

Pre-service teacher education: Observing senior teachers through the theoretical lens of Ellis's principles of instructed language learning

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ABSTRACT

EN The study is based on a training project completed in Italy as part of a qualifying course for high school teachers of L2 English. The project moves around the framework that Rod Ellis proposed in 2010 on the relationship between Second Language Acquisition and Language Pedagogy and it argues the need for student teachers (STs) to take the role of classroom researchers during their learning process and carry out critical observations through a solid theoretical lens, such as the 10 principles for instructed language learning by Ellis (2005a, 2005b). Three case studies are analyzed to explore how STs observed classroom activities armed with the knowledge of the principles. Data is based on feedback they gave during seminar discussions and remarks made in written reports. Moreover, a follow-up survey of informants after five years' in-service practice questions whether and how this experience influenced the quality and degree of their understanding of teaching and learning. Considering these results, suggestions are made for future implementations of this kind of project.

Key words: INSTRUCTED LANGUAGE LEARNING, SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION, LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY, COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH, ITALIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL, ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL)

ES El estudio se basa en un proyecto de capacitación realizado en Italia como parte de un curso de cualificación para profesores de inglés como L2 de educación secundaria. El proyecto se inspira en el marco que Rod Ellis propuso en 2010 sobre la relación entre la adquisición de segundas lenguas y la pedagogía lingüística, y sostiene que los profesores en formación necesitan asumir el papel de investigadores dentro del aula durante su proceso de aprendizaje y realizar una observación crítica a través de una lente teórica sólida como los 10 principios para el aprendizaje de idiomas instruido de Ellis (2005a, 2005b). El análisis de tres estudios de caso explora cómo los estudiantes observaron las actividades de aula armados con el conocimiento de dichos principios. Los datos se basan en los comentarios que hicieron durante los debates del seminario y en las observaciones realizadas en los informes escritos. Además, una encuesta de seguimiento de los informantes después de cinco años de docencia cuestiona si esta experiencia influyó, y de qué manera, en la calidad y el grado de comprensión de los procesos de enseñanza y aprendizaje. Teniendo en cuenta estos resultados, se hacen sugerencias para futuras implementaciones de este tipo de proyectos.

Palabras clave: APRENDIZAJE DE IDIOMAS INSTRUIDO, CAPACITACIÓN DE PROFESORES DE SEGUNDAS LENGUAS, ENSEÑANZA DE LA LENGUA, ENFOQUE COMUNICATIVO, EDUCACIÓN SECUNDARIA ITALIANA, INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

IT Lo studio si basa su un progetto di tirocinio inserito in un corso di abilitazione per docenti d'inglese nella scuola superiore (TFA). Il progetto si ispira al quadro teorico proposto da Rod Ellis nel 2010 sul legame tra acquisizione della L2 e didattica delle lingue e si basa sull'idea che i tirocinanti debbano effettuare le osservazioni in classe vestendo i panni di ricercatori, con una lente teorica solida come i 10 principi per l'insegnamento delle lingue di Ellis (2005a, 2005b). L'analisi esplora il processo di formazione dei tirocinanti in tre casi studio e le modalità in cui essi si sono mossi nell'osservazione delle lezioni di lingua, armati della conoscenza dei principi di Ellis. I dati includono le riflessioni dei tirocinanti durante le discussioni seminariali e nelle loro relazioni di fine percorso. Inoltre, dopo cinque anni d'insegnamento di ruolo, quegli stessi tirocinanti sono stati intervistati per ricevere informazioni su se e come questa esperienza abbia influenzato la qualità e il livello della loro consapevolezza dei processi d'insegnamento e apprendimento. Sulla base dei risultati, vengono avanzate alcune proposte per lo sviluppo di questo tipo di progetti.

Parole chiave: APPRENDIMENTO DELLA LINGUA, FORMAZIONE PER DOCENTI DI LINGUA, DIDATTICA, APPROCCIO COMUNICATIVO, SCUOLA SECONDARIA ITALIANA, INGLESE COME LINGUA STRANIERA

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The focus of this paper is the need to situate second language teacher education (SLTE) in Italy within a theoretical framework which can be accessed and shared by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, teacher educators, and language teachers. The study recounts a 2015 training project designed for those aspiring to teach English as a second language in high school. Specifically, the project consisted of a group of seminars held within a wider course on EFL teaching methodology. This course was part of the Italian *Tirocinio formativo attivo* (TFA, active formative training), a now defunct one-year teacher qualifying course which included up to 400 hours of school practicum.

The outline of the project followed the framework that Professor Rod Ellis (2010) created to guide the relationship between SLA and language pedagogy (LP), arguing that there is a need to “design and implement an SLA course for teachers that can be [...] investigated empirically” (p. 197). The theoretical lens through which classrooms were observed during this training course was guided by Ellis’s principles for successful instructed language learning (2005a, 2005b), which “draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives and are offered as ‘provisional specifications’ for a learning-centered language pedagogy” (Ellis, 2005b, p. 209).

Trainees’ reflections on observations of senior teachers’ practices during the course and five years later were analyzed to investigate the effect that this kind of learning experience had on the student teachers (STs). The purpose was to find out what the STs gained as a result of applying the theoretical lens of the principles for instructed language learning (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b) both in their immediate observations and afterwards, as they became in-service teachers. An examination of the data will help determine whether this model can be transferrable and applicable elsewhere.

This research attempts to respond to the needs of the Italian teacher training and enrolment scheme, which has not had the opportunity to stabilize itself into a solid and well-rooted system because of frequent governmental alternation between left- and right-wing parties. Each winning coalition often nullified decisions taken by the preceding rival one without considering the impact this instability would have on the efficiency of the teacher training system and on the creation of a shared set of values for teachers’ identity. Over the years, practicums have been included sporadically in teacher education plans; simultaneous and consecutive models have alternated and even coexisted; universities have been involved intermittently; pre-service courses (when included) have varied in terms of length and enrolment requirements; procedures have changed. A teacher training project like the one proposed here could help solidify the collaboration between SLA research and LP in the shaping of educational pathways to train teachers who can critically assess teaching practices and make choices with methodological awareness.

A theoretical tool for observations in pre-service school practicum is offered to prevent STs being sent into teaching apprenticeships without any tools to assess senior teachers’ practices as sometimes happens (cf. Richards, 1998; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Singh & Richards, 2006; Ur, 1996; Wallace, 1991). The reason why Ellis’s principles (2005a, 2005b) were chosen is because they were drafted upon the request of educational institutions (the Ministry of Education in New Zealand) and thus were specifically conceived for the learning of languages in schools. Guidelines have been proposed by others, but they were focused on somehow propaedeutic issues to the principles and on the quality of language teaching in general classroom contexts (Brown, 2000, 2001; Lightbown, 2001) or in the university context (Allwright, 2003). Also, since Ellis’s principles are offered as “provisional specifications”, they are open to be discussed, interpreted, investigated so teachers can access them actively and critically. In this regard, it is argued that Ellis’s principles for successful instructed language learning (2005a, 2005b) could favorably be used by a shared community of educators in SL (second language) teacher preparation courses as a solid tool for classroom observation, as an aid to strengthen STs’ background knowledge, as an enforcement to their self-assessment and as a point of reference in their later teaching career.

1. The theoretical models of the study

1.1. Bridging the divide between SLA and LP through teacher education

The following outline covers the theoretical background of this study, presenting studies that have attempted to bridge the gap between SLA and LP within the context of teacher education. Particular attention is given to a fundamental element that structured my project: the features of the nexus Ellis proposed in 2010 to guide the relationship between SLA researchers, classroom researchers, teacher educators and language teachers. Also, particular reference is made to Erlam’s research in teacher education contexts which—like my project—was based on Ellis’s nexus (2010) and more specifically on the principles for Instructed Language

Learning (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b), used both as a filter to access SLA theoretical knowledge and as the model for evaluation of teaching practices.

The divide between SLA research and LP has been widely acknowledged. Stewart (2006) and Han (2007) relate that the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) organization attempted to bridge this gap. The SLA researchers, mostly teachers themselves, were increasingly concerned with the growing range of issues brought to light by the research but which were not always raised for pedagogical reasons (Ellis, 1997; Erlam, 2008).

If on the one hand, some argue there can be no divide since theory is in fact practice, then on the other, it must be acknowledged that theory and practice are conceived and performed differently in SLA and in LP. For example, the theory of the researchers is more explicit and involves technical knowledge whereas the theory of teachers is often translated in terms of the action it provokes; it is implicit and based on practical knowledge (cf. Ellis, 2008, 2010; Schon, 1983). Undoubtedly researchers and teachers communicate through different discourses (Gee, 1990) and have different perspectives and needs, related to their own distinct contexts. Clarke (1994) sees a kind of dysfunction in this theory/practice discourse caused by the peripheral position assigned to teachers who are often seen only as disciples of theoreticians. He argues this dysfunction can be resolved if teachers value themselves more and put their own experience of language teaching first.

In search of ways to bridge the divide between theory and practice, Ellis (2010) proposes a number of strategies that can be used by SLA researchers to facilitate “the process by which technical knowledge about SLA can interface with teachers’ own practical knowledge of teaching” (p. 198). Strategies can be based on implications sections of research reports, the preparation of summaries or stories accessible to practitioners, collaborative research among researchers and teachers, action research and exploratory practice. These strategies are mutually supportive. Still, they raise questions regarding what SLA can offer to teachers and how it can have a meaningful impact on what teachers do. Seeking answers, Ellis examines the nexus between SLA and LP that connects SLA researchers, classroom researchers, teacher educators and language teachers. Teacher education is the most appropriate field of mediation between SLA and LP, and teacher educators can play several functions: they can share information about SLA, mentor, and raise awareness. Researchers can take the role of teacher educators and teachers can act as classroom researchers. With this perspective, he proposes a set of eleven principles that can guide the relationship between SLA and LP.

The principles are meant to be used as a guide to design an SLA course for foreign language teaching programs. They identify which SLA topics may be relevant to teachers and explain how theory and technical knowledge can interface with teachers’ practical knowledge.

Principle 1 states that teachers should be helped to develop or modify their own existing theory on the way in which learners acquire the L2 under instructed learning. Ellis adds that the theory that teachers develop should be explicit. Principle 2 addresses the topics covered in SLA courses, which need to be demonstrably relevant to teaching. To assess relevance, handbooks for teachers could be consulted or teachers themselves could be invited to identify the topics that fit their needs the most. Principle 3 holds that topics should consist of “ideas” rather than “models”. Principle 4 stresses that texts must be comprehensible to teachers. The articles proposed should primarily be reports of classroom research (Principle 5) and any proposition arising from SLA theory should always be presented as a “provisional” specification (Principle 6).

According to Principle 7, the SLA course should encourage teachers to experience and reflect on the process of learning another language or create debates where they can relate what they learn in the course to their own experience of teaching an L2. To solidify the link between technical and practical knowledge, awareness-raising tasks based on L2 data or on SLA texts can be used (Principle 8). These can guide teachers to discover and reflect on the “ideas” presented in the text. Ellis highlights Erlam’s (2008) report of her in-service workshop for teachers as a good example of awareness raising activities.

