

TEACHING ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: THE EDUCATIONAL USE OF ECONOMIC TEXTS

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Abstract:

The present paper tries to emphasize how to learn the Italian language and culture through technical texts, with special emphasis on the texts of the economy. The use of authentic materials such as special purpose languages, in our case the language of economics, during the lessons of Italian, has proven to be a good method for language acquisition.

As the basis of our work, we have chosen the vocabulary of economic language, even though the list of terms used particularly in a field are also present in the common language. We have developed a teaching unit dedicated to business students who have a B1-B2 proficiency level. Starting from a banking-financial text, our lesson takes into consideration, through various exercises, morphological and syntactic aspects, as well as the vocabulary of finance and economics.

Key words: language of economics, sectorial language, teaching

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Teaching Italian to foreign learners is facing today profound changes. The figure of the teacher in front of new didactic approaches, as well as the new socio-economic realities with impact on teaching, are nothing but realities reflected especially in the use of contemporary Italian. The classic question: “Which language to use?” should be reformulated, nowadays, according to the socio-linguistic changes, such as the massive immigration of foreign workers in Italy, the development of electronic means which provide a considerable support for self learning, as well as for learning at distance etc. The figure of the teacher must adapt itself to modern times and, therefore, updating courses for Italian teachers abroad have a fundamental role.

Our paper has tried to reveal how to teach Italian language and culture through technical texts. The use of authentic materials such as *special purpose languages*, in our case the language of economics, during the lessons of Italian, has proven to be a good method for language acquisition.

The term *linguaggi settoriali* refers to different languages, distinguished by the field of activity or the social group. According to Diadori (2007: 265) “special purpose languages” have some important characteristics such as:

- Accuracy, simplicity, and clarity;
- Objectivity;
- Abstractness;
- Generalization;
- Density of information;
- Brevity and consistency;
- Neutrality;
- Lack of ambiguity;
- Impersonality;
- Logical coherence;
- Use of defined technical terms, symbols and figures.

The use of different types of texts related to specialized languages has entered the practice of teaching, emphasizing the specific features and problems that result from teaching *special purpose languages* or *microlanguages*. The term belongs to Balboni (2002):

“[...] useremo microlingue scientifico-professionali per riferirci alle *microlingue* (prodotte cioè dalla selezione all'interno di tutte le componenti della competenza comunicativa in una lingua) usate nei settori scientifici (ricerca, università) e professionali (dall'operaio all'ingegnere, dall'infermiere al medico, dallo studente di liceo al critico letterario) con gli scopi di comunicare nella maniera meno ambigua possibile e di essere riconosciuti come appartenenti ad un settore scientifico o professionale [...]” (Balboni, 2002: 9).

As the basis of our work, we have chosen the vocabulary of economic language, even though the list of terms used particularly in a field are also present in the common language. The vocabulary of a specialized language must identify objects, experiences, and communication acts characterized by terms exclusively belonging to a technical or scientific field (in this case the differences between common language and specialized language, as for example, the lack of synonymy, are important).

As far as morphology and syntax are concerned, there are also several phenomena, such as: the omission of phrasal elements without compromising the comprehension of the text, the reduction of verbal moods and tenses (verbs are reduced only to the function of linkers for noun phrases), the nominalization, etc.

Our work has tried to develop a teaching unit dedicated to business students who have a B1-B2 proficiency level and to answer the following questions:

- Why are students motivated to study special purpose languages, such as academic or professional languages?
- What is the aim of teachers in such subjects?
- What are the skills to be developed in order to meet the needs of the students?
- Which activities to choose to answer students' needs and purposes?

The following part of our paper has tried to propose different exercises in order to answer the needs of the students, as well as to explain the role, the purpose, and the result of each type of activity.

Here follows the economic text and the exercises:

Procura bancaria¹

Il signor con il presente atto dichiara di nominare procuratore, con (o senza) facoltà di farsi sostituire da altri, il signor, acciocchè abbia a compiere tutte le operazioni necessarie in nome del mandante e per suo conto, con la Banca, e in particolare:

Fare aprire e disporre conti, depositare e ritirare somme, emettere, pagare e girare assegni, depositare e ritirare titoli e valori; farli amministrare e incassarne le rendite.

Aprire cassette di sicurezza, locarne di nuove, esercitare diritti relativi.

Acquistare, sottoscrivere e vendere titoli di rendita, azioni, obbligazioni e titoli di ogni genere; fare operazioni su valori.

Fare operazioni in divise estere, chiedere benestare e autorizzazioni.

