Humanising Language Teaching

Teaching Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking Through the Use of Interactive Workbooks

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Introduction

Reading is an ability that has great importance in learning, and this is due to the fact that reading is definitely part of our daily activity, but, most importantly for this study, reading is one of the skills that students have to learn both in English as a foreign language and in their native language. Especially nowadays, a lot of information is conveyed through English, which is now extensively used in social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, and the like. However, reading comprehension both in a native and a foreign language can be challenging for students, especially for young learners. In fact, they must learn to master a series of key skills, like decoding, to fully understand the content of a text. So, reading is a complex process that is based on a number of different skills that lead to the ultimate aim of reading in itself.

Teaching reading comprehension through online and blended tools has become a major issue in the teaching of daily practice since mobile devices are now an established part of the students' lives. Nowadays, teachers should be aware of this, especially after the last two years, which were strongly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the disease and the two lockdowns imposed in Italy in 2020 and partially in 2021 obliged students and teachers to approach the teaching and learning process in a completely new and different way and to come up with strategies and tools to overcome the limits imposed by distance learning. In such an unexpected situation, teachers had to re-invent their roles and their teaching methods, adapting them to remote learning, so we witnessed a series of strategies to cope with distance teaching and assessment. Learners, on the other hand, needed to be engaged more thoroughly than before, due to the fact that they were confined and isolated in their homes in front of a computer screen for days.

The present study stems from the teaching activity during the first pandemic wave in Italy in 2020, when schools moved their activities entirely online starting from March to June, and the experimental action research carried out, which involved 10 classes of middle school students aged 11–13, whose level of English ranged from A1 to A2, as expected according to the Italian national indicators. The real challenge was to engage students through online distance learning, trying to overcome the feeling of loneliness given by the lockdown and the isolation perceived in their own room. However, the ultimate aim was also to help students perceive reading as a positive alternative to video gaming and discover the pleasure of reading (Reading for Learning and Extensive Reading) through the use of interactive learning software such as *Liveworksheets*.

Literature review

Of the four basic skills in foreign language learning, reading is probably the first to be acquired by students, who can easily start decoding words and phrases from the very beginning. According to McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara (2013), reading is the activity that students usually learn and do in English as a foreign language and is probably the first receptive skill to be acquired since students have the time to decode the words and the syntactic structures.

Reading in a foreign language is useful for other purposes too; any exposure to English (provided students understand it more or less) is a good thing for language students, and reading is an act of composition since, when we read, we compare meaning in our minds (Harmer, 1998, pp. 68–69), both in the foreign and in the native language, giving reading a fundamental role in the overall development of language acquisition. Through reading, students can improve their vocabulary mastery, their pronunciation when reading aloud, their spelling, and their writing skills (Farris, 2004, p. 321). In fact, through reading activities, students can improve their own language, their overall reading skills, and their minds too, but even their way of approaching problems and finding solutions. Moreover, they will get information and ideas from what they read and what they need to know for future use.

In the teaching practice, then, reading is used to get a comprehensive understanding and ideas from a text. Furthermore, a reading activity can also help students become lifelong learners since they keep refreshing and adding knowledge every time they read (Pustika, 2018).

In this particular modern age, students cannot be easily separated from their smartphones, and for this reason, the use of digital media needs to be maximised for teaching and learning. Inevitably, being constantly online implies that students are now interested in something digital, online, and unique (Erya & Pustika, 2021). Therefore, the teacher plays an important role in choosing the right teaching strategy, especially when teaching reading, an activity that might be perceived as boring and less engaging if compared to the multimodal world available through computers, tablets, and smartphones. The teacher's creativity and strategy become fundamental skills in order to engage students and help them improve their performance in reading.

Reading comprehension requires the coordination of multiple linguistic and cognitive processes, including word reading ability, working memory, inference generation, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and prior knowledge activation (Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005). In the process of reading, readers need to use reading strategies to understand the meaning of the text and its constituents, both overtly and covertly.

Reading strategies are the key elements in developing students' reading comprehension. In fact, reading strategies influence readers to adjust their reading behaviours to work on text difficulty, task demands, and other contextual variables (Koda, 2015). Reading is a highly strategic process during which readers are constantly constructing meaning using a variety of strategies.

Several research studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between learners' reading strategies and their reading comprehension skills. Brookbank (1999) carried out an action research project in two elementary schools and one junior high school in a large Midwestern town, whose students had poor reading and vocabulary skills linked to a poor home environment. The study highlighted that through the use of graphics organised, the schools improved their students' reading ability. So, the application of various reading strategies has proven to be useful in increasing learners' reading comprehension proficiency.