Principle 9 argues for the need for teachers not only to become users of SLA research but also to be researchers in their own classroom. This can be done through collaborative research with an SLA researcher, action research or exploratory practice. It is important that the issues relate to teachers’ own understanding of language pedagogy. As for the role of the SLA researcher, it “should be that of facilitating the teacher’s research by providing relevant information from SLA and helping to develop appropriate data collection instruments and procedures” (Ellis, 2010, p. 196). Ellis suggests encouraging teachers to disseminate their own research through presentations or other forms of reporting. This is important to bridge the gap between

“researchers” and “teachers”. Principle 10 highlights the ideal that the teacher is the one who “ultimately determines the relevance of SLA constructs and findings for teaching” (p. 197) and that it is the SLA researcher who determines the relevance of the findings of teacher research for SLA. Lastly, Principle 11 implies that teacher educators need to evaluate their courses to establish which “ideas” were more useful to help teachers develop or modify their beliefs on instructed language learning.

In brief, in order to bridge the divide between SLA and LP, it is necessary that, whenever SLA researchers operate as teacher educators, they abandon the working structure of the academy and allow teachers to have their say. On the other hand, teachers should recognize the validity and importance of the technical knowledge that SLA research can convey. In this respect, Ellis (2010) points out that “somewhat surprisingly, there have been relatively few studies of how teacher educators approach SLA when functioning in these different roles and even less of what impact they have on teachers” (p. 193).

McDonough (2006) investigated whether teacher education had any effect on trainees’ actual teaching. She involved a group of teaching assistants in action research within a graduate-level seminar. After she provided the students with experience in conducting classroom research, they demonstrated an expanded view about research and understood the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. They used the experience to change their teaching practice and worked on action research even after the seminar.

Other studies predominantly investigated the effects that knowledge of SLA can have on trainees’ beliefs about language learning. Badger, McDonald, and White (2001) elicited the beliefs about language learning of students taking an undergraduate course in SLA. The students were asked to respond to Lightbown and Spada’s (1993) questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the course. While the control group not taking the course did not show any significant changes, the students involved in the SLA course demonstrated a shift from a stronger to a weaker behaviorist view in that they became less convinced on issues related to imitation and L1 interference. Peacock (2001) performed a longitudinal study on teachers’ beliefs about L2 learning. A cohort of 146 pre-service teachers were followed for three years through classroom observations and instruments which included self-report questionnaires. The investigation showed that the beliefs of these STs actually varied very little over the three years. Peacock suggests that trainers should actively guide reflection among trainees to challenge STs’ beliefs over time.

Farrell (2003, 2006) investigated the transition from a teacher education program to life in a real classroom for a first-year English language teacher in Singapore. Beginning language teachers are often shocked by the gap between their idealized visions of teaching and the realities of the classroom; Farrell suggests that the use of a “story structure” framework (setting – complication – resolution) may be one way of avoiding the disillusionment created by some first-year teaching experiences. Angelova (2005) also examined the development of a mixed group of teacher trainees. They were asked to follow some short lessons in Bulgarian, a language they did not know, to complete a journal, and to take over some discussion after the lessons. Although data showed few overall changes in the vision of teaching, the trainees found the short lessons they were given more useful than traditional teacher education.

Watzke (2007) investigated the variation of pedagogical content knowledge across time. He analyzed the beginning teaching experiences of nine teachers of French, German, and Spanish during their first two years of teaching at the high school level through reflective journals, classroom observations, and interviews. The results show that the theoretical knowledge supporting communicative language teaching (CLT) develops as pedagogical content knowledge through a process of teaching, conflict, reflection, and resolution which is specific to the in-service classroom context.

Erlam’s (2008) study focuses on the attempt to bridge the divide through the mediation of the teacher educator and also examines the necessary background knowledge needed for successful CLT. First, she gathered case studies of senior language teachers who showed evidence of the use of the principles for instructed language learning (Ellis 2005a, 2005b) in their teaching practices (Erlam, Sakui, & Ellis, 2006). Then, during a workshop for support services language advisors in New Zealand (NZ), taking the role of both teacher educator and researcher, she gave a key word for each principle and opened a discussion on the reasons why some principles had not been evidenced in the case studies. The discussion also included the relevance of each principle and the constraints to each in the context of day-to-day work (Erlam, 2008). The participants chose to use the principles in professional development sessions with both primary and secondary school language teachers. Once advisors started to use the principles in their observations and evaluations of teaching practice, they met again and were encouraged to discuss in small groups the relevance they gave to specific principles. It was also agreed that advisors should take one principle as key focus for

each year and enforce its use amongst teachers. When later the Ministry of Education (MOE) in NZ promoted a further project with the aim of helping language teachers in primary schools, advisors chose to use the principles as a key component of the program. They first presented the principles to teachers, who were encouraged to do action research to test the application of the principles in class, then they used a “progress standard” document designed to assess the participants’ teaching practice according to the principles. The outcomes of this project have substantial implications for teacher education which here played a central role in linking theory to practice.

Other studies have been carried by Erlam on SLTE which focused on the observation of teachers in a year-long professional learning program (Teaching Professional Development Program - TPD) that she directed in New Zealand for several years. What is important for the design of my study is that Erlam (2016) designed this course around Ellis’s principles for instructed language learning (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b). The TPD program that Erlam (2016) described aimed to encourage teachers who were already fluent in one language to learn another, so that they could be beginner language learners again, reflect on this learning experience with the eyes of teachers, and sit international language exams. Also, it aimed to empower practitioners with general as well as specific SLA pedagogical skills through a course run at a university for a total of eight days, in four blocks. Moreover, teachers were offered ‘in-school support’ in that they were visited four times over the course of the year by an In-School Support Facilitator (ISSF), who recorded meaningful utterances to discuss them with the teacher through two evaluation tools, the EPS and the Progress Standards. The tools were adapted from the case studies carried out by Erlam et al. (2006) with regard to the application of Ellis’s principles (2005a, 2005b). In 2015, Erlam reported that about 48 primary and secondary school language teachers who had completed the TPD (2015a). During the program, they had been introduced to TBLT and they had tried out language tasks in their classroom practice. Facilitators observed them and helped them assess their practices. A telephone interview was conducted one year after this experience to re-evaluate it and detect difficulties teachers might have come across. This was done to draw conclusions on what could be better implemented in the future SLA pedagogy courses based on TBLT. Erlam was able to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development program and determine the aspects of task-design which were difficult for teachers, in order to dismantle any risk of ambiguity in the process of teaching task criteria (see also Erlam, 2015b).

The problem space for my work is situated within the studies mentioned above. It tries to implement an SLTE project based on Ellis’s principles (2005 a, 2005b) and make it adherent to the Italian national context and requirements. It tries to expand Erlam’s (2008, 2015a, 2016) studies, shifting from education for teacher advisors or for in-service teachers to one for STs and from the context of a workshop or a professional development course to the context of a qualifying course. My study examines the effects of a set of seminars in the TFA course, designed within Ellis’s framework (Ellis, 2010) on STs’ methodological awareness and beliefs. It argues that students need to be co-researchers during their learning process and practicum and to be offered a solid theoretical lens to do critical observations, like the ten principles for instructed language learning (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b). The principles are presented below, together with the studies which investigate their application in the classroom and their perceived applicability for teachers. The principles are thus held to be a valuable theoretical lens for observations in pre-service school practicum.

1.2. The principles for instructed language learning (Ellis 2005a, 2005b): A theoretical lens for pre-service teachers’ classroom observations

Ellis’s principles for instructed language learning (2005a, 2005b) can be seen as a general education document of quality teaching derived from SLA research. They are offered as “provisional specifications” (in line with Stenhouse, 1975) and therefore they are not self-imposed, but rather lend themselves to be something that teachers and teacher educators can discuss, interpret, trial, and engage with (Erlam et al., 2006, p. 2). Research has largely attempted to direct teachers in second language classroom practices with specific guidelines drawn by scientific investigation (cf. Allwright, 2003; Brown, 2001, 2002; Lightbown, 2000) but what makes the principles a particularly appropriate theoretical lens in pre-service courses for school teachers is that they originate from the precise needs and requests of educational institutions. They are thus conceived for all second language teachers but particularly for those practicing in schools.

The principles were outlined within a project commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2005. The research project had two main objectives. As for the first, Professor Rod Ellis was asked to present an overview of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and—in light of that—introduce a

set of principles that could help teachers direct themselves towards effective classroom practices and evaluate their own language teaching (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b). The second objective was to present case studies of teacher practices and beliefs to find evidence of the ten principles in the classroom and to investigate second language pedagogy in light of these beliefs and practices (Erlam et al., 2006).

The two projects attempted to bridge the gap between SLA and LP (e.g., Erlam, 2015, 2016) and were soon followed by the publication of new specific guidelines for learning languages in New Zealand. These guidelines replaced those from the former curriculum (e.g., East, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2007, 2010, 2011). The principles have also been disseminated beyond NZ to research areas in Ghana, Iran, Vietnam and South Korea, as will be later discussed.

The 10 principles are listed here. Ellis's discussion will be summarized further on in the analysis.

Principle 1 - Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.

Principle 2 - Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.

Principle 3 - Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.

Principle 4 - Instruction needs to focus on developing implicit knowledge of the second language while not neglecting explicit knowledge.

Principle 5 - Instruction needs to take into account the learner's built-in syllabus.

Principle 6 - Successful instructed language learning requires extensive second language input.

Principle 7 - Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.

Principle 8 - The opportunity to interact in the second language is central to developing second language proficiency.

Principle 9 - Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.

Principle 10 - In assessing learners' second language proficiency, it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

Each principle is sustained by guidance on how to apply it and by a variety of theoretical perspectives, the main one being the computational model of second language learning (Lantolf, 1996), which holds that acquisition works by way of cognitive processing of input and output. CLT conceived within the framework of task-based language teaching (TBLT) methodology is the baseline to the whole set of principles and the MOE guidelines supported the idea of moving from less effective communicative teaching towards TBLT (e.g., East, 2012).

Ellis (2005a, 2005b) acknowledged the limitations of the computational model, which does not include reflections on the sociocultural aspects of learning. He admitted that there were sometimes controversial aspects to SLA and all these considerations led him to caution that the principles should be considered as provisional specifications, citing Stenhouse (1985). Ellis reviewed the principles in 2014 within the context of sociocultural theory, for which learning takes place within social interaction. Interaction is not seen only as an input-output process but more as an important mediator for language acquisition because the simple act of "talking about language leads to learning" (Ellis, 2014, p. 42). As a result of this review, Principles 11 and 12 were added.

Principle 11 - Learners need to engage collaboratively in talk about linguistic problems and try to agree on solutions to them.

Principle 12 - Instruction needs to take into account the subjective aspect to learning a new language.

