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Foreign Language Anxiety in Students with
Learning Disabilities

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Introduction

This thesis is about foreign language education, learning disabilities and a particular psychological state that the two aspects involve: foreign language anxiety.

The main goal is to present an overview of language anxiety in different contexts through the analysis of previous studies and through a questionnaire administered during the year (2015) to the students of Ca' Foscari University in Venice.

Language anxiety was first mentioned in 1986 by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope and described as a feeling of worry and unease that arises while writing, speaking, reading or listening a foreign language. Even though anxiety is often caused by personal attitudes or predispositions, Foreign Language Anxiety is situation-specific and affects foreign language learners.

Despite almost 30 years of research, causes and effects are not always clear. However, it is clear that teaching approaches and testing modalities play very important roles in it.

Lack of information and consequent absence of compensatory measures make the students' situation worse.

The first chapter presents the more frequent learning disability (i.e. dyslexia), the main difficulties it may cause and some examples of support methodologies and tools, intended to be used to help dyslexic learners.

The second chapter aims at clarifying the departure point on which the rest of the thesis is based, defining in particular contexts of language teaching, testing and evaluation.

The third chapter specifically concerns language anxiety at school, reporting the research studies of Horwitz (1986), Saito (1999) Sarason (1972). The three researchers created three different

questionnaire scales to evaluate respectively Classroom, Reading and Test Anxiety.

In 2014 Paola Celentin administered some questionnaires to teachers and students of a primary school in Veneto in order to evaluate their perception of evaluation of students with a diagnosed or suspected learning disability. The results of her study and the methodologies used were reported in chapter 4.

Taking inspiration from all the research studies mentioned above, a questionnaire was developed for this final composition and described in chapter 5. This specifically focuses on the perception of language lessons and exams of the students of Ca' Foscari University in Venice. Particular attention was paid to the answers given by students with learning disabilities.

Finally, a double comparison was presented in the last chapter in an attempt to locate shared aspects and differences in three contexts of administration and to investigate the reliability of the results obtained in Ca' Foscari study.

1. Dyslexia and Language Learning

1.1 Hypotheses

It is not easy to exhaustively define the term “Dyslexia”. The word itself is a combination of two Greek words, *dys*, meaning poor or inadequate, and */exis*, meaning words. It could be said at this point that dyslexia is a problem some people have in dealing with language, but this would be both simplistic and unclear. Defining it has medical, psychological, linguistic and social implications, and the definition will depend upon the purpose or the goals one has.

Researchers from all over the world have been focusing their studies on the inability to read for at least 150 years, trying to give it a name, a definition and explain causes and consequences.

In 1878, Adolf Kussmaul, a German clinician and physician, described the case of a man who had lost his ability to read and became *word blind*.

The term “Dyslexia”, was then used for the first time, nine years later, by the German ophthalmologist Rudolf Berlin.

However, these scientists were describing cases of acquired dyslexia, which is thought to be related to other medical conditions, like aphasia or amnesia.

A study conducted in 1896 by W. Pringle Morgan introduced the term *Congenital Word Blindness*, an impairment that is not related to any other medical conditions and is present despite normal IQ and education.

In the wake of this, a series of articles about dyslexia were published; doctors and researchers started to show interest in it, and important discoveries made their work both useful and fulfilling.

The researchers had associated the causes of the difficulty to read with visual deficits, lack of intelligence or poor education. However, the discoveries of this period began to give more precise information about the true nature of dyslexia. Specifically, people began to associate dyslexia with genetics.

Furthermore, it has been realised that the language spoken correlated with the number of dyslexic people. In other words, researchers understood that the disparity in the number of cases of dyslexia among different countries could be explained by the “difficulty” of the language spoken.

From the 20th century this area began to involve other fields of study, such as psychology and teaching, which were strongly related to the consequences of dyslexia. As a result, it became clear that special teaching, using innovative tools and methods, could improve those children’s ability to read.

In 1925 the American physician, Samuel Torrey Orton, focused his attention on 25 students who had been defined as “retarded or failing in their school work” by their teacher. After two weeks of analysis of their behaviour, he found out that 18 of them had difficulty in reading. Such difficulty was not defined as “blindness”, but more as a confusion in identifying the connections among letters.

These events were followed by a considerable amount of scientific investigation and publications about the neurological basis of the deficit and the possible atypical developments of the brain that may cause it (Melero, 2013). It became clear that a shared definition of dyslexia was required.

Consequently, at the 1968 meeting of the World Federation of Neurology, it was established that:

Dyslexia is a disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and sociocultural opportunity. It is dependent upon fundamental cognitive disabilities which are frequently of constitutional origin.

However, this definition was quickly recognised to be problematic. Firstly, it contains a number of unclear general terms, such as “conventional instruction” and “adequate intelligence”. What defines *conventional* and *adequate*? What are the parameters? Secondly, it seems to be a definition by exclusion, which explains what dyslexia is not, but does not explain what it really is. While the definition makes it clear that dyslexia is not related to intelligence and education, the criteria nevertheless fail to diagnose the deficit. Unsurprisingly, this definition has fallen out of use (Snowling, 2000).

Consequently, an epidemiologic point of view was introduced in the studies from the 1980s. In the same period it was asserted that the deficit was not related to visual diseases but to the processing of language. This gave birth to the theory of the phonological deficit - which aimed at demonstrating that the linguistic basis of dyslexia is characterized by low phonological skills. Further studies attempted to understand if a specific intervention on phonology could improve reading ability.

However, Max Coltheart and Nancy Ewald Jackson (1998) argued that dyslexia is not necessarily related to children’s phonological skills. Failure in reading can be explained through orthographic difficulties or through the impossibility to establish a relation between

letters and phonology. Therefore, authors assumed that those were examples of two distinct patterns of reading difficulties: one related to the phonological skills and one related to orthographic word recognition. For this reason they claim that defining dyslexia as a phonological deficit is incorrect and they propose a distinction between proximal and distal causes. The former is related to a deficit in the information-processing system, whereas the latter is the underlying reason why this system might be damaged.

The definitions of dyslexia often exclude cases in which other deficits are evident, such as a low IQ and education. And what if the deficits were coexistent? Coltheart and Jackson (1998) suggested a different approach, which is based, indeed, on this distinction.

The more accepted method to diagnose reading disabilities is through a comparison among children of the same chronological age.

This criterion was strongly supported by Sally E. Shaywitz, Co-Director of the Yale Centre for Dyslexia and Creativity, who considered wrong evaluating dyslexia as an isolated disorder. Shaywitz and her collaborators (1992) hypothesized the existence of a continuum in the normal distribution of reading ability. Dyslexia is a part of this continuum, but located at the tail. Dyslexic children are, from this point of view, the lowest readers of a scale which compares the reading performances of peers (Shaywitz, 1992).

Figure 1.1 shows the results of the study (Shaywitz, 1992) that aims at demonstrating the validity of this approach. Panel A represents a typical plot of the age-standardized reading score, compared to the full-scale IQ for the sample, which was composed of 414 children attending a Connecticut school in Kindergarten, grade 1, 3 and 5, with no sensory impairments or serious intellectual disabilities. Panel C shows the discrepancy scores for grade 3 and grade 5.

