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A FEW REFLECTIONS ON SPECIFIC LEARNING DISORDERS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ITALIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1. Teaching and Inclusiveness in Italy

The latest news reporting that the Italian Parliament is passing a new school reform that fosters an increase in English studies has been the hint for this paper to reflect on foreign language teaching in Italian Secondary Schools, focusing on "special needs" students.

The *World Conference on Special Need Education*, held in Salamanca in 1994 by UNESCO, produced *The Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and Framework for Action* declaration, encouraging governments to design educational systems able to respond to different needs, to give all students access to regular schools, in conformity with a child-centred pedagogy.

> The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. (UNESCO 11-12)

The more recent UNESCO recommendations, stated in the document *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education* of 2009[2], and the provisions adopted by the European Community[3] have resulted in a tendency to include "special educational needs" students in mainstream classes, nevertheless with considerably different approaches in the world between countries.[4] It is therefore useful to define the two concepts, mainstreaming and inclusion, since they are both generally translated in Italian with the term "*inclusione.*"

> Inclusion in education is an approach to educating students with special educational needs. Under the inclusion model, students with special needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students. Implementation of these practices varies. Schools most frequently use them for selected students with mild to severe special needs. (…) Inclusive education differs from previously held notions of integration and mainstreaming, which tended to be concerned principally with disability and "special educational needs" and implied learners changing or becoming 'ready for' or deserving of accommodation by the mainstream. By contrast, inclusion is

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[2] *Policy Guideline on Inclusion in Education*, Paris: UNESCO, 2009. Last visited 1/3/2015. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001778/177849e.pdf

[3] In 2000, UNESCO, with the *Dakar Framework for Action* defined the principle of "Education for all" (Education For All - EFA). The documents produced deal with the right for education, as a goal for all governments to be reached by 2015. The importance assessed to inclusive education by UNESCO is confirmed in many other documents, for example in the *Conclusions and Recommendations of the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education*, Geneve, 2008. Last visited 24/2/2015. www.unesco.org/education/efa. *EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020* reflects the commitment of the European Union in the disability field, following the 2007 Council's adoption of the decision for the inclusion of the CRPD (UN *Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*), signed by the European Community in 2007, which in the future should form part of the EU legal system. Last visited 28/2/2015. http://ec.europa.eu.

[4] More detailed information can be found in the study of Susan Peter *Inclusive Education: An Efa Strategy for all Children*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2004. Last visited 1/3/2015. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1099079877269/547664-1099079993288/InclusiveEdu_efa_strategy_for_children.pdf

about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child. Inclusion rejects the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities from students without disabilities.[5]

The Italian educational system is first in the world for what concerns full inclusion schooling, with a percentage of more than 99.5% students attending regular classes. Italy is thus taken as a model of inclusive education, as we may see in the essay written by the American professor Ferri: "Inclusion in Italy: What Happens When Everyone Belongs":

> Despite inevitable imperfections, there is much to learn from the Italian approach to inclusion. First, beyond simply implementing a generic policy, the Italian model demonstrates the importance of fostering a shared vision that resonates within a particular cultural context. Whereas U.S. disability policies tend to focus on civil rights, for example, the Italian teachers I spoke with, framed inclusion in terms of an ethic care or concern – viewing the classroom as a family where everyone is valued and belongs. The model of inclusive education in Italy is consistent with a strong familial orientation of Italian culture and heritage.[6]

It is worth to quote the note on MIUR's (Ministry of Education, University and Research) webpage:

> L'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità costituisce un punto di forza del sistema educativo italiano. La scuola italiana, infatti, vuole essere una comunità accogliente nella quale tutti gli alunni, a prescindere dalle loro diversità funzionali, possano realizzare esperienze di crescita individuale e sociale. La piena inclusione degli alunni con disabilità è un obiettivo che la scuola dell'autonomia persegue attraverso una intensa e articolata progettualità, valorizzando le professionalità interne e le risorse offerte dal territorio.[7] [8]

In Italy a very small percentage (approximately 0,01%) of students with disabilities are educated in separate specialized settings[9]. Highly specialized centres have developed methods of inclusion and teaching laboratories and act as resource centres and as bridges to mainstream/inclusive education. In the MIUR's document *Linee guida per l'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità* we read:

