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Pallotti, G., Borghetti, C., Ferrari, S. & Zanoni, G. (2023), "Teachers and researchers collaborating to develop effective language education: The project Observing Interlanguage". In Erickson, G., Bardel, C. & Little, D. (Eds.), Collaborative research in language education: Reciprocal benefits and challenges, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 119-132. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110787719-009>.

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8 Teachers and researchers collaborating to develop effective language education: The project *Observing Interlanguage*

Abstract: This chapter presents an action research project conducted in primary and middle schools in northern Italy. School teachers and university researchers collaborate at all stages and levels. Initially, teachers conduct a needs analysis on their classes using the Interlanguage approach to language teaching, which consists in observing the pupils' competences, processes and strategies in a positive way rather than just focusing on their errors and shortcomings. Didactic activities are then jointly designed to address these needs and to promote an inclusive language education in which all the students are involved regardless of their initial competences and linguistic background, performing numerous collaborative and meta-cognitive activities. Data are also collected at the beginning and end of the school year in order to assess the effectiveness of the intervention in the classes involved. The latter systematically outperform control classes in a number of dimensions, especially those having to do with effective communication and text organization. Both teachers and researchers discuss the results and then publish their findings and reflections in scientific articles and monographs, didactic materials and textbooks for teacher training in order to extend the reach of this approach to other contexts and communities.

1 Introduction

One of the greatest challenges in the field of language education is identifying effective strategies to develop language competences for all students, regardless of whether they are using their first or an additional language. The project presented in this chapter is meant to respond to this demanding task, by means of an action-research teacher training methodology.

The aim of the project *Osservare l'Interlingua/Observing Interlanguage*, started in 2007 in Reggio Emilia (Italy), is to foster effective language education in multi-lingual classes at elementary and middle-school levels. Its main tenet is that effective teaching practices should be grounded in the teachers' careful analysis of their pupils' needs, competences and learning strategies, that is, in 'observing

their interlanguage', seen broadly as any attempt at developing and complexifying linguistic–communicative competences, and thus not limited to L2 acquisition but also including the acquisition of new linguistic skills such as reading and writing.

In order to pursue these goals, *Observing Interlanguage* systematically integrates teacher education and action research. During the former, teachers are trained to analyse their pupils' texts according to the 'interlanguage approach to language teaching' (Pallotti 2017a). As for the latter, they design new pedagogical practices to respond to the learning needs they have identified and carry out the planned activities with their classes for an entire school year. Teachers also monitor the effects of the newly devised teaching materials and procedures along the way, possibly revising them. Each of these actions, though to different degrees and according to each party's competences, is conducted collaboratively between teachers and researchers, who meet every two to three months throughout the school year.

The chapter starts by outlining some key principles of 'interprofessional collaborative action research' which inform the project from a methodological point of view (section 2). Then, it introduces the *Observing Interlanguage* project (section 3), before focussing on its two components, namely teacher training (section 4) and action research (section 5), which are kept separate for descriptive purposes only, as they overlap in many ways. The final sections (6 and 7) report on a preliminary assessment of *Observing Interlanguage* collaborative research and outline future directions for broadening its scope.

2 Interprofessional collaborative action research

The label *action research* (AR)¹ describes a whole family of approaches through which teachers introduce and evaluate new practices in their classes, usually by means of a number of investigative cycles (for general overviews see Altrichter et al. 2002; Kinson, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Mills 2003; Reason and Bradbury 2001; for language education see, e.g., Borg 2010; Burns 2005; Nunan 1992). Action research is a form of classroom research (McKay 2006) in which practitioners

¹ Some of these sources (e.g., Kinson, Pain, and Kesby 2007) address what is commonly known as 'Participatory Action Research' (see also MacDonald 2012; McIntyre 2008; McTaggart 1997), namely a specific type of action research which, based on poststructuralist discourses, emphasizes the practitioners' ownership of the research processes, values their diverse funds of knowledge, and is explicitly oriented towards social transformation. While *Observing Interlanguage* is not directly inspired by these contributions, they can help define – often by comparison and/or contrast – what action research is.

identify a problem, gather and analyse data, undertake changes in teaching practices according to the obtained results, and test the effects of the modifications implemented. Besides helping teachers find pedagogical solutions which are grounded in their contexts, AR has proved to be useful for teacher education (Burns 2009), mostly because it offers practitioners the opportunity to ‘reflect on and improve (or develop) their *own* work and their *own* situations’ (Altrichter et al. 2002: 130).

