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Texts and ideas in the history of language learning and teaching

edited by
Giulia Nalesso, Alessandra Vicentini



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[17]

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Theory, practice or an impracticable combination of the two?

Contradictory ideas in nineteenth-century ministerial syllabi for English in Italian technical schools

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ABSTRACT: This contribution deals with the impact that the institutionalisation of modern foreign language teaching in post-Unification Italy had on the contents and the teaching approaches adopted in the new national education sector. Two official syllabi for the teaching of English as a foreign language in higher-rank state technical schools (*istituti tecnici*), issued in 1876 and 1886 respectively, are examined with the view of identifying the general ideas, continuities and changes in the approaches to modern foreign language teaching as endorsed in the official governmental documentation.

KEYWORDS: English, technical education, Italy, nineteenth century, syllabus.

RIASSUNTO: Il presente contributo esamina gli effetti che la statalizzazione dell'insegnamento delle lingue straniere moderne nell'Italia postunitaria ha avuto sui contenuti e sugli approcci didattici adottati nel nuovo sistema scolastico nazionale. Nello specifico, vengono esaminati due programmi ufficiali per l'insegnamento dell'inglese come lingua straniera negli istituti tecnici, emanati rispettivamente nel 1876 e nel 1886. L'obiettivo è quello di individuare le linee generali, le continuità e i cambiamenti negli approcci all'insegnamento delle lingue straniere presentati nella documentazione ministeriale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: inglese, istruzione tecnica, Italia, Ottocento, programma.

1. Introduction

In post-Unification Italy, the new national education sector was regulated by the Casati law, adopted by the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia in 1859 and extended to the new Kingdom of Italy in 1861. Among its main provisions, the law introduced compulsory elementary education for boys and girls in sex-segregated primary schools, codified the division of secondary education into three main branches¹, and established sex-segregated primary teacher training schools. French was introduced as the only modern foreign language in the lower-rank technical schools. At the higher level of secondary technical education, the physics-mathematics section, and, later, the commerce and accounting section started to offer English or German as a second modern foreign language in Years 2 to 4 of the four-year course². In the second half of the nineteenth century modern foreign languages were also taught in several types of vocational schools, as well as teacher training courses preparing secondary school teachers.

The institutionalisation of modern foreign languages as new subjects in the curricula of state schools triggered a paradigmatic shift in modern foreign language teaching in Italy. Pellandra (2004: 70-71) describes this development by focusing on the symbolic change, embodied in the new figure of modern foreign language teacher in the Italian school sys-

¹ These were represented by 1) general-education (or classical) high schools attended by students aspiring to continue their studies at university; 2) technical institutions specialising in professionally oriented instruction, as well as 3) lower-rank secondary schools (the so called *scuole di arti e mestieri*, schools of applied arts and craft) specialising in vocational training. See Morandi (2014: 22-33) for a concise, but meticulous overview of the evolution of the Italian school system from 1859 to the present day.

² In 1860, the other sections were represented by the administrative-accounting, agronomy, and chemistry sections. In 1872, after a series of short-term reforms, the sections were reduced to three that included physics-mathematics, agronomy, and commerce, with some schools offering also the fourth, so called industrial section. Finally, in 1876, the commerce section was transformed into ‘commerce and accounting’. For four years, between 1885 and 1889, the latter had two distinct curricula divided into ‘commerce and private accounting’ and ‘administration and public accounting’. The two were merged in 1889 and the new diploma in accounting was formally established (Lazzini et al. 2018: 53-54).

tem, from the traditional, one-to-one model of learning represented by the dyad of a private tutor and his pupil to the teacher as a state employee tasked with the management of a typically overcrowded class. The relationship between the teacher and the pupils, the didactic materials needed to satisfy the needs of a large group of pupils learning together, the constraining effect of the extremely rigid syllabi, issued by the Ministry for the teachers to follow, and so on, had to be adjusted to the new educational context of a state school.

