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An Innovative Education Experience for Future Foreign Language Teachers

The *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Metodologie e Tecnologie Didattiche*/Teaching Labs

Abstract

This contribution aims to describe the innovative experience related to the Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Metodologie e Tecnologie Didattiche/Teaching Labs, *which have been developed since A.Y. 2017/18 as part of the courses in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Verona. The objective of these* Laboratori *was to offer a preliminary teacher education experience for students interested in becoming foreign language and literature teachers.*
The article will first discuss the rationale at the basis of the Laboratori *project, also in connection to the importance of introducing language and literature students to the teaching profession, within the strategic priorities identified by the 2021 European Resolution in the field of education and training. The structure of the* Laboratori *and their characteristics will then be described in detail, highlighting the innovative aspects, in particular with reference to the blended learning approach, the familiarisation with the eTwinning European project, the micro-teaching sessions, as well as the practicum in lower and upper secondary schools. Some qualitative results and future perspectives will finally be discussed, including the developments which have led to the new* Teaching Lab: Methodologies, Technologies and Practicum *structure.*

Keywords: *language teacher education, future language/literature teachers, micro-teaching, blended learning, eTwinning*

1. Introduction[1]

The proposal to integrate the professional development programmes of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures – University of Verona with courses initially titled *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Metodologie e Tecnologie Didattiche – Lingue e Letterature/Culture*[2] has been developed since the A.Y. 2017/18 for a range of reasons, first and foremost the urgent need—emphasised in several paragraphs of the *Piano degli Obiettivi del Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere 2017/19*[3]—to include courses that would enable students to approach the profession of becoming a foreign language and literature secondary school teacher. In particular, with reference to the *Punti di criticità per il Dipartimento – Sezione Didattica,*[4] the aforementioned plan stated "Una carenza da colmare è quella relativa alla stipula di convenzioni con scuole secondarie e con istituti culturali utili per lo svolgimento di stage per gli iscritti al corso di laurea magistrale in Lingue e Letterature Comparate Europee ed Extraeuropee."[5] The present project, designed to educate and train future teachers, gave continuity to a constant, lasting involvement of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in teacher education. This, in turn, was seen to be a strategic element to promote a connection between teaching, research and the university's third mission.[6] A notable result of

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[1] The structure of the article has been jointly planned by all authors; more specifically, however, C. Battisti is the author of parts 1, 2 and 3; F. Dalle Pezze of part 2.1; P. Vettorel of part 3.1 (including 3.1.1, 3.1.2 and 3.1.3); M. F. Bonadonna of part 3.2 (including 3.2.1 and 3.2.2).

[2] "Workshops and Practicum in Foreign Languages and Literatures/Cultures Teaching" (translation by the authors). As delineated in this article, the project, which began during the A. Y. 2017/18, was initially named *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Metodologie e Tecnologie Didattiche – Lingue e Letterature/Culture.* Subsequently, in the A.Y. 2022/23, it became an integral part of new LM-37 MA programme (*Languages, Literatures and Digital Culture*) as a core course. It was renamed *Teaching Labs: Methodologies, Technologies and Practicum,* encompassing not only the languages and literatures/cultures hitherto embraced (specifically English, French, German, and Spanish), but also incorporating Russian language and literature/culture. In this article, the former designation will be employed when specifically referring to the project's development prior to the academic year 2022/2023. Conversely, the latter title will be employed when specifically alluding to the distinctive characteristics of the project after its integration into the core curriculum. However, both titles will be utilised when discussing elements that remained consistent throughout the project's evolution.

[3] "Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures Goals Plan 2017/19" (translation by the authors).

[4] "Departmental critical issues – Didactic section" (translation by the authors).

[5] "A critical point to be addressed is that relating to the signing of agreements with secondary schools and cultural institutes for the internships of students enrolled on the Master's Degree Course in *Comparative European and Non-European Languages and Literature.*" See "Piano degli Obiettivi del Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, 2017-2019" (2017, 15, translation by the authors).

[6] In addition to its two main goals—education and academic research—Italian Universities engage in Third Mission activities aimed at disseminating knowledge and culture and

this involvement was, for example, the active participation of many colleagues, most of whom then became the course development team that contributed to the planning and development of the *Laboratori*. These colleagues had previously been involved in the PAS and TFA pre-service and in-service foreign languages teacher education courses,[7] which covered the demand for teacher education in the Veneto region. The Departmental involvement in teacher education has further developed with the offer, since A.Y. 2018/19, of Tandem training courses[8] for I and II level secondary school teachers. The educational offer of the University of Verona for teacher training has thus been constant and varied over the years and has contributed to improving and consolidating relations with the educational institutions of the Province of Verona and of the Veneto Region.

The departmental academic research in applied linguistics and foreign language teaching—which resulted in several innovative publications—was equally relevant to the development of the proposal for the Project of the *Laboratori*.

The proposal to extend the educational offer of the Master's Degree Course in *Comparative European and Non-European Languages and Literature* with the *Laboratori* also stemmed from an informal survey of the courses offered by neighbouring universities, which revealed the absence of this type of workshop.

