommendation by the Council of Europe in favor of a multilingual formation of students as well as to the reform of the primary school which dates back to 1985.

Even though psycholinguists recommend "The earlier, the better", that alone is not sufficient for successful learning to take place. Other conditions are also required in order to sustain and promote language learning over time. To learn a language, which cannot be compared to other subjects which are content specific, depends on a continuous exposure to it and to its use in meaningful contexts under the guidance of a skilled teacher. This becomes even more important when, as is the case in Italy, learners of an L2 go from the very first year of primary school on through to the last year of high school—a thirteen-year period which includes diverse stages of cognitive and emotional development. Clearly, such an extended learning experience must be sustained by well-trained teachers. If these conditions are not met, the continuity of learning could be compromised with the risk of demotivating students.

One of the critical conditions, therefore, for successful foreign language learning beginning at primary school is that the teacher be well-prepared in terms of language, methodology, culture, and intercultural communication. Research at an international level and recommendations by the Council of Europe point out that the role of the teacher is one of the variables that can lead to positive results. So, these teachers should be highly trained and motivated throughout their career, even more so since they are responsible for introducing classes of very young children to a foreign language. Too often, however, the complexity of the learning/teaching process of both early learners and their teachers is underestimated.

**TESOL Italy**, therefore, is concerned about the university programs for future teachers, which on the one hand, do state the requirement of achieving a B2 level in English, whereas on the other hand, the number of hours in class and the credits earned per course have been cut. No clear indication of either how to assess the level of language competence actually acquired or how to integrate that ability with teaching methodology has been defined. With regard to in-service training, TESOL Italy is also concerned about the gradual reduction in the number of hours, the quality, and the resources available with respect to the original project of long-ago 1991.

It must be acknowledged that the current compulsory teacher training program has proven to be unsatisfactory, that is, unable to guarantee successful results. Therefore,

more adequate ways must be found to encourage teachers to engage in the lengthy process of professional development—of which language certification is only the first essential step. In particular, the current in-service training has far too few numbers of hours in direct contact with the trainer compared to hours on-line, and needs to improve on the quality of the materials and the types of courses offered. The development of the abilities to speak and listen have been reduced to such an extent that current teachers in training programs are very insecure about their ability to use the language correctly and fluently. Obviously those abilities - which are the most critical ones for young learners - may well be neglected. In addition, these teachers may very well have incorrect notions about the language, with the consequence of unwittingly providing both an incorrect model of the language itself and how best to learn it.

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Thus, **TESOL Italy** believes that it is important to establish:

- 1) a policy based on the principles of early language learning that includes:
  - pre-service and in-service training programs that combine language and methodology preparation, that value language awareness, that develop intercultural sensitivity; and that enable teachers to take advantage of the wide range of pertinent on-line resources available;
  - investments in courses which are cost-effective and foresee subsequent quality control;
  - support for exchanges of schools, classes and teachers in Europe as well as regular grants for teachers to study abroad;
  - awareness-building of the school authorities regarding the distinctive nature of language teaching, so that they appreciate and encourage teachers to attend training courses;
  - the availability for teacher use of age-appropriate resources and materials, including audio-visual materials in the L2 with Italian subtitles.
- 2) awareness-building—both within and out of school in the community at large—of the value of learning other languages with the aim of fostering an appreciation of other cultures and encouraging language use beyond the limits of the classroom;
- 3) greater exposure to other languages by means of authentic materials, including cartoons and films in the original version, regularly scheduled and broadcast on public television.

In light of the above points, TESOL Italy suggests a reconsideration of the policies regarding early language learning in primary school which, despite a substantial investment in time and financial resources, have neither been rewarded by adequate levels in teacher preparation nor produced significantly improved results by the very young learners.

The above document reflects the position of TESOL Italy on early language learning and teacher training.

### ***TESOL Italy and early language learning (1970 – 2011)***

The teaching of a foreign language to young learners has been supported by TESOL Italy from the very beginning, since among the founding members was Prof. Renzo Titone, a well-known scholar and pioneer in this field. From the 1970s on the association contributed to innovative projects such as ILLSE, which introduced early language teaching in Italy. Since then, TESOL Italy has organized national and international conventions, seminars and special sessions during the annual convention attended by teachers ranging from primary school to university, on this specific subject. It is worth mentioning two early examples: ***TESOL Italy Convention on English in primary school***, Università della Tuscia, Viterbo, aprile 2000 and ***TESOL International Research Symposium on ESL/EFL Standard for Younger Learners***, Roma, Facoltà di Ingegneria, Università La Sapienza, settembre 2003. In addition, an entire special issue of its academic journal was dedicated to this theme: ***Primary Teaching – Perspectives Special Issue***, December 1996. vol. XXIII no.2.

TESOL Italy has also collaborated in different ways regarding early language learning with the Ministry of Education (Scientific Committees, INDIRE/ANSAS), universities and RAI, Italian Public Television (*Il Divertinglese*). In the past few years TESOL Italy on its own has offered language improvement courses requested by primary teachers.

TESOL Italy has recently carried out **a survey on the teaching of English in primary school, and on the pre-service and in-service training of teachers**. The results will soon be published in a special edition of Perspectives which will also contain a bibliography organized according to themes.