> L'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità è un processo irreversibile, e proprio per questo non può adagiarsi su pratiche disimpegnate che svuotano il senso pedagogico, culturale e sociale dell'integrazione trasformandola da un processo di crescita per gli alunni con disabilità e per i loro compagni a una procedura solamente attenta alla correttezza formale degli adempimenti burocratici. Dietro alla "coraggiosa" scelta della scuola italiana di aprire le classi normali affinché diventassero effettivamente e per tutti "comuni", c'è una concezione alta tanto dell'istruzione quanto della persona umana, che trova nell'educazione il momento prioritario del proprio sviluppo e della propria maturazione.[10] [11]

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[5] Entry: "Inclusion". Last Visited 16/2/2015. http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Inclusion+(education)

[6] Ferri, Beth. "Inclusion In Italy: What Happens WHEN Everyone Belongs*", Disability and the Politics of Education: An International Reader*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 41-52.

[7] Last visited 26/2/2015. http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/web/istruzione/disabilita

[8] The education of students with disabilities is an asset of the Italian educational system. The Italian school, in fact, wants to be a welcoming community in which all students, regardless of their functional abilities, can achieve experiences of individual and social growth. Full inclusion of students with disabilities is a goal that the "autonomy" school pursues through an intense and articulated planning, enhancing internal resources and professionalism offered by the area (Translated by the author).

[9] The latest data available refer to year 2010, found in a European Commision Press Release dated July 2012: Italy has the lowest number in Europe of separately educated students. Last visited 14/4/2015. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-12-761_it.htm

[10] *Linee guida per l'integrazione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità,* Roma: MIUR, 2010. 3

Therefore, in an educational system based on mixed-level/mixed-ability classes, which applies the principle of full inclusiveness, Italian teachers are facing the urgent need to be adequately trained and supported to work in classes with an increasing number of "special needs" students.

The Italian short form BES *(Bisogni Educativi Speciali)*, which can be compared to the English SEN (Special Educational Needs), includes three typologies of disadvantaged students. The first: students with physical, sensory or neurological disabilities, certified by Law 104/1992; the second: students with a specific learning disorder (in the past defined as "learning disability"), shortened with the acronym SLD (in Italian DSA*: Disturbi Specifici di Apprendimento*) or bearing an ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) diagnoses, for whom the new Law 170/2010 indicates the best approaching didactic method; the third: students with social, cultural, linguistic and economic disadvantages. The data supplied by MIUR regarding BES students may give us an idea of the percentage, which is constantly increasing: in school year 2001/02, BES students were 139.000 (1,59% of the total school population), in 2010/11 they were 220.000 (2,5%).[12] Therefore, all teachers are directly involved in adapting their didactics to these new classes, and after the implementation of the above mentioned Law 170/2010 they have to receive adequate training in order to be able to recognize and treat these learning disorders in their daily school practice. I must not omit to report that all newly assigned teachers receive some training on this subject, while long working teachers increasingly feel the need to be trained this pressing issue.

We must specify that the presence of a specialized teacher to support the disadvantaged student (in part or full time, depending on the grade of disability) is provided only for students who are certified according to the aforesaid Law 104/1992. In the current School Year 2014/2015 specialized special needs support teachers are reported to be 74,000, for a total number of 150,000 Law 104/1992 certified students.[13] So, we can deduce that there is one supporting teacher every two certified students, as recommended by MIUR.[14] It must be said that the support teacher helps the student for an average of ten hours per week, that is only one third of the total school time. For the rest of the time the students follow regular classes. The supporting teacher (in Italian: *insegnante di sostegno)* is formally assigned to the whole class.

Therefore, it is easily understandable that teaching in a class context that is becoming more and more complex is a very demanding – and at the same time challenging - task for today's (and tomorrow's) teachers.