Reading strategies based on skimming, scanning, making predictions, and questioning help the students have a reasonable reading comprehension level. However, the level of the students' comprehension might vary from task to task, depending on the students' background knowledge and the complexity of the tasks themselves. The majority of the students could apply reading strategies to their reading processes, but sometimes they are not successful and cannot lead to a comprehensive understanding of the texts. Ultimately, it is up to teachers to be able to implement strategies and tools with the idea and focus on developing background knowledge, vocabulary, inference, and comprehension skills in order to improve reading as a whole (Elleman, 2019).

English reading comprehension in Italy during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a vast spread and use of new technologies and distance learning software at a global level. In Italy, after the first outbreak, teachers were obliged to transfer their lessons online by using, at first, any resource available in terms of technology and know-how.

The implementation of online teaching and learning has tackled new challenges both for teachers and students (and their families), and the following years have witnessed the use of this emergency solution again. DAD, or *Didattica A*

Distanza, Distance Teaching (as it has been named in Italy; later on differentiated from DDI, *Didattica Digitale Integrata*, Digitally Integrated Teaching, where online lessons and lessons in presence alternate) have opened gaps in the digital divide and, in some cases, in students' knowledge. This seems especially true for foreign language teaching, which, in particular in Southern Italy, has never reached a widespread B2 level among students at the end of high school. This trend has been confirmed by the recent results of the INVALSI tests, which are held annually for primary and secondary classes, namely for the fourth year of primary, the last year of middle school, and the last year of high school.

The National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI) is a public research institution having full statutory, regulatory, administrative, accounting, patrimonial, and financial autonomy pursuant to the Italian Constitution, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, University, and Research. INVALSI is part of the National Evaluation of the Education and Training System (SNV). Its aim is to promote the improvement of educational levels as well as human capital quality through research on educational systems, policies, and practices, through the deployment of tools to measure students' learning outcomes and skills, and through the quality assessment of schools that INVALSI coordinates within the SNV. INVALSI also contributes to the growth and development of the educational system, which is the driving force behind the economic development of the country and the promotion of social equality according to national, European, and international goals.

National standardised tests for grades 2, 5, 8, 10, and 13 are one of the three strands of INVALSI institutional research. For grades 8, 10, and 13, test administration is computer-based (CBT). For grades 8 and 13, each student obtains a certification for all the tested subjects. https://bestr.it/organization/show/136?ln=en. Thus, INVALSI tests were created in order to monitor the educational system in Italy, and, despite the widespread controversy among teachers and instructors, they mirror the actual skills and competences acquired by Italian students, who are tested in Italian (L1), math, and English (as a Foreign Language).

INVALSI Tests 2021 were done by more than 1.100.000 students from primary school (2 and 5 years), about 530.000 students from the first grade of secondary school (last year), and about 475.000 students from the last year of secondary school. Results for the middle school, where the action research in this paper had been carried out, show that compared to 2019, results in Italian and math were lower, while for English (whose level at the end of lower secondary school is A2) they are stable (but only Listening and Reading are tested).

Specifically, at the national level, students who do not reach appropriate results, namely those not in line with the provisions of the National Indications, are: English – Reading (A2): 24% (-2 percentage points compared to 2018 and +2 percentage points compared to 2019), while English – Listening (A2): 41% (-3 percentage points compared to 2018 and +1 compared to 2019). If we also consider the results in L1, we may notice that the same percentage at the national level is 39% (+5 percentage points compared both to 2018 and 2019).

The picture worsens when geographical differences are taken into consideration; in fact, in some regions of southern Italy, there is a higher number of students with very low levels of results, which reach 50% of the Italian students in Italian and 30–40% in English—reading (55–60% in English – Listening).

If we compare the data for Italian and English, which are both tested, especially in reference to reading comprehension, it is clear that students cannot master reading strategies and probably should improve their critical thinking. Critical thinking is one of the so-called 4 Cs, which characterise the deeper learning competencies and skills for the 21st century, together with Creativity, Collaboration and Communication.