As mentioned above, a second project was funded by the NZ MOE in 2005, which studied teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in light of the ten principles (Erlam et al., 2006). Six teachers were invited to participate. The participants of the research were two teachers of French as a foreign language (FL) and two of Japanese FL. These teachers were considered by the MOE to be models of "best practice". Meaningful common aspects emerged from the case studies, although each teacher translated their conception of pedagogy into different classroom practices. As for the main findings, there appeared to be no clear understanding of "built-in syllabus," and this led to the conclusion that "the easiest way to ensure that teaching is compatible with the learner's built-in syllabus is not to follow a structural syllabus" (Erlam et al., 2006, p. 40). When reporting the results connected to Principle 2, researchers pointed out that teachers

seemed to make little use of tasks, especially in junior classes. Given the misconception that tasks mainly involved free production, these were postponed to later years when they could be performed more easily by learners. This may be connected to the fact that opportunities for output (Principle 7) seemed to increase according to the proficiency level of learners, who were on occasion asked to produce mostly oral but also written texts, and that interaction (Principle 8) seemed to take place mainly in modelled conversation patterns where little evidence of negotiation of meaning was found, although teachers were agreeable to scaffolding learners while producing texts. Also, tasks were sometimes confused with language exercises as role-plays. According to Erlam et al. (2006), there was “a need [...] for teachers to think through more fully what a ‘task’ is and how they can incorporate them into lessons for learners at all levels” (p. 39).

Research studies were carried out to investigate teachers’ adherence to the ten principles and the challenges and difficulties language instructors faced in implementing language teaching efficiently. They all globally confirmed the conclusions drawn by Erlam et al. (2006) regarding the application of the principles, despite the obvious divergences emerging in the different contexts. Howard and Millar (2009), for example, pointed out that teachers in South Korea had concerns about priority issues, which they saw as major obstacles to the implementation of the principles: secondary school and university placement examinations, the high student/teacher ratios, and the teachers’ level of proficiency in English. What is more, the teachers in the study had never received meaningful training on language acquisition theories, group work management or issues related to individual differences. CLT appeared to them as incompatible with the South Korean socio-cultural background. The same concerns applied to the Indonesian context, investigated by Kartikawati and Andriani (2017), and the Iranian context, analyzed by Bagheri and Mehrnoush (2013), where lack of time, number of students per class, the national testing system, and the structure of language books came out as the most meaningful constraints. Another conclusion that Bagheri and Mehrnoush drew was that, surprisingly, teachers in private schools had a stronger awareness of the principles and disseminated them more widely in classes.

Connor and Nazari (2020) studied the perceived relevance and applicability of the ten principles in adult English foreign language (EFL) learning environment in Qatar, this time including students in the analysis. Results showed that students and teachers agreed on the importance of some principles but not others, especially those regarding focus on meaning vs. focus on form. Teachers in Qatar seemed to make use of the “strong” version of CLT (Howatt, 1984) while students seemed partial to the “weak” version, which is blended with more traditional methods like explicit grammar lessons. Furthermore, despite being aware of the importance of interaction, many learners felt embarrassed when interacting in English in groups.

Elsewhere, I have presented similar research focusing on the practices applied by fifteen EFL high school teachers in Italy according to the principles (Petrocelli, 2020, in press). The challenges that teachers faced in implementing the specifications were mainly the high number of students per class and the structure and requirements of General English (GE) certification exams. As for the application of the principles, the results present a complex picture, indicating the existence of two macro groups of practitioners. One smaller group was made up of four more traditional teachers who advocated the use of grammar-translation and more structured methods of teaching whereas the other consisted of seven teachers who aligned with more communicative approaches and applied task-based teaching, despite sometimes having a low level of awareness and without always applying all the task components, especially the need to achieve a clearly defined, non-linguistic goal. Between these two macro groups stood the four remaining teachers, who alternated between approaches. The internal constraints of the most traditional group of teachers seemed to block them from rearranging their teaching methodology into a more communicative approach. Their initial teacher education background, which occurred at the beginning of their 30-year long career, may further complicate this unwillingness or inability to adapt to CLT. This imprint was evidently hard to redefine and update in subsequent years.

Thus, varying contexts clearly have an impact on the quality of teachers’ performance but what we mainly see from the data is that, globally, there is little awareness of the theory that leads to a solid form of CLT practice. This originates not only from contextual constraints but also from a lack of cohesive, organic, clear, and straightforward plan of transmission of theory to practice through pre-service and in-service teacher education pathways.

The reason for the success of the NZ project “is that it made technical knowledge, that is, SLA research, accessible to teachers” (Erlam, 2008, p. 263), as Widdowson (1993) had suggested. The principles for instructed second language learning give teachers access to the knowledge of the community of SLA researchers, never before available to them, in an immediate and direct way. The principles offer clear

concepts in a commonly accepted basic, but substantial, technical language that teachers can easily comprehend and share amongst all SLA professionals, whether examining their own practices autonomously or with the guidance of a mediator such as an advisor or teacher educator.

This is the reason why I decided to implement a qualifying course for pre-service teachers offering the principles for instructed language learning (Ellis 2005a, 2005b) as the bulk of the necessary knowledge toolkit for SL teachers and why I decided to shape the course according to the framework that Ellis (2010) proposed, meant to solidify the nexus between SLA and LP through the mediation of teacher education. We have seen from previous research how strongly the imprint of pre-service teacher education can influence the identity of practitioners and how difficult it sometimes has been for some to rearrange their approach to conform to new theories. This is why I think it is fundamental that early bird teachers start their service in an educational environment that offers them a solid theoretical lens through which they can construct their methodological awareness, reflect on their teaching beliefs and perform structured observations of second language classes in their practicum.

Field observation within the classroom practicum plays a key role in this qualifying course. Research has shown that the focus of most SLTE programs has primarily been on subject knowledge rather than on pedagogy. In many cases, STs are sent into teaching apprenticeships without any tools to critically assess senior teachers' practices and with the understanding that they are simply apprentices, whereas the practicing teachers are complete experts, which is not necessarily true (cf. Burns & Richards, 2018). The presence of a practicum in a qualifying course for pre-service teachers has a significant role in that it involves active learning and allows STs to view SLA ideas applied in real teaching contexts. This is essential to help shape their professional identity, facilitate cooperation with teachers and supervisors, establish relationships with students and colleagues and help manage the classroom (Burns & Richards, 2018). Unfortunately, the presence of a practicum has been quite unstable in Italy, and thus STs have not had the chance to grow and develop within such a framework. As stated above, the Italian teacher education system, which will be outlined in the next paragraph, is characterized by a substantial instability for both the teacher education system and the enrolment procedures, given the frequent governmental turnovers. This study in fact emerged from an attempt to contribute to the creation of solid educational pathways, which can both shape new teachers and eventually also nurture in-service ones during their career.

1.3. Pre-service teacher education in Italy

As Ellis (2010) points out when outlining the relationship between the actors involved in the SLA-LP nexus, the roles they perform "are, to some extent at least, determined by the wider context in which they operate" (p. 191) and therefore it is necessary to outline the latest history and policies of the Italian educational system in order to understand how a more solid connection between SLA researchers and language pedagogy in the teacher education field could be beneficial to teachers' education.

The Italian type of enrolment for new teachers has frequently varied over past decades. This has prevented mentoring institutions from stabilizing organic forms of initial teacher education and identifying a shared set of background knowledge and competences for new teachers, second language teachers included. As Barbieri (2010) points out, in the last two decades there has been a frequent alternation of left- and right-wing parties and the turn-taking winning coalition frequently nullified previous legislation. The impact of this instability on the teacher training system was not taken into account by decision makers. As a result of this marginalization, the Italian teacher education system remains underdeveloped,

[lacking] sound experiences in order to make decisions, and very weak, and it is exposed to the wind of political changes: instead of growing as an autopoietic system, able to give itself the rules of working, it depends on external decisors, often in strong distony with the real need of a school system and a teacher training system strictly connected and functionally co-operating (Barbieri, 2010, p. 24).

This is because while political decision-making tends to focus on the short term, teacher education needs a long time to stabilize innovation. What is more, for decades, the national training system has been alternating between the so-called simultaneous model, in which the professional skills are embedded in the whole educational curriculum, and the consecutive model, where a strong disciplinary competence is required, followed by a one- or two-year program of teaching-oriented curriculum. This ultimately increases the discrepancy and decreases the uniformity in teacher education across all levels.

In 1999 an opportunity for uniformity arose when all future secondary teachers in the Italian school system were to receive a consistent type of academic training. A consortium of universities in each region was created with the institution of the *Scuola di specializzazione all'insegnamento secondario* (SSIS, Interacademic graduate school of secondary school teacher training.). This decision allowed the implementation of commonly shared educational pathways among universities as well as between mentors from both the academic world and secondary schools. This exchange permitted universities to offer a strong theoretical disciplinary knowledge and high schools to offer the possibility for STs to put these theories into practice. This collaboration had little time to be nurtured and metabolized because it only lasted until 2009 when it was suspended by political turnovers.

Fortunately, the collaboration between universities and secondary schools continued through *Tirocinio formativo attivo* (TFA, Active formative training), which replaced SSIS courses in 2010, with a shortened time span of one academic year. TFA programs were managed by universities in collaboration with regional authorities. STs carried out their practicum under guidance of a school tutor in host schools. Course topics were defined at the national level and included pedagogical competences, disciplinary contents, and active training and observation in schools for approximately 400 hours. Unfortunately, this attempt at a uniform and standardized approach to teacher education was also eradicated by subsequent political decisions.

Today there is no longer pre-service training for secondary school teachers since entry requirements for the teaching career were redefined by Law 107 in 2015. Based on the results of a compulsory national competitive examination taken after graduation, the top tier of competitors is awarded teaching contracts that last three years during which a sort of apprenticeship must be carried out. In the first year, newly employed teachers are required to complete 50 hours of compulsory training, 20 hours of which through an online platform offering opportunities for communication, discussion, and exchange of materials among other apprentices. This is followed by a two-year paid internship at the end of which secondary school teachers are awarded a permanent national contract.

This whole system implies that new teachers learn predominantly by doing and therefore they are not exposed to teaching methodologies, nor are their beliefs questioned or discussed before they start their teaching career. Not only did this ministerial move eliminate the chance to experiment and stabilize the innovations carried out by former legislation but it also blocked the avenues of collaboration that had been established among researchers, teacher educators and schools through either SSIS or TFA courses. This means that now, Italy is arguably taking a risk by sending new teachers into class without any tools to critically self-assess their teaching practices.

The *Education and Training Monitor* by the European Commission (2019) has reported that Italy is among countries that will have to replace around half of their secondary school teaching workforce in the next decade. This implies that there is and there will be a need to train new teachers and it is evermore necessary to share practices and pursue common forms of second language teacher education.

The *European Profile for Language Teacher Education* (EPOSTL, 2007) reflects this urge toward uniformity not only in Italy but in the whole of Europe in the specific field of second language teacher education. While offering a frame of reference through descriptors that provide a systematic way of considering competences, the profile advises that these descriptors should not be considered as a checklist of dos and don'ts but rather as a stimulus for researchers, teacher educators, STs and teachers to discuss what learning and teaching principles feed into each competence. In other words, the EPOSTL does not address the theoretical background needed for STs to understand that the behaviors and practices they apply respond to specific theoretical views and have specific effects on language learning processes. As said before, my work tries to offer this background knowledge through Ellis's (2005a, 2005b) principles for successful instructed language learning within the framework of a course design that has specifically been created to strengthen the nexus between SLA and language pedagogy (Ellis, 2010).