Since 2004, MIUR has provided guidelines that should lead teachers, students and families, from infantry schools to University, through these new issues. Law 170/2010, and many regional decrees, have established the centrality of the *Consiglio di classe* (Teaching Board) in identifying - if not previously diagnosed - special needs students, at all levels of education. Upon receipt of a certificate, supplied by the family and drawn by the Health Service or a by a private specialist, the school must provide a so called *Piano Didattico Personalizzato*, shortened in PDP (in English: "Personalized Learning Plan"). This personal learning plan does not impose a one-to-one relationship between teacher and student, with a consequent – and often feared – increase in the teacher's work; it should rather indicate the most suitable teaching strategies to ensure that each student can perform at his/her best. The PDP, which must be prepared within

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[11] The education of students with disabilities is an irreversible process, and as such it can not rely on disengaged practices that empty the pedagogical, cultural and social meaning of integration, thus transforming it from a growing process for students with disabilities and their mates in a procedure which only pays attention to formal correctness. Behind the "brave" choice of the Italian school to open regular classes to have them become effectively "common" for all, there is a high conception of education as well as of the human being, who finds in education a priority of his development and growth. (Translated by the author).

[12] ISTAT*. L'integrazione degli alunni con disabilità nelle scuole primarie e secondarie di primo grado statali e non statali.* Last visited 28/2/2015. http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/143466

[13] ISTAT. *L'integrazione degli alunni con disabilità nelle scuole primarie e secondarie di primo grado statali e non statali.* Last visited 28/2/2015. http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/143466

[14] Students with physical disabilities are also assigned an assistant to help them in their physical needs.

two months from the beginning of each school year by the class teachers, is a contract between the school and the family, and to come into force it must be signed by both parts. It is a plan with a clear strategy that, through a specific didactic path, aims at fostering the best performance in a BES student, in certain, or all, subjects. It is important to stress that the PDP maintains continuity of contents with the learning plan of the rest of the class.

Regarding the contents of the PDP, we can summarize by saying that it specifies the most appropriate methodologies chosen by each teacher for his/her teaching subject, or learning area.[15] New teaching methodologies should reduce to the minimum traditional ways of teaching, such as lectures, grammar tests with fixed patterns, mnemonic repetition of concepts or application of rules. Lessons scheduled according to the once fixed sequence of explanation/study/final test must be interspersed with less traditional didactics.

Great importance is given today to variety in teaching strategies, teaching materials and tools (maps, diagrams, images). Teachers should stimulate information recovery through, for example, brainstorming, trying to create a link with the students' previous learning experience. Workshop activities should be encouraged, while the workload should generally be reduced. Teaching experts underline the importance of this new educational approach for the whole class group and not only for BES students.
We will not go further into details on the forms and contents of the PDP. Even if in the past few years there has been much discussion on the necessity of introducing a personalized – and facilitated – didactic plan for minor learning disabled students, today the PDP is a common practice in every Italian school.
It must be added that BES students are granted compensatory and dispensatory measures (specifically for SLD students), as well as appropriate forms of tests and evaluation: we will go further into these matters in the next few pages. If educators in general should avoid activities in which students could be in conflict with themselves and their peers, as it should happen with learning disabled students facing school failures, today teachers should focus mainly on maximizing each student's performance, adapting the tasks to the students' individual learning styles. So, if a good teacher should always motivate his/her students, making the goal and the tasks clear and simple, this educational strategy is of primary importance to SLD students.

2. Teaching a Foreign Language to Italian SLD students
In Italy, as in other countries, we do not have precise data on the presence of SLD in the population, but it is estimated to be approximately 4-5%: this range may depend on the age at which the diagnosis is made and on the means used to certify it. My teaching experience confirms these statistical data: in an average class of twenty/twenty-two students, there is at least one student with a certified Specific Learning Disorder, sometimes with an ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) diagnosis. Specific Learning Disorders include dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography and dyscalculia.[16] Sometimes, the four disorders are present in combined forms. SLDs are esteemed to have important familiarity factors, often with a chronic but evolutionary course: they modify in relation to age and educational requirements; at the same time environmental (school, family and social context) and neurobiological factors are intertwined. SLDs persist throughout life and are a potential factor of vulnerability. Therefore, a continuous support must be granted to the disadvantaged person throughout his/her life. Coordinated and integrated interventions (in Italian this process is called *presa in carico)* are guaranteed to control the learning disorder and promote school, social and work integration. Every step of this process must be done in cooperation with health professionals, family and school, with commitment of all the interested parts. Even if it is strongly recommended that families and school keep a continuous and open dialogue on the learning difficulties of the student, it is to be reported that unfortunately this is not always an easy goal to reach, and lack of cooperation from one side or another proves to be highly detrimental for the individual/student.