Although in principle action research may be conducted by individual teachers analysing their own practices, it is mostly considered a collaborative activity taking place among colleagues. Collaboration is needed to distribute workload, as AR requires a considerable time commitment (Richards and Farrell 2005). Moreover, it helps achieve greater impact ‘as it offers a strong framework for whole-school change’ (Burns 1999: 13) and for educational change at large. Finally, collaboration fosters teacher development. Either within the frame of AR initiatives or of ‘teacher research’ experiences in general (Borg 2010, 2013), the establishment of communities of practice provides teachers with opportunities for professional learning: they share and compare class activities, develop new pedagogical ideas together, experiment with innovative practices in their classrooms, and bring the resulting reflections back to the group for further discussion (Borg, Lightfoot, and Gholkar 2020).

Action research also often implies some kind of collaboration between practitioners and researchers (McKay 2006; Reason and Bradbury 2001). In this sense, it is a form of co-constructed research, where new educational and scientific understandings result from ‘interprofessional’ partnership: teachers bring their expertise as regards subject matter, curriculum and pedagogy, as well as knowledge about individual learners and the sociocultural context. In other words, they bring the teacher knowledge they develop over time thanks to training, experience and reflection (Freeman 2002; Mann 2005). For their part, academics may share insights about scientific knowledge and research methodologies. This form of collaboration is often embedded in teacher training initiatives, some of which are meant to promote learning for all in multilingual and multicultural classes (as in Dubetz 2005 and Scarino 2014), even when these teaching, research, and training programmes are not explicitly labelled ‘action research’. Levels of participation by teachers and researchers can vary significantly according to the project and to the specific stage of the study (identifying the problem, collecting and analysing data, etc.) (Kendon, Pain, and Kesby 2007). Yet, these forms of interprofessional collaboration may contribute to addressing a frequent criticism levelled at teacher research, that is, its lack of methodological rigor and its being seldom made public for the benefit of larger teaching and research communities (Borg 2010). Finally, making action research interprofessional is a way to challenge the

belief that action research – and teacher research at large – is necessarily small-scale and qualitative (Burns 1999; Mann 2005), as well as its opposite, that is, that large-scale quantitative studies are necessarily decontextualized and distant from the teachers' and students' needs.

3 The *Observing Interlanguage* project

The *Observing Interlanguage* project consists in a joint collaboration between the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Department of Education and Human Sciences, and a network of schools in the Reggio Emilia area. From 2007 to 2019, the Reggio Emilia municipality played a major role as regards practical implementation and networking, a task that is now carried out by the university and some volunteer teachers. The project thus involves a number of professionals who work in different capacities: university researchers, in-service school teachers, teacher trainers, educators, and university students enrolled in the course for prospective primary school teachers. The main assumption guiding the project is that the learning needs found in multilingual classrooms are an opportunity to challenge traditional pedagogical approaches, thus representing a chance for the development of more effective teaching practices for all pupils, regardless of whether Italian is for them a first or an additional language.