Although closely connected to and determined by the urge to respond to the training needs of future teachers identified by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, the project also fits into the broader framework of research on the renewal of university practices for the training of (future) teachers (Macaire 2020; Coonan 2012; Étienne et al. 2009). In particular, the project comes under research that emphasises the need for an integration of theory and practice in the initial training of future teachers: "les conceptions et modalités actuelles de formation […] se fondent sur la professionnalisation de la formation"[9] (Altet 2010, 138). It should also be emphasised that the project addresses and enhances some of the strategic priorities identified by the 2021 European Resolution in the field of education and training, such

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transmitting research results outside the academic community, thus contributing to social and cultural advance.

[7] PAS and TFA courses were one-year courses to train teachers and teachers-to-be to access a permanent position in the Italian public secondary school system. They were held by universities, the *Percorsi Abilitanti Speciali* in 2014 and the *Tirocini Formativi Attivi in* 2011/12, 2014/15, 2015/16.

[8] The Tandem project offered secondary school teachers the opportunity to attend free training classes held by university teachers.

[9] "Contemporary paradigms and methodologies in training are on the professionalisation of training" (translation by the authors).

as the need for "highly qualified and motivated teachers and trainers," the use of digital technologies, networking and knowledge sharing between training institutions (Consiglio dell'Unione Europea, 2021/C 66/01).[10]

2. The project

A first experimental, pilot edition of the *Laboratori* was offered in A.Y. 2017/18. The course was originally designed for M.A. Students attending the Master's Degree in *Comparative European and Non-European Languages and Literatures* as an elective course with a maximum of 10 participants for each language and literature/culture. The first pilot edition comprised courses for English, French, German and Spanish languages and literatures/cultures. Each course had a specific representative and the teaching staff consisted of colleagues from the Department, who taught both language and literature.

The course was organised in two main sections: the methodological part (3 CFU)[11] and the practicum experience (3 CFU) that the students undertook in secondary school classes. An essay illustrating the teaching experience during the practicum was a course requisite for the final assessment. At the end of this first pilot edition, the whole team[12] worked on the strengths and critical points of the course in order to propose it again the following year, with some changes and improvements.

In the following A.Y., the course was opened to *Foreign Languages and Literatures*-B.A. students as the programme of their curriculum is also targeted at future teachers—and in the latest editions to students attending the Master's Degree Courses in *Languages for Communication in Tourism and Commerce* and in *Linguistics.*

As in the pilot course, the areas included in the subsequent editions were language and literature/culture for English, French, German and Spanish. The thematic focus on issues related to Language/Literature Teaching was complemented in these new editions with an added element, which was the use of digital tools in language and literature/culture teaching. In particular, the aim was to offer innovative, new teaching practices centred on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Pratibha 2019; Németh, Csongor 2019;

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[10] See
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2021.066.01.0001.01.ITA.
Last visited 04/08/2023.
[11] CFU, or university educational credits, serve as a measure for assessing the amount of learning, encompassing personal study, needed by a student to gain knowledge and skills relevant to the educational activities outlined in the degree programme.
[12] The authors of the present article and Sibilla Cantarini for German Language.

Hamon, Cervini 2015) and on the development of transversal skills. These further developments can also be ascribed to the Departmental Project of Excellence on "Digital Humanities applied to Foreign Literature and Languages" (2018/2022)[13] that allowed the Department to become a centre of excellence and a laboratory for experimentation in the field of Digital Humanities (D.H.). The activities of the *Laboratori* became a leading element of the Didactic Area of the Project of Excellence precisely because they were the first D.H. training opportunity for students expressing an interest in becoming foreign language and literature/culture teachers.

In the subsequent editions of the *Laboratori*, the two-part subdivision already present in the pilot course was maintained. However, the methodological part was further developed with the addition of an "eTwinning" and a micro-teaching session. The students' active reflection conducted in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Moodle was closely connected to the methodological part. This online activity was introduced in A.Y. 2018/19 and has partially replaced the final paper required in the first pilot version of the course.

Starting from A.Y. 2017/18, five yearly editions of the course have been provided to plan, test and consolidate its structure. In the A.Y. 2022/23, the *Laboratori* became part of curriculum A of the new LM-37 MA programme (*Languages, Literatures and Digital Culture*) as a core course, taking on the intriguing label of *Teaching Labs: Methodologies, Technologies and Practicum* and encompassing not only the languages and literatures/cultures hitherto embraced, but also incorporating the domain of Russian language and literature/culture.

2.1 The Blended Learning structure

As early as the planning stage, the need to organise the methodological part of the course according to a blended learning model appeared as a keystone on which there was full agreement among the teachers in the course development team. On a very broad level, the starting point was flexibility, a very wide-ranging concept that sets the course within a 21st century education perspective: flexible learning can be seen as a meeting point between different learning needs and a way to achieve greater responsibility in the learning process (Müller and Mildenberger 2021). Our trainees are doubly involved in this practice: on the one hand they experience flexibility as students, and on the other hand they have the opportunity to take steps towards applying it during their practicum experience and in a real professional context. Flexibility is a concept closely related to the principles of learner-centeredness, which has been widely studied over the last decades. Since two reports (1993, 1997) by the American

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[13] For further details, see https://dh.dlls.univr.it/. Last visited 19/05/2023.