1.4. Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of my study is to examine the effects of a group of seminars designed within Ellis's (2010) framework and held within a qualifying teacher course to encourage STs' methodological awareness. I will examine what the STs learned to determine whether this project is transferrable and applicable elsewhere. In particular, STs' observations of senior teachers' classroom practices through the theoretical lens of the principles for instructed language learning (Ellis 2005a, 2005b) will be taken as evidence of the evolution of the students' capabilities to recognize and understand successful language teaching practices

and to apply the principles later on in their career. Their understanding of the contextual constraints that shape those practices will also be considered. As mentioned earlier, the study argues that students need to be co-researchers during their learning process while being offered a solid theoretical lens to do critical observations.

Thus, I can frame my research questions in the following terms:

- What did the STs gain by being asked to learn and apply the theoretical lens of the principles for instructed language learning (Ellis 2005a, 2005b) in their observations of senior teachers' practices?
- How have these STs evolved into in-service teachers in terms of their own understanding of language teaching practices through the lens of the principles?

2. Methodology

2.1. Design for the group of seminars on the principles in pre-service teacher education

The project that I present draws on a reflective model of teacher education integrated into a craft/apprenticeship model. The approach acknowledges that the participants are mostly un-experienced STs who have not thoroughly engaged with practices in classrooms nor hold strong beliefs to sustain these practices.

I organized a group of seminars on the principles (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b) within a wider course I held on EFL teaching methodology for the TFA teacher qualifying course held at the University for Foreigners of Siena in 2015. This course was held fully in English and designed for postgraduates in English language and literature who wanted to become EFL teachers in Italian lower and upper secondary schools. Seven STs took part in the course. The seminars were cyclical and were focused on specific principles each time. Each cycle of seminars included these phases:

Preparatory phase:

Students read excerpts from articles related to the principles that would be presented in the following cycle of seminars. This phase helped familiarize with the issues raised by each principle and warm up on the specific vocabulary (e.g., built-in syllabus, focused task, ...).

Phase 1:

The principles were presented by the trainer and discussed in the group. Students thus had the chance to match the concepts shown in the readings with the principle presented. The following debate gave way to clarification of doubts and sharing of ideas.

Phase 2:

Field observations were carried out through a questionnaire on the principles. When needed, specific teaching behaviors or possible exchanges of ideas with the observed teachers were jotted down on a notebook. This was done to increase the trainees' awareness of the theory behind teachers' practices and their ability to observe classroom behaviors critically and with solid argumentation drawn from SLA research. Also, trainees had the chance to envisage the challenges teachers face every day, which can create obstacles to the application of some CLT practices.

Phase 3:

Trainees gave their feedback on field observations through group discussion. This activity was a chance for the trainee to check whether their understanding of the practices in light of the principles were shared by everyone, to clarify doubts, to leave issues open for re-discussion after new observations.

Phase 4:

Trainees wrote their final report on the overall experience. The aim of this activity was to help STs structure the narrative of their learning activities and in so doing evaluate the experience according to what was particularly beneficial for their growth and development as qualified teachers.

Ellis's (2005a, 2005b) principles were introduced at a stage where STs had already become familiar with the CLT approach and the methods and techniques connected to it. In particular, STs had come across the presentation, production and practice (PPP) paradigm, which combines CLT with more traditional methods, and the TBLT paradigm, which is the baseline for the principles in that it more effectively addresses the demands of a student-centered classroom where language is used as it is in natural communication (cf. Ellis, 2003). Despite some adaptation, the overall criteria for the outline of the group of seminars I hereby present are derived from Ellis (2011, p. 19), in which he gives a practical example of a unit on corrective feedback as part of an SLA course for teachers within the framework for the SLA-LP nexus.

Aim: The aim was to introduce content concepts through the principles (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b) and then encourage STs to observe senior teachers' practices through the theoretical lens offered by the specifications. The purpose was to give students a practical tool derived from SLA theory to do critical observations, and thus to develop their capability to recognize and understand successful language teaching practices, as well as to understand the contextual affordances and constraints that shape those practices.

Text (in the Preparatory phase): Ellis (2005a) - students were told about the principles that would be presented in the next seminar and they were asked to read excerpts from the following studies related to each principle as preliminary work on the topic.

Principle 1: Lewis, 1993; Foster, 2001; Myles, 2004.

Principle 2: DeKeyser, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Long, 1996.

Principle 3: Ellis, 2001; Richards, 2007.

Principle 4: DeKeyser, 1998; Ellis, 1993 ; Krashen, 1981.

Principle 5: Krashen, 1981; Pienemann, 1989.

Principle 6: Krashen, 1981.

Principle 7: Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998; Swain, 1995.

Principle 8: Lantolf, 1996, 2000; Long, 1996.

Principle 9: Dörnyei, 2001.

Principle 10: Ellis, 2003; Norris & Ortega, 2000.

Supporting research articles (in Preparatory phase and in Phase 1): Excerpts from studies and theory related to each principle were offered to help STs identify key constructs and empower them with technical vocabulary (input, output, interaction, types of tasks, etc.). Reference to these excerpts was made during the trainer's presentation of the principles in the seminar as to make the connection clear between the excerpts and the principles. Particular attention was given to the principles outlined in Ellis 2005b across the whole series of seminars. Most of the reading was carried out during the seminars.

Evaluation of "ideas" (in Phase 1): After the lecture where supporting literature was examined, examples of good practices were raised in problem-solving activities on the applicability of each specification. Each principle was discussed and the STs were invited to give their feedback or hypothesize possible modifications according to their beliefs.

Awareness-raising task (in Phase 2): STs were asked to trace evidence of the application of the principles during their practicum, which consisted of EFL classroom observation in lower and upper secondary schools. The seven STs were primed to use the questionnaire during theory classes. During field observation they were also asked to jot down descriptions of specific student and teacher behaviors related to the use of the principles and to exchange views of beliefs on instructed learning with the observed teachers.

Questionnaire (Appendix): The questionnaire was composed of yes/no questions, some of which were followed by scaled questions. The questions were drawn from the description of the principles that Ellis proposed, with guidance on how to operationalize them (2005a, 2005b). The questions were discussed with STs before observations so that they could raise questions or propose adjustments. Entries were structured simply to aid STs to detect behaviors clearly. STs observed a total of 15 teachers during their lessons for a minimum of 10 hours for each teacher.

Research project (Phase 3): The results of the observations were discussed in plenary sessions of the seminars. Each principle was analyzed in terms of whether the senior teacher appeared to have used it and with which practice or strategy. Moreover, since some teachers were observed by more than one ST, data were compared and any form of discrepancy in responses was examined through vivid and constructive discussion, which offered STs the possibility to further increase their awareness of teaching methodologies.

Evaluation (Phase 4): At the end of the course, STs were asked to produce a written report on this experience in which they were asked to present the theory that they had learned, describe the most significant practices observed, comment on those practices, and reflect on how their beliefs and level of awareness had changed over the course of the seminars.

2.2. Data collection

Data was collected through the following methods and during the following phases of the seminars.

2.2.1. Questionnaire on the application of the principles (during Phase 2)

STs were asked to trace evidence of the application of the principles during their observations by way of a questionnaire designed to elicit such practices (Appendix). They were primed to use the questionnaire during theory classes.

2.2.2. In-depth discussions after observations (during Phase 3)

A field-observation notebook was used during discussions with a single page for each principle. The researcher completed a set of field notes for each plenary class of the seminar by jotting down observed STs' comments relevant to each principle. In terms of research ethics, prior consent was obtained from informants.

2.2.3. Student teachers' written reports (during Phase 4)

In their final reports, STs were asked to describe and comment on the most meaningful practices they observed in class. The students' qualitative notes provide evidence of the growing sophistication in STs' understanding of teaching and learning through Ellis's principles along with heightened awareness regarding the contextual constraints facing teachers. The seminars were held in English but the report was written in Italian, so the quotes from reports will be translated.

2.2.4. Questionnaires to three of the STs after five years' in-service experience

Five years after the TFA course, three of the seven teachers were asked to respond to a questionnaire. Questions were related to the role the principles had played in their teaching approach, how they felt their teaching competencies had developed during the course and after it, and the way in which classroom observations contributed to the development of their methodological awareness. They were also asked if they were satisfied with the seminars and if they would transfer the model to other teacher qualifying courses.

2.3. Case studies

Data is shared through the case studies of three STs. The objective is to discover if the STs, armed with the knowledge of the principles, were able to observe classroom activities through that theoretical lens and whether and how it then influenced the quality and degree of their understanding of teaching and learning. The most meaningful feedback that they gave during the seminar discussions and the remarks that they made in the written reports were used as qualitative notes.

Studying the answers on the questionnaires completed after five years' in-service experience aided in understanding if these former STs actually saw a reward in having received this type of pre-service education. Did they find that the principles were actually useful for their teaching orientation? Do they remain useful?

Benedetta, Chiara, and Giuseppe's cases were chosen because they narrate three different learning stories and offer three different perspectives on the principles. Benedetta was particularly interested in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), so she was able to envision the principles being used in this kind of context. She also had the chance to observe particularly good practices by teachers who implemented TBLT. Chiara's story is interesting because she observed two teachers with diametrically opposed teaching styles and had the chance to increase her awareness of the dos and don'ts of CLT practices. This also

happened to Giuseppe, who enriched the discussions with insightful comments related to assessment as well as to the influence of GE certification exams on classroom teaching practices. Importantly, the comments they raise, especially Giuseppe's, often integrate not only SLA but also pedagogical insights. Therefore, these case studies could be regarded as "a means of bridging theory and practice and demonstrating the complexity of teaching as a profession" (Crandall, 2000, p. 40).

3. Data analysis

3.1. Case study A (Benedetta)

3.1.1. Feedback after classroom observations

When Benedetta started her TFA course, she had taught EFL in a private language school for a total of 55 hours at an elementary and advanced level, so she had had minimal teaching experience. Benedetta spent 10 hours observing in a lower high school and 150 in an upper high school, which was divided into two areas: a lyceum focused on applied science and a technical college. Secondary education in Italy lasts eight years and is divided in two stages: *scuola secondaria di primo grado* (lower secondary school), also known as *scuola media*, and *scuola secondaria di secondo grado* (upper secondary school). The middle school lasts three years from the age of 11 to age 14, and the upper secondary from 14 to 19. The first two years of upper high school are compulsory; the remaining three years are voluntary. There are three types of *scuola secondaria di secondo grado* and students can choose what type to attend: *liceo* (lyceum), *istituto tecnico* (technical college), *istituto professionale* (vocational college).

In her practicum, Benedetta observed classes and taught some lessons under guidance of her school-tutors. Since she was interested in ESP, she chose to observe also some of these classes, so she was able to spot the presence of principles in this specific context. She carried out her observations in the last three years of Italian secondary school, where students are required to learn general and specialized language uses. They study English literature in the lyceum or, if they attend a technical school, they must learn the ESP related to their field of study (Chemistry, Electronics, Information Technology, Mechanics, Energy, etc.). Benedetta observed ESP classes in a lyceum with one teacher, and at a technical school in the specialization of Chemistry and Mechanics with another teacher. Although she observed four teachers in total, most of her comments regard two who both taught in upper high school classes. She pointed out:

Excerpt 1.