This contribution deals with one aspect of this nineteenth-century paradigmatic shift, namely the impact that the institutionalisation of modern foreign languages had on the contents and the teaching approaches prescribed by the state to be adopted in Italian schools. Focusing on the English language, I will examine two versions, issued in 1876 and 1886 respectively, of the syllabus for English as a foreign language in higher-rank technical schools (*istituti tecnici*). I will analyse the contents, as well as the educational goals and didactic methods that are briefly discussed in introductory notes accompanying the syllabi. First, I will offer a brief outline of the pre- and post-institutionalised phases of English language teaching and learning in nineteenth-century Italy, focusing on two well-known teachers and authors of didactic materials who can be said to have been key promoters of the English language in that period.

2. Teaching English in nineteenth-century Italy

Anecdotal evidence from the first half of the nineteenth century suggests that, even before its institutionalisation as a school subject, English as a foreign language in Italy was gradually starting to lose the flavour of exoticism³:

³ On the topic of teaching and learning English in the eighteenth century, see Vicentini's (2015) pioneering research that has examined the first grammars specialised in the teaching of English to Italians. See also Shvanyukova's (2020) contribution dealing with language learning in a merchant community in Livorno at the turn of the eighteenth century.

The study of the languages and literatures of the North has recently made some great advances. Ten years ago, English was known here a little less than Turkish, and Shakespeare in original was held for a rare book. Now, instead, we have been inundated with Anglomania: English is a *fashionable* language, [*i damerini*] have been annihilated by *dandies*, no longer are [*ragunate*] held but *clubs*, racing horses are called *Brown, Lady, Fanny*, and he who admits to not taking his meals the English way, will be labelled an Ostrogoth. The indefatigable John Millhouse (also known as John Mills) with his grammars, exercises, anthologies, and translations, has contributed greatly to popularising his language, and he has just published a little volume with thematic dialogues that will be of great help to those wishing to study English [...] (Re 1842: 204-205)⁴

That English was gaining traction in Italy around the mid-19th century is testified by the growth of the book market of teaching materials for the study of English. Already in the 1840s, the range of didactic publications for Italian learners of English started to diversify by including, in addition to the more traditional forms of grammar books, new dictionaries, comprehensive English courses for beginners (frequently composed of several volumes), reading books, pronunciation treatises, as well as new specialised texts such as, for example, compilations of synonyms and letter-writing guides. John Millhouse, mentioned in the quotation above, was one of the most prolific authors of English language didactic materials active in the 1840s-1850s, a pioneer at the forefront of the movement to promote the teaching of English to Italians. A famous lexicographer, who authored a two-volume Italian-English and English-Italian dictionary, Millhouse's professional background undoubtedly shaped his approach to language teaching⁵. Symbolically, Millhouse can be identified as a key promoter of English language teaching and learning in Italy in the pre-institutionalised phase of English as a foreign language in the first half of the nineteenth century, with his

⁴ My translation. Italics are used in the original to mark English loanwords.

⁵ Millhouse's outstanding achievement as a lexicographer was to offer new ways of teaching correct pronunciation to language learners. On Millhouse see O'-Connor (1990), Shvanyukova (2018), Nuccorini (2020a). On the same topic, see also Nuccorini (2020b).

multitude of teaching materials addressed primarily at an audience of self-studying learners:

In the Graduate Course I tried my hand at teaching [Italian learners] to read English prose writers and poets without a dictionary and without a teacher. I succeeded. The book has had an exceptional circulation. Two editions of two thousand five hundred copies have, in three years, almost sold out. Already in every café, in every casino, in every literary saloon all over Italy, Sicily and Malta you see people reading English, American and Indian newspapers and books, without having had any other teacher than my book; many of them have learned to understand English in less than three weeks of study without any other expense than that of seven francs.⁶ (Millhouse 1852: 9, my transl.)