Psychological Association (APA), learner-centeredness has focused on the personal and contextual factors influencing learning and motivation. As McCombs (2015) stresses, learner-centred principles create a systemic framework for achieving high-quality instruction.

When looking at blended learning, Hrastinski (2019, 567-568) points out that it has by now become an umbrella term that describes the use of online technologies in education. More than fifteen years have passed since the publication by Bonk and Graham (2006), a volume that undoubtedly represents the first global guide to the booming, and initially chaotic, phenomenon of teaching and learning by replacing part of the physical onsite classroom time with an online learning environment. Since then, many other studies have explored the different aspects of this now common practice, amongst which the crucial qualities a teacher should have while applying blended learning (Bruggeman et al. 2021; Heilporn, Lakhal and Bélisle 2021, 2) and the perceptions of students towards this approach (López-Pérez, Pérez-López and Rodríguez-Ariza 2011). It should also be noted that this research field has seen an ever-expanding bibliography (for an overview see e.g., Müller and Mildenberger 2021; Castro 2019).

The *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* fall into the category of blended learning not only for the use of technology for teaching and learning but also because, according to Allen and Seaman's traditional classification (2010, 5), which underlines the existence of a continuum that goes from "web facilitated courses" to completely "online courses," they devote between 30 and 79% of the total time to online training and therefore fall in the middle of the continuum. Other more recent classifications, such as Bernard et al.'s one (2014), state that the threshold to define a course as blended learning must be 50% onsite and 50% online activities, a condition that is on the whole met by the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs*. In addition, as Hrastinski (2019, 566) points out, the literature often emphasises a qualitative evaluation rather than a merely quantitative one as a criterion for blended learning, since a qualitative conceptualisation can further highlight its benefits.

Therefore, this qualitative aspect is of particular importance in the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs*, as face-to-face time harmonises with asynchronous time given that they complement each other: in this perspective, online activities can be understood both as an expansion of face-to-face time and preparation for a subsequent face-to-face meeting (Hrastinski 2019, 566). In short, since blended learning constitutes a foundational part of the *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Tecnologie e Metodologie Didattiche/Teaching Labs*, and according to the terminology proposed by Alammary, Sheard and Carbone, they can be said to constitute "a high-impact blend built from scratch" (Alammary, Sheard and Carbone 2014, 447), i.e., a type of course in which the teacher gains great experience in designing for blended learning, becomes familiar with

technology and has high confidence in its integration in the curriculum, due to the institutional support provided during the course.

To stimulate active thinking, teachers set up online activities that invite students to reflect on assigned questions, from very specific issues to much broader ones. The online activities help students to record their reflections on a particular topic or theme discussed in class. They also offer students the opportunity to get familiar with the various functions of the Moodle platform, which is not always exploited to its full potential. The most widely used tool, for this purpose, is certainly the "Discussions" forum.

Students are also invited to discuss the choice of topic for their micro-teaching session (see section 3.2): through a special forum they ask their peers for feedback on their proposal, so that peer collaboration guides everyone's choices. In this way, therefore, not only does the class group ensure a certain variety of topics (since everyone tends to leave out topics already covered by others), but it also represents a moment for appropriate choices. If, for example, a student proposes a grammar topic that is evidently too advanced for the level of competence of the target audience imagined in the micro-teaching, other classmates will help him or her better calibrate the option. Finally, since the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* do not include a final exam specifically designed to ascertain the skills acquired on an individual basis, peer learning is strongly encouraged, particularly in the individual reflections that are part of the tasks in the online forums.

3. The project in detail

Having highlighted the salient steps that led to the creation of the *Laboratori* and their characteristics, we now turn to the details of their structure. As outlined above, the methodological part includes two seminar lessons of language teaching; two seminar lessons of literature/culture teaching; a seminar with experienced secondary school teachers; an eTwinning seminar lesson with an eTwinning ambassador, and a micro-teaching session.

The four seminars of language and literature/culture teaching aim to help students develop skills, confidence and knowledge in language and literature teaching. As far as English language teaching is concerned, for example, students are guided to reflect on methodological approaches in language teaching, on aspects related to lesson planning and coursebooks, and on digital tools in foreign language teaching. As to literature and culture, they are guided to plan a lesson on the basis of new methods and practices to approach literary and cultural texts in foreign language literature. Furthermore, students are exposed to pedagogical strategies tailored to cater to the requisites of both digital natives and digital immigrants, thereby

facilitating the cultivation of visual literacy skills. Noteworthy components encompass an enhanced focus on diverse media formats such as, for example, films and graphic novels, as well as performative arts in English literature. Additionally, the lessons delve into the intricate process of transposing literary content into alternative media or performative art expressions. Moreover, the interdisciplinary dimension of digital mapping is introduced, entailing the amalgamation of cartographic methodologies with contemporary digital tools to visually depict and analyse spatial components inherent in literary compositions.