I was particularly interested in two classes of the second biennium of upper high school (3rd and 4th year), both with a B1 level going to B2 (CEFR - Common European Framework, Council of Europe, 2001). The approach used can be defined as CLT since the priority is that students speak English in real and active contexts.

As for Principle 1, Benedetta saw that formulaic chunks were used as a type of recast (Long, 1996, p. 436) for higher-level students. She noticed the two teachers tended to change the sentence components that were structured incorrectly without interrupting the flow of speech and—once the oral production was finished—asked the students to repeat the utterance to help them memorize the correct pattern. During seminars, Benedetta said she thought teaching formulaic chunks would be a monotonous activity for either teachers and students, but seeing senior teachers performing activities like the ones mentioned, she understood how formulaic chunks could be also simply presented through the repetition of the correct word/phrase in teachers' feedback, in a way that she thought useful but not invasive.

She also noticed how these two teachers performed practices which were primarily meaning-oriented (Principle 2). One of them, in particular, stressed that her main concern was to keep communication going. Benedetta recounted the experience of seeing these teachers perform tasks in ESP classes. For example, in the fourth year of the lyceum, students usually study Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The teacher asked her class to watch the Zeffirelli version of the tragedy, then divided it into groups and asked each to analyze one character and present it to the rest of the class. The goal was to outline the actions of each character and determine which had the greatest responsibility for the tragic end. To do this, a class discussion was opened, and students were asked to use their own linguistic resources to express their opinion and come to a common decision.

A teacher in the Mechanics ESP class proposed a task on "Pros and Cons of the Electric Engine." The teacher reported students' feedback on the whiteboard. She then divided the class into four groups, who were

asked to write two lists, each with five pros and five cons. Finally, students had to debate in plenary to make a shared decision on the most relevant advantages and disadvantages. Students were then asked to write a brief summary on the topic discussed in class. In the same class, the teacher presented the topic “Alternative and Green Fuels,” and students were asked to prepare a presentation in groups with the aid of the Internet and their mechanics books. The presentation had to include elements like types of fuel, ways of production, and costs. Each group had to choose a speaker to present their findings. Benedetta commented:

Excerpt 2.

The meaning-oriented activities in these ESP classes show how the student-teacher interaction can be less asymmetrical than in the GE classes, since often students are the experts of the meanings conveyed. What is more, being your teacher’s teacher definitely increases motivation and self-esteem.

Benedetta reported having seen these teachers insert focus on form activities (Principle 3) at the end of this kind of lessons, mostly by writing the frequent mistakes of the students on the blackboard, thus to favor reflection strategies and metalinguistic awareness. She recounted having viewed a lesson where form was retrieved from students’ implicit knowledge (Principle 4). Benedetta said she was captivated by the way in which one of the two teachers presented future prediction through a brainstorming activity on “What worries you about the future?” She recorded students’ feedback on the whiteboard and, in doing so, elicited expressions and structures used for this function. Whenever students produced non-targeted utterances, the teacher would simply write them correctly on the whiteboard to encourage students’ autonomous processing of language data. She then divided the class into four groups. Each group was asked to create two lists, one with five negative predictions and one with five positive ones. Students then had to debate in plenary and agree on the best and the worst prediction for the future. It was only at the end of the task that the teacher took a moment to reflect on the explicit knowledge about the future tense that had arisen spontaneously through the exercise.

Benedetta commented that this teacher showed consideration of the built-in syllabus (Principle 5) since she only presented new input when students were developmentally ready; the teacher also used the advantages of the inductive approach by leading the learners through the discovery of grammar by way of tasks. She showed appreciation for the approach used, which clearly promoted students’ interaction, participation, critical thinking for a deeper understanding of the language. Benedetta pointed out that the two teachers made extensive use of English in class (Principle 6), complete with videos and realia. Instructions were provided in English and repeated several times until completely understood but this does not mean that Italian was completely avoided. These teachers used it after having tried, with no success, to make themselves understood through rephrasing and miming. Also, Italian was used when the teacher or the students wanted to capture each other’s attention at an emotional or affective level, for example by telling jokes.

As for the output (Principle 7), Benedetta noticed that the teachers who advocated for the importance of communicative approaches tended to use scaffolding techniques to co-construct the output with their students and help them develop fluency and automaticity. They tried to use some specific language elements during the lesson. For example, Benedetta reports about expressions that related to the main topic of the lesson, like pre-modified elements that are typical of ESL uses (“a compact battery-operated black and white printer”) and did not mind students using them in the output even if deep understanding of these elements had not taken place yet. As for interaction, Benedetta realized how challenging it was for students to be involved in it and for teachers to promote it in class. She wrote on her final report (Principle 8):

Excerpt 3.

The complexity of interlocution derives from multiple challenging factors: you cannot plan what you are going to say, you must negotiate, you must be ready for the unexpected. What is more, the spoken language is more fragmentary, more immediate, with a weaker cohesive structure than the written language. It is not surprising to see that interaction represents the major challenge for both the teacher and the learner.

Benedetta reported two experiences that were significant illustrations of how any situation, moment or form of input can become a catalyst for valuable interaction. She mentioned having seen teachers start the lesson with themes like “The Secrets of a Longer Life” or “Healthy Food vs Junk Food” asking students to give their ideas, thus giving way to debates that were so involving that they lasted almost the whole lesson. In this way, Benedetta said, “meaning is actively co-constructed through the negotiation of each interlocutor.”

These teachers also helped students participate in language-related activities that were beyond their current level of proficiency and offered a full range of contexts for learners’ interaction. Benedetta reported on the use of authentic materials (newspaper articles, literary texts, films, TV series, etc.) to start conversation activities, in which the teacher encouraged the use of words and expressions newly learned through the input. This happened often in the ESP classes, where on some occasions students were already familiar with the topics presented in the input materials (in fact, sometimes they were more knowledgeable than the teachers) but had not yet learned the terms in English. Benedetta reflected on how interaction can only occur under these conditions:

Excerpt 4.

a positive environment, harmonious relationships among interlocutors, interest for the topic, which lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1981) and increase motivation, making communication become more effective

She was therefore able to realize how important it is to take account of individual differences in learners as well as of their preferences (*themselves, their life, their tastes, their opinions*) (Principle 9). She mentioned how in the final year of lyceum, a teacher introduced a module on “The Dystopian Novel” asking students to read and comment on excerpts by Orwell, Huxley, Bradbury and Golding. The teacher explained that students in this class were particularly interested in this type of novel and were eager to find out about novels that they had not come across in their personal reading. Benedetta commented,

Excerpt 5.

In this way, the approach to literature becomes more student-centered.

As for analysis or assessment (Principle 10), Benedetta stated that in her short teaching experience she had never given her students open tests, especially task completion or role-plays. But during the observations, she watched students perform both oral and written free productions and seen moments in which students were asked to present a PowerPoint presentation to their peers. She said that this helped her to have a clearer idea of how to assess free production.

3.1.2. Feedback 5 years after the TFA course

In 2016, soon after the TFA course, Benedetta and all the trainees who followed the TFA course became in-service teachers after passing a competitive public exam. Benedetta ended up teaching in the upper high school where she had done her practicum, so she had the chance to collaborate with her former tutors.

She states that the knowledge of the principles helped improve her teaching practices:

Excerpt 6.

especially in adopting a more meaning-oriented approach through task-based activities (e.g., internet projects, web quests) and in giving students more opportunities for output in the classroom (e.g., role-plays, class discussions, referential questions) as well as providing corrective feedback when needed (e.g., recasting) (Principles 2, 3, and 7).

Before becoming a qualified teacher, she claims she instinctively applied principles 6, 8, and 9. In fact she regularly exposed students to real-life input and gave them opportunities to interact and negotiate input through cooperative learning. She was also particularly attentive of students’ different learning strategies, so she would encourage them to share their learning techniques through the VARK test. This test was primarily developed by the Lincoln University of New Zealand in 1998 (Fleming, 2009). It helps learners identify their learning styles through visual, aural, reading, writing, and kinesthetic (VARK) instruments. This experience sensitized Benedetta to the fact that identifying and employing appropriate learning styles can help select the

right teaching styles for everyone. On the other hand, Benedetta did not have awareness of Principles 1 and 10 before the seminars. So, after the seminars she started to adopt more rote-learning strategies with beginning and intermediate students within the framework of a lexical approach (e.g., teaching them a lexical chunk as one unanalyzed item). When it comes to assessment, she says she now uses open tests like task completion or role-plays, which she did not often employ before the TFA course. At present, she would like to apply Principle 5 more. She could not imagine teaching without a textbook and admits that could be a mental and structural constraint so she hopes that she can become more detached from it as her expertise grows.

Benedetta claims the seminars helped her become more aware of the importance of applying the principles during the learning and teaching process and she feels that all principles are useful.

Excerpt 7.

The questionnaire was a powerful observation tool during my year as a student teacher since it helped me notice many aspects of which I would not otherwise be aware. It was a consciousness-raising tool as it made me deeply aware of my own teaching style.

She is grateful to have been given the opportunity to observe senior teachers in the classroom environment because she learned so much from their expertise in every aspect of language teaching and she thinks the principles could definitely help other STs develop their teaching skills.

Excerpt 8.

It was a fundamental step in becoming the teacher that I am today

It is important to highlight the fact that none of the senior teachers observed were native English speakers. There are often strong, unjustified prejudices against non-native English teachers despite their qualification and experience. It is meaningful to see that no specific reflections on the topic were raised, neither by Benedetta nor by the other trainees on their beliefs associated with native speakerism; this could be a sign of their general appreciation of the professional role and the competence in English of their senior teachers.

3.2. Case study B (Chiara)

3.2.1. Feedback after classroom observations

When Chiara started her TFA course, she had had some experience teaching Italian as an SL and EFL in two Italian private schools. She then spent eight months as teaching assistant in Germany. The only teaching experience she had held in Italian high schools was in a lyceum for three weeks, when she oversaw six classes. Chiara did her practicum in an upper high school and in a lower high school, but since she spent only one week in the latter, most of the remarks she made in the seminar discussions and in the reports regard her experience in upper high school. This school was a lyceum, divided into two sections, one focused on languages, the other on biology. Chiara had the chance to both view lessons and try out some teaching practices with the supervision of her tutors.

During classroom discussions, Chiara explained she had become particularly intrigued by the sharp differences of the practices of two teachers who worked in the same school and taught in the same grades. Therefore, she raised many comments on these differences. These two teachers will be referred to as A (with a stronger CLT approach) and B (more inspired by traditionalist views).

As for Principle 1, Chiara said that Teacher B did not seem to push students to learn memorized patterns. She tended to interrupt them to correct their pronunciation or translate words they did not know. Chiara commented that this clearly did not increase student self-esteem or the development of their communicative strategies. Teacher A instead helped students build a repertoire of formulaic expressions. Words and phrases were written on the whiteboard, and students were asked to keep record of them in a copybook. Chiara pointed out that this was a great help for them to memorize the words.