Another Englishman, whose name was Theophilus Chambers Cann, can be associated instead with the institutionalised phase of English language teaching and learning in Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Operating under different conditions and stimulated by the demands of the new market of didactic publications addressed at schools, Cann was able to produce a series of works that circulated widely and were adopted in a range of schools all over Italy⁷. Cann's most popular and successful publications included *The Theoretical and Practical Grammar of the English Language* (1872), which went through several revisions and re-editions between 1873 and 1914⁸, *First English Reading Book* (1873), a manual of English literature published in 1875, as well

⁶ The extract is from the preface to the first edition of Millhouse's *Temi sceneggiati ossia dialoghi italiani ed inglesi per isvolgere le regole della grammatica analitica o quelle di qualunque altra grammatica inglese* (Torino, 1842), quoted here from 5th edn. published in 1852 in Milan.

⁷ See Shvanyukova (2018, 2019) for a more detailed account of Cann's contribution to the promotion of English language teaching and learning in Italy. On Cann's successful grammar textbook see Nava (2019).

⁸ After 1914 the original one-volume work was revised and expanded into two volumes by Giuseppe Molinaris and advertised as an updated version of Cann's nineteenth-century work, under the title of *Grammatica razionale, teorico-pratica della lingua inglese: nuovo corso completo ad uso degli italiani* (Firenze, 1916). It appears that the final edition of yet another twentieth-century version, this time authored by Federico Olivero, came out in 1947 as *Grammatica della lingua inglese di Teofilo C. Cann*.

as a variety of other specialised didactic texts. Just like his illustrious predecessor, Cann did not limit himself to producing one type of English language teaching materials only, but worked hard to offer as wide a range of works as possible. However, unlike Millhouse who appears to have worked as a private tutor/freelance author, Cann was well integrated into the Italian school system. He was professor of English at the higher teacher training institute for girls in Florence until his death in 1894⁹. Thanks to his innovative approach to language learning, Cann's didactic materials made him a household name in Italy for teachers, pupils and government officials alike. As we will see in the next section, a selection of Cann's textbooks was placed on a special list of recommended works in the syllabi approved by the Ministry of the Kingdom of Italy for the use in higher-rank technical schools.

3. English as a foreign language in Italian technical education (1876-1886)

As already hinted at in the Introduction, state technical education in Italy underwent a series of (mainly) short-term reforms in the second half of the nineteenth century. For reasons of space, these reforms will not be addressed here in detail¹⁰. Instead, I will compare the two versions of the syllabus for English as a foreign language in higher-rank technical schools that were issued in 1876 and 1886 respectively, with the view of identifying the changes and continuities in the contents and the teaching approaches as endorsed in the official governmental documentation.

⁹ Before the institute was formally established in 1882, Cann taught English at the lower-lever teacher training school for girls.

¹⁰ See fn. 1 and fn. 2 for useful bibliographical sources on the topic.

3.1. 1876 syllabus for English in higher-rank technical schools

In 1876 the two sections in higher-rank technical schools that offered a second modern foreign language instruction (either English or German) were the physics-mathematics and the commerce and accounting sections. The second foreign language was introduced in the second year of the four-year course, with 3 lessons (1.5 hours each) per week for three years. French, the first foreign language, was taught only in the first two years of the course, with two lessons per week (i.e., for a total of 3 hours per week)¹¹. The part of the syllabus dedicated to English is taken up mainly by a detailed list of topics that had to be taught in the individual year of the course. Table 1 offers a summary of the topics planned in the first two years of English language teaching in the physics-mathematics section:

Table 1. Summary of the topics to be taught in Years 2 and 3 (1st and 2nd years of English language teaching respectively) according to the 1876 Ministerial syllabus¹².

Year 2 (*1st year of English language teaching)	Year 3 (*2nd year of English language teaching)
The English alphabet	The complete rules of the Saxon Genitive
Pronunciation – Practical exercises in reading and writing (dictation) – Rules of the English orthoepy that must be applied consistently	Auxiliary verbs to be and to have
Regular verbs: simple and compound tenses	The uses/absence of the article with proper names, collectives and abstract nouns
Auxiliary verbs to be and to have	The use of adjectives as singular or plural nouns to refer to nationalities, political parties and religious denominations.
Simple and compound future and conditional tenses; active and passive voices	Irregular and compound comparative and superlative forms

¹¹ French, however, was already taught at the lower-level of technical education, throughout the three years of the lower-level technical school. That is to say that pupils choosing the technical path would have had five years of French language teaching upon graduation.

