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Article abstract

Foreign language didactics is a field which, notwithstanding the many centuries of application and development, is still very methodologically problematic. Statistics clearly show that, in certain countries, the educational system provides foreign language instruction that is not apt and does not deliver effective linguistic competence; a few methods, however, have been developed to contravene this problem. In the specific case of Italy, a country which is renowned for its general monolingualism, Associazione Culturale Linguistica Educational (ACLE) has developed an innovative language teaching method (Rational, Emotional, Affective Learning) to attempt to fill the lacunae of the Italian school system, especially in regards to the teaching of English as a foreign language. This paper seeks to briefly outline the REAL method and its applications, describe its affinity to didactic and cognitive theories, and speculate on its potential effectiveness.

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"Rational, Emotional, Affective Learning" and the Use of Innovative Methods in Foreign Language Teaching

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Activity is not merely doing something, it is doing something that is motivated either by a biological need, such as hunger, or a culturally constructed need, such as the need to be literate in certain cultures. Needs become motives once they become directed at a specific object. Thus, hunger does not become a motive until people decide to seek food; similarly, literacy does not become a motive for activity until people decide to learn to read and write. Motives are only realized in specific actions that are goal directed (hence, intentional). (*Sociocultural Theory* 8)

Introduction

Often times, students who undertake the learning of a foreign language do not achieve communicative competence even after spending an extended period of time studying the language.¹ This phenomenon could be due to a lack of authentic and emotional contextualization, and it is a noteworthy issue in the Italian setting. Foreign Language Teaching in Italy (an important example of which is the teaching of English as a foreign language, compulsory at various levels) has proven itself to be strikingly unsuccessful—this claim can be substantiated by statistical analysis of multilingualism in Italy and Europe.

Statistics tell us that the European countries where respondents are least likely to be able to speak any foreign language are Hungary, where 65% of the population is monolingual, Italy (62%), the United Kingdom and Portugal (61% each), and Ireland (60%) (Eurobarometer 5), while more than three quarters (79%) of Europeans think English is an important language for children to learn (77). These data, provided by the latest Eurobarometer report (2012), show that Italy is second on the list of EU countries that are least multilingual. In fact, this country is even less multilingual than the UK and Ireland, where English is an official language, and, given the role of English as a global lingua franca, we may rightfully think that Anglophone countries would be the most monolingual. English is also the most widely taught foreign language in the EU, and it is perceived to be useful for personal development by most Europeans. Italians, however, continue to struggle with multilingualism. In this respect, we must highlight the fact that the Eurobarometer does not take the minority and indigenous languages of Italy into consideration. Looking at data from the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) from the year 2006, we learn that only 45% of the population speaks Italian at home; that is, most families actually speak a regional or other minority language at home, therefore making Italy one of the most multilingual countries in Europe and most Italians bilingual since childhood. As we have seen, however, linguistic skill ratings plummet when we look at foreign-language knowledge, with English being the prime example of this educational shortcoming.

The Associazione Culturale Linguistica Educational (A.C.L.E.), a not-for-profit English language teaching organization in Italy, believes to have identified some important faultlines in the Italian education system, and has attempted to address these issues through a method titled *Rational, Emotional, Affective Learning* (R.E.A.L.). A.C.L.E. offers full-immersion summer camps to children who are four to fifteen years of age, high school camps for secondary school students, as well as training programs for Italian teachers of English. The organization also runs tours across Italian schools through its Theatrino program, which aims to motivate children to learn English through theatrical performances and workshops. About 400 full-immersion camps take place each year all over the Italian peninsula, and all of these employ REAL methodologies. On its website, the Association describes the Italian School System as being obsolete because it

"functions by virtue of teaching methodologies that have long been discredited throughout much of the Western world. These include rote memorization and an emphasis on theoretical learning with few or no practical components. Opportunities for students to develop and use critical thinking skills are virtually non-existent; students are rarely asked what they think about a topic or issue and just as rarely asked what they feel. As a result, a student's emotional and rational development is largely disregarded, and the student is left with a body of memorized and mostly forgotten information which does not have any practical bearing on his or her world. It is education for amnesia." (A.C.L.E. Website)