Particular emphasis is dedicated to the pivotal role that teaching foreign languages, literatures and cultures assumes in advancing cultural diversity and fostering intercultural discourse, above all in the case of English, given its global spread. Therefore, teacher and students consider together the new challenges and opportunities of teaching foreign languages in a digital, intercultural and inclusive world. The seminar with experienced secondary school teachers aims to provide students with an 'insider view,' offer a description of how the school, as an institution, works, and highlight the aspects that must be taken into account in everyday practice. Students are also introduced to the Syllabus, that is, an outline and summary of topics to be covered in an education course, and the National Guidelines which describe the goals and aims of secondary education.

The eTwinning seminar lesson, which will be discussed in detail later, is the same for all languages and organised in collaboration with the Regional School Office (USR) within the Indire ITE plan.[14] This seminar has always been of great interest to our students since the very first course in A.Y. 2019/20, and it was introduced because the course development team strongly believed in the role of eTwinning in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages and in the importance of sharing this teaching opportunity (Kearney and Gras-Velázquez 2015; García Ruano 2013).

Micro-teaching sessions—to which we will also return in more detail below—were introduced in A.Y. 2018/19. In these sessions students are asked to prepare a 20-minute lesson related to one of the topics analysed in the language or literature/culture lessons, which is then shared in class with peers. The Micro-teaching experience allows students to acquire and master teaching skills in a protected learning environment before entering the real classroom (Yusuf 2006). As we will see below, lessons are delivered and video-recorded in the two Micro-teaching classrooms (Co-working rooms) created and equipped by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

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[14] The Department is part of the Initial Teacher Education institutes (ITE) network.

thanks to the Project of Excellence funds with the aim of facilitating and encouraging digital teaching.

The practicum hours (75 in the first five editions and 50 in the *Teaching Labs*) in lower (11 to 13-year-old students) or upper secondary schools (14 to 18-year-old students) are regulated by the procedures established by the Internship Office of the University of Verona and the academic supervisor is the referent of each specific *Laboratorio/Teaching Lab*. It offers students many opportunities, within diverse school contexts, to refine and put into practice the knowledge and skills they have developed during the methodological part. To support the students in the Practicum and in the Micro-teaching experience, the course development team has created guidelines and an observation checklist after the first pilot course.

3.1 eTwinning

Since A.Y. 2018/19 a seminar specifically dedicated to eTwinning has been introduced as an integral part of the *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Tecnologie e Metodologie Didattiche/Teaching Labs*. The Seminar aims to familiarise students with the possibilities offered by the eTwinning Erasmus+ programme and has been organised in cooperation with the regional USR Veneto office.[15] During the 4-hour seminar, the eTwinning ambassadors[16] introduce the students to the educational aims of eTwinning and guide them in the exploration of the various sections of the portal, inviting them also to simulate a project. In the following sections, the main characteristics of eTwinning, and the reasons why it represents an invaluable resource in language teacher education, will be outlined.

3.1.1 What is eTwinning?

eTwinning started in 2005 and has been part of the Erasmus+ European Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport since 2014, and of the Lifelong Learning Programme since 2007. Coordinated at a European level, the programme is also supported by National Support Services in the 43 participating countries.[17] 16 years after its launch, in 2020 the eTwinning community in Europe counted 43 adhering countries, with more than 930,000 enrolled teachers and 123,000 activated projects (Unità Nazionale eTwinning/INDIRE 2021), figures that testify to its great importance in education.

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[15] Ufficio Scolastico Regionale, regional education office according to the Italian system.

[16] eTwinning ambassadors are trained and selected at a national level and provide training and support for eTwinning initiatives.

[17] https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/about/eTwinning-NSO. Last visited 04/02/2023.

eTwinning provides teachers and educators operating in one of the countries involved with a platform where to create professional networks, communicate and cooperate at different levels. The original eTwinning platform[18] migrated to the European School Education Platform in 2022.[19] Educational projects between two or more schools across Europe and beyond can be set up and developed through the platform dedicated spaces, thus creating digital opportunities to interact, share ideas and practices in the development of online projects and communication. Many opportunities are also offered to educators to participate in numerous webinars and learning events, both nationally and internationally, on a variety of topics, allowing them to be active part of the eTwinning community and broaden their professional and educational tools. eTwinning thus represents an invaluable opportunity to learn about innovative approaches to education and put them into practice within a lively community of teachers and educators, in a safe digital environment and through the support of online and face-to-face training, national support services and the local networks of eTwinning ambassador teachers.