Although in the first years only a few schools and teachers were involved, now the project concerns about 10 primary and 3 middle schools, with approximately 20 teachers and several hundred pupils every year. The university contributes with a scientific coordinator (Gabriele Pallotti), 6–7 students doing their internship in the participating schools, mentored by 3–4 expert teacher supervisors (with a 50% employment with the university and 50% of their workload in class). The training group meets every two to three months during the school year in order to plan, implement and revise experimental teaching interventions. Teachers, in some cases with the help of student interns, carry out their lessons in the classrooms and conduct formative assessment on their pupils, based on a careful analysis of their interlanguage. The university team coordinates the training sessions, suggests possible avenues for pedagogical innovations, and performs more large-scale, quantitative analyses to monitor the project's effectiveness on a variety of linguistic aspects. The training and research components of the project are thus tightly intertwined and result in the integration of different roles and funds of expertise.

4 The teacher training component

Several activities developed by the project over the years have been aimed at developing writing skills, which were seen by teachers as a crucial competence needing to be reinforced. Through a process approach (e.g., White and Arndt 1991; Graham and Sandmel 2011), pupils are led to experience and gradually acquire the stages implied in text production: generating and organizing ideas, writing the initial draft, revising, and editing. Writing tasks are carried out cooperatively in small and large groups (e.g., Storch 2013), and they encourage the semiotic mediation of thought by making the writing process more concrete through the use of artefacts such as boxes, envelopes, paper strips, posters (Englert, Mariage, and Dunsmore 2006). Feedback, including peer-to-peer feedback, has always a formative orientation, focussing on learners' strengths and weaknesses, analyzing their strategies, and suggesting ways of developing skills, promoting learners' autonomy and self-regulation (e.g., Andrade and Evans 2013).

The action research teacher-training methodology puts the learning/teaching process at the centre. Teachers are guided in applying research-based tools for observing their school context and consequently set learning goals, develop pedagogic interventions and evaluate the teaching/learning processes, through both a collaborative reflection on their lessons and an analysis of students' performance over time. University researchers assist them in this undertaking and, at some points, collect data for more systematic quantitative analysis, but do not impose their priorities or set the project's agenda based on their need to collect standardized data. This represents an exemplary case of reciprocity as both parties involved, teachers and researchers, contribute by drawing on their pools of expertise and obtain tangible results with a clear bi-directional relationship of mutual advantage.

The project has been running for many years now, and no iteration has been identical to previous ones in a never-ending process of experimenting, discussing and revising. However, on a broad level, a relatively stable feature is that the project's activities may be grouped into three main phases. The first involves needs analysis and goal setting. Teachers conduct systematic analyses of their pupils' oral and written productions, in line with the interlanguage approach (Palotti 2017b; Selinker 1972). The main goal is to overcome the traditional stance of 'hunting for errors' and seeing learners' productions as defective, incomplete, and instead to be able to appreciate pupils' competences, especially communicative competence, which is often neglected in traditional approaches that almost exclusively focus on formal accuracy. This orientation, and the ability to analyse children's texts accordingly, takes some time to develop. Text-analysis sessions are therefore periodically held as part of the teachers' long-term training. In these sessions, more experienced participants share their way of seeing language

productions with newcomers, in a collective effort to strengthen everyone's skills in educational linguistic analysis, which is also part of the course taken by the university students involved in the project.

The second step in the activity cycle consists in planning and implementing the lesson cycles for the following months. Each of these cycles normally takes 8–12 sessions of about two hours each. Learners are guided to work extensively on the same text, so as to have the opportunity to return several times, from different perspectives, to their own productions or those of their peers. This motivates them to refine their work and become experts (e.g., Graham et al. 2012). Learning is mainly viewed as a discovery process, and tasks are structured so that every student can contribute according to their abilities; in other words, teachers do not provide different activities for different proficiency levels. In this way, all students work together, with the same objectives and focussing on the same tasks, so that they can learn from one another, which is especially beneficial for struggling pupils, as teachers have repeatedly attested. Each child is motivated to go through the different phases of the writing process, and experiment with various kinds of learning interactions – with the teacher, in small and large groups – developing a deeper awareness of their own learning processes.