Several research studies (namely, Damasio's *Descartes' Error*, cited by A.C.L.E.) show that emotions are closely

connected to learning and cognition, and that they are essential to rational thinking and to common social behaviour. In a Foreign Language Learning or Second Language Acquisition setting, this is especially true since a foreign language does not become relevant or applicable to the real world until it is used to express one's thoughts, emotions, and feelings or to recognize and comprehend another's in a code that is different from one's own native language and for a purpose that is of significant importance to the speaker (such as successful communication). Language also has a close relationship with survival—the thoughts that are verbalized through language are often desires or reactions to surrounding environments and circumstances. We utilize language in order to efficaciously function in a specific situation. There is a definite shortcoming on the part of institutions that teach foreign languages when it comes to the positive exploitation of emotional intelligence and survival needs as leverage in order to achieve successful learning goals. Language courses that focus strictly on grammar have been criticized *ad nauseam* for the lack of the appropriate stimuli that actually contribute to the development of proficiency (Omaggio Hadley 107). However, many institutions (post-secondary or otherwise, and not just in the Italian setting) continue to deliver language instruction strictly through grammar, and knowledge of the language is usually also assessed within grammatical parameters. As we are often reminded, unfortunately, the majority of institutions continue to struggle to meet learners' needs to acquire functional language ability within the academic setting. In light of decades of empirical studies on second language acquisition, perhaps the greatest impetus for communicative language teaching comes from the teacher's own experiences in classrooms where, despite theirs and their students' sustained efforts, little useful language ability ever develops (Musumeci 90).

Overall, and in settings that may include but are not limited to Italian and Canadian academic institutions, what is lacking is a curriculum that caters to different learning styles and which incorporates real, authentic, and emotional contextualization of the foreign languages, encourages the student to utilize the language for the achievement of real-life goals and employ it in its vast array of possible applications by moving away from reading and writing towards more communicative objectives (building relationships, navigating various social settings or satisfying physical or emotional needs in the foreign language), especially in the initial stages of language acquisition. Many students, in fact, feel that they must visit a country where the language of interest is spoken in order to acquire a desirable level of communicative competence. While immersion in a real life setting is of absolute importance, it can and must be emulated in an educational setting. *Rational, Emotional, Affective Learning* as adopted by A.C.L.E. is a method which attempts to integrate different learning styles and to create a full-immersion environment in which students are obligated to utilize the foreign language in order to socially *survive* that very learning environment. By creating an interdependent connection between language and the achievement of real goals (and therefore genuine emotions and feelings of fulfillment), a student will be intrinsically motivated to utilize whatever tools she must in order to reach a specific objective, which should be long-term and not limited to the classroom environment. In this respect, research has confirmed that "the analysis of affective factors in learning processes enriches educational psychology. Nevertheless, it would be important for further research to consider emotions not isolated, but in interaction with cognitive and behavioural factors" (Mayring and von Rhodeneck, 7). On its website, A.C.L.E. advertises its approach to the teaching of foreign languages as holistic and asserts that this is advantageous because it motivates students to learn through various types of activities, which fix the learning experience in their long-term memory by stimulating the synergy between instructor and learner through a humanistic approach. This, in turn, motivates a learner to use the language not just for the culturally constructed need or parental obligation of having to learn it.²

In turn, teacher-training, a very important player in the success of the R.E.A.L. method, is carried out by adopting the method itself: instructors are taught to teach in the exact same way that they are expected to behave with students—this is particularly effective as it also associates emotions with learning, and future instructors are trained through socialization and musical, theatrical, and recreational linguistic activities that are identical to the ones they will be carrying out with their future students. The main goals of future A.C.L.E. teachers are to enjoy the activities, to be fully engaged in a learning process disguised as a real social and often recreational situation, and to successfully become a tutor and be appointed to teach.