In Italian primary and secondary schools the teaching of a second language, English in particular, has been made compulsory from 2004 with *Decreto Legislativo 59*. English is now taught at all levels of schools in Italy, from nursery (optional) to Upper Secondary Schools. Moreover, in 2010 Italy decided to implement a

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[15] Some PDP models are available at the site http://www.istruzione.it/web/istruzione/dsa
[16] For more information see the Italian website www.aiditalia.org/

European provision, thus outstanding other European countries: the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) syllabus. As required by the so called *Legge Gelmini*, all Italian Secondary Schools final year's students have to learn a discipline in a "vehicular" foreign language. The importance of the study of a second language as a way of "building knowledge" is stressed in the work of the Italian educational experts Claudia and Rossana Gabrieli:

> Il concetto fondamentale da tener presente è che chiunque sia colui che apprende una lingua, di fronte a qualunque problema di apprendimento, gli obiettivi posti non possono cambiare: si deve saper ascoltare e comprendere, parlare ed esprimersi sempre per lo stesso motivo, ovvero la costruzione di conoscenza. Se la competenza linguistica viene ritenuta fine a se stessa, essa è totalmente demotivante per qualunque tipo di studente e a maggior ragione per uno studente dislessico, o con qualsiasi altro tipo di problema specifico. Per tale motivo, si devono assolutamente stabilire contenuti ed obiettivi che tengano conto di una certa lingua e di un certo tipo di apprendimento, ma allo stesso tempo, ovviamente, di problemi specifici, perché non c'è alcun motivo per cui uno studente dislessico non possa imparare, almeno ad un livello base, un'altra lingua o anche più lingue.[17] [18]

I will now try to focus the attention on the teaching of a second language, namely English, to Special Needs students, with SLD dyslexia.

It is useful to go through a brief definition of dyslexia. In October 2007, the British Dyslexia Association Management Board approved the following definition:

> Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be life-long in its effects. It is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities. It tends to be resistant to conventional teaching methods, but its effect can be mitigated by appropriately specific intervention, including the application of information technology and supportive counselling.[19]

This definition is based on the famous definition adopted by the IDA (International Dyslexia Association, the most important and well-known association dealing with this learning disorder) in 2002, but it implies more, since it states the importance of intervention and support. The above definition has also been used by the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and has been reached through the famous Definition Consensus Project:

> Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in

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[17] Gabrieli, Claudia, and Gabrieli Rossana*"Dyslexia, what is it?". Uno studio teorico e pratico sull'insegnamento della lingua inglese agli studenti dislessici*, Roma: Armando, 2008. 13-14

[18] The key concept to remember is that anyone who learns a language, facing any learning problem, can not change the pre-set objectives. You must know how to listen and understand, speak and express yourself for that same reason, namely the construction of knowledge. If the language proficiency is considered a goal in itself, it is totally demotivating for any kind of student and even more for a dyslexic student, or for any other kind of learning disabled student. For this reason, you absolutely must determine the contents and the objectives to be taken into account for a certain language and a certain type of learning, but at the same time, of course, consider specific problems, because there is no reason why a dyslexic student could not learn, at least at a basic level, one, or even more, foreign languages.(Translated by the author).

[19] British Dyslexia Association. Last visited 6/2/2015. http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexic/definitions

reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.[20]

We may refer to recent publications for updated and complete information about SLDs.[21]

As a general statement, we can say that all classes, in one way or another, are mixed abilities classes. The differences in linguistic ability may depend on several factors, due also to the different 'learning styles' of the students: we know that some can learn languages better and more quickly or may have had a greater exposure to foreign languages than others. On the contrary, other students may be disadvantaged by having a different native language, thus facing difficulty in understanding the teacher's explanations and instructions, as well as using didactic material not in their mother-tongue. If for a student unencumbered by a learning disability studying a foreign language is enriching and rewarding, for a disabled student it can be a stressful and a frustrating experience. While it has long been recognized in the learning disabilities research field that learning a foreign language is a great challenge to SLD students, this fact has been ignored in foreign language instruction and in schools in general until very recently.