Reading comprehension and critical thinking

The relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking has been largely investigated; this bond is clearly advocated, using as a starting point the use and combination of schema theory with principles of critical thinking as effective ways of enhancing the concept of reading comprehension (Norris & Phillips, 1987). More specifically, Norris and Philips support the idea that critical thinking theory provides methods both for activating existing schemata and for constructing new ones because, according to critical thinking theory, one arrives at explanations by supposing possible ones, weighing them against the evidence, and suspending judgement until sufficient evidence is in. Schema theory, which is an explanation of how readers use prior knowledge to comprehend and learn from text, as Aloqaili

(2012) reports, provides powerful rationales for making links between students' individual backgrounds, specific subject area knowledge, and critical thinking. In particular, the relationship among reading comprehension, critical thinking, and prior knowledge is interdependent, which means that prior knowledge serves as a foundation for critical thinking and inference-making, where critical thinking and inference-making work as effective means to activate prior knowledge.

There are six principles behind the teaching of reading (Harmer, 1998, p. 70) that support the ideas advocated in critical thinking. According to this, reading is not a passive skill, and students need to be engaged with what they are reading. Students should also be encouraged to respond to the content of a reading text, not just to the language, and prediction (activation of schemata) is a major factor in reading, while the choice of an appropriate task for the topic (the right kind of questions that engage students) and the text should be exploited to the full, with appropriate follow-up activities to re-use the grammar and/or the vocabulary in the text.

Probably one major aspect of teaching reading is the criteria for selecting authentic material because the teacher should provide a purpose for the students to read the text. According to the purpose, then, we can select the appropriate text: travel brochures or catalogues can be used to get information, whereas to respond to curiosity about a topic, magazine or newspaper articles are quite useful. Moreover, reading is a skill and an activity that we constantly use in our lives, both in the form of skimming (reading for main ideas or key topics) and scanning (for specific pieces of information), so it entails the learners' ability to use the foreign language and select the ideas that are more relevant to the task given (Scrivener, 2005, p. 185).

Decoding is more closely associated with reading comprehension than linguistic competence, but once decoding is mastered, linguistic comprehension becomes a better predictor of reading comprehension (e.g., Catts, Adlof, & Weismer, 2005). So, what should teachers practically do in developing critical thinking? According to Penny Ur (2017), students can be encouraged to use critical thinking within language exercises as well as in communicative work, from the most elementary levels, and teachers should encourage students to use a critical approach to reading or listening to texts, from word level upwards. As she also stresses, this means checking for logic, consistency, evidence, etc., especially when approaching material accessed through Internet sources, where students should be encouraged to be on the lookout for distortions, illogical arguments, gaps, contradictions, and a lack of evidence.

Online teaching

What changed in this new pandemic situation is the setting where learning and teaching took place. In a digital online learning environment, the physical borders of the class disappear and students and teacher meet in a virtual environment, in which the physical perimeter is the device screen. In this untouchable environment, implementing language tasks with elements of critical thinking has proved to be quite challenging for traditional teachers and teachers, now confronted with the ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) tools. On the other hand, online teaching has been long used, but mostly for university courses or adult teaching, where usually a high level of interest is already present in the students. Online teaching in the Italian public schools, mostly with primary or lower secondary learners, where education is compulsory, is probably even more challenging. Among the specific problems that a teacher has to overcome are the span of attention (which changes according to the learners' age) and the ability to use ICT tools, both for the teacher and the learners (who are mostly able to use their personal smart devices passively).

Online teaching and learning entail the productive use of devices while engaging students in meaningful tasks to enhance language learning. During the last year of the pandemic, in 2021, Italian schools went completely online or in a blended environment for long periods of time (with tested-positive students connected from home). Hence the need to engage students in both the virtual and real environment while developing language and critical thinking skills, whose outcomes were clearly demonstrated by the INVALSI national tests. There are several ways to keep students' attention when working online, and teachers' creativity plays a dramatic role in such a dematerialized environment.

At the same time, the page layout and its organisation are extremely important, so it would be advisable to use a few pictures, images, or animations, as well as a few colours and the same font. A page that is overloaded with visuals may easily distract or tyre students due to the overload of information and stimuli. On the other hand, a file or webpage with no graphics and full of text may result in a lack of involvement and interest since students nowadays are more

accustomed to the multimodality that the Internet offers. Reading material must be easy to approach and use, and the more the experience of reading online is close to that of the real world, the more students will be interested and involved in what they are reading.