R.E.A.L. Learning General Guidelines

This is a chart created to illustrate and summarize some of the principal directives established by A.C.L.E.'s R.E.A.L.model:³

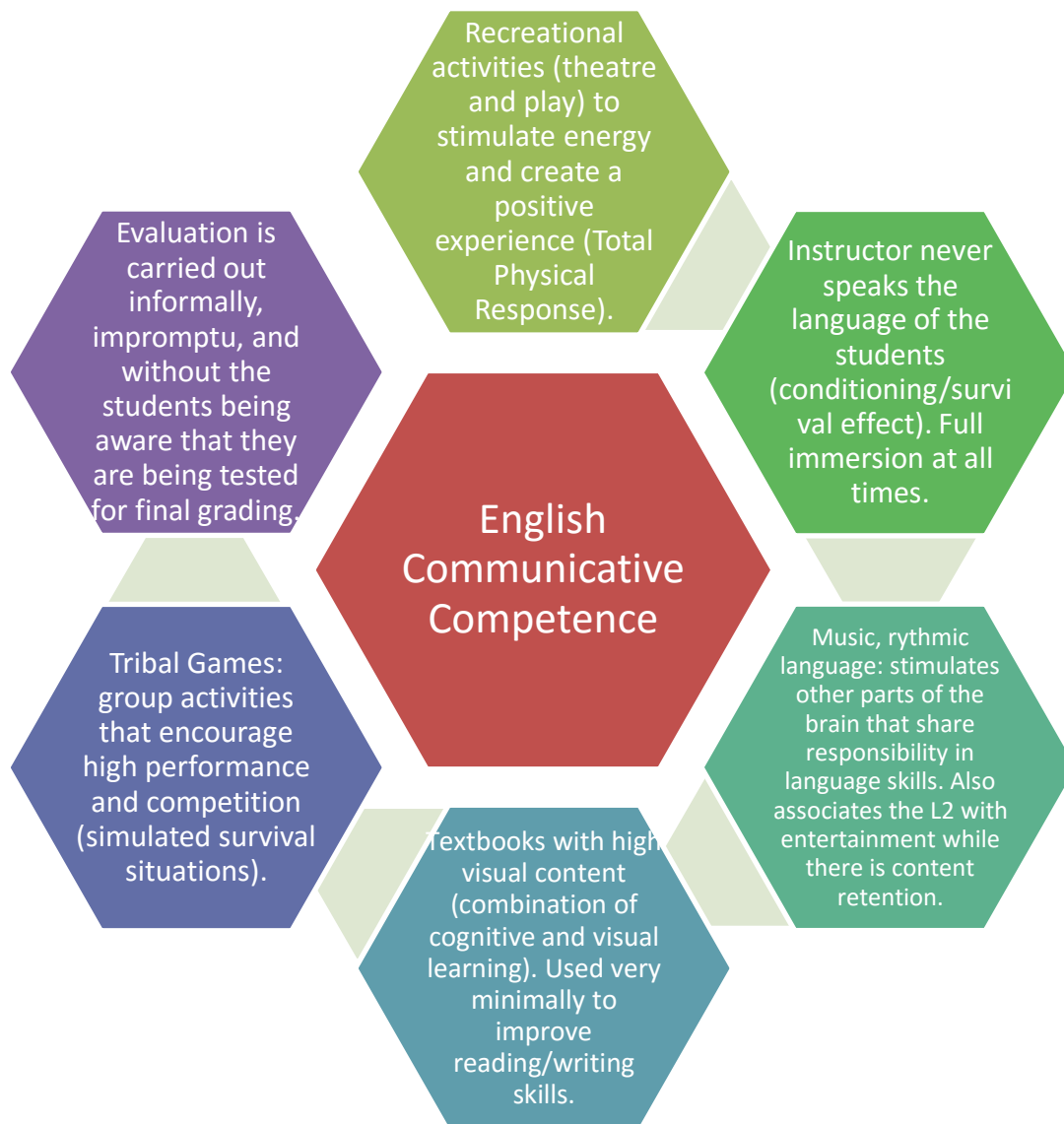


Fig. 1. Major factors in R.E.A.L. learning (designed by author).