3.1.2 eTwinning in Italy

As for Italy, the national eTwinning unit, which is also part of the National Erasmus+ Agency, is located in Florence within the *Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa* (INDIRE). It cooperates with the European eTwinning unit, with other National Units, as well as with local regional school offices (USR) to promote eTwinning initiatives and to provide support to schools, teachers and teacher educators.[20]

Italy has always been very actively involved in the eTwinning community. As of February 2023, there are 100,200 teachers who have enrolled, with 11,000 schools involved and 33,500 active projects,[21] showing a continuous growth since 2015 (Nucci, Tosi and Pettenati 2021b, 15). Projects have involved more than 800,000 students since 2005, of which 51% in upper secondary schools, 13% in lower secondary schools, 29% in primary schools and 7% in pre-primary ones (Unità Nazionale eTwinning/INDIRE 2021, 12).

Italy represents the second most numerous community of registered teachers since 2005, with a 400% growth from 2014 to 2020. Italian teachers have also been very active in the eTwinning

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[18] www.etwinning.net. Last visited 04/02/2023.

[19] ESEP, https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en. Last visited 04/02/2023.

[20] More information about the eTwinning Italian Unit and eTwinning in Italy can be found at the INDIRE dedicated website: https://etwinning.indire.it/cose-etwinning/. Last visited 04/04/2023.

[21] https://etwinning.indire.it/. Last visited 04/02/2023.

platform, with more than 850 groups for networking activities and about 7,500 live events (Unità Nazionale eTwinning/INDIRE 2021, 12).

It should also be mentioned that during the Covid-19 lockdown period the Italian National Unit provided valuable support to teachers with webinars and other initiatives, and in particular with the eTwinning *"SOS Didattica a Distanza"* online group that was created to support teachers with distance education, providing also practical activities and tools[22] (Nucci, Tosi and Pettenati 2021a, 79). The innovative experiences developed *via* eTwinning have thus also represented a source of inspiration and help for teachers to effectively manage distance education (Unità Nazionale eTwinning/INDIRE 2021, 39).

3.1.3 eTwinning and teacher education

In general, eTwinning sees its mission as improving European educational curricula through internationalisation and innovation in teaching and learning approaches, favouring the European dimension and shared citizenship for new generations (Unità Nazionale eTwinning/INDIRE 2021, 8). These educational aims are fully reflected in the teacher education initiatives eTwinning promotes, both online and in presence. eTwinning teacher education opportunities are offered both in dedicated webinars and national and international conferences organised by the eTwinning National Unit and by the European one, and at a more territorial level in cooperation with local School Regional Offices (USR) and eTwinning ambassadors. Between 2014 and 2020 more than 80,000 teachers were involved in these teacher education initiatives, with an increase during the 2020 lockdown period (Unità Nazionale eTwinning/INDIRE 2021, 32).

These educational and training opportunities involve teachers, but also eTwinning ambassadors and future teachers, the latter through the *"eTwinning for Future Teachers*—Initial Teacher Education" (ITE) programme.[23] Italy has been part of the ITE network since 2013, and more than 20 universities have incorporated eTwinning in their initial teacher education programmes at different levels, above all for future pre-primary and primary teachers. The ITE programme has involved more than 12,000 university students in Italy, who familiarised with the eTwinning platform and worked on projects in cooperation with other national or international ITE institutions and universities (Unità Nazionale eTwinning/INDIRE 2021, 37).

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[22] https://www.indire.it/2020/05/26/sos-didattica-a-distanza-il-gruppo-etwinning-nato-per-fare-squadra-nellemergenza/ Last visited 04/02/2023.
[23] https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/about/etwinning-future-teachers. Last visited 04/02/2023.

It should be mentioned that the University of Verona has been a participant in the ITE programme since A.Y. 2018/19, both with the eTwinning seminar part of the *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Tecnologie e Metodologie Didattiche/Teaching Labs* at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and with the courses in the Combined Bachelor's + Master's single-cycle degree in Primary teacher education (*Corso di Laurea Magistrale di Scienze della Formazione Primaria*). The university, in fact, was awarded the eTwinning ITE Award in 2022.[24]

For all the above reasons, eTwinning and its engagement with teacher education represent an extremely useful opportunity to provide teachers, and future teachers, with pedagogical tools. Such tools may help them experience and later develop innovative approaches in teaching, and in Foreign Language teaching in our case. The use of ICT and digital tools in everyday pedagogical practices, the Project Based Learning and 'learning by doing' oriented approach in the development and management of projects, their cross-curricular characteristics, as well as the focus on a cooperative sharing of knowledge and professional networking are all central aspects in eTwinning, which can significantly contribute to the actual development of good teaching practices (e.g. Fabbro, Ranieri and Imbimbo 2021, 90-92; 105-109; Nucci, Tosi and Pettenati 2021a, 62, 69). In addition, participation in eTwinning is inherently connected to internationalisation, since communication takes place through a shared additional language (often English but not only) and promotes the development of intercultural competence and active citizenship (Pettenati, Tancredi and Martinelli 2021). From this viewpoint, it is particularly valuable in foreign language teaching, in that it can contribute to sustain and foster the development of communicative competence and actual language use (e.g., Vettorel 2013).