Prendere e dare somme a mutuo; pattuire interessi, costituire ed accettare tutte le forme di garanzia; acquistare e cedere crediti.

¹ Taken from G. Novara (1998: 57).

Garantire ad avallere debiti di terzi: costituire garanzie. Accettare per il mandante l'esecuzione immediata.

Emettere, girare, accettare o mettere in pagamento effetti e cambiali.

Rilasciare quietanze, approvare regolamenti di conti.

La presente procura resterà in vigore sino al giorno lavorativo incluso, successivo al giorno in cui sarà notificata alla Banca, mediante lettera raccomandata, la revoca della procura.

Luogo, data e firma

Activity 1 (the exercise tries to establish the reading comprehension level of students).

Mark the true sentences with a tick and the wrong ones with a cross:

Vero Falso

- a) Il mandatario può fare varie operazioni bancarie nel nome del mandante.
- b) L'acquisto e la rinuncia a crediti fanno parte dalle operazioni bancarie.
- c) Il mandante non può rilasciare quietanza.
- d) La procura è valida fino alla notifica della Banca.

Activity 2 (the exercise guides the comprehension of the text in a more analytical manner, emphasizing additional information in the text and lexical competence, as well as the difference in style between economic and common language).

Transform the following fragments into phrases used in common language:

a) *La presente procura resterà in vigore sino al giorno lavorativo incluso, successivo al giorno in cui sarà notificata alla Banca, mediante lettera raccomandata, la revoca della procura.*

b) *Il signor con il presente atto dichiara di nominare procuratore, con (o senza) facoltà di farsi sostituire da altri, il signor, acciocchè abbia a compiere tutte le operazioni neccesarie in nome del mandante e per suo conto, con la Banca*

Activity 3 (the exercise tries to enlarge the vocabulary of the students using semantic relations between terms).

Give the antonyms of the following terms:

- a) *depositare*; b) *acquistare*; c) *pagare*; d) *pattuire*; e) *conferire*; f) *approvare*.

Activity 4 (the vocabulary exercise emphasizes specific word combinations).

Combine the words in column A with the words in column B:

A	B
esercitare	rendite
esigere/rilasciare	quietanza
conferire/revocare	interessi
avallere	debiti
pattuire	procura
girare	diritti
incassare	assegni

Activity 5 (the students become aware of the mechanisms used in order to form words, they use terms to generate other terms).

Transform the verbs into nouns and the nouns into verbs:

- a) *acquistare*; b) *garanzia*; c) *girare*; d) *operazione*; e) *autorizzazione*; f) *notificare*.

Activity 6 (the exercise develops the ability of students to define some of the economic terms found in the text).

Match the terms with their definition:

assegno rendita interesse effetti cambiali

- a) reddito derivante dalla proprietà di un bene;
- b) titolo di credito all'ordine contenente la promessa di pagare al beneficiario una determinata somma di denaro a una scadenza stabilita;

- c) compenso spettante a chi presta o deposita un capitale per un certo periodo di tempo;
- d) mezzo di pagamento consistente nell'ordine scritto a una banca di pagare una somma determinata alla persona indicata;
- e) titolo di credito, ordine di pagamento.

Activity 7 (students are asked to pay attention to the use of phrasal markers in the text).

Read the texts and choose the function of the conjunctions in italics:

a) Il signor (...) dichiara di nominare procuratore, con (o senza) facoltà di farsi sostituire da altri, il signor (...), *acciocchè* abbia a compiere tutte le operazioni necessarie in nome del mandante e per suo conto.

- a1) conseguenza a2) tempo a3) causa a4) fine

b) La presente procura resterà in vigore *sino* al giorno lavorativo incluso.

- b1) conseguenza b2) tempo b3) causa b4) fine

Activity 8 (the list of economic terms and expressions helps students memorize their meaning and use; for instance: *titoli, valori, depositare, ritirare, avvalere, debiti, interessi* etc).

Make a list with the terms and expressions strictly linked to economics.

Activity 9 (students have to pay attention to the style and organization of the text in discussion and to understand that the infinitives and the nominal phrases are preferred in economic texts).

Answer the following questions:

- a) Which verbal tense is predominantly used in the economic text above?
- b) How is the text organized (look at the logic of the paragraphs, layout etc.)?

Conclusions

Starting from a banking-financial text, our lesson has taken into consideration, through various exercises, aspects such as morphology and syntax, vocabulary of finance and economics, word formation, style, range etc.

Once again, we have come to the conclusion that the use of authentic materials such as special purpose languages, in our case the language of economics, during the Italian courses, is a successful method for language acquisition, as well as for Italian culture and civilization acquisition.

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