Applications of the R.E.A.L. Method

Teacher-Training

Hundreds of native speakers of English from all Anglophone countries around the world take part in A.C.L.E.'s programs each year, after careful screening through a remote "distance-learning course" (A.C.L.E. Website). These English instructors are known as "trainee-tutors" who, once accepted into the program, undergo a one-week intensive training at one of A.C.L.E.'s centres. During the week-long training, future instructors have the opportunity to experience many real-life applications of the R.E.A.L. method as these are seamlessly integrated into their own training.

"The orientation prepares tutors for their role by providing them with exciting activities, songs and games which help students acquire the English language. In addition, we send tutors to camp with a manual that contains plenty of ideas for dynamic lessons, drama activities, and classroom management techniques. Of course, the tutors' own creativity, input and ideas are essential for making the camps more enjoyable for the students and themselves." (A.C.L.E. Website)

Trainee tutors internalize the teaching methodologies by undergoing a learning process which successfully positions them as the *students*. They acquire teaching techniques such as musical activities, group competitions, visual and written components, etc. by virtue of said activities being incorporated into their own experience as learners. New trainee-tutors are also taught some basic Italian-language skills, so as to be able to communicate with the host-families with which they will be residing once they are sent out to individual camps. At the end of the initial training, trainee-tutors normally receive an Introductory T.E.F.L.-T.P. Certificate (Teaching English as a Foreign Language Through Theatre and Play), approved by the Italian Ministry of Education.

Full-Immersion Camps

A.C.L.E. runs full-immersion summer, city, and high school camps for children and adolescents throughout the Italian peninsula. Camps are supervised by camp directors, who are usually teachers of English in regular Italian schools. The main objective of the summer camps is to fully immerse students in an environment where English is the only language spoken and to create contexts in which students are able to function through not only limited verbal communication but also through emotional and kinesthetic means. The camps are conducted by employing a vast array of teaching techniques that attempt to accommodate the learning needs of all students: competitive, musical, and ludolinguistic activities ensure that students are constantly encouraged to utilize English in order to overcome social and recreational barriers, while visual and textual components ensure the achievement of more traditional learning goals (namely, spelling and grammar). The main objectives of summer camps are to "provide an environment for young, native English speakers from around the world to meet and share multicultural experiences with Italian students" and to "give Italian students an exciting alternative to a study abroad programme" (ACLE Website).

A typical day at most camps will run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and will include various activities: morning warm-ups, songs, preparation for the Final Show, workbooks, conversation circles, sports, tribal games, and so on. Most of these activities take place outdoors. The "final show" is an integral part of each camp as it allows students to showcase their newly-acquired abilities in both the foreign language and general performance; the show usually consists of a short recital (complexity is dependant upon the fluency level of the class and/or the children's age group).

Tutors who teach at summer camps normally live with host-families whose children are attending the camp. This gives children an opportunity to use English not only during the day, but also at home, an environment which is typically monolingual.

Supporting Theories and Research

Many celebrated theories and approaches to language-learning can be related to the R.E.A.L. method, such as:

Sociocultural Theory (key scholar: Lev Vygotsky)

A theory of mind according to which social experiences are intrinsically connected to language. As Lantolf describes in his essay "Sociocultural Theory and Second or Foreign Language Learning", "[t]he core concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated" by cultural and symbolic artifacts, and speech is one of them (15). Sociocultural theory is useful in language acquisition because it helps to determine the "central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking" such as language (30).

Total Physical Response (key scholar: James Asher)

Total physical response is a language-teaching approach that links learning to physical movements. This method can be particularly effective with children, as language can be taught in a playfully kinesthetic way. This approach prioritizes listening and movement over the production of language, as "the use of techniques to act out what is understood ensures that comprehension of the language is taking place" (Omaggio Hadley 119).