Secondly, learning by doing can increase the level of engagement and interest and improve students' performance and comprehension. Thus, learning from experiences resulting directly from one's own actions, as contrasted with learning from watching others perform, reading others' instructions or descriptions, or listening to others' instructions or lectures, is by far more effective. A possible explanation of the effectiveness of learning by doing, as expressed by Reese (2011, p. 15), is the fact that it requires direct experience with the topic under investigation. Furthermore, online and digital tasks have the advantage of virtually manipulating the texts, and in general, online learning brings dynamism and, on the other hand, puts the student in control, allowing independent development progress (Mexhuani, 2014, p. 7).

Methodology and materials

During the first pandemic outbreak, Italian schools were closed from March to July 2020, and all the teaching activities had to be moved online through different online environments and tools. This circumstance provided the opportunity to carry out an action research plan, a type of research conducted by teachers "to reflect on their own practice and the situation in which they are practicing... [and] to understand and improve their practice and the situation in which they are practicing" (Axe, Ponte, & Brouwer, 2008, p. 56). At that time, the experimental online activity was conducted on 10 classes of middle school (about 200 students ages 11 to 13) whose level of English was ranging from A1 to A2. The frontal online lessons were delivered once a week for each class through the Zoom video calling platform, and during those 45 minutes of lessons, students were involved in a listening activity (through a short video clip) concerning the topic of the lesson, whether it was grammar or civilization. Students were given a task to perform during the online lesson to provide them with instant feedback at the end of the video call. Apart from their textbooks, from which assignments were given (such as grammar or vocabulary exercises), it was also fundamental to have feedback on their reading performances and to give students the opportunity to memorise words and phrases and to understand, of course, the content of a given text. *Liveworksheets* were then chosen as a way to assign reading tasks, and the choice was made on the basis of some specific features of this online software.

Liveworksheets.com is a website that turns traditional worksheets into interactive worksheets and provides self-assessment. In fact, students can work online, through their smartphone, tablet, or computer, and send their answers to their teacher directly into his or her inbox on the website. In this way, there is no need to send personal emails, and the teacher can simply check the automatically assessed test. In particular, *Liveworksheets* has those features that are able to engage and motivate students in reading because the technologies used allow students to perform, on their touch-screens and computers, different tasks, such as drag and drop, match items, do multiple choices or open questions, and, more interestingly, for teaching a foreign language, listen to and/or watch videos within the same worksheet. In fact, multimedia information transfer has great potential in terms of developing skills and abilities through its simultaneous effect on several channels of perception of information (Vassilieva & Drugov, 2019, p. 464).

Teachers can create their own interactive worksheets and collect them into specific workbooks, or they can use materials created by other teachers from the website community. Finally, teachers can embed the worksheets in a virtual learning environment, send them through online messaging, and, ultimately, download and print them. For the action research, the activities created and embedded in the worksheets, which were turned into microlearning environments, were about different topics: British culture, Reading for Pleasure and Music; each topic was inserted in a specific workbook. Clearly enough, British and Anglo-American culture and civilization were focused on the history, geography, and customs of the United Kingdom and the United States. As reading for pleasure, an abridged version of *A Study in Scarlet* by Arthur Conan Doyle was used. This was because the genre had already been covered in the Italian literature lessons. Finally, the music worksheets were focused on lyrics and listening comprehension, with listening tasks focused on grammar and/or lexis.

In each case, a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology was used due to the best-known CLIL conceptual frameworks of the 4Cs framework (culture, communication, content, and cognition) (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh,

2010) embedded in a relevant context, which can provide a background for the development of all CLIL activities in a given learning environment. Moreover, a CLIL learner is not necessarily expected to have the English proficiency required to cope with the subject before beginning study (Graddol, 2006). In CLIL, subject matter means much more than acquiring knowledge and skills. It is about the learner constructing his or her own knowledge and developing skills that are relevant and appropriate. More importantly, language needs to be learned in context (i.e., learning through the language), which requires reconstructing the subject matter and its related cognitive processes through a foreign language, e.g., language intake and output (Krashen, 1985).

Discussion and Results

During the months from March to June 2020, a series of worksheets and related workbooks were created and distributed through online classes (using the digital online workspace of Edmodo and Google Classroom). Students worked at home and sent their results to the teacher's inbox by means of a specific reference code included in each worksheet. Worksheets were created using Microsoft writing software, adding, where deemed necessary and useful, short video clips to the text with exercises, ensuring that the final layout was ordered and not overloaded with images and words. When the worksheets were taken from books and internet pages, they were uploaded and then modified through the tools offered by the online software.