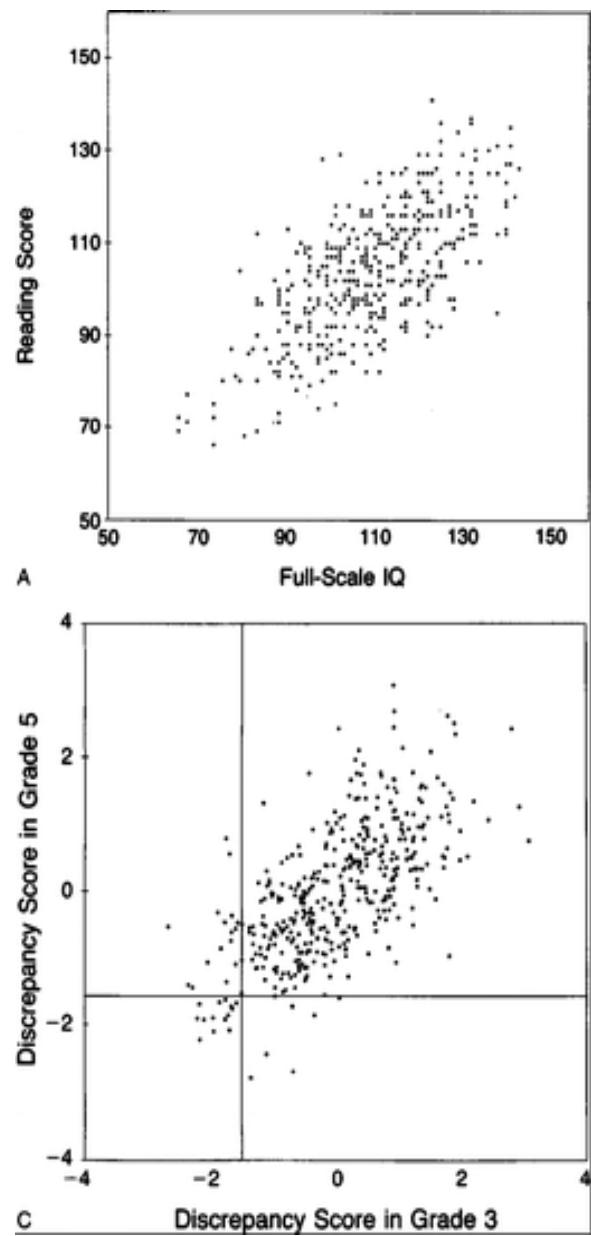


Figure 1.1. The Relation between the Age-Standardized Reading Score and Full-Scale IQ of Children in Grade 3 (Panel A), and the Relation between Discrepancy Scores for Reading-Disability Classifications in Two Different Grades (Panel C)

Panel C visually illustrates the Continuum Hypothesis: the horizontal axis is the discrepancy score (in SD) for the IQ and the reading test in grade 3, and the vertical one the same discrepancy score but in grade 5. All the dots that appear to the left of the vertical line or below the horizontal line represent children (respectively grade 3 and grade 5) who had been classified as dyslexic.

Furthermore, this criterion allows researchers to understand how dyslexia evolves over time; the upper left and the lower right quadrants include cases that were classified as having dyslexia in one grade but not in the other.

In 2012 the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) reported on its website the definition proposed by Lyon, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2003) which described dyslexia as a specific learning disability with a neurological basis,

“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 reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.”¹

Even though this is certainly adequate it is nevertheless difficult to objectively choose one explanation instead of another. This inevitably

¹ IDA Adopted by the Board of Directors, Nov. 12, 2002. This Definition is also used by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

involves multiple fields of study, determined by empirical and theoretical findings.

Therefore, researchers should treat all the definitions given until now as *hypotheses* in order to learn from them and go farther, beyond the limits of their points of view (Tønnesen, 1997).

In general, it is necessary to clarify the purposes before giving a definition of dyslexia because different aims will often produce different results. In fact, definitions are usually provided for different purposes, such as diagnosing, classifying or analysing the symptoms.

Given that the main consequences of dyslexia are visible while learning at school, in particular while learning foreign languages, it is useful to try to expound a hypothesis with the purpose of an accessible teaching approach, dedicated to all the children for which a traditional teaching practice is not enough.

Reading is one of the most complex skills to acquire because it requires the translation of written symbols into sounds, a mechanism that is possible only when several basic skills are developed or present, such as, among other things, unimpaired vision, average intelligence and an appropriate training.

Despite the complexity of the process, the majority of children learn to read relatively easily at the age of 6-8, during their first school year. However, a minority of children do not reach this goal at the same time as their peers, even though they are unaffected by any other physical or psychological pathology. These children are often identified as dyslexic and make up around 3-5% of children in Italy, and 15% in English speaking countries.

This discrepancy might be due to the characteristics of the written language used. Unlike Italian, English is not a transparent language from an orthographic point of view and consequently dyslexia

is easier to notice. The transparency of a language is determined by the correspondence between graphemes and phonemes, in other words how much the written language is similar to the spoken one. However, it cannot be said that dyslexia does depend on the type of language used. In fact, every dyslexic person shows impairments on phonological awareness skills, which are not related to specific languages but to language itself.

Noam Chomsky, one of the major linguists of all time, have argued that everyone has an innate ability to communicate founded on a Universal Grammar, which is common to every human being and it is not related to the different languages (Chomsky, 1965).

Following this perspective, one could argue that dyslexia involves something deeper than the specific language spoken in a community or dealt with; it is a trait of a particular population that appears very early, even if it is hard to identify before one starts to read.

Such identification, on the contrary, can be influenced by the language.

Diagnosing a dyslexic child who speaks a transparent language is more difficult than that of the child who speaks a non-transparent one. In addition, in the first instance dyslexia normally appears through an inadequate reading speed, whereas in the second one is manifested by a non-fluent performance, which is often inaccurate and full of uncommon spelling mistakes. Dyslexic people with a transparent native language have the advantage of having easier access to a certain form of written language that could allow them to develop some basic but useful phonological skills.

However, also in a transparent language it is possible to identify dyslexia, there are sounds that do not have a fixed reproduction into a written form and could be difficult to learn to read.

In conclusion, it seems to be overall accepted that people can be defined as dyslexic if their performance in a standardized reading test is significantly under the mean of that of their age and instruction peers. However, this assumption is true only if two conditions are met: normal cognitive development and no physical impairments. Therefore, the diagnosis has to be made in a period where the child's system has already reached a good development but it is still capable of rehabilitation.

A recent proposal of definition of dyslexia in the field of language teaching methodology is that of Carlos Melero (2013) published in the quarterly journal EL.LE Educazione Linguistica:

La dislexia es una dificultad específica del aprendizaje causada por una/s posible/s anomalía/s neuronal/es [A] que es/son la causa de un/varios déficit a nivel cognitivo [B] que crea/n una serie de complicaciones a nivel comportamental [C]. Estas complicaciones pueden ser más o menos evidentes/graves en base al entorno en el que se sitúe el sujeto.

In the complete definition, letter [A] will correspond to the different physical-biological anomalies; letter [B] will be substituted with the possible cognitive deficits and [C] with the main behaviour deficits. (Melero, 2013).

1.2 Difficulties

Different theories have confirmed that dyslexia derives from a neuro-biological deficit causing a certain activation of the brain while doing specific actions. This creates a particular difficulty in doing automatic tasks that are normally very easy and immediate for people who do not have this kind of learning difference. Dyslexic children have to make a greater effort and need more concentration even for those skills that their peers have already acquired and mastered.

One such task is reading. Besides a normal visual and cognitive development, what does a child need to learn to read?

Certainly, a large vocabulary can help initially because children can recognize a word more readily if they have already heard it and know its meaning. However, it is also true that vocabulary itself will develop in greater part during the act of reading, once the child has learnt to do it. Secondly, a good verbal memory plays a very important role because once the input has been elaborated, it has to remain available in order to be used to develop other abilities.

Another component necessary for learning to read is the meta-phonological one. When one listens or speaks never thinks about how the different words are built and how they are formed because people assimilated it since born (Daloiso, 2012). However, while learning new skills, people need to understand the process. Reading requires a further step, which is the conversion from the written code to the oral one. To do this, an analysis of the phonological elements is necessary, and for people with dyslexia, this step is difficult.

As children realize that they are not able to do some basic skills in their own mother tongue, while their peers continue to progress, a psychological status of demoralization and, at the worst consequence,

rejection, inevitably develops. The teacher has at this point the responsibility of making them feel comfortable at school and enhance their ability, rather than pointing out their difficulties.