¹² The original syllabus is written in Italian, all translations are mine.

Conjugation of the auxiliary to do	Address terms in English
The noun – The regular and irregular forms of the definite article – The partitive – Declensions – The most important prepositions	Substituting articles for possessive adjectives in sentences such as “he washed his hands” – Substituting possessive pronouns with of: a friend of mine, etc.
Introduction to the Saxon Genitive	Reflexive and reciprocal pronouns – Conjugation of reflexive verbs with the use of the auxiliary to have in compound tenses – Substituting simple personal pronouns with reflexive pronouns
General rules for the use of adjectives – Regular comparative and superlative forms	The use of third-person pronouns instead of demonstratives – Omission of relative pronouns and its impact on the syntax of a relative clause
Cardinal and ordinal numbers; fractions; multiplicative and iterative numerals – Using numbers to talk about dates and to tell time	Irregular verbs that do not change form in the past simple and the past participle
Pronouns	Irregular verbs that change the final -d into -t (send, build, etc.)
The main adverbials of time	Irregular verbs that acquire a final -t in the past simple and the past participle, with vowel changes in the root
The main conjunctions	Exercises in the use of auxiliaries needed to form future and conditionals forms
	Periphrastic constructions (I am writing – I am going to write – I am to write)
	Forming adverbs of manner from adjectives – Irregular cases with adjectives that end in -e, -y, -ble, -dle, -tle
	The use of simple adjectives as adverbs
	Forming adverbs with suffixes -ward and -wards
	Demonstrative and interrogative adverbs
	The use of adverbials of place
	The use of adverbials of time
	Conjunctions

The description of the contents for the final year of English language teaching in Year 4 includes only three entries: 1) Exercises to practise the various forms of irregular verbs; 2) Syntax: general rules – Dictation,

writing and conversation practice; 3) A brief overview of the history of the English literature. If a cursory examination of the lists of contents for the first two years English language teaching confirms a strong commitment to an increasingly complex grammar instruction, with apparently little attention paid to the development of pupils' communicative language skills, this impression is somewhat mitigated when we read the following introductory note that precedes the detailed syllabus:

It is believed that the study of orthoepy is more useful when it goes hand in hand with that of other aspects of grammar, rather than being taught first separately.

When choosing reading materials, it must not be forgotten that all teaching, in addition to imparting sound knowledge prescribed by the syllabus, must contribute to the raising of the level of general culture, as well as the mind and character, to prepare young people to carry out their duties in and out of school. Therefore, any readings that are either frivolous or entertaining only must be excluded; the amusing anecdotes that occupy too much space in the anthologies must be replaced with serious and instructive writings that better portray modern life. Scientific topics, for example, dealing with physical geography or other related subjects, presented in an easy and engaging manner, are especially suitable for the pupils whose intelligence needs to be stimulated. Moreover, selecting such readings will help the pupils to get a new perspective on things they have already studied. What matters the most is that the reading materials must satisfy the student's needs to broaden his horizons and teach him to feel and think in a noble way.

Two footnotes are added to the introductory note with some recommendations about the didactic materials that the teachers may decide to use in class. This list includes some popular grammar books of the period, such as Cann's 1873 grammar mentioned above, a grammar by Girtin (1873), as well as some textbooks dealing with English literature (Craik [1851], Grant [1866], Cann [1875]), and a range of more specialised didactic texts.