The inclusion of eTwinning seminars in the *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Tecnologie e Metodologie Didattiche/Teaching Labs* appears fundamental, then, in an approach that provides trainee students with a first chance to familiarise themselves with innovative tools and approaches in foreign language teaching. The comments on the experience by the Project team, the eTwinning ambassadors and the students who participated have in fact been very positive, highlighting the high potential eTwinning has for foreign language teaching and learning. Their comments in the dedicated Moodle forum touched upon a number of key aspects eTwinning implements, amongst which we find the following, each accompanied by examples of remarks by the trainee students:

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[24] https://etwinning.indire.it/etwinning-for-future-teachers-ite/ite-award-certificato-etwinning-per-la-formazione-iniziale-degli-insegnanti/. Last visited 05/02/2023.

- **cooperation among teachers working in different contexts**: "Among the advantages offered by the initiative, I find the idea of 360-degree collaboration (that is, between teachers, students, schools, parents and local authorities) very interesting," together with "the possibility for teachers to continuously grow from a professional point of view, comparing themselves with colleagues from other countries, all over Europe and even beyond European borders" (EM, A.Y. 2021/22); "E-twinning is surely a powerful tool to use when teaching foreign languages and the fact that they invest a lot on new and future teachers is interesting and meaningful" (CP, A.Y. 2021/22); "What I found really interesting is the cooperation the teachers can build among themselves. I didn't know that more than 900,000 teachers are involved in this project, which includes members who come from almost every nation in Europe. This aspect is important, because it promotes the professional growth of the person […] I think that the more a teacher studies and updates his hard skills and soft skills, the better he will coach in front of the class" (sic; AC, A.Y. 2020/21); "Before having this meeting, I had no idea about this amazing platform that is eTwinning, which is among the many things a great opportunity for teachers from all over Europe to keep in touch and collaborate by communicating and developing projects of various type or simply sharing knowledge and ideas" (ML, A.Y. 2020/21).

- **foster communication in realistic contexts through English as a lingua franca**: "The idea that through a safe website students can interact with one another using English as Lingua Franca is really useful for the concept of teaching English in a more pluralistic and inclusive perspective. Indeed, interacting with students from all Europe and even from outside Europe can be extremely useful to increase motivation in learning a foreign language and make student realise the existence of different Englishes. Moreover, the eTwinning projects are ideal to make students use the English language actively and in concrete situations" (RS, A.Y. 2021/22); "I believe that eTwinning is perfectly suitable for teaching and learning English, as well as other foreign languages, thanks to its international dimension and 'borderless community.' In fact, students can interact with learners from other countries, using online tools in complete safety. It is thanks to the communication that takes place in these 'classrooms without walls' that students can practice, actively use and improve their language skills, comparing themselves with students from other parts of the world, thus enriching themselves, not only from a strictly linguistic point of view, but also from a cultural perspective" (ET, A.Y. 2021/22); "I think that eTwinning is a very useful platform for children and young adults to learn English and help them raise awareness that English is used not only by British or American people but it is a means of international communication. Students will learn that English in its Lingua Franca role is used by speakers with a variety of linguacultural backgrounds and teachers have the fundamental role of educating students 'to encounter such diversity with respect, curiosity and wisdom" (LG, A.Y. 2020/21).

- **foster the development of intercultural competence:** "an example is 'Cultural Heritage,' an activity that can be done with 12 to 15 years old students, which focusses on civic, cultural awareness and expression, digital and language competences and which takes into consideration cross curricular areas, art, foreign languages, geography, history and music. This is interesting when teaching a language, and in particular when teaching English. Indeed, when we teach a language we do not have to focus only on the grammar and the vocabulary, but we also have to take into

consideration the cultural heritage, traditions and the lifestyle of the people who speak English in their everyday life. The eTwinning project is, therefore, very suitable for this kind of task" (ET, A.Y. 2021/22).

- **increase students' (and teachers') motivation**: the platform "offers this secure space were teachers, coming from all over the world, can collaborate. As teachers are required to know the ever-changing world of students, which has increasingly to do with technology, I think that such a platform could help us to provide different stimuli which will help them to learn" (ADS, A.Y. 2021/22); "Since every teacher would love to make his/her lessons interesting and pleasant, the idea to be inspired by the other colleagues and share the experience with the students from other countries is attractive. The eTwinning platform can help to realise this dream. First, it is a perfect example of how we can engage our students into a productive and creative activity where they will learn doing something and sharing their experience with other peers. Second, it is an opportunity to practice foreign language and to 'put in life' the abilities acquired at school in a passive way. Finally, collaborative learning is the best way to reinforce personal motivation and to involve everybody" (KB, A.Y. 2021/22).

The value of eTwinning as expressed in the students' own words is clearly summarised in the following comment: "from a linguistic point of view, this is a great opportunity to practice a foreign language without being pressured. Children from different nationalities won't feel scared of being judged because everyone is on the same page; they are trying to talk in a different language from their native one, so they understand this situation and try to help each other. Therefore, in my opinion, E-twinning is a useful tool for everyone (from primary school students to high school students, even for the teachers themselves) because they can share ideas, collaborate and improve" (NZ, A.Y. 2020/21).