In some years, the whole group tried to converge on a single, shared lesson cycle, obviously adapted to the competences and needs of different age groups. Even in such cases, though, each teacher had the opportunity to select, adapt or fine-tune the overall scheme to their specific context. In other years, teachers were left free to choose one of the previously developed interventions, or to create new ones, in order to promote their agency and their ability to propose further innovations.

The third part includes evaluation of the experience, both from teachers' and pupils' perspectives. Teachers share with the group their experience in the classroom and discuss their findings and how they solved specific problems, with the ultimate aim of defining future learning and teaching objectives and the strategies to attain them. Pupils metacognitively reflect on the learning programme, discussing what they have acquired, what they liked most and least, their difficulties and achievements. This results in diary entries in which pupils report, often in the form of recommendations for themselves or for their peers, what they perceived to be the main take-aways of the didactic activities.

5 The action research approach

After having identified the students' needs in line with the interlanguage approach, and planned pedagogical actions accordingly, teachers and researchers collaborate in data collection. This normally consists in asking pupils to write individual texts both at the beginning and at the end of every school year, to assess their progress over time. Practitioners and academics play complementary roles in this and subsequent stages. Teachers implement the designed pedagogical solutions in their classes, which overall represent the project experimental group. Researchers organize a parallel data collection with classes not involved in the programme (the control group, that is, classes in the same schools or areas whose teachers decided not to take part in the pedagogic experimentation) and perform subsequent quantitative analyses, which allow for comparisons over time and across pupils and classes (section 5.1). When all data have been transcribed and analysed by the researchers and some pre-service student teachers, results are commented on during the periodic discussion sessions among teachers and researchers (section 5.2). This analysis also leads to feedback being given to pupils not in terms of marks or evaluative expressions like *good, fair, well done*, but in terms of individualized recommendations for the future and indications for making classroom work more effective.

5.1 The project studies: An overview

This quasi-experimental research design, with experimental and control classes, is quite resource-intensive, and thus does not take place every year, but every 2–3 years. This has allowed us to gather a considerable amount of data, some of which have already been analysed in some publications, while others are still in progress.

The most extensive study (Pallotti, Borghetti, and Rosi 2021; Pallotti and Borghetti 2019) considers data collected during a school year in seven experimental and seven control classes, in grades 3–5. It looked at the effects of the *Observing Interlanguage* approach on different measures of text quality, including the pupils' ability to divide and organize their texts into paragraphs, to use punctuation marks to divide the syntactic units, or to introduce and maintain entities in discourse through appropriate referential chains. These investigations also aim to evaluate the project's effects on monolingual and multilingual pupils. The main findings are that pupils in experimental classes obtain better results than those in control classes on almost all dimensions assessed. Moreover, multilingual children in the experimental group outperformed both monolingual and multilingual

students in control classes on the vast majority of text features, with just a few exceptions.

Other studies focussed only on certain classes and/or specific dimensions of writing. Some concentrate on the use of reported speech in grade 4 (Pallotti, Borghetti, and Ferrari 2019) and grade 5 (Borghetti et al. 2019), based on two experimental and two control classes. Both investigations show that, at the end of the school year, pupils participating in *Observing Interlanguage* increase considerably their use of direct speech to make their texts more lively and expressive; by contrast, this narrative strategy remains largely unused by pupils in the control classes. Ferrari and Burzoni (2018) carried out a holistic examination of the texts produced at the end of the school year in two experimental and two control classes (grade 5). This study was carried out using scales slightly adapted from Kuiken and Vedder (2018) to rate overall functional adequacy. The texts produced in the experimental classes proved to be shorter but more complete, comprehensible, coherent and cohesive than those in the control classes; they were thus more concise, but not poorer in terms of ideas.

5.2 Back to training and education

The studies reported above as well as other project-related investigations (e.g., Pallotti 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) show that *Observing Interlanguage* produces positive results in various areas of language development. These findings help feed the teacher training component of the project (section 4) and encourage a series of initiatives meant to make its methodology public for the benefit of additional teachers and students (section 7).