The introduction of a foreign language at school is not immediately characterised by negative feelings. On the contrary, students seem to realize that starting from the beginning once again could represent a clean slate, a way to demonstrate to themselves and the world that they can do it. These feelings, dominated by enthusiasm and curiosity, are very important to set the new language acquisition but they gradually vanish and disappear as the child deals with difficult aspects of the language, which are rarely explicitly explained by the teacher.

One of the first obstacles that students have to face in the process of acquisition of the first foreign language, which is usually English, is dealing with sounds that are not present in their own mother tongue, Italian in our case, such as /θ/ or the voiced /h/ at the beginning of the word. Despite the high frequency of these sounds in words that the child is required to know very soon, such as *three* or *hello*, only in few cases teachers explain how to pronounce them and show the students the movement of the lips and the tongue necessary to say it correctly.

Therefore, when the first difficulty arises, the child, already insecure, may feel unable to go on. When the initial optimism fades, it is the teacher's responsibility to prevent it from turning into a gradual refusal for the foreign language.

The Stimulus Appraisal theorized by Schumann (1997) analyses how students evaluate the input given by their teacher, starting from the opinions given in questionnaires used to assess second language learners' motivation. The approach developed by Schumann identifies five categories for different rates of acquisition: novelty, intrinsic

pleasantness, goal/need significance, coping potential and norm/self compatibility (Schumann, 1997).

Children with learning impairments meet the first problem already in the “novelty” phase. When they are going to study a foreign language, as discussed, their feelings are dominated by optimism and positivity. Unfortunately they will soon realize that the difficulties encountered before will also be present in studying a different language, and they have to make more efforts to do what their schoolmates can do very easily. Only a specific individual teaching program will prevent profound discouragement.

The psychological aspect plays a very important role in a good education and success at school, especially in SLI (with Specific Learning Impairment) students dealing with learning a second language. The specific psychological condition that emerges among second language learners is called Foreign Language Anxiety, which will be discussed in the next chapters.

When discussing memory, it is necessary to make a distinction between the declarative (or explicit) and the procedural (or implicit). After the first elaboration of the input (by working memory) the declarative memory enables different areas of the language acquisition such as vocabulary, grammar and intercultural aspects. This is the basis on which procedural memory is built. The procedural memory in fact is activated to make the procedures automatic, for the effective use of the language.

Usually, the first problem for SLI students emerges in the working and declarative memory, but this does not seem to be directly related to the deficit. On the contrary, a direct connection has been found between dyslexia and procedural memory, with the risk of an impediment in making some mechanisms automatic. The student has to

think and control what he is not able to automate, inevitably causing a non-fluent production (Daloiso, 2012).

Despite the difficulties dyslexic students can find while learning a foreign language, it is important for them and all the people around them (including teachers, parents and schoolmates) to know that, with a specific method and appropriate tools (see 1.3), they can reach both goals and general competency.

Fluency in a language is the crowning achievement of different abilities and the path to it may be different from individual to individual. A person who has a good visual memory, for example, will follow a learning method that includes writing and images, while a dyslexic student will prefer activities that involve listening and speaking.

In the few last years, school and teaching methods have evolved from an approach based mostly on grammar to a more communicative approach. In the new method, the first goal of learning a foreign language is communication, rather than accuracy of form. Communication is understood to be not only the exchange of words, but the sharing and understanding of culture, gesture and ways of life. Therefore, the most important competencies required are not only linguistic but also socio-pragmatic and metalinguistic (Balboni, 2008).

Regarding linguistic skills, general competences in comprehension and production are not damaged in learning impaired students. What could be problematic for the SLI student is the decoding of a written text and the discrimination of sounds in the oral comprehension, for which specific strategies must be adopted. Dyslexia does not affect all the language abilities, but could make some tasks more difficult than usual and therefore, the teacher should pay more attention to the student (Daloiso, 2012).

If the goal of language learning is communication, socio-pragmatic skills play a very important role in the acquisition. This seems to be a positive aspect for those students who show problems in a linguistic area. In fact, socio-pragmatic abilities are not affected by dyslexia and could be used as a compensation to communicate (Daloiso, 2012).

The third component is the metalinguistics. That is the ability to think and talk about a language, a step further than simple knowledge of the grammar rules, and rooted in deeper study and reflection that goes beyond what is usually taught at school.

Grammar is not to be intended as a field limited to the morphosintactic rules of a language. It includes, in fact, all the structural rules that govern a language, such as phonetics, semantics, orthography and textual cohesion.

In conclusion, it is possible to assume that dyslexia itself only causes general difficulties in the deeper levels of the language (phonetics, semantics and orthography). However, if effective rehabilitation – through specific learning strategies - is not implemented in time, it can also have repercussions on other aspects of language acquisition (Daloiso, 2012).

1.3 Support methodologies and tools

As already clarified, the teacher and the condition of the student at school play an important role in the acquisition of a foreign language.

Before talking about the possible methodologies and tools to support the learner in class it is useful to explore the situation in which the approach to the new language takes place.

When children begin the first year of Primary School they usually already know some decontextualized English words, learnt during the three years of kindergarten². However, at the age of 6, they are introduced in a completely new way of learning, sitting on a desk facing a teacher.

A new approach to the foreign language is proposed to (or imposed on) them. The acquisition derives from the explanation of the teacher, sometimes accompanied by group activities, and then consolidated by homework. Children then uses the foreign language with people with whom they normally speak their mother tongue, creating an unnatural process.

Furthermore, the time spent speaking English is usually limited to the time of the class, which is three to four hours a week, eventually supplemented by the “unintentional” input exposure through English songs, films and advertisements, which is nevertheless brief. Therefore, the time spent during an English lesson must be well organized in order to take the greatest possible advantage of it. In this limited timeframe, special devices need to be utilised, more so if dyslexic students are in the cohort.

² Such data refer to the Italian school system. We use here the term *Kindergarten* to indicate the pre-school attended by children from 3 to 6 years old, which is commonly called *Scuola Materna*.

Students should be exposed to different possible methodologies being in the condition to find their own supporting method. At school it is important for them to be integrated in the group with the other students, in order to feel comfortable and collaborate with them, so a good teaching approach is necessary.

A good and generally shared didactic method is the one theorized by Paolo Balboni (2008), based on the globality-analysis-synthesis method.

Such method starts from the assumption that:

Acquisition occurs through a global perception at first, followed by a phase of analysis, and it ends with a synthesis, where the mind fixes what it has observed and analysed.

Reflecting on causes and consequences of the difficulties in learning a language for students with special needs, Melero (2012) introduced further adjustments with the objective to propose a didactic action that could reduce their everyday barriers at school.

The resulting model (Figure 1.2) has been adapted from Balboni's model for language teaching, where dyslexic students could meet barriers.

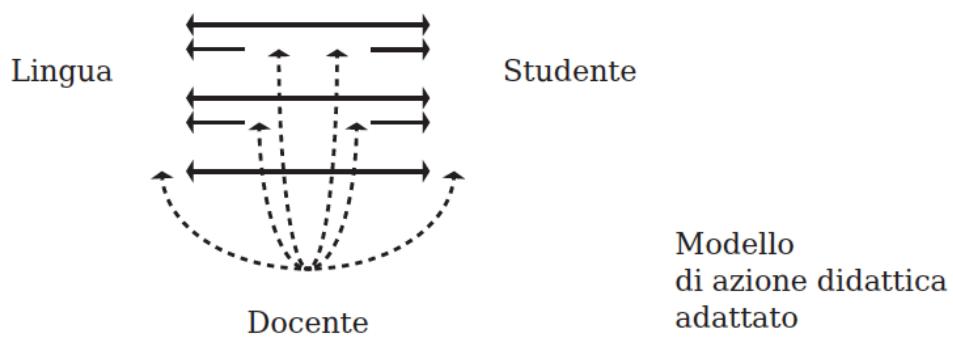


Figure 1.2 Carlos Melero (2012), *Mezzi informatici per l'accessibilità glottodidattica: riferimenti teorici e proposte di applicazione*, EL.LE, p. 67

The original method proposed by Balboni defined the role of the teacher in the foreign language acquisition process (Figure 1.3). Here, teachers represent the link between students and language without interposing between them. They are the training system, they plan the materials, the technologies and the methodologies to have access to the language.