3.2 Micro-teaching

Micro-teaching constitutes another key moment in the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs*. This activity aims to provide a context for the practical application of theoretical notions, to enhance the process of reflection, self- and peer-assessment on the part of future teachers, as well as to promote the use of digital tools, which is a characteristic of the whole course, as we have seen above. After a brief introduction to micro-teaching in the context of foreign language teaching education, we will describe how it has been developed in the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* at the University of Verona.

3.2.1 A method for training prospective teachers

Since it was first introduced in the 1960s at Stanford University (Allen and Ryan 1969; Allen 1967), micro-teaching has been a particularly popular method in teacher education in diverse contexts. Prospective teachers have the opportunity to acquire and test their teaching skills in

an academic environment, which is in fact a protected situation, before going into real classes (Yusuf 2006). This method is also adopted for the training of second language teaching skills, and has been put into practice above all in English language teaching contexts (e.g., Koc and Ilya 2016; Ping 2013; Ismail 2011).

The micro-teaching method generally consists of a "teach-reteach" cyclical process (Allen 1967, 5) which is made up of several steps: during the first phase of planning, the prospective teacher designs a lesson plan around a specific topic; then, he/she conducts a micro-lesson putting the teaching techniques explored in the methodological sessions into practice. This lesson is addressed to a micro-class of a group of peers and University supervisors, simulating a group of students; the micro-lesson generally lasts a few minutes and is usually videorecorded. In the following step, it is crucial that the future teacher reflects on this micro-lesson experience in order to identify strengths and areas for improvement concerning, for example, clarity, behaviour, gestures, interactions, etc.; the recording viewing and the feedback given by peers and supervisors contribute to this reflection and self-evaluation. After this first experience, a second one is conducted, following the same steps of planning and teaching, with the goal of improving the previous performance. Feedback from the micro-class and reflection by the future teacher are still central to the process.

Despite some critical issues, such as the artificial context in which the micro-teaching simulation is conducted (Ismail 2011, 1050), several studies show its effectiveness in the training of future teachers (Önal 2019; Ping 2013). Among the advantages of micro-teaching, it has to be said that, starting from its general structure, it is a flexible approach, which can be easily adapted in specific contexts and training situations (Önal 2019, 809). Recent studies also highlight the fact that different digital tools contribute to the effectiveness of micro-teaching (Omolere 2020; Önal 2019).

3.2.2 The micro-teaching experience in the Laboratori/Teaching Labs

Micro-teaching was introduced in the second version of the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* during the academic year 2018/2019: as a matter of fact, the 2017/2018 pilot course had highlighted the need to better develop practical skills, as well as ICT skills and transversal skills, following the sessions devoted to theoretical and methodological training (Pratibha 2019; Németh and Csongor 2019; Hamon and Cervini 2015). The course development team coordinating the *Laboratori* agreed that the micro-teaching method could be effectively adopted to achieve these objectives.

Micro-teaching is scheduled at the end of the first theoretical part dealing with teaching methods of the language and literature/culture chosen by the student. In all the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* from the 2018/19 to the 2021/2022 ones, due to the limited amount of available hours, micro-teaching was structured exclusively on the first part of the "planning – teach – feedback/reflection" cycle. Thus, in the planning phase, prospective teachers plan a lesson by choosing one specific language or literature/culture topic; the task involves making the objectives, the audience and the target language level explicit. This is also influenced by prior discussions conducted in preliminary sessions. The micro-lesson has to be designed for the context of the Italian lower and upper secondary school, where participants are expected to hold their practicum.

In the second phase, the micro-lesson is exposed to the micro-class, which consists of the other future teachers and the university supervisors. Until the 2021/2022 edition, all micro-lessons were held in a single 4-hour session. The duration of the micro-lessons, generally 8 to 20 minutes, had to be adapted to the needs of each language group and to some practical issues, such as the number of students and, consequently, the time available for each.

Over the years, the video recordings modes of the micro-teaching lessons have changed thanks to the Department new technological equipment. On the pilot course, the videos were made using personal devices, such as tablets and mobile phones, while, since 2020, new digital tools have been used. Lessons are currently delivered and recorded in the two "digital rooms" created and equipped by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature. In these rooms, new tools such as a new multimedia system, a video projector and a video recording/streaming system are currently available. The third phase of the micro-teaching, as we mentioned above, is a central step dedicated to feedback and reflection about the experience. This phase is divided into two distinct steps within the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs*. Firstly, immediately after the micro-teaching has taken place, the participant receives feedback from

peers and from the supervisors. To facilitate this feedback, all students are given an observation checklist prior to the start of the micro-teaching lesson, which allows them to focus on specific aspects and techniques. The checklist, initially developed for the English group, was later extended to all the languages. It focuses on a range of criteria about the organisation and structure of the lesson (for example, "The development of activities/tasks is appropriately planned in terms of time"), teaching strategies and clarity (such as "The teacher shows knowledge of the subject matter"), pedagogical materials, time management, students' involvement.