In the few cases in which systematic studies show that the teaching has not achieved the expected outcomes, researchers and teachers start planning new pedagogical changes for the following school year. These new investigative cycles usually start with academics presenting the obtained results in dedicated teacher training sessions. Then, as a group, all actors formulate hypotheses as to why some specific results are not satisfactory and agree on what changes or additional activities should be foreseen for the future. For example, after having identified that in the 2013–2014 cohort multilingual pupils struggled to maintain verb tense cohesion more than their monolingual classmates (Pallotti and Borghetti 2019), it was hypothesized that this feature might be more directly related to language proficiency than the other dimensions of writing. Therefore, some focus-on-forms activities were integrated within the pedagogical interventions planned for the following school year, in order to support some pupils' language proficiency together with all the other students' writing abilities. Unfortunately, we were not

able to collect additional data in the following years in order to analytically assess the effectiveness of these new activities. However, teachers report that they did try them and found them valuable.

6 Assessing the project: Teachers' perspectives

The quantitative data presented in the previous sections show that the approach of *Observing Interlanguage* produces measurable and objective effects on the pupils' writing skills. On the other hand, there are also more qualitative ways of evaluating the effectiveness of an action research project, such as collecting the opinions of those who actively participated. In 2015, at the end of the eighth year of experimentation, individual interviews were conducted with teachers, pre-service student teachers, pupils and some parents. Responses were recorded and transcribed; in the following pages a few excerpts will be presented in English translation.

As pointed out by Borg (2010), working across an action research project often poses challenges related to several contextual constraints that teachers normally face at school, such as time, and the need to follow and complete the school programme and to prepare students for examinations. Both teachers and researchers were aware that at the beginning it takes commitment and time to follow a different approach to teaching writing, based on collaborative and group activities. However challenging this approach may seem at first glance, teachers' perceptions turned out to be extremely positive.

At the beginning it wasn't so simple, because I thought it was something a little far from what we did practically at school. However, as you begin to work, you understand that you can apply this methodology to many other activities and disciplines.

Respondents highlighted several strengths of the experimental approach, such as the results achieved by the students, the discovery of new materials like audiovisual stimuli, and new pedagogical approaches and techniques for teaching Italian and other subjects.

Teachers recognized the importance of the project in building 'grassroots' skills to deliver practical solutions for improving pupils' competence and overall quality of writing, and showed their interest in continuing to be involved in the experimentation.

It was a need that I felt for both myself and my students precisely on written production, because I realized first of all that I needed tools for teaching written production, how to teach

children to write a text. [. . .] What was really useful was to work a lot in such an articulated way on the different phases of written production, which are often dealt with in a hurry.

The project responds to the need for a training placed in the daily teaching experience that it is so difficult to find, and we have exactly found a practical dimension. So we have gradually improved our skills also from the point of view of our professional training.

As stated above, a distinctive feature of the proposed methodology compared to more traditional approaches consists in the attention paid to pupils' productions and the diagnosis of their competencies and needs, going beyond simple hunting for errors. Several teachers became aware of the stages and processes involved in the acquisition of new linguistic skills and how this awareness may impact curriculum design and pedagogy, paying special attention to the diversity of levels, sociolinguistic backgrounds and learning styles.

The thing that struck me the most and continues to strike me is the idea of dwelling on children's mistakes in a slightly different way; that is to say, trying to see what indications are given to us by pupils' mistakes. This is something that changes the idea of 'error', making it a starting point [for the intervention], not the end point.

Moreover, most teachers perceived the collaboration among pupils to be value-adding and enriching.

What surprised me the most was the inclusive value of the pedagogical intervention: in each group all participants were essential for the success of the text, so all the students participated actively. Even those who usually experience the process of writing with greater difficulty (for example, kids with specific learning disorders, 'interruptions' generally due to lack of exercise, laziness) were responsible at all stages of the intervention.