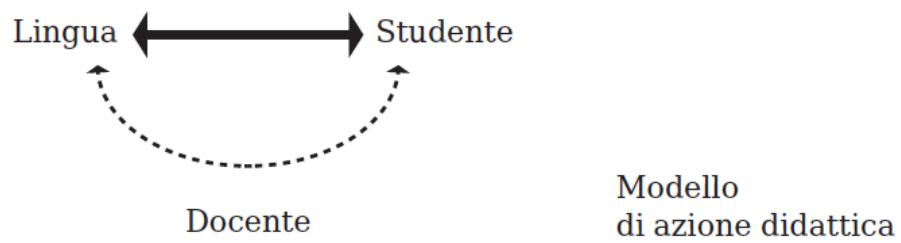


Figure 1.3 Paolo Balboni (2012), *Le sfide di Babele. Insegnare le lingue nelle società complesse*, Torino, UTET Università, p. 81

Melero (2012) suggests the same model adapted for students with special needs (figure 1.2). In this case, teachers have also the task of helping learners to surround or reduce the difficulties.

To do this they ('DOCENTE') should, first of all, understand and define what the "special needs" of the specific learner ('STUDENTE') are, identifying then the causes and trying to hypothesize possible solutions or individual supports.

Once the general condition is clear they should reflect on causes and consequences of the student's barriers (the interrupted lines in the graphic) so that it will be possible to plan defined actions to recreate the link to the language.

The consequences may or may not have their origin from the dyslexia itself, and may include uncomfortable psychological sensations (Melero, 2012).

As has already been said, the time available at school is not enough to learn a foreign language. However, nowadays there are many possibilities to listen or use it. Such possibilities are easily accessible from home and often for free. Common examples are music, films, TV series or programs and radio, but also social networks and telecommunications software.

The advantage of using these is that they are based on multisensoriality, which is one of the basic parameters suggested when dealing with dyslexic people.

A multisensorial approach can be used also to facilitate the act of studying or in class.

The digital version of schoolbooks, for example, can be a simply *pdf*. file, which is easier to read and use and it is also readable by text-to-speech technologies, or it can be integrated with audio and video or

even multimedia and interactive activities. In addition they can be constantly updated and improved.

In the last few years, Italian schools have introduced more technologic didactic supports, such as laptops, being always available in class, audio and video tools and the Interactive Whiteboard (IWB), in Italy called LIM (Lavagna Interattiva Multimediale).

The LIM is a large interactive support on which students and teachers can write and draw with a special pen but also add images from other sources and visualize files or videos. All the contents created can then be processed and modified through dedicated software, but also shared with students and printed.

It is a useful tool that promotes a new teaching approach based on the inclusion of all students and stimulates their interest and attention. In Italy, its use is now spreading, but is still not used by many teachers who do not have the ability to utilize its potential yet.

2. Foreign language learning at school

2.1 Language teaching

Language education is a branch of study that is constantly evolving. The current ideas and methodological choices come from the evolution of education of the 20th Century, when progress in language studies and research met institutional innovation.

In 1967 the spread of the Modern Language Project by the Council of Europe represented a decisive moment that encouraged a 'language exchange'. The project promoted an intensified Modern-Language Teaching Programme and set out its basic tenets. The main goals were the removal of the language barriers between European countries, the study of modern languages as an intellectual enrichment and a full, mutual understanding and co-operation in Europe.

Furthermore,

a knowledge of modern language should no longer be regarded as a luxury reserved for an élite, but an instrument of information and culture which should be available to all.¹

This project was consolidated in 1992 when the European Union declared that every citizen had the right to be taught English and at least one of the other languages among those of the Community (Balboni, 2012).

This right required the formulation of a robust and universal teaching method.

¹ Resolution (69) 2 (Adopted By The Ministers' Deputies On 25 January 1969). On an

The first references to language teaching date back to the Middle Ages. At the time the first objective of learning was communication; consequently no grammar was taught, and the act studying consisted in the interaction with a native speaker.

During Renaissance and the 17th Century, the first grammars and dictionaries were written and people started to learn the language as an object. In this period in Italy the so-called “formalistic approach” was developed.

This methodology focused on grammar, phonology and vocabulary as a normative system, based on fixed and unchanging rules presented through a deductive method. According to this perspective students are not asked to discuss and think about the language, but to learn rules and lessons by rote, memorizing what the teacher and the books say. Such approach, even though it seems to be very old and out-dated, is still used in many classes and courses today, for instance in the use of the many lists of decontextualized words, verbs and paradigms, or grammar tests - in which only good memory skills are tested.

In the 19th Century, a “natural approach” was introduced in the American private and élite institutions, to meet the needs of a multicultural society. In this case the teacher is a native speaker who interacts with students only by using the target language. Grammar has only a minor role because the first goal is conversation.

The first half of the following century was a change of direction. Because of the World War and the Great Depression people stopped traveling and cultural exchanges were nearly impossible. The dissemination of foreign languages consequently worsen. The only possibility to learn was through books. In response, the “Reading Method” (Balboni, 2012) developed, which was based on the written form of the language.

However, the spreading of gramophones and audio recorders in the second half of the 20th Century made the study of the languages easier, more precise and faster. At the same time a teaching approach focused on *pattern drills* was developed. Pattern drills were based on the reinforcement-punishment process of the operant conditioning of Skinner. This method was ultimately unsuccessful on a practical and scientific point of view, and the advent of sociolinguistics definitely prevailed on it.

The *Modern Language Project* (1967) heralded a period in which the meaning of language learning in Europe radically changed. The approaches adopted up until this moment were mitigated by a growing interest in social, cultural and pragmatic aspects of the language.

The first result of this evolution was the “communicative approach”, in which the language has, first of all, a social role. Crucially, in this model students are the centre of the process, and this process could change according to needs, interests and ability. Teachers are guides to make such process easier, but they are no more seen as an unquestionable model.

From all the above-mentioned experiences, a so called “situational approach” was developed, which focused on the linguistic context. Lessons and activities are not presented in isolation, but they are always introduced in a precise space-time situation, by real actors with roles and objectives. Good and well-structured teaching materials are used within this method. (Balboni, 2012)

Teaching approaches are constantly evolving. However, the legacy of these foregoing methods are still present today.

An aspect that had been nearly ignored until the 1970s was the psychological consequences of the teaching method on the student. A specific science called Psycholinguistics studies the neurobiological factors that enable or prevent students to acquire and use a language. Therefore, language teaching obtaining information from this fields,

contends that it is possible, scientifically, to improve and personalize a teaching method.

Before starting to teach a language it is important to reflect on some basic points. First of all, it is important to identify the goals. Language education aims at obtaining a good communicative competence, which is based on linguistic, extralinguistic and contextual skills.

In order to design good lessons or courses it is important to define “the path” to be followed. A good tool is the Teaching Plan or Teaching Unit, which teachers can use to make their work easier and to clarify to the students what they are going to do. A coherent and useful Teaching Unit is based on the Gestalt Theory, which was theorized in the first half of the 20th Century, and whose sequential process is still used today. It is a sequence composed by consequential phases, which are globality, analysis and synthesis.

The idea is to start from a global point of view to introduce the activity and to draw the learner’s attention. In this phase students formulate hypotheses concerning the topic of the specific unit they are going to deal with. After this first phase another sequence opens, composed by a deeper analysis, a spontaneous synthesis and a guided reflection (Balboni 2013). These phases imitate the natural acquisition process and facilitate the act of learning.