As for Principle 2, Chiara did not give accounts of activities that respond to the criteria of a task. For example, students were asked to prepare and present projects in group work. During their presentations, the teacher encouraged students to use their own linguistic resources to communicate effectively but these exercises in situational language practice cannot be considered as plain communicative tasks because there is

no information gap and no non-linguistic outcome. Despite this, Chiara described teacher A's practices as mostly focused on communicative skills in real life situations, and she claimed:

Excerpt 9.

As Lakoff (1999) argues with his theory of embodiment, you learn if you use the language, not if you memorize grammar rules mechanically.

Chiara recounted how Teacher A made sure that content related to form (Principle 3); this was presented through referential questions that pushed students to elicit language practices and thus become more aware of them. She preferred to guide students through awareness of form by way of focused tasks. Chiara also witnessed moments of corrective feedback followed by guided reflection of grammar mistakes in activities that were not primarily aimed at the improvement of grammar mastery. For example, Teacher A spent much time correcting students' open written responses connected to a reading activity. Regarding Teacher B, Chiara pointed out:

Excerpt 10.

Grammar rules are presented briefly in Italian, often with no examples on the whiteboard but only reading the rule on the textbook. Students are just pushed to learn from the book at home. These are episodes of focus on forms, which involve a primary emphasis on linguistic structures.

As for implicit knowledge (Principle 4), Teacher A was well practiced in negotiating meaning to fill linguistic gaps that might block communication. In so doing, she used elicitation or clarification requests to help learners process the language data of the input and become aware of the choice of language necessary for effective communication. If needed, when students had finished speaking, she spent time encouraging awareness. In case mistakes were made only by distraction, she did not insist on reflection but recast only to reformulate the utterance into a correct version without interrupting communication. On the contrary, Teacher B tended to interrupt students frequently to correct them when they spoke ("No, that's wrong!"). Self-correction was not encouraged, and learners were not invited to question how structural features work. Online planning was not allowed when students were pushed to verbalize their implicit knowledge. Chiara adds:

Excerpt 11.

The explanation of grammar rules is done in Italian through a constant comparison with Italian structures, which on the one hand facilitates the learning of the rule but on the other tends to create confusion in learners, in my opinion.

Chiara noticed that peer correction helped students retrieve information from their implicit knowledge of form. She argued:

Excerpt 12.

The explanation students can have from their peers becomes a sort of scaffolding for them. Also, those who explain can benefit from this activity because they have the chance to revise forms and make ideas clearer for themselves.

Teacher A seemed to take consideration of the built-in syllabus by making sure that learners were developmentally ready to acquire specific features, but she preferred to expand the time needed to teach, rather than modify the order of the syllabus in the textbook (Principle 5). For example, Chiara recounted that the teacher changed the topic of a class when she realized her students had never come across some preparatory content in the years before. To Chiara, this showed "a great level of expertise and flexibility." Instead, an excessive use of textbooks was made by Teacher B. Chiara observed students who were correcting a reading activity for homework:

Excerpt 13.

Every activity is corrected entirely by one student. Turns are taken according to the order of desks in the room. The students in the other part of the room are thus sure it will not be their turn to correct until the following 15 minutes, so they do not feel motivated to be focused on what the rest of the class is doing. These activities, if presented in a more involving way, would be very useful for the development of students' comprehension skills but instead in this way they only aid the 'best ones in class', also because they are corrected quickly with the rush of reaching the end of the unit, independently from the actual needs of the students.

In terms of input exposure (Principle 6), Chiara pointed out that Teacher B, whose practices seemed to cling more to grammar-translation methods, made little or no use of English in class. She intended to wait to use L2 until students had reached a level of communicative autonomy. Opportunities for exposure to input were more often proposed by Teacher A. The same happened for the output (Principle 7). The more traditional teacher seemed to constantly push students to produce correct output and did not always collaborate to sustain their productions. Teacher A, conversely, promoted interaction (Principle 8) and tended to use scaffolding techniques to co-construct the output with her students and help them develop fluency and automaticity:

Excerpt 14.

Teacher A collaborates with her students in negotiation of meaning to solve communication breakdowns. She suggests possible solutions in English to finish the sentence the student might be trying to say.

At higher levels, Chiara reported several moments of real interaction and collaborative communication. In the lyceum, students were often asked to give personal opinions on the historical or literary works studied and this gave way to fruitful debate. Some teachers were prone to modify the spatial setting of the seats to create a more communicative setting to aid circle time or group work activities. Teacher B did not create contexts where students had a reason to attend to language, which means she did not stimulate students to speak for a real communicative purpose, but for the purpose of simplistic exercises. For example, she asked students to perform a role-play in pairs. The dialogue was scripted in the language coursebook in an area dedicated to word expansion. The subject was food shopping. It included blank areas that students had to fill in with the newly learnt names of groceries. Thus, interaction was confined to some degree of text/input manipulation, which could not be considered as a task. As for Principle 9, Chiara considered individual difference firstly in terms of the relationship that teachers establish with their students.

Excerpt 15.

Teacher A enters class with a smile, asks students to take their seats with an affectionate mood; she calls students by their names and sometimes with nicknames derived from their names or surnames (e.g., "Can you please stop talking, Rebecchina, darling?"). It is totally the opposite with Teacher B instead, who enters the classroom only sometimes smiling. Sometimes she looks indifferent and she does not seem to have the same good relationship with her students as the other teacher has.

Also, Chiara raised an interesting comment on the motivational constraints that can emerge with a grammar-translation method applied to young students:

Excerpt 16.

This approach only works when students show strong intrinsic motivation, they are willing to deepen their knowledge by practicing outside of school but surely this does not have a positive effect on weaker and less motivated students, since it does not take account elements like cognitive styles or learning strategies. This means that often weaker learners of English start hating English, thinking it is a "difficult" subject, and raise their affective filter. Learning a language instead should occur in a relaxing environment with no anxiety.

As for assessment (Principle 10), Chiara observed that no task-based assessment was used in either written or oral texts. Also, Chiara reported having seen much grammar assessment performed, especially by the classes of Teacher B, who asked students to prepare and present group projects. During their presentations, the teacher corrected them in pronunciation and grammar. Feedback was given in Italian. At the end students were asked to read but the teacher constantly interrupted their reading to correct their pronunciation. In her final reports Chiara pointed out:

Excerpt 17.

The idea that teaching must regard practical language uses through CLT is still not commonly spread among all teachers. To this end, I hope there is soon going to be a turnover of EFL teaching staff.

3.2.2. Feedback after 5 years from the TFA course

Chiara has become a lower high school teacher. Five years after the TFA course, she acknowledges that the principles helped her improve her teaching approaches and practices:

Excerpt 18.

...because before getting to know them, I actually did not have almost any teaching experience at all. So, I had the chance to start teaching, having the principles in mind, and I could use them as a point of reference when I didn't know exactly how to react to some students' response or how to manage certain situations.

Chiara said that she did not know the principles at the start of the seminars and she found Principle 4 particularly interesting, as she had never reflected on the difference between implicit and explicit knowledge and learning process in the students' minds. Before the seminars she intuitively followed Principles 9 and 10 without actual knowledge of them. For example, she understood instinctively that teachers must take into account that each student has his/her own language level and cognitive styles, but she had never thought of that explicitly and actually put these thoughts into words:

Excerpt 19.

Before attending the TFA course, I did not know much about learning theories or didactic methods and through my studying of the principles and the observation of other teachers; I realized that teaching material can be modified and adapted to the students' needs. Their "built-in-syllabus" changes due to different factors and they may not be ready to start learning a certain topic one year, differently from other students of the same age attending the same class.

The questionnaire was useful as an observation tool to Chiara in that when observing the classes of senior teachers, she knew that she could not base her judgement exclusively upon her own ideas, so having a questionnaire as a point of reference was very useful to take notes in class and, consequently, to increase her teaching competence level.

Excerpt 20.

When I observed senior teachers, I learned a lot both from what I considered to be actions I would not implement (such as too much grammar during a lesson or boring and long homework corrections), but also from the good practices of those I considered "good teachers." Some examples of good practices could be motivating the students with songs, poetry reading or videos or using everyday life references to explain grammar rules.

The observation questionnaire became a point of reference in Chiara's future teaching career. When she started teaching on her own, she studied it carefully and felt more prepared to enter the classes, knowing better what to expect from students and how to manage the various learning situations. Chiara considers communication among students a vital element to learn a foreign language so she would like to apply principles 6 and 8 more extensively. However, one constraint to their application is that teenage students are not always happy to speak English in front of the teacher and other Italian classmates, because they fear

making mistakes and “losing face”. Another constraint that she sees is difficulty using the target language as a medium of instruction due to the average level of lower high school students and the significant presence of learners with special needs. Chiara thinks that seminars organized within this framework should be made available to student teachers, because she thinks it is vital to be offered the opportunity to observe someone else’s classes before starting to teach. She strongly believes the principles could be used as good guidelines for student teachers in their learning process in the future:

Excerpt 21.

...because they represent the perfect decalogue to refer to when experiencing teaching for the first time, when doing observations, when trying to put theory into everyday practice.

3.3. Case study C (Giuseppe)

3.3.1. Feedback after classroom observations

At the start of the TFA course, Giuseppe had had a one-year teaching experience in a private language school and he had also gained some degree of experience assisting special needs students. Giuseppe spent 10 hours observing in a lower high school and 150 in the same upper high school as Benedetta.

Giuseppe was particularly interested in issues related to assessment as well as in the influence of GE Certification exams on classroom teaching practices. GE certifications awarded by accredited international exam groups like Cambridge Assessment and are often requested by universities and in the business world in Italy. In fact, Italian universities require B1 or B2 level certification before undergraduate degrees are given, and many private companies consider the possession of a certification as a prerequisite for employment. According to Italian teaching guidelines, learners should, on average, reach A1+/A2 at the end of lower secondary schools, A2+/B1 after the first two years, and B2 by the end of upper secondary school (at the age of 18). So, although the guidelines are well-structured according to the CEFR, secondary school final certificates are unfortunately not given much value by either universities or businesses. Therefore, schools are pushed by families and executives to either use textbooks aimed at preparing for certification exams or, ideally, to run extra courses in the afternoon to train students for this kind of exam.

There is a problem associated with the management of these courses. For bureaucratic and economic reasons, internal teachers are generally favored for extra courses, but some are unwilling to teach them because they are already overloaded by the work with the curricular classes. If this happens, since the employment process of external teachers is quite complicated and expensive, schools sometimes choose not to implement extra-curricular courses, which pushes students to private language schools. Nevertheless, the teaching autonomy advocated in the Italian guidelines is undeniably influenced by the need to help students familiarize themselves with the structure and requirements of certification exams. Giuseppe said that the first thing that struck him about the school was its formulation of two main objectives. The first was to constantly try and improve the quality of the curriculum to help every single student with every single cultural background, attitude or ability reach his/her highest potential. The second was to prepare students for European skills certification exams run by companies external to the school (ECDL, GE Exams, Cisco, etc.), defined as a necessary passport to the world of university and business.