The impact of the theoretical principles and practical approaches presented in the action research also emerged in some insights by the student interns. As emphasized in the following comment, students have the possibility to put into practice what they study at the university by means of a simple and attractive methodology. As a result, some students repeated the internship experience for a second year, while working on their master's thesis, to consolidate their teaching skills as well as their ability to collect and analyse the pupils' texts, and to plan focussed teaching activities accordingly.

Surely there is everything I have read in the books, especially while studying for the exam. Observing the theoretical models of the authors who deal with these techniques, these new strategies, and applying them directly on the field is a wonderful satisfaction, because for the first time I observed what I study at the university and the positive results in practice. Apparently, from what we read in the books, it really seems very difficult to carry it out at school due to deadlines and to the fact that there is never the presence of more than one teacher in class. It seemed impossible to be able to manage a class of twenty children, to satisfy all their

needs and requirements, because they are in any case all different from each other. In practice, it takes very little: it is sufficient to apply these new methods to carry out beautiful work even with small children in grade 2. It was amazing how we were able to create a text, transcribe it, edit it, and do all the activities in small group and large groups.

7 Future directions

The project members have come to realize that the approach taken by *Observing Interlanguage* differs in many respects from standard school practice in Italy, which is also reflected in present-day textbooks. This is why the group has always been concerned with producing teaching materials and activities, which can be drawn upon from both the teacher-authors in later years and from a wider community of professionals across the country, who cannot directly take part in the action research.

Since the very beginning, a website was created containing all the lesson cycles implemented year after year. These are not published as narrative accounts of past experiences, but as descriptions formulated in an atemporal present tense. This is an important point in our opinion – readers should feel that what is proposed by the team is widely applicable and it is not limited to a particular spatio-temporal context, although it is clear that the activities were indeed trialled in real classes by real teachers. The website also contains children's oral and written productions collected in some years, which may be used in several ways, for example to produce new didactic materials inviting for instance pupils to reflect on other children's performance, or to give other teachers the opportunity to practise interlanguage analysis.

However, the quantity of materials produced over the years made browsing the website rather complicated, especially for new users. Furthermore, even more experienced teacher-authors felt the need for more structured resources, accompanying them across the entire school cycle. A syllabus was thus created, containing a selection of the most effective materials, in a progression from the first grade of primary school to the third grade of middle school. The syllabus is an adaptable tool and all the materials are available in an editable format, so that activities can be added, deleted, adapted or enriched according to the class context and the teaching objectives. The units are structured as follows. For every school grade, two 'long' lesson cycles (typically, one on a narrative text and another one on an expository text, but in some cases the focus is argumentative or meta-communicative) are proposed, spanning over several sessions, in which pupils learn how to carefully and slowly craft a text, going through several phases. These are accompanied by a few shorter activities dealing with more formal aspects, always connected to the main communicative orientation of the longer

project work. In many cases, both teachers and pupils are asked to reflect on other pupils' production, so that everyone is trained in observing interlanguage.

Currently, some of the most experienced teachers are writing a book, which will appear in a series on language education published by one of the most prestigious Italian educational publishers. The volume will present to other teachers the *Observing Interlanguage* project and, more generally, the principles of a task-based, communicative approach to teaching writing, with a practical, hands-on orientation.

Finally, the whole group of university researchers, teachers and students has embarked on an even more ambitious project, namely a textbook to be used directly in primary school classes and covering all aspects of language education. As mentioned above, many activities of the *Observing Interlanguage* project focus on writing skills, although activities on oral competences have been developed on some occasions. In the coming years, oral communication will receive more attention, as well as receptive skills such as reading and listening, and metalinguistic awareness. This will enable us to propose a complete language education course, to be published open-access and with no commercial profit, which is one of the most effective ways of promoting good practice at school and to further the collaboration among researchers, teachers and university students. The book, in fact, as all the activities developed in the projects, will blend solid theoretical foundations with practical experience, as all activities will be tried out in class before being edited, fine-tuned and finally offered to a wider public.

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