In particular, for the workbook *A Study in Scarlet*, an abridged version of the book was uploaded, chapter by chapter, in pdf format. Taking worksheets from printed books had the advantages of using authentic material, already set for the appropriate language level, and having a clear layout where text and pictures were already distributed in an orderly manner.

As shown in the previous paragraph, online material should be clear and ordered, but at the same time colourful and attractive. Each chapter had a series of warm-up questions, such as true or false, multiple choice, which were implemented with a multimodal enhancement. The body of the chapters was each enriched with vocabulary activities in order to raise learners' knowledge and also because, in some cases, follow-up activities were based on exercises on synonymity and opposites. More interestingly, some words were cancelled in post-editing and substituted with their phonic realisation.

Liveworksheets, in fact, have the chance to insert words and phrases and choose the related pronunciation, either in the British or American English variety. For example, students listened to the words and phrases and could choose between minimal pairs. In other instances, students had to write down the word or phrases heard, so as to match the phonemic sounds with the written form. Through the learning-by-doing procedure, learners had the chance to manipulate the text online, using their BYOD, and physically drag and drop words, matching words with their meanings, by means of a virtual pencil during the exercise. This variety of tasks allowed us to tackle different types of learning styles due to the nature of the multimodal texts created on *Liveworksheets*. Reading performance, dealing with some foreign language reading tasks of diverse types, relies on different cognitive abilities, and gaining a keen insight into the nature of the relationship has been extensively investigated (Hashemian, Jafarpour, & Adibpour, 2015, p. 42).

According to the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), each individual has a unique combination of a number of intelligences that are uniquely arranged in each individual's brain and may or may not work collaboratively together. Thus, nine types of intelligences can be distinguished: Bodily-Kinesthetic, Existential Intelligence, Interpersonal Intelligence, Intrapersonal Intelligence, Verbal-Linguistic Intelligence, Logical-Mathematical Intelligence, Musical Intelligence, Naturalist Intelligence and Spatial Intelligence. The possibility to shift words or to link words and phrases with one another may be helpful for students whose learning type is kinaesthetic, whereas the use of images may be useful to students whose learning style is prone to visuality. Finally, implementing oral tasks in the virtual text may be good for those who have musical intelligence. At the same time, a number of different types of tasks were implemented in order to help develop critical thinking. Those were placed at the end of the reading material, and the tasks presented were mainly those where students had to catalogue, enlist, or associate ideas and consequences with the inferred meaning.

Results were gathered informally, and students filled in a short questionnaire was. In this section, a I will provide qualitative assessment with a slight approximation to percentage results.

The first set of data is the number of students who handed in their task, that is, those who sent back the worksheets to have immediate feedback. More than 70% of the students were regularly handing in their homework, and a few were those who never or rarely did their homework.

Secondly, the marks given through assessment reflected students' results, too. Using a grading system of 10, where acceptability is 6 out of 10, nearly 80% of the students got marks ranging from 7 to 9 or 10. Even though some of them might have worked together, this is a positive result because interpersonal intelligence was then tackled and learning and acquisition occurred.

The end of the course questionnaire was made up of six items, focusing on assessing the positive and negative aspects of using *Liveworksheets* and working online from the students' point of view. The qualitative results showed that the students appreciated the framework provided by the software and the setting, as well as working on a smartphone or a computer. In particular, they appreciated the use of a familiar virtual environment where reading was happening. Moreover, they found the use of the worksheets easy and engaging and appreciated the fact that their work could be immediately submitted without the need to forward it through emails.

What seems interesting is the fact that students did not perceive they had worked more than usual, such as during a traditional lesson, probably because they were at home, but nevertheless the tasks were perceived as easy and meaningful. Finally, they did not feel that their level of English had improved dramatically, but they still appreciated the new methodology linked to the software and its potentialities, and they felt their reading skills had improved, feeling less worried about tackling an extensive text in English.

Conclusions

The present research action plan on *Liveworksheets.com* showed that the software is a flexible tool: it enables you to create and set different tasks by using a great variety of texts, from mind maps to books.

Moreover, worksheets can be distributed online or in the classroom through a virtual learning environment and a smart device, so they are suitable for distance and blended learning. More importantly, it enables the creation of a multimodal learning environment because video and audio can be embedded in the same worksheets to suit different learning styles and learning difficulties.

Finally, although the experimentation was carried out during the online English classes, implementing *Liveworksheets* could also improve native language reading comprehension because students can be actively engaged throughout their reading. In fact, future research and studies might be focused on the implementation of this software to submit reading comprehension for L1.

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