The teaching unit is an essential tool for the teacher, but it must not be considered as a fixed manual. Balboni (2013) proposes the following model of teaching unit.

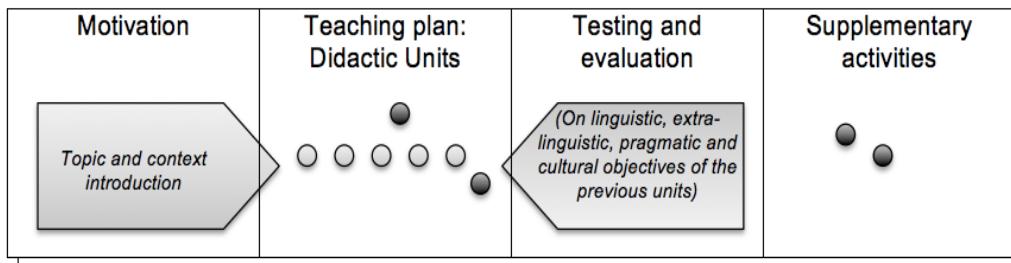


Figure 2.1 – Balboni P.E, 2013, Fare educazione linguistica, 19.

Motivation is the basis of acquisition: “There is no acquisition without motivation” [Balboni, 2013]. Learners have to find their positive personal reasons to start the demanding process of language acquisition. Therefore, it is highly significant to stimulate the interest before starting the activities. Teachers can do it by recognising and promoting the students’ skills, presenting videos, songs, pictures or other up-to-date materials, also sharing their personal stories or experiences.

The second step, according to Balboni’s Teaching Unit model (2013) is the presentation of the unit’s sequence, which is planned but can be modified based on need.

The third step is evaluation, in order to monitor the activities, determine the learning goals already reached and reflect on the reliability of the process currently taking place.

After the evaluation it is not recommended to switch topics rapidly. It is better to find new contexts in which what has been learned so far can be used. This final step is important and must not be formal and difficult, but pleasant and interesting, so that learners feel satisfied and encouraged to continue their linguistic and cultural exploration.

2.2 Language testing

Students often consider formal assessment as a negative moment, feeling under pressure and judged. Testing is a necessary step in the process of acquisition, that aims at evaluating the acquired abilities and to constantly monitor the acquisition level reached. Evaluating should never be an end to itself but part of the teaching plan, with precise motivations and goals.

There are many different ways to evaluate language skills, but how can teachers understand which one is the most appropriate for their specific purposes?

In 1980 Carroll proposed four parameters to set and judge good teaching techniques. His model suggested a reflection on different aspects that can be applied to testing: relevance, acceptability, comparability of its results and economy (Balboni, 2013).

The test *relevance*, which is probably the most violated parameter in language teaching, is related to the identification of the effective object of an activity. *Acceptability* refers to the opinion of the students and the effect of the test on their motivation. *Comparability* is the possibility to compare the results among them. *Economy* mostly refers to the time required to the teacher to prepare, present and correct the test.

However, these parameters are no more enough to fully judge good testing; therefore, further matters should be taken into consideration.

Two important conditions to be respected are *validity* and *reliability*. The first indicates how much the test is consistent with the initial goal for which it was administered. It compares the initial aim of

the test with what the test actually evaluates. The second one is more technical and measures the accuracy of the results. A test, in fact, should bring to standardized results, comparable also with other students and subsequent administrations.

In addition to the above mentioned parameters, Novello (2014) mentions *authenticity* and *equity*. A test is authentic if it is based on activities that are plausible, near to real life and it is equal if it gives the students more opportunities and possibilities to show their abilities, through different methodologies.

Teachers should evaluate the state of the acquisition constantly. Therefore, the content of a test should be based on the period in which it is taken in the global teaching process. Dickins (1992) suggested the following model, in which circles indicate tests whose content is related to recent lessons and acquisition and squares represent tests that refer to a wider period of time:

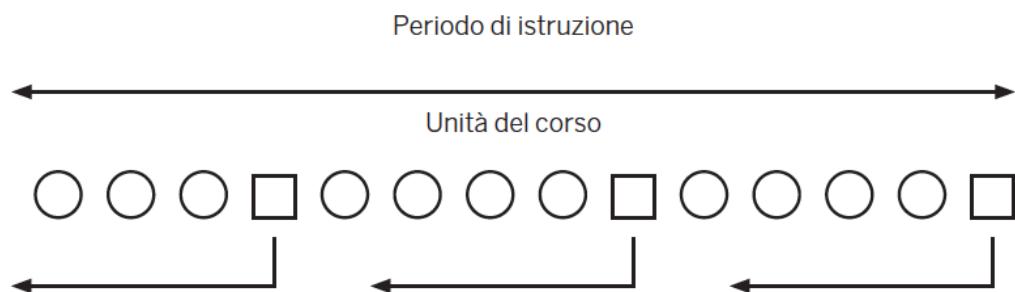


Figura 2.2 – Novello (2014) Dickins (1992) Testing in teaching period

The first ones are presented more frequently and include a small number of activities because they are focused on few specific topics, while the second ones are presented only few times during the school year, but include more activities and they last more time.

Teachers should follow some theoretical bases while evaluating. There are different test types that can help teachers in the choice, depending on the situation and the goals that they are going to assess.

First of all, it is possible to identify *aptitude tests* and *proficiency tests*: they both analyse a person's language skills, taking into account future possible performances rather than past achievements. However, while the first type is done in the initial education phase to predict students' aptitude to the language, the second measures adequacy of control in relation to a specific task in real life, which are later required to perform.

On the other hand, the *diagnostic test* is administered during the teaching period and enables teachers to identify specific weaknesses, so that an appropriate remedial programme can be planned.

Furthermore, during the school year teachers can propose a *progress test* or *an achievement test* to assess the progress of the students. In the first case they do it with reference to the goals proposed in the teaching plan, the second is more formal and is designed primarily to measure individual progresses rather than the progress of the whole class.

In conclusion, testing is a process that needs a careful preparation, first of all by identifying and determining the goals of the evaluation, proceeding then with the right choice of test types and the creation of the contents. Finally, also a good evaluation strategy is important and must be clear to students. Teachers and students should be able reflect on the results they have obtained, on the way they got it and on the nature of the emerging difficulties. If teachers conduct it on their own, in fact, a test does not have a real meaning and utility, but if students are actively involved it plays a positive role in acquisition.

2.3 Test Evaluation

Once the test is correctly planned and administered, the teacher, or the examiner, moves to the following phase: evaluation.

Evaluation consists in the analysis of the results through strategic actions that aim at ensuring the greatest reliability and clarity of the intervention. The results are analysed and converted into a value. Such value has to take into account the individual background of the students and the entire path they took, from the starting point.

Students should be able to understand how this final process works and what the evaluation they obtain means. To know if they have passed a test or not is not enough and does not allow teachers to understand which phase of the teaching process did not work properly as expected or where students need further improvements. A deep observation of the educational path, both individually and in class, will add important information for the examiner. This is one of the reasons why teachers should organize a testing plan at the beginning of the school year. They should avoid long one-shot tests at the end of it and spread the evaluation phases during the time, instead.

Therefore, language education researchers propose a distinction between *formative* and *summative evaluation*.

Formative evaluation is a constant and frequent assessment that aims at giving information about a current education process thanks to its immediate feedback. It controls the goals achievement of every single student and allows the teacher to understand when changes to the planned path have to be introduced. The information obtained in a formative evaluation should help both teacher and students, influencing their future actions. *Summative evaluation* is, on the contrary, administered at the end of a process, or a period of time marked by fixed schedule and administration (school year, term, end of a course

etc.). Its purpose is to test the advancement and not the competence, in fact it does not provide for any consequences.