3.2. 1886 syllabus for English in higher-rank technical schools

The new 1886 ministerial syllabus introduces some important changes concerning second modern foreign language teaching in technical schools. The main change concerns the distribution of the hours for the second foreign language teaching. In the new syllabus, the second foreign language is now introduced only in the third, instead of the second year of the four-year course, and is consequently taught for two years only. At the same time, the reduction of the years of teaching is compensated for with an increase in the hours of teaching per week. In fact, second foreign language teaching is now allocated six hours, instead of 4.5 in the 1876 syllabus, per week, in the physics-mathematics, as well as in commerce and accounting sections. Moreover, for pupils choosing the ‘commerce and private accounting’ curriculum in the latter section¹³, in Year 4 two extra hours of dedicated business letter-writing instruction are introduced. Table 2 summarises the changes in the distribution of the teaching hours:

Table 2: Distribution of the teaching hours for the second foreign language (English or German) in the 1876 and 1886 syllabi.

	1876 syllabus (physics-mathematics & commerce and accounting sections)	1886 syllabus (physics-mathematics & commerce and accounting sections)	1886 syllabus (commerce and accounting section, 'commerce and private accounting' curriculum)
Year 1	none	none	none
Year 2	4.5	none	none
Year 3	4.5	6 (2+4)	6 (2+4)
Year 4	4.5	6	6+2 hours of business correspondence

Another novelty concerning the re-distribution of the teaching hours in the 1886 syllabus is represented by a non-mandatory (but clearly stated in the syllabus) division of the six weekly hours of teaching into 2 hours of traditional lectures (i.e., lessons reserved for the theoretical part), and 4 hours devoted to exercises, in other words, to more practically oriented teaching.

¹³ See fn. 2.

A longer introductory note with some common indications for the two second foreign languages now precedes the presentation of the specific instructions for the teaching of English and German respectively. Several parts in this new introductory note repeat (at times, quite literally) some passages from the 1876 introductory notes that dealt separately with either English or German, as some examples from the new note below show:

- (1) *The objective of these courses is to teach pupils to understand a literary or scientific book, to write a familiar or business letter, as well as, very importantly, to enable them to talk about the most common topics.* (Extracted from the German section of the 1876 syllabus, p. 58)
- (2) *For both languages, the teachers will attend meticulously to the study of orthoepy which will go hand in hand with that of other aspects of grammar.* (A slightly revised version of a passage in the 1876 English section quoted above).
- (3) *One of the shortcomings in the teaching of foreign languages has to do with a limited vocabulary that the students manage to acquire.* (Extracted from the German section of the 1876 syllabus, p. 59)
- (4) *To address this issue, when practising reading and translation or when doing dictations, teachers should introduce the greatest possible variety of authors and topics, taking care, at the same time, to select only authors that are appropriate for the school environment and its needs; this will undoubtedly yield some good results.* (A new addition)

What follows (sentences 5-7) is a reprint of an extract from the 1876 English section that dealt with the choice of the reading materials. In addition to the importance of scientific topics, we find a stronger emphasis on the literary culture, as well as the general culture and history of the country where the target language is spoken.

Other examples of ideas extrapolated from the 1876 German language note include passages encouraging teachers to devote less time to the presentation of the theoretical rules that, in any case, must be accompanied by exercises even during the two hours set aside for the explanation of the new rules. The new 1886 syllabus develops this idea

further in the final paragraph that sets forth the following teaching desiderata:

The six hours of [language] teaching in Years 3 and 4 must be divided into hours devoted to theoretical instruction accompanied by practice, and hours dedicated exclusively to practice. Moreover, even during those lessons dedicated to the presentation of the new rules, the teaching must be carried out in a practical manner, so that, for example, as soon as the new rules of pronunciation and grammar have been introduced, the pupils are tested orally and made to exercise, reading and writing on the blackboard. Pupils must also be given written homework that will be corrected orally at school. Finally, taking into account the number of students and their aptitude, if deemed to be necessary by the teacher and the headmaster, some dedicated hours will be set aside for more extensive practice in reading aloud, translation, composition and conversation.

The emphasis on the practical nature of second foreign language teaching is renewed in the concluding lines of the introductory notes. The ministerial document spells out to teachers that Italian pupils have too little time for learning either English or German at an age when their memory is no longer as fresh and receptive as it used to be, asking teachers to make an effort

to guide the pupil to obtain a certain practical knowledge of the language, as a way not only to obtain better results immediately, but to avoid the danger, especially in the beginning, of boring them or making them feel an instant aversion. Rather than making them translate literally, which in many cases is actually impossible, the pupil should be taught to express his thoughts, through the use of idiomatic phrases, in the language he learns so that a little at a time he can start to think in the foreign language.