In English-speaking countries the percentage of SLDs is far higher – more than twice - than in Italy, due to the characteristics of the English language, defined as "opaque".[22] In English there are 26 graphemes, 20 vowels and diphthongs and 26 consonants: the lack of correspondence between sound and sign makes the language (even when it is L1) very difficult for dyslexic students. In the recent study "Dyslexia and the Phonological Awareness Hypothesis: Developing Awareness in Young English Language Learners'" by the Italian linguists Costenaro and Pesce, we read:

> English children learn to read more slowly than children from other countries, who although beginning formal education later, can reach higher levels of accuracy much sooner (Ziegler, Goswami 2005). The delay in the acquisition of reading skills in English children is caused by the problems related to the low degree of transparency of the English language and the high inconsistency of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (589). [23]

We can add that even French present similar difficulties, while Spanish and German are considered "transparent" languages, and thus present less difficulties for students affected by SLDs. The Italian language is as well a "transparent" language since there is greater correspondence between sound and the graphic sign, even if we may find homophones and not homographs (i.e. *c'era/cera*) and irregular accentuations of polysyllabic words (i.e. *légge/lègge*).

Reading, writing and speaking are simple acts if they are performed automatically, quickly and correctly, with a minimum level of concentration, as in L1 and L2, but if this automatism is not present - as it is in case of dyslexia - the student is constantly forced to use a great amount of energy. Thus, he gets tired quickly and risks staying behind in learning; at first glance, in fact, students suffering from these disorders may seem lazy or distracted. A teacher must not feel discomforted: an SLD student very seldom does his homework (many do not manage to write homework assignments on the school diary) does not take notes or copy from the blackboard. In general, we may say that the workload for these students must be reduced, both at home and at school. Before examining the approaches that have been developed to teach English to SLD students, I need to say a foreword: my teaching experience confirms that dyslexics are very different from one another,

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[20] International Dyslexia Association. Last visited 6/2/2015. http://eida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/
[21] See the website http://psychcentral.com/disorders/specific-learning-disorder/, in particular the article "Specific Learning Disorder" by Johnna Medina. Last visited 14/2/2015.
[22] Further detailed data can be found at the site of British Dyslexia Association: http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/dyslexic/dyslexia-and-specific-learning-difficulties-in-adults. Last visited 6/2/2015.
[23] Costenaro, Verusca, Pesce Antonella "Dyslexia and the Phonological Awareness Hypothesis: Developing Awareness in Young English Language Learners", in *Educazione Linguistica – Language Education*, Vol.1. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari 2012. 581-604.

and what is good for one student can be wrong for the other, depending also on the severity of the disorder. In general, anyway, for a student with a recognized SLD, a foreign language represents a problem, especially if it belongs to a different linguistic group and if it is an "opaque" language, as it is the case of English. After an initial interest for the subject, an SLD student has difficulty in bearing the effort required to learn a new language, and he/she is likely to get soon discouraged. It is always a good practice to motivate the students, giving them continuous and concrete evidence of the importance of having a good knowledge of English today. I can say that the majority of Secondary School students, being Digital Natives, are willing to study English, in a world where English is Lingua Franca. As a starting point, I think that taking into consideration the contemporary cultural aspects of the countries in which the taught language is spoken, can be very helpful to catch the students' attention. In particular of SLD students, who are usually interested in social and media related issues and like to show to the teacher and the class their being always "up-to-date". We remind that SLD students do not have cognitive deficiencies and, on the contrary, they have average intelligence quotients, often even above the average.

3. Teaching Strategies

Keeping in mind that every class presents its own peculiarities, generally speaking I follow the principles suggested by the pragmatics of the so-called "Total Physical Response", about which we read in the famous essay "The Total Physical Response Approach to Second Language Learning" by professor Asher:

> There is evidence that the skill of listening comprehension has high positive transfer especially to speaking a foreign language. And listening skill seems to have a large positive transfer to reading and writing depending upon the fit between phonology and orthography of a specific language (4).[24]

Also according to the more recent "Communicative- Formative Approach"[25], I try to speak English during all my class time, since all students, not only SLDs, learn better from direct experience. In particular, SLD students' intuitiveness is to be encouraged, for example in catching the general meaning of a new text in a listening comprehension, since probably they have already encountered many English words. Working on the oral comprehension should help students memorize the language, without having to look at the written words.