A second step in this phase is the reflection and self-assessment of each participant *via* the Moodle platform: after a short period of time following the inputs received during the micro-lesson, each future teacher reflects on the strengths and critical points that have emerged, posting his/her reflections on a forum, thus sharing reflections with the other participants and the supervisors. Given the centrality of the reflection moment, this activity is mandatory for the completion of the micro-teaching experience.

Starting with the 2022/23 course, the micro-teaching cycle can be completed by students, depending on the number of hours available within each group: some participants have therefore the opportunity to repeat the micro-teaching phases of "planning-teach-feedback/reflection," on the basis of the reflective feedback received from their peers and from the teacher. Furthermore, these participants can conduct their micro-lesson on a language/literature/culture topic.[25]

To conclude, on the basis of qualitative results, the experience of the the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* can be said to have had positive results as a first opportunity of future foreign language teachers training, both from the supervisors' and participants' point of view. As far as the University supervisors are concerned, they have witnessed students putting into practice the theoretical and methodological concepts introduced in the preliminary lessons, which has also allowed personalised suggestions to each participant, as well as guidance for the practicum to be carried out in secondary schools. Furthermore, the lesson simulation has reinforced the interaction between the University supervisor and future teachers, thus highlighting possible new aspects for reflection, not analysed during the methodological meetings. Furthermore, the possibility of replicating the structure of the micro-teaching session has provided the opportunity to adapt it to the specific features of each language group, as well as to the changes taking place at institutional levels.

Student feedback has also been generally positive. Some critical points have been highlighted, such as the emotional difficulties in simulating the lesson in front of peers and academic supervisors or, in other cases, the difficulty in finding teaching material suitable for the secondary school level. However, the comments received from the prospective teachers show that this simulation provides them with a greater awareness of a range of tools and classroom management techniques, which equip them to deal with real lessons in the school. Micro-teaching also highlights didactic aspects they had never thought about (e.g., the role of gestures and voice, the active involvement of the class, the role of the context) and allows a comparison

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[25] At the time of writing, data are not yet available for the 2022/23 micro-teaching experience.

with the teaching strategies used by other peers. In some cases, the micro-teaching lesson plan simulated at the university was in fact put into practice by the participants during their practicum at school.

4. Conclusion

This contribution has aimed to illustrate and discuss from a qualitative point of view the innovative experience of the *Laboratori e Tirocini di Introduzione alle Metodologie e Tecnologie Didattiche/Teaching Labs*, part of the courses offered by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Verona since A.Y. 2017/18. Their innovative characteristic lies first of all in their aim to provide a preliminary teacher education experience for students who may want to become foreign language and literature/culture teachers in English, French, German, Spanish and, since the 2022/23 edition, Russian. In this way, the educational offer of the Master's Degree Course in *Comparative European and Non-European Languages and Literatures* has been extended by the introduction of the *Laboratori* as mandatory courses, which may also involve other degrees in the future; it is also worth mentioning that such courses are not offered by neighbouring universities.

As we have seen, the structure of the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* is well grounded in a blended learning rationale. The experience and expertise in the use of online technologies and the specific blended structure proved to be winning factors also during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown period, which led to widespread closure of on-site lessons throughout Italy. Our University and our Department, like all Italian Universities, made efforts to reschedule classes and research activities and move teaching to the distance online context. The experience gained by means of the *Laboratori/Teaching Labs*, together with the presence of software and classrooms specifically designed for blended teaching, and created expressly for the Project, helped and accelerated the transition to distance learning. The *Laboratori/Teaching Labs'*s reflective framework, where theoretical aspects are to be applied in practice both in the micro-teaching sessions and in the practicum, was supported by the blended learning rationale. The seminar approach soundly contributes to this integration of theory and practice, together with the opportunity for students to benefit from working with experienced language and literature teachers. The sessions aimed at the familiarisation with the eTwinning European project, and the introduction to the use of new technologies in language/literature teaching, also proved to be both popular and innovative aspects, as discussed above.

The *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* experience can hence be considered innovative thanks to the synergetic interaction of its characterising features—from blended learning to micro-teaching.

All these elements, which have characterised the project and its implementations over the years, have been positively evaluated by the actors involved, students in the first place, but also the school teachers who supervised them during their practicum. Further research will expand the qualitative elements discussed in this article with quantitative findings from the new *Teaching Labs* experience.

One further element worth mentioning is the fact that the *Laboratori*, and their current development in the *Teaching Labs: Methodologies, Technologies and Practicum*, have aimed at fostering the development of transversal skills and of digital, intercultural and critical competences, too. The *Laboratori/Teaching Labs* can thus be said to represent a particularly valuable instance of good practice, that might possibly be adopted in other higher educational contexts, too, opening new future perspectives in professional terms for language and literature teacher education.

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