This is how the part reserved for the common indications for the two second foreign languages ends. For the English language specifically, we find a shorter dedicated introduction that aims to identify the main challenges associated with the learning of English specifically:

Given that the grammar of this language is not difficult, the present syllabus has maintained the traditional order of the topics as presented in the philological treatises, which follows the natural course of discourse

and, as such, will not be deemed monotonous or troublesome by the pupils.

On the other hand, having recognised the major difficulties the pupils experience when learning English pronunciation and spelling, the teacher will use every opportunity to get them to practise their oral skills, as well as spelling, by getting them to write on the blackboard.

Another special challenge of the English language is to be found in its phraseology; it is thus imperative that, together with the new vocabulary and rules the pupils must learn new idiomatic phrases peculiar and proper to the said language, and above all are taught how to avoid being misunderstood.

The specific contents of the English language course, now spread over only two years of teaching (in Year 3 and Year 4) in the 1886 syllabus include the following topics:

Table 3. Summary of the topics to be taught in Years 3 and 4 (1st and 2nd years of English language teaching respectively) according to the 1886 Ministerial syllabus.

Year 3 (*1st year of English language teaching)	Year 4 (*2nd year of English language teaching)
The English alphabet – Pronunciation rules – Diphthongs and stress	The definite and indefinite article – The partitive: Syntactic rules
The definite and indefinite article – The partitive	The complete rules of the Saxon Genitive
The grammatical gender of nouns – The plural form – The cases - The Saxon Genitive – The endings for compound nouns	The augmentatives and diminutives – Collective nouns – Nouns that have been transformed into adjectives by adding -ed
The adjectives – Comparative forms – Irregular comparative and superlative forms – The absolute superlative	Address terms in English
Cardinal and ordinal numbers; fractions; multiplicative and iterative numerals – Using numbers to talk about dates and to tell time; suffixes for the formation of adjectives	Numeral adjectives
Personal pronouns – Possessive adjectives and pronouns – Reflexive and reciprocal pronouns – Relative and interrogative pronouns – Demonstrative adjectives and pronouns – Generic pronoun one – Distributive and indefinite pronouns	English monetary system – English system of measures (weight, length, area, volume)

The verb – Regular verbs – Simple and compound tenses – Future and conditional rules – Imperative – Subjunctive - Auxiliary verbs to be, to have, to do – Must, ought, need, should better	Personal pronouns – Possessive adjectives and pronouns – Reflexive and reciprocal pronouns – Relative and interrogative pronouns: Syntactic rules
The present participle/the gerund	The verb: Syntactic rules – The position of the subject – Agreement with the verb – Three ways of forming the present and past simple – The use of definite and indefinite past – Syntactic rules for the future tense, the conditional and the imperative – Syntactic rules for subjunctive – Syntactic rule for the infinitive - To make and to do Reflexive and impersonal verbs – Syntactic rules for can, will, must
Irregular verbs	List of verbs with most frequently used prepositions
Adverbs	Syntactic rules for adverbs – Questions – Negation etc.
Prepositions	Italian prepositions that are translated idiomatically
Conjunctions	Syntactic rules for conjunctions
Interjections	A brief overview of the history of the English literature.
Abbreviations used in personal writing, in print, in familiar correspondence	As in Year 3, assiduous practice of learning by heart, dictation, exercises of translation, writing and discussion of topics presented in reading materials and translation exercises.
Assiduous practice of pronunciation rules and writing on the blackboard – Practical exercises of reading; oral and written exercises of translation from Italian into English and vice versa – Learning by heart, dictation, discussion of topics presented in reading materials and translation exercises	

The comparison of the specific contents in the two syllabi shows that a strong commitment to grammar instruction remains the main characteristic of the rigid ministerial syllabus. At the same time, the added emphasis on a more practically oriented kind of teaching is made visible in the explicitly mentioned “assiduous practice/practical exercises, etc.”,

both in the accompanying introductory notes and the 1886 syllabus itself.