We have already seen that today traditional didactics must be reduced to the minimum: i.e. lectures to present new grammar, vocabulary and language functions, must not last more than 10-15 minutes, since after that time the SLD student (but the whole class in general) has difficulty in paying attention, especially if the lesson is "unluckily" scheduled in the last part of the school day. Grammar rules must be repeated many times, using schemes, maps and pictures, preferably with different colours. Mind maps and charts will be prepared in case of more complex texts to help memorization by SLD students, faculty which is often compromised in dyslexic students.[26] Students are to be encouraged to create schemes and maps, using colours, images, words links, according to logical connections established by themselves.

Today, an essential tool of any class is the Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) and the majority of Italian schools is supplied with one. All textbooks have their electronic version.[27] If a screen and a computer are the tools with

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[24] James Asher, professor emeritus of psychology at San José State University, developed a famous language teaching method, the "Total physical response" (TPR), which is based on the coordination of language and physical movement. Asher James: "The Total Physical Response Approach to Second Language Learning", *The Modern Language Journal* 53.1(1969): 3–17.

[25] The "communicative approach" is an approach to language teaching focused on interaction, in the means of teaching and the aims of studying the language. Didactics is based on role-plays, language exchanges, pair-works, interviews, "learning by teaching", games.

[26] These mind maps can be used by the SLD student during the oral tests as a "compensatory measure".

[27] MIUR established that from School Year 2012/2013 all text books must have a double version: paper and electronic.

which nowadays we ought to devise our lessons, we should also keep in mind the pedagogists' recommendation to switch off the electronic devices after a while, and reserve a certain part of our didactics to a more traditional way of teaching (i.e. frontal lessons, open discussion, etc). This is done in order to reinforce students and teacher's relationships. Moreover, improving personal communication has a positive effect on ADHD students (we remind that many SLDs present both disorders), and whose attention deficit may increase if they are constantly forced to stay in front of an electronic screen. Also pair work and group work are to be encouraged to promote social and communication skills in the foreign language (so practicing oral functions). "Active books" and "LIM books" – electronic formats of the traditional paper textbooks and workbooks for the Interactive Board - are a common practice in all my lessons, as in those of many colleagues. Educational software has become a necessary tool today for any subject, but in particular for language learning and teaching since it offers many activities to improve the four linguistic skills (oral and written comprehension, oral and written production), in a captivating way. Some interactive activities are in my opinion particularly useful for dyslexic students: combinations of image/sound/written word, glossaries with recorded pronunciations, karaoke.

Keeping in mind that reading and writing are the most difficult tasks for a dyslexic person, it is important that text books use suitable fonts (such as Arial or Verdiana 12-14), large line spacing, and clear graphics, rich in pictures. Exercises must follow patterns of progressive difficulty. It is important to give all the instructions in Italian, as well as grant extra time to accomplish the tasks. In case of severe dyslexia, the SLD student should be encouraged to use the CD provided with the textbook, the Smart Pen or the speech synthesizer (as a compensatory measure). He/she must never be forced to read aloud in class. Nevertheless, my experience proves that there are dyslexic students, who have somehow learnt to compensate their learning disorder and who are often willing to read aloud in class, maybe with a little help from the teacher. Some students need to use a device: a sort of a "paper ruler" with an opening space – a line - in the centre that serves to keep lines separate while highlighting the relevant one.