A third reason for a test to be administered is *diagnosing*. In this case evaluation is used to discover the difficulties of the students and consequently plan suitable support methodologies and tools.

It is then important to make a distinction between different ways of evaluating. Evaluation can be *objective* or *subjective*, *holistic* or *analytic*, *criterion* or *norm-referenced*, it can be based on the judgement of *competence* or *progressivity* and on *rating scales* or *checklists*.

The difference between objective and subjective is clear. The first, *objective evaluation*, is determined by predefined criteria and ratings and does not require the examiner's personal opinion. It is mainly used to test the language acquisition strictly related to the educational path proposed. *Subjective evaluation* is, on the contrary, based on the global impression of the teachers, who define their own criteria. It is often used to judge performances that do not follow fixed parameters or are improvised. For this kind of evaluation, in fact, examiners do not need to be prepared in advance. The disadvantage is that in this way they may easily forget or omit crucial elements and the results cannot be compared with other or future performances.

Furthermore, evaluation can be holistic or analytic (Novello, 2014). *Holistic evaluation* gives a global judgement of students performance assuming that all relevant aspects of language skills develop at the same rate and can be embedded in a single score. It is relatively easy and fast to administer but may lead to lose important information. *Analytic evaluation* takes into consideration the single aspects of the ability observed. Therefore, it takes more time but provides useful information for the teacher and the students.

A third distinction has been made by researchers between norm- and criterion-referenced evaluation. A *norm-referenced evaluation* compares the performance of the single student with that of the others,

the score is hence based on the results of the entire group. If the result of the student is not compared with other students but with specific criteria on the basis of series of previous performances, it is a *criterion-referenced evaluation*. The first can help differentiate students and identify those who have specific needs; it is good to measure learning progress or to improve the teaching method. The second, since it is based on predetermined criteria, is more reliable and concise but does not take into account the learning context of the student.

An evaluation can be made on the basis of the criteria of *competence* or *progressivity*. In the first case the results would be divided into those who passed and those who did not. A threshold defines which students reached the competence required, without taking into account the quality of the results. If these data were not enough, the teacher could base evaluation on the *criterion of progressivity*. In this case, in fact, different levels of competence are taken into account and the data obtained are to be interpreted using a criteria sliding scale. For these reasons the first is more suitable for a final test or exam, whereas the second can be adopted for formative contexts in which students and the teachers need more precise information about the performance (Novello, 2014).

Finally, another distinction of evaluation modalities is through a rating scale or a checklist. In the case of *rating scales*, students, on the basis of the result obtained, are associated to a certain level to which they have achieved the aim of the activity. *Checklists* refer to specific elements, which are relevant for a certain level or topic, and are often used as a tool for self-evaluation.

As already seen, the feedback of a test plays a very important role in language education. Therefore, it has to be clear, detailed and shared by all the persons who take part to the education process, not only students and teachers but also families, who need to be informed and involved in the class decisions. Even if it is the last step of the

teaching plan, it has to be developed beforehand because that choice would influence the course of the teaching method.

First of all the teacher chooses between a quantitative and a qualitative feedback (or both). In most cases, at school, judgements are set through scores/numbers, that give global information about the performance but they are, in fact, useless if one wants to know what students are able to do or which skills are more problematic. In this sense a qualitative approach would be more appropriate because enable the participants to understand and reflect about the performance.

Therefore, the qualitative feedback is a fundamental tool of a complete teaching plan that aims to an effective language education.

3. Language anxiety

3.1 Anxiety in second language learning

Some affective variables can prevent from success in second language acquisition process. Such variables are motivation, self-confidence and anxiety.

Anxiety contributes to the Affective Filter. The Affective Filter (Dulay and Burt 1977) hypothesis states that there is a relationship between affective variables and success in language learning. When the Affective Filter activates, the input cannot reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. This tends to show stronger evidence when particular communicative-type tests are used. (Krashen, 1982)

The psychological state of anxiety is a very frequent phenomenon in second language learning. It consists of a combination of different feelings that could depend on many factors, such as tension, difficult tasks, uncomfortable situations, lack of ability or presence of specific learning disabilities.

Macintyre and Gardner (1989) identified three different types of anxiety in a second language-learning context: trait, state and situation-specific anxiety.

Trait anxiety is “*an individual’s likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation*” [Spielberger 1983], a stable predisposition and a personal characteristic not directly related to specific contexts. A person who shows trait anxiety could become anxious while dealing with foreign languages but also in many other situations.

State anxiety, on the contrary, refers to something temporary. It is a transient experience to a current situation but not a stable psychological aspect of the individual’s personality. It could be, for

example, the temporary emotive state of a student to the stimulus of an important test.

The last type of anxiety identified by the two authors is the *situation-specific anxiety*, which is directly related to a particular type of situation and occurs consistently over-time within that given situation. According to different classroom situations it is possible to recognise other subcategories, such as *text anxiety* (if the student is always anxious during texts), *math anxiety* (if anxiety occurs while solving mathematics problems) or *language anxiety* (if occurring while speaking a second language). (Khan, 2010)

3.2 A definition of Foreign Language Anxiety

In a second-language learning context, it is necessary to distinguish between common anxiety and the situation-specific one: Foreign Language Anxiety.

A definition of Foreign Language Anxiety in literature was given by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), who assumed that it is not a simple combination of fears - such as communicative apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation – in foreign language learning, but rather:

a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.

[Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986]

Language researchers demonstrate that anxiety activates on the two basic task requirements of foreign language learning: listening and

speaking. Many students feel uncomfortable in speaking in class, reading aloud or in role-play situations. However, it seems that anxiety arouses already from the first approach to the language and prevents from discriminating the sounds and structures of the target language message.

Furthermore, anxiety arouses very frequently while students are taking a test or exam. Such emotional state prevents them recalling the information they had acquired. The immediate consequences could be excessive study or, on the opposite, the refusal and avoidance of studying.

Therefore, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) highlight three kinds of situations that may cause Foreign Language Anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation.

Anxious students often feel less competent than their peers and fear being negatively evaluated by them. The class climate plays a very important role to prevent anxiety, if students feel uncomfortable in their acquisition's place it would be very difficult for them to succeed.

3.3 Causes and effects of anxiety in written and oral tasks

3.3.1 Introduction

Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) investigated second language anxiety in association with achievement in speaking and writing. Low self-confidence could be the main cause of both, but which one is a language-skill-specific anxiety?

The two abilities in terms of language anxiety seem to be related but independent. The act of speaking immediately involves feelings of

fear and uncertainty and may concern a more general type of anxiety. Writing apprehension has been identified since 1970s as a specific form of anxiety for written communication.¹

Speaking, being one of the most anxiety-provoking aspects among second language learners, has been studied to a larger extent and specific instruments have been designed to measure it.

Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a 33-item individual self-report that analyses, through simple personal questions, the communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation of foreign language learners.

To identify writing anxiety Michael Miller and John A. Daly (1975) created the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test (SLWAT), on the assumption that early negative writing experience could originate anxiety. They assumed that

Since students with negative writing experiences have not found success in writing, they avoid it. Over a period of time, this avoidance should result in some sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. They lack the necessary competence gained through experience and thus, when encountering a situation where they are forced to write, do poorly and justify their experience of failure.

[Miller and Daly, 1975]

The study of Cheng and his collaborators (1999) aims at analysing in an empirical and systematic way the connection between written and oral production using the two mentioned scales. The subcomponents of the two methods were examined to identify the correlated dimensions of the two constructs.

¹ However, the studies on writing anxiety have been focused mainly on first language learners. Only few studies on second language learners (and with confusing results) have been reported.

The results clarify that the two constructs are independent. Anxiety may arise in various students, some of whom may be affected by low self-confidence in speaking and others by low self-confidence in writing. Since low self-confidence (or self-esteem) is present in both cases, it can be assumed that its emergence is the first factor that contributes to anxiety. Such feeling plays a very important role in language education, one of its main consequences is the underestimation of self-ability to learn and negative expectations.