As Giuseppe pointed out, the first objective is clearly pedagogical, but the second one includes the issue of certifications. He argued that the dichotomy of these objectives was reflected in the consequent dichotomy residing in the sometimes-divergent teaching approaches of the EFL teachers in the school. To give evidence of this he often raised the example of two teachers he observed, whom I will refer to as Teachers C and D. Teacher C was particularly interested in certification and, according to Giuseppe, he seemed to align more with a structuralist approach and the PPP model. As for teacher D, she was more likely to use CLT practices, TBLT, and student-centered pedagogical approaches.

Giuseppe reports that this difference was visible in the way in which the two teachers related to formulaic expressions (Principle 1). Teacher D preferred to push students to use formulaic expressions in class to make learners internalize the chunks while using them. Teacher C, on the other hand, did not seem to encourage their use, and the rule-based competence of the students was significantly challenged by his corrections, especially regarding the way students pronounced words. Giuseppe commented:

Excerpt 22.

I do not agree with this approach. Teacher C continuously corrects pronunciation mistakes with reference to the standard British accent and sometimes these corrections are out of place because they relate to areas which do not regard the efficacy of the message and so they seem to me rather aimed at the teacher's own self-pleasing need, really.

As for Principle 2, Giuseppe said that concern about classroom control discouraged Teacher C from using communicative approaches. He consequently proposed more structured activities which tended to play a double role: on the one hand, they allowed learners to build up a well-rooted knowledge of linguistic elements and on the other, they permitted strong control over students, keeping them focused and quiet. What, according to Giuseppe, characterized Teacher D was that she instead gave primary importance to meaning practices. Giuseppe recalled having seen the teacher divide the class into groups and propose that each create a video project. In the video, students were required to reproduce a scene from a movie they liked or from a script they were free to invent and write collaboratively. Giuseppe particularly liked this practice and commented as follows:

Excerpt 23.

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- Students are encouraged to express their own creativity.
 - Students learn through cooperation.
 - Their talents, either visual, auditive or kinesthetic, are respected and used for the benefit of the group.
 - Students can give their contribution no matter what their level of English is and can adapt parts of the script with their own language resources.
 - Each student can offer his/her competence in extra-linguistic skills like acting skills, editing skills, or social skills, for the benefit of the group.
 - Students learn more vocabulary and discover new communicative contexts through the watching and the making of movie scenes.

Teacher C made intensive use of corrective feedback and was particularly careful towards non-formative utterances whereas the other intervened little and only when there was a communication breakdown because of the use of non-targeted forms. She believed that structuring lessons excessively on specific linguistic forms could be counterproductive to the language learning process. In his report, Giuseppe commented:

Excerpt 24.

Teacher D explains grammar rules [...] but her explanations always arise from communicative contexts, be it through the reading of a text that does not revolve around language forms, or listening to a conversation or to a song, etc. While explaining how structures work, she leads students to reflect on how they have been used in the context given.

Regarding issues related to implicit and explicit knowledge (Principle 4), Giuseppe pointed out in discussions that he saw Teacher C enforce explicit knowledge by asking students to memorize grammar rules from the book at home and do the related exercises, which were then discussed and corrected in class. When this happened, the lessons revolved around one topic of grammar and the use of metalanguage (either in L1 or L2) was significant. Self-correction was not encouraged, and learners did not tend to raise questions on how structural features work. Teacher D instead negotiated meaning and allowed online planning to help learners retrieve information from their implicit knowledge and increase their awareness of them. Giuseppe observed that she treated language as an object to study when she proposed a type of "irregular verbs challenge" game, where students were divided into teams and in turns had to guess the meaning and paradigm of irregular verbs to win.

As mentioned before, Giuseppe was particularly interested in the influence GE exams have on teaching practices in school and in the discussion about Principle 5 many issues were raised regarding this aspect. First, Giuseppe mentioned the choice that teachers make with regard to the textbook. He pointed out:

Excerpt 25.

In his first year in a new school, a teacher will be in charge of several classes, each one with a heterogeneous identity. His/her task in an upper high school will be to help these students reach a B2 level of communicative competence. With great probability, in this new school the department will have chosen to use a GE exam preparation coursebook. This means that all the exercises and the activities in the coursebook will be modelled on GE certification standards. So, what will be the challenges that this teacher will have to face? On the one hand, he/she will have to come to terms with the fact that surely weaker students will not be able to do all the activities and keep pace with the coursebook units. On the other, if the teacher decides to readjust the syllabus for the benefit of weaker students, he/she will have to give reasons to school superiors and department colleagues for this decision.

There was some mismatch between what teachers taught from textbooks and what, in fact, students took in. But the need for teachers to work organically as a department with the goal of leading students to B2 evidently did not make them feel at ease with the idea of reorganizing the syllabus in their classes. As for Teacher C, Giuseppe noted that his objective was solely that his students succeed in doing the activities well, and he did not pay much attention to the development of their general competences, which consist of knowledge, skills, existential competence, and ability to learn (Council of Europe, 2002). Giuseppe says:

Excerpt 26.

I think this teacher is a certifier, rather than an educator and in my opinion this approach does not fulfill the school's educational mission.

Teacher D made sure that her lessons were structured according to her students' actual needs and attitudes, so she adjusted the syllabus or her practices to align to her classes' abilities and requirements. As for language input (Principle 6), again Giuseppe noticed that Teacher C used very little English as opposed to Teacher D who made her best efforts to maximize her use of English. She made wide use of gestures and facial expressions to avoid instructing in Italian especially in early years, and this contributed to create a joyful and relaxing atmosphere. Giuseppe noticed attention to both written and oral output (Principle 7) across all levels for both teachers. For Teacher C, many activities were connected to GE certifications. For example, students were asked to observe, describe, and compare two pictures, and, for the written output, they were asked to write essays, reports, articles, and reviews, as requested in the First Certificate Exam by Cambridge Assessment.

When dealing with Principle 8, Giuseppe had interesting reflections on what actually aids interaction and again he emphasized one central idea: students are more apt to interact if the environment that their teacher offers is welcoming, warm and non-judgmental. Looking at the non-verbal communication of the two teachers, he argued that the approach and the amount of interaction they proposed was proportional to their own willingness to establish a communicative relationship with their students.

Excerpt 27.

Teacher C:
enters the classroom without looking at the students; says hello silently and quickly takes the coursebook from his handbag; puts teaching objects (book, bag, CD player, ...) on his teaching desk that in a way create a barrier between him and his students; calls the students by their surname (rarely by their first name).

Excerpt 28.

Teacher D:
enters the classroom and smiles at her students; she stops and waits until they all say hello and then while standing, she asks how everybody is doing; she makes it so that the desk is emptied of any object that might create a barrier between her and the class but she rarely sits because she prefers to be closer to the students; sometimes she sits amongst the students; she calls everybody by name or with nicknames deriving from their surname.

These reflections automatically led to considerations related to Principle 9. The grammar-translation approach and the lexical approach, exemplified by Teacher C, were, according to Giuseppe:

Excerpt 29.

...less “empathetic” approaches because they require less interaction amongst learners and do not involve their individual aspects and motivational components.

Giuseppe argued that assessment (Principle 10) is the area where the dichotomy between CLT approaches and more traditional approaches is more evident.

Excerpt 30.

One the one hand we have teachers who almost exclusively use grammar tests; on the other we have teachers who make up their own tests according to the needs and backgrounds of their learners. Through these tests they can obtain information on their students’ progress and thus plan activities accordingly.

For Teacher C, grammar tests, gap-filling, and GE certificate exams were a basis for much of the written and oral assessment. For example, Teacher C extensively prepared first or second year students to observe a photograph and then talk about the themes related to the photos. Teacher D, instead, was observed by Giuseppe giving her students a test she had created specifically for them. Students were asked to listen to a pop song whose lyrics expressed feelings of frustration and doubt. Teacher D asked students to find connections between the song and the sentimental world of Hamlet, a character they had previously studied. After listening to the song, students were given a handout with the lyrics and had to fill in the gaps with words from a list. Then, sentences taken from parts of the lyrics had to be transformed using a key word that needed to be inserted in a second sentence, which had a gap in it. Students had to use the key word to complete the second sentence so that it would have the same meaning as the first. This activity was also structured as practice for the writing part of GE certificate exams, but instead of being standardized, it was customized for those specific students. After this kind of priming activity, students were asked to answer open questions that guided them to the analysis of the text and the similarities that could be found between Hamlet’s feelings and their own feelings.

It was clear to Giuseppe why the classes taught by Teacher C had not reached the same assessment level as the ones of Teacher D. In his opinion, it all depended on these two totally different approaches in assessment.

3.3.2. Feedback after 5 years from the TFA course

According to Giuseppe, the knowledge of the principles helped him improve his teaching approaches and practices. Before learning them:

Excerpt 31.

I used to teach in a less reflective way, sometimes neglecting the importance of a balance between focus on meaning and focus on form. Now I try to take into proper account learners’ built-in syllabus in order to plan lessons that can be stimulating on both aspects and that include an assessment phase made also of uncontrolled performance through which I can get a clearer idea of their second language learning process.

Before the TFA course, he had not been formally introduced to many of the principles because the course was his first opportunity to study SLA theories. Despite this, he instinctively applied Principles 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8. He mentions that he had had some ideas about the importance of respecting learners’ different learning styles but had never really reflected on how this could be part of lesson planning. He used to focus more on the object of learning, the language, and little on the learning process. The observations through the theoretical lens of the principles gave him the opportunity to understand that:

Excerpt 32.

...even senior teachers should be open and ready to reconsider their approaches and practices when they are not successful

They also helped him understand that successful instruction is based on prior accurate planning and successful interaction in the classroom.

Excerpt 33.

I learned that there are no one-size-fits-all teaching practices, that teachers should keep their eyes and ears open to students at any time, that teachers should never feel good enough to teach everybody everything but they should be ready to learn from students, show them their feelings, create a favorable learning atmosphere, have no prejudices towards learners and, finally, that every day is a good day to put on a smile and show the learners that learning can be fun.

Giuseppe thinks that no principle is less useful than the others and that any prospective teacher should learn to observe their own and other teachers' practices through Ellis's principles. Today, while teaching, he says he always tries to leave enough space for interaction, both teacher-learner and peer-to-peer. In addition, he tries to dedicate more time to students' performances without focusing too much on errors, at least at an early stage. He would like to apply Principle 10 more extensively:

Excerpt 34.

sometimes having too many students in the same classroom with different levels of proficiency can represent a constraint due to the fact that free productions require more time and effort to be prompted and then analyzed. I wish I could have less paperwork to do and more time to set the scene for more creative work with the learners.

Giuseppe strongly disagrees with the ministerial decision to stop the TFA course because in second language learning both theoretical background and classroom observation are fundamental for a prospective teacher. He hopes that the practicum will be reintroduced because, in his experience, teaching cannot be improvised, rely solely on traditional methods or be accomplished through rote repetition.