4. Testing the SLD students

One of the most difficult task for the teacher of a dyslexic student is finding the correct way of testing the learning disabled student. Oral tests are to be privileged, while the written ones must be considered of minor importance (as a "dispensatory measure"). All class tests must be planned in advance, they should not be preferably more than one a day. Moreover, the schedule of the lessons should not be changed, in order not to create anxiety in the SLD students. SLD students do not usually have problems with oral comprehension, while oral production, albeit on a limited programme, is often inferior to expectations due to the fact that the SLD student has indeed great difficulty in memorizing the lexicon and the syntax rules necessary to build sentences. Some students present also difficulty in putting time sequences in the right order. Written tests must be simplified and misspelling mistakes, typical of dyslexia (for example "si" in place of "is"), must not be taken into account. To test linguistic abilities, preferably one at a time, the assigned exercises must be very simple, for example reporting messages, writing emails or short letters (guided by the teacher and with the vocabulary, even when the class is not allowed to use it), true/false and multiple choice exercises, filling forms, matching words and pictures, till at least the second year of the Secondary School. In case of more complex texts, as the ones foreseen in the last three years of Upper Secondary School, where the Reading Comprehension is a common test, we may encourage the students to highlight with different colours the various parts of the text, so to guide them towards the corresponding questions. Open answers are to be avoided since the SLD student has lack of lexicon memorization and deficiencies in applying grammar and syntax rules. For this same reason, it is recommended to avoid translation from Italian into English, while the opposite is a good exercise, preferably supplying a glossary. Dictation in English should also be avoided, but sometimes, in order not to exclude the SLD student from the rest of the class, and providing him/her a list of the most difficult words, as far as spelling is concerned, I had the whole class make the test. I evaluated only the positive results - words correctly spelt - considering anyway this test of minor importance.

During my teaching years, I found the computer a good means of testing my SLD students. Preferably in the ICT room, and singularly, in order to prevent them being afraid of the class mates judging their performance, I was able to carry successfully written and oral tests. Using the CD supplied with the text book, the many

Internet resources, as well as materials I had previously prepared, I had my students first become familiar with the exercises, then helped them with the basic instructions needed to perform the required tasks. After the students' self-correction, I could test them at the computer. These tests are useful to get objective written and oral assessments, usually with the result of sufficiently good performances.[28] At the same time, in order to improve socialization of SLD students, I organized group work, for example on specific themes, assigning different tasks according to the individual students' skills, as to improve their self-esteem.

5. Conclusions

As a teacher, I often fear I am not able to make my SLD students fully use their potential, thus "waste" their talent and lose interest in learning. Teaching today is not an easy task and discouragement is a common feeling among teachers. My hope is that, as more research is being done and more teachers are recognizing the problem, more solutions can be found for the students facing the challenge of learning a foreign or second language. Much work has been done but much more is still to do, since teaching a foreign language to disadvantaged students is a recent research field.[29] As an example, I can cite here the recent collaboration between Oxford University Press and some researchers of Ca' Foscari University in Venice, which resulted in producing innovative teaching and learning materials. Current technologies are undoubtedly effective classroom supports. Furthermore, I think necessary steps to be taken by governments are to invest in an up-to-date compulsory training for all teachers and at the same time provide adequate support means for daily school practice. School psychologists and other qualified professionals must help teachers and families to focus on successful interventions and coordinate their execution. An SLD student can learn how to compensate his/her disability and be a good student only if his/her family recognizes his/her need for help, both at school and at home, through specialized support, as the one offered by supporting teachers, Health and Social Services and educationalists. A positive attitude and commitment by teachers, students and families can really make the difference. If teachers, parents and schools create plans together to aid the SLD students, they can come independent learners and successful individuals. I would like to conclude this paper by adopting the American motto "No child left behind!", tailored to the Italian schooling system. [30]

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[28] I cite here some websites useful for English language teaching: www.bbc.co.uk/education/languages/; http://britishcouncil.org; http://fonetics.org; www.teflq.com; http://cast.org

[29] A few updated references: Costenaro, Verusca, Pesce Antonella. *The Complete English Grammar for Italian Students. Grammar summaries and exercises adapted for students with dyslexia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Daloiso, Michele. "Lingue straniere e dislessia evolutiva: verso una glottodidattica accessibile", in AA.VV. *Glottodidattica giovane*, Perugia: Guerra, 2011. 53-60. Famous International magazines to mention are the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* and the *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, Routledge.

[30] *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB), a United States Act of Congress, is a revision of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA, 1992), which included *Title I*, the government's aid program for disadvantaged students. http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/guide/index.html

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