The same focus on practice is repeated in the short, dedicated syllabus reserved for the two extra hours of business letter-writing instruction that is now introduced in Year 4 for pupils enrolled in the ‘commerce and private accounting’ curriculum. The introductory note presenting the rationale for these extra hours starts by explaining that

It is not possible to provide a detailed syllabus of this part of the English and German courses that must be carried out in totally practical manner and dedicated wholly to the topics related to commerce.

The language teacher is then instructed to collaborate with his colleagues (teachers of commerce and accounting) and coordinate the contents of foreign language lessons with those of the other two subjects to make them as complete and practical as possible. The tension between the need to vary their teaching activities and the need to teach a specific practical skill of specialised letter-writing in English comes to the fore in the following passage:

The exercises should consist mainly in practising to write business letters. This does not mean, however, that reading, translation, memorisation and conversation are excluded. By alternating the various activities, the professor will make his teaching as varied as possible, so that the pupils are never tired and are, instead, attracted by the novelty and obvious usefulness of the tasks they are asked to do.

The teacher is left without any further instructions as to either the texts or the methods that can be used to realise the objectives of the specialised business letter-writing course.

4. Concluding remarks

It is a well-known fact that the division, in post-Unification Italian secondary education sector, into the two main branches of general-education (or classical) path and technical education reflected an ideological separation between the former that aimed to prepare the country’s future ruling class and the latter that served the purpose of educating a new

professional class (Tomasi 1978). This separation was codified in Art. 276 of the Casati law that made the general utilitarian orientation of the technical instruction explicit in the following formula: “all subjects have to be taught by focusing on their practical application, with special attention given to those uses that may contribute to improving the natural and economic conditions of the State.”¹⁴ The separation of the different languages, with Latin and Greek taught in the general-education path and modern foreign languages introduced in the technical branch was imbued with similar ideological values. While the study of Latin and Greek was connoted with fundamental cultural and formative values, the study of modern foreign languages was initially attributed an overtly utilitarian value.

The preliminary analysis conducted here on the contents and teaching desiderata as presented in the two ministerial syllabi for the teaching of English in higher-rank technical schools has identified some tensions and contradictions in the official understanding of how a modern foreign language should be taught. The lengthy and detailed lists of grammar contents that the syllabi diligently describe leave no doubt as to the fact that the same methodologies employed to teach classical languages in Italian schools were adopted by modern foreign language teachers. If we take into account these lists of grammar contents only, then, with the exception of some vaguely worded additions to the 1886 syllabus (see above), the official documentation does not contain any traces of a truly practically oriented kind of teaching of modern foreign languages. The accompanying notes, however, tell a somewhat different story. Here we learn about the importance of stimulating pupils’ curiosity and making language learning an engaging and fun activity imbued with strong formative values. What are we to make of these contradictory ideas? The search for possible answers should not be confined to the analysis of the official sources but must be combined with the study of other sources documenting the lived experience of contemporary teachers and pupils grappling with the rigid constraints of the ministerial regulations. Pireddu’s recent study of the two pamphlets written by Luigi Pavia, a nineteenth-century teacher of English in Italian technical schools, is an

¹⁴ Quoted in Tomasi (1978: 8), my translation from Italian.

example of an investigation that sheds light on such experiences. Pireddu (2022) analyses the ways in which Pavia responded to and criticised the top-down reforms that brought about changes and innovations described in the official syllabi, his ideas about the role of the teacher and his relationship with pupils, as well as his concerns and proposals for the effective teaching of foreign languages. Only a combination of the study of the official sources with the study of a variety of sources documenting such first-hand experiences of nineteenth-century teachers and pupils can help us make sense of “the clash between humanist education, the needs of the entrepreneurial classes, and classroom reality” (Pireddu 2022: 206) in modern foreign language teaching in nineteenth-century Italy.

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