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, the way in which SLTE for pre-service teachers is generally organized has some limitations. Researchers, teacher educators, and school-tutors do not usually manage to work cooperatively because courses and practicums are often organized separately. This means that STs do not receive enough structured preparation to maximize the learning experience of their practicum. Furthermore, practicums have been offered quite sporadically in TE programs, since conflicting ministerial decisions have at times removed them from pre-service qualifying courses. As we have seen, at present Italy has no pre-service courses whatsoever. Competitors win teaching positions and start their practicum while teaching, without having received prior theoretical knowledge or technical knowledge apart from their own personal studies or experience that they may have gained through supply teaching jobs.

The project that I proposed was an attempt to bridge the gap between SLA and LP through teacher education. It privileged classroom observation, putting STs in the role of co-researchers who investigated teaching practices through the solid theoretical lens of the ten principles (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b). This was possible because the Italian TE system was living a virtuous moment, in that it offered TFA courses, based on the idea of an active practicum (*tirocinio attivo*) being the main way to attain an educational background (*formativo*). A positive characteristic of this project, as reported by STs, is that it gave them the chance to view what was really happening in Italian schools, not to learn from results derived from external contexts. But, for this model to be further applicable in the Italian context, different decisions must be made in Italy and pre-service teacher education with practicum must be reintroduced. Evmorfia, another ST of the group whose feedback has always been very deep and straightforward, comments:

Excerpt 35.

As far as the enrolment issue is concerned, I believe it is wrong to create soft and hard paths to recruitment and we need a coherent and unified mode of teaching qualification. The lack of unified admission requirements has led to different thoughts of teaching. This multi-ramification sometimes impedes communication among teachers, as we talk and

think in different languages. The TFA has been a highly selective competition and can be kept like that but we need to standardize it. Finally, I believe that when the course is organized by valid organizations and supported by competent personnel, it can be extremely useful for teachers not only as “corso abilitante” (qualifying course) but also as Life Long Learning and training for in-service teachers.

The problems connected to SLTE are widely discussed in literature, as is the lack of solid and organic learning experiences through practicum (cf. Richards, 1998; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Singh & Richards, 2006; Ur, 1996; Wallace, 1991). Practicums are often based on the assumption that senior teachers can be models to STs but, in fact, teachers are individuals who often make different choices from what SLA would prescribe. Apart from Italy, the experience outlined in this study could be applicable in other countries, especially in Europe, with the necessary modifications linked to each national context. The recent survey data of the 2019 Education and Training Monitor, which contains a dedicated analysis of school teachers in the EU, stresses the importance of induction and mentoring programs at the early stages of careers and the necessity for solid structured practices, since European education systems are confronted with a number of challenges relating to teachers and several countries already face or are about to face shortages. In this regard, the Education and Training Monitor states that:

A high-quality induction with classroom experience, good opportunities for professional trainings and appraisal methods focused on teachers' development needs have been identified as three common policy elements in countries where learning outcomes are good. (European Commission, 2019, p. 26)

I found inspiration from studies like Erlam (2008) and Ellis (2010) to present a project where SLA research “was not seen as a set of studies conducted by a group of experts, but a process that teachers could be encouraged to join in and contribute to, as well as researchers” (Tarone & Allwright, 2005, as cited in Erlam, 2008, p. 264). This was done by presenting the principles (Ellis, 2005a, 2005b) in seminar lectures, discussing them, operationalizing them through an observational questionnaire and then giving STs the chance to observe senior teachers' practices through this theoretical lens. STs were encouraged to view the principles as a source of open reflections which could take several directions and perspectives along the SLA/LP continuum. This is why, as seen from the case studies, each ST reflected on either methodological or pedagogical concerns depending on their areas of interest.

This is in line with what Erlam (2008) did when she shared discussion on the principles and former case studies (Erlam et al., 2006) with teaching advisors in NZ: “the view of knowledge was process-oriented (Korthagen et al., 2006); that is, knowledge was seen as a subject that could be created by the learners themselves (Freudenthal, 1978) rather than as a created subject.” (Erlam, 2008, p. 264). STs had the chance to become classroom researchers, learn the rigor and efficacy of research, investigate the psychological and structural constraints on teaching, and make discoveries about their own beliefs and identities. The aim was to make them the protagonists of their learning experience and not simply containers to be filled in with notions.

Another positive outcome of the project was, of course, that it gave STs a horizon of reference in their later career. As seen, all STs in the case studies confirmed that seminars on the principles were fundamental to supporting intuitive knowledge with specific scientific knowledge. They gained confidence through this type of observation and all of them mentioned that the principles were extremely useful for their future teaching choices. It might be surprising to find out that before the TFA course, trainees were not so familiar with SLA theories applied to the language classroom. This definitely depends on their university curricula, which focused more on issues related to literature and general linguistics, as is the case for almost all prospective EFL teachers in Italy. A wider offer of SLA related content would be advisable for university curricula designed for English language experts who wish to specialize in teaching EFL.

The discussions carried out in the seminars also gave STs the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the practices observed; this is something that they often have little time or chance to do with their peers now that there are enrolled teachers. The most positive result of the project was that all seven of the STs who followed the seminars passed the subsequent State competition against a huge number of competitors vying to be assigned a permanent teaching contract. This means that their level of preparation fully responded to national requirements.

In light of these results, projects like these could be carried out in other SLTE pre-service contexts. What should be guaranteed is a solid integration between the theoretical course and the practicum, as well as the meaningful involvement of host schools with motivated senior teachers who align to CLT practices.

Implications for SLTE training beyond this project are logical not only for pre-service but also in-service education. As seen in previous studies, those in-service teachers who embrace CLT mostly have an intuitive approach to its practices rather than formal, technical training on the principles, so structuring more courses on the principles could definitely help homogenize teacher beliefs and CLT practices in school. Senior observations through the lens of the principles could be substituted in favor of peer-to-peer observations. These could be later discussed through reflective talks amongst colleagues and a tutorial leader. The principles could be favorably used for self-assessment along the whole teaching career. Obviously, since what is lacking today is a convergent and organic pathway which would contribute to and strengthen the identity of CLT in schools, it goes without saying that ministries should collaborate with SLA and LP experts in order to implement a unitarian educational pathway for all language teachers.

To improve the design of the project, more hours should be dedicated to the seminars unless SLA theories were included in the university curricula designed for prospective EFL teachers, as it would be advisable. Unfortunately, as stated above, in Italy most undergraduate educational pathways for prospective teachers of EFL tend to focus primarily on literature and general linguistics, so teacher trainees approach courses without an adequate prior knowledge of SLA theories. The principles, in fact, relate to a whole world of theories of SLA which cannot be summarized or studied solely as an overview. A limitation is that Principles 11 and 12, which Ellis added in 2014, were not included in the seminar discussions, nor in the observations, so seminar time should be added to accommodate discussion of these additions. Not doing so would definitely be a loss since these last two principles refer to relevant issues that were raised by STs based on an implicit level of knowledge and it would be appropriate to promote formal reflective talks and observations on them.

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Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE ON INSTRUCTED SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ITALIAN HIGH SCHOOLS - BASED ON ELLIS (2005B)

Name of observer: _____ Type of school: Scuola secondaria di I grado / II grado

Classes where observation was carried out: medie / primo biennio / secondo biennio / quinto anno

PRINCIPLE 1 - Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence

1. Does the teacher engage students in the use of formulaic expressions?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively
2. Are students required to learn rote-memorized patterns of grammar?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively

PRINCIPLE 2 - Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning

3. Does the teacher propose activities in which students focus on the meaning of lexical items?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively
4. Does the teacher propose activities in which students focus on the meaning of grammatical structures?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively
5. Does the teacher propose activities in which students focus on pragmatic meaning (i.e. the highly contextualized meanings that arise in acts of communication)?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively

PRINCIPLE 3 - Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form

6. Is form taught through lessons designed to teach specific grammatical features?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively
7. Is form taught through focused tasks (i.e. tasks that require learners to comprehend and process specific grammatical structures in the performance of the task)?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively
8. Is there incidental attention to form through corrective feedback?

YES / NO

If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather / extensively

PRINCIPLE 4 - Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge

9. Are there any attempts to verbalise students' implicit knowledge as to make them consciously aware of how a structural feature works?

YES / NO

| | |
|--|--|
| 10. Are students pushed to use metalanguage (either in L1 or L2), that is the ability to understand and do explanation of rules? | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively YES / NO |
| 11. Does the teacher allow time for online planning as to facilitate students' access to their own explicit knowledge? | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively YES / NO |
| 12. Does the teacher engage learners in consciousness-raising tasks, i.e. in thinking and communicating about language, so that the language point becomes the topic that is talked about? | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively YES / NO |
| PRINCIPLE 5 - Instruction needs to take into account the learner's 'built-in syllabus' | |
| 13. Does the teacher adopt a zero grammar approach that makes no attempt to predetermine the linguistic content of a lesson (i.e. a Task-Based approach)? | YES / NO |
| 14. Does the teacher ensure that learners are developmentally ready to acquire a specific target feature before introducing it? | YES / NO |
| 15. Does the teacher reorder and restructure the syllabus sequence proposed in the textbook? | YES/NO |
| 16. Does the teacher focus the instruction on explicit rather than implicit knowledge as the former is not subject to the same developmental constraints as implicit knowledge? | YES / NO |
| PRINCIPLE 6 - Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input | |
| 17. Is the target language the medium as well as the object of instruction? | YES / NO |
| 18. Does the teacher create opportunities for learners to receive input outside the classroom (i.e. through graded reading, surveys, activities which require the use of internet, ...)? | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively YES / NO |
| PRINCIPLE 7 - Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output | |
| 19. Does the teacher make learners perform both in written and oral output? | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? WRITTEN - a little / much / rather /extensively ORAL - a little / much / rather /extensively |
| 20. Does the teacher create opportunities for learners to produce pushed output (when learners are pushed to use the TL accurately and clearly)? | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively |
| 21. Does the teacher create opportunities for learners to produce structured output in the development of activities that encourage learners to use newly learned TL? | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively |
| 22. Are learners required to use their own linguistic resources when producing output? | |

| | | |
|--|--|----------|
| | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| 23. Are learners required to use a predetermined set of forms? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| PRINCIPLE 8 - The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency | | |
| 24. Does the teacher create contexts of language use where students have a reason to attend to language? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| 25. Does the teacher provide opportunities for learners to use the language to express their own personal meanings? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| 26. Does the teacher help students to participate in language-related activities that are beyond their current level of proficiency? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| 27. Does the teacher offer a full range of contexts for learners' interaction? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| PRINCIPLE 9 - Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners | | |
| 28. Does the teacher employ strategies to develop and maintain their students' intrinsic motivation? | | YES / NO |
| 29. Does the teacher try to teach at a pace that is not too fast and not too slow? | | YES / NO |
| 30. Does the teacher use a variety of learning activities? | | YES / NO |
| PRINCIPLE 10 – In assessing learners' L2 proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production | | |
| 31. Does the teacher assess language by way of metalinguistic judgement (e.g. grammaticality judgment test)? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| 32. Does the teacher assess language by way of selected response (e.g. multiple choice)? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| 33. Does the teacher assess language by way of constrained constructed response (e.g. gap filling exercises)? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |
| 34. Does the teacher assess language by way of free constructed response (e.g. a communicative task)? | | YES / NO |
| | If so, to what extent? a little / much / rather /extensively | |

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