About the nature of the two anxiety constructs, Cheng and his collaborators (1999), consistently with previous studies, claim that FLCAS is not only a measure of second language speaking ability but a general measure to evaluate foreign learners during language class. Therefore, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety seems to be a more general type of anxiety (with a strong speaking anxiety element), whereas SLWAT is used to define a more specific anxiety, strictly related to writing skills.

Beside speaking and writing, also reading and listening tasks may provoke anxiety in second language learners. Recent studies propose other skill-specific types of anxiety: listening comprehension anxiety (Vogely, 1998) and reading anxiety (Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999).

The hope is that this spreading interest will lead to more sensitive and appropriate measurement systems and teaching methodologies to avoid anxiety.

3.3.2 Classroom anxiety

Often students assume they are not able to learn languages. Many of them, independently from age and education background, are good in every other subject, but not English (or other foreign languages). They claim to have a mental block that prevents them from

going further and improve because they just do not have the aptitude for it. They may be affected by foreign language anxiety. In order to demonstrate the validity of this hypothesis Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) tested it with FLCAS.

The scale centres on the two main tasks required in a foreign language class, i.e. listening and speaking. Foreign language anxiety most frequently arises during testing situations, when students feel unable to answer questions they know and forget what they have studied and learned. After the test it happens that they immediately remember the correct answer and they recognise where they got wrong during the test.

The three authors created 33 personal questions trying to understand why this happens and which are the main effects. The items were chosen according to the opinions given by a group of students that participate to a “Support Group for Foreign Language Learning” at the University of Texas in 1983.

Each item contains an assumption about a psychological state that activates during second language class or testing. The students choose if they strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neither agree nor disagree (N), disagree (D) or strongly disagree (SD) with it.

1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class.
2. I don't worry about making mistakes in language class.
3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on in language class.
4. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the foreign language.
5. It wouldn't bother me at all to take more foreign language classes.
6. During language class, I find myself thinking about things that have nothing to do with the course.
7. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am.
8. I am usually at ease during tests in my language class.
9. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.
10. I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.
11. I don't understand why some people get so upset over foreign language classes.
12. In language class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.
13. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in my language class.
14. I would not be nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.
15. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting.
16. Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.
17. I often feel like not going to my language class.
18. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class.
19. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make.
20. I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in language class.
21. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get.
22. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.
23. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do.

24. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the foreign language in front of other students.
25. Language class moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind.
26. I feel more tense and nervous in my language class than in my other classes.
27. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.
28. When I'm on my way to language class, I feel very sure and relaxed.
29. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.
30. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules you have to learn to speak a foreign language.
31. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language.
32. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.
33. I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.

Figure 3.1 – FLCAS Items (Horwtiz, 1986)

The FLCAS was administered to seventy-five university students from four introductory Spanish classes.

Anxious students admitted that they feel afraid to speak in the foreign language class: half of them (49%) *starts to panic when they have to speak without preparation in language class* and one third (33%) *gets nervous and confused*. They often feel less competent than the other students (38%) and sometimes fear their negative judgement (10%).

Most of the participants answered that *the language class moves too quickly and they worry about getting left behind* (59%). This statement emphasizes the importance for the teacher to become aware of the problems and to ensure an inclusive teaching method. The teacher should, first of all, acknowledge the existence of foreign language anxiety and then find the perfect way to deal with it.

It is impossible to define the rules to do it because many factors need to be taken into account. Teachers may try to avoid anxiety in the teaching context or decide to help them individually. Also the students must learn to recognize anxiety, in order to understand when and why it arises and how to behave when it happens.

In addition, the results of the FLCAS clarify that the foreign language increases the anxiety in class more than any other subject. In fact, 34% of the students admitted that *they feel more tense and nervous in their language class than in the other classes*.

3.3.3 Reading anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is more commonly associated to oral communication. For this reason many studies analysed the role of anxiety in speaking (and listening). In the primary instrument to measure it, the FLCAS (Horwitz, 1986), 20 items of 33 focus on speaking and listening. However, there is another common type of anxiety that creates difficulties while learning a second language: reading anxiety.

Even though it seems to be the least anxious task, for some students, reading a foreign language can provoke anxiety. Saito, Garza and Horwitz (1999) explored it, creating a new specific measurement, the Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale (FLRAS).

Reading (silent reading) is an individual activity that allows reflection and does not depend on other participants. However, there are aspects related to the act of reading that may provoke anxiety: unfamiliar scripts and writing systems and unfamiliar cultural material (Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999).

Reading anxiety differs from the other types of anxiety because it seems to be related to specific writing systems, whereas general foreign language anxiety is independent from the target language.

“The less the learner can depend on the reliability of a specific system of sound-symbol correspondences, the more anxiety he or she would be expected to experience in the act of reading.”

[Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999]

If the correspondence sound-symbol is high, learners can easier read in the foreign language. A test written in an unfamiliar writing system would make the reading process less immediate, more difficult and slow.

Readers may also find difficulties in reading a text that is culturally far from them, about which they do not know much. Processing the language will be in this case even worse for the learners because once they decode the words, they may realise that they do not understand them and that the first effort was useless.

The study (Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999) examines Foreign Language Reading Anxiety in three target languages, each of which utilizes a different writing system – French, Russian and Japanese. Three hundred eighty-three students enrolled in the university courses for these languages participated. Two instruments where used: the FLCAS and the FLRAS. The latter contains 20 items also scored on a 5-point scale, as for the FLCAS.

1. I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I am reading in (French, Russian, Japanese).
2. When reading (French, Russian, Japanese), I often understand the words but still can't quite understand what the author is saying.
3. When I'm reading (French, Russian, Japanese), I get so confused I can't remember what I'm reading.
4. I feel intimidated whenever I see a whole page of (French, Russian, Japanese) in front of me.
5. I am nervous when I am reading a passage in (French, Russian, Japanese) when I am not familiar with the topic.
6. I get upset whenever I encounter unknown grammar when reading (French, Russian, Japanese).
7. When reading (French, Russian, Japanese), I get nervous and confused when I don't understand every word.
8. It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while reading (French, Russian, Japanese).
9. I usually end up translating word by word when I'm reading (French, Russian, Japanese).
10. By the time you get past the funny letters and symbols in (French, Russian, Japanese), it's hard to remember what you're reading about.
11. I am worried about all the new symbols you have to learn in order to read (French, Russian, Japanese).
12. I enjoy reading (French, Russian, Japanese).
13. I feel confident when I am reading in (French, Russian, Japanese).
14. Once you get used to it, reading (French, Russian, Japanese) is not so difficult.
15. The hardest part of learning (French, Russian, Japanese) is learning to read.
16. I would be happy just to learn to speak (French, Russian, Japanese) rather than having to learn to read as well.
17. I don't mind reading to myself, but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to read (French, Russian, Japanese) aloud.
18. I am satisfied with the level of reading ability in (French, Russian, Japanese) that I have achieved so far.

19. (French, Russian, Japanese) culture and ideas seem very foreign to me.
20. You have to know so much about (French, Russian, Japanese) history and culture in order to read (French, Russian, Japanese).

Figura 3.2 – FLRAS Items (Saito, Horwitz & Garza, 1999)

During the semester, the students were asked to fill in both the FLCAS and the FLRAS. The results of the questionnaires made clarity on different aspects of Reading Anxiety.

First, reading anxiety exists and has, like general foreign language anxiety, negative effects on students' performances.

Second, the comparison among three languages (and writing systems) revealed that reading anxiety, unlike general one, does depend on the target language; among the languages analysed in this study, Japanese seems to be the most anxiety-inducing, followed by French and Russian. The fact that Japanese would provoke more anxiety was expected because of his non-roman writing system and the foreign cultural content. However, the finding that reading Russian provokes less anxiety than reading French was surprising.