Communicative Language Teaching

The central focus of this method is on communicative competence, defined as "the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning" (Savignon 72). Communicative competence is normally the highest priority and the most immediate objective of the language learner. This approach is guided by the notion that "[t]he new language system

will be learned best by struggling to communicate one's own meaning and by negotiation of meaning through interaction with others" (Omaggio Hadley 117).

Learner autonomy

Along with Communicative Language Teaching, the learner's independent role in the acquisition of a second language is to be taken into consideration. Theorists have recognized the importance of the student's own level of motivation, their perception of the learning environment, and other factors that can influence learning beyond what is "caused exclusively by external incentives reinforcing certain responses" (Schalkwijk et al. 169). Therefore, students must take ownership over their own learning in order to maximize the potential for language acquisition beyond the instructional environment.

Conclusion

The R.E.A.L. model embraces and caters to various learning styles, and this is a very valuable facet of this methodology, which language instructors at various levels should internalize and attempt to implement. As post-secondary language educators, we have witnessed some of our students perform extremely well on grammar tests but not be able to utter a full sentence in the target language, while others, who are able to hold basic conversations and successfully communicate, have a very difficult time grasping strict grammatical models, and might not pursue future studies in language because they find themselves unfit for such disciplines. We must seriously acknowledge and address the need to diversify language classes in order to create an environment that teaches realistic use of the language much more than knowledge about the language, and where students are assessed on their ability to communicate successfully and *survive* in the language rather than to memorize grammatical exceptions and complicated conjugations, the lack of which does not harm basic communication, especially in introductory-level language courses.

Though the R.E.A.L. method seems to effectively address most of these lacunae, proving its success in an empirical and pragmatic way would mean looking at its long-term application. A.C.L.E.'s immersion programs do not run for periods longer than two weeks, therefore, it would be difficult to identify concrete and measurable long-term benefits. The next step of this research, however, would be to assess whether students who have attended A.C.L.E. camps do perform better in language courses in their regular school programs. For now, A.C.L.E. programs solely function as a catalyst for the ignition of interest in language learners. R.E.A.L. standards also require instructors to be highly energetic and vivaciously engaging at all times. Games and other ludolinguistic activities require a considerable amount of physical and mental exertion on the instructor's part, and most of the activities are to ideally be carried out in a spacious, barrier-free environment. Considering these strict parameters, it is safe to state that it would be difficult for post-secondary institutions to locate and fund premises that are entirely conducive to this method, as well as acquire teaching talent that would be able to sustain such strenuous instructional activities (but also be linguistically and pedagogically competent) for a time that is longer than the current maximum of two weeks. Nonetheless, there is much to be taken away from this and similar methods, especially when it comes to the ability to create an anxiety-free language-learning environment that is mostly driven by social interaction, survival motivators, and recreational activities, as these not only have the true ability to ignite passion for language-learning, but also to render the field a much more attractive one for students to pursue. This methodological shift is especially necessary in the Italian education system, which, as we have seen, uses inadequate methods for the teaching of foreign languages.

Editors' Addendum

This article is a modified version of the one originally published in May 2016.

Notes

¹ Communicative competence generally comprises the abilities to express, interpret, and negotiate meaning in a different linguistic and cultural context (St. John and van Esch 8).

² "ACLE ha riassunto nell'acronimo R.E.A.L. (Rational Emotional Affective Learning) l'impianto teorico su cui sono basate tutte le attività rivolte ai docenti e ai giovani. L'approccio umanistico affettivo ha il grande vantaggio di motivare la volontà di apprendere e fissare l'esperienza nella memoria a lungo termine, stimolando la sinergia tra discente e docente" (A.C.L.E. Website).

³ This information is strictly experience-based knowledge. It is not to be interpreted as a formal outline of ACLE's

teaching approach.

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