It has been noted that although the Cyrillic symbols may create difficulties in the first approach to Russian, phonetics appears easy once learned. On the contrary, the difficult French phonetics may be realized only later. In fact, 40% of Japanese learners are "*worried about all the new symbols you have to learn in order to read*" but the percentage of French and Russian learners who agree with this assumption was surprisingly 62 and 86%. Since the survey was administered at the beginning of the learning process, it is also possible that until that moment the students of Japanese had not faced yet the difficulties they expected to have.

Also the results about the role of culture in reading a foreign language are confusing. According to the participants it seems that unfamiliar scripts and culture in Japanese creates less problems than in the other two target languages.

It can be assumed that students are in general prepared for the difficulty of the language they chose to study and seem to be ready of a bigger challenge if the language is far from their native language, and they consequently feel more motivated. This condition may cause less anxiety.

Reading-anxious students, for example those who agreed or strongly agreed with the assumption of the first item (*"I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I am reading"*), think they should understand every single word of a written text. It is a common mistake trying to give a detailed translation to a text, even before having a general idea of it. This way of approaching a written text inevitably generates anxiety and prevents from success.

3.4 Test anxiety

Students of any age and grade feel the moment of testing as the most worrisome of the entire education process. Although each person collects different types of symptoms and reacts differently, this condition generally provokes similar physical, emotional and cognitive problems. Being testing in most cases the only source of evaluation, it is evident that the results must be used taking into account these factors that inevitably invalidate the performance.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that stress may be both negative and positive. In fact, low anxious persons may benefit

from such feeling during a test, whereas high anxious ones consider it as a debilitative condition.

Causes and effects of test anxiety are still not completely understood. The interest demonstrated from researchers in this field is more focused on treatment techniques rather than on the nature of this specific kind of anxiety.

However, a complete study on this topic was directed by James G. Hollandsworth in 1979 among the Psychology students of the University of Southern Mississippi.

To choose the participants for the study the authors and his collaborators administered the Test Anxiety Scale (TAS) and the General Anxiety Scale (GAS) (Sarason, 1972) to 239 undergraduate students.

1. While taking an important exam, I find myself thinking of how much brighter the other students are than I am.
2. If I were to take an intelligence test, I would worry a great deal before taking it.
3. If I knew I was going to take an intelligence test, I would feel confident and relaxed.
4. While taking an important exam, I perspire a great deal.
5. During class examinations, I find myself thinking of things unrelated to the actual course material.
6. I get to feeling very panicky when I have to take a surprise exam.
7. During a test, I find myself thinking of the consequences of failing.
8. After important tests, I am frequently so tense my stomach gets upset.
9. I freeze up on things like intelligence tests and final exams.
10. Getting good grades on one test doesn't seem to increase my confidence on the second.
11. I sometimes feel my heart beating very fast during important exams.
12. After taking a test, I always feel I could have done better than I actually did.
13. I usually get depressed after taking a test.
14. I have an uneasy, upset feeling before taking a final examination.
15. When taking a test, my emotional feelings do not interfere with my performance.
16. During a course examination, I frequently get so nervous that I forget facts I really know.
17. I seem to defeat myself while working on important tests.
18. The harder I work at taking a test or studying for one, the more confused I get.
19. As soon as an exam is over, I try to stop worrying about it, but I just can't.
20. During exams, I sometimes wonder if I'll ever get through school.
21. I would rather write a paper than take an examination for my grade in a course.

22. I wish examinations did not bother me so much.
23. I think I could do much better on tests if I could take them alone and not feel pressured by time limits
24. Thinking about the grade I may get in a course interferes with my studying and performance on tests.
25. If examinations could be done away with, I think I would actually learn more.
26. On exams I take the attitude, "If I don't know it now, there's no point in worrying about it."
27. I really don't see why some people get so upset about tests.
28. Thoughts of doing poorly interfere with my performance on tests.
29. I don't study any harder for final exams than for the rest of my coursework.
30. Even when I'm well prepared for a test, I feel very anxious about it. I don't enjoy eating before an important test.
31. I don't enjoy eating before an important test.
32. Before an important examination, I find my hands or arms trembling.
33. I seldom feel the need for "cramming" before an exam.
34. The University should recognize that some students are more nervous than others about tests and that this affects their performance.
35. It seems to me that examination periods should not be made such intense situations.
36. I start feeling very uneasy just before getting a test paper back.
37. I dread courses where the instructor has the habit of giving "pop" quizzes.

Figure 3.3 – TAS Items (Sarason, 1972)

From the results obtained the researchers selected 3 low-anxious and 3 high-anxious students for a further investigation. The participants were then asked to complete the Otis-Lennon Mental Ability

Test² (Otis & Lennon, 1968. Cited in Hollandsworth, 1979), while being videotaped with a camera. The videotape was then shown to the subjects and stopped in order to allow them to comment. Subsequently, the entire testing procedure was reviewed, subjects were provided with the Otis-Lennon Test Booklet to check the performance step by step. After that, three self-report instruments were presented³.

The results of the experiment show, as expected, that the low-anxious students obtain higher results in testing. It was also possible to demonstrate that high-anxious students presented debilitating anxiety, whereas the anxiety reported in low anxious was facilitative.

Furthermore, the thoughts of high-anxious students interfere on the performance in a testing situation, whereas this does not happen in the other group of participants.

This study leads to some important conclusions.

First, there seems to be a strong positive correlation between test anxiety level and academic results. The more subjects are test-anxious, the less they will obtain good results in a test. All the low-anxious participants, without exceptions, present superior academic records than the high-anxious ones.

Second, if students are defined as low-anxious it does not mean that they do not show any form of anxiety. The study demonstrated that during tests they were aroused but the self-report clarified that they reported a high level of facilitative anxiety, which is positive in testing situation.

Third, test anxiety provokes in students many thoughts that are task-irrelevant and have negative effects on their performances.

² It is a measure of general mental ability or scholastic aptitude developed for use with American students. It comprises 80 verbal and nonverbal items arranged in spiral omnibus form. (Hollandsworth, 1979)

³ The self-report instruments administered were the Cognitive Interference Questionnaire (Sarason), the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberg, Gorsuch & Lushene, 1970) and the Achievement Anxiety Test (Alpert & Haber, 1960).

3.5 Language anxiety in students with learning disabilities

According to neuropsychology's studies, dyslexia is often present in comorbidity with other difficulties, related in particular to psychological aspects. Dyslexic students, in fact, often suffer from anxiety, depression and demotivation, caused by failure in learning.

In a subject with learning disabilities, anxiety can appear since the first schoolyear. In this phase, in fact, education is almost completely focused on the acquisition of literacy skills process. Children recognize soon a diversity between them and the other students and do not understand the reason why even working harder they cannot reach the goals.

Such diversity increases constantly in the first years of studies and causes a negative psychological state that makes the situation even worse.

These first experiences of frustration and dissatisfaction are typical of dyslexic subjects that have not been diagnosed yet. Their complex system of feelings can be summarized in the following traits: low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, motivational weakness and relationships reluctance. (Daloiso, 2012)

Among these, as already seen, language anxiety is the specific psychological state that emerges while dealing with a foreign language. It is typical of many students but it is emphasized in subjects with learning disabilities.

Language anxiety is a situational, and not character, trait. It arises mainly with particular tasks, for instance reading aloud in front of an audience, reading aloud and translating or answering questions, learning by heart a text or a list of decontextualized words, rapidly answering questions, improvising dialogues or role-plays without supports. (Daloiso, 2012)

What do these tasks have in common? They are rapid, they are multi-tasking and they should be mechanical, automatic. Unlike their peers, students with specific learning disabilities are not able to automatize the processes and even an easy and supposedly trivial task could become very difficult for them.

To cope with the many series of everyday actions and thoughts, people automatize simple and repetitive tasks in a subconscious way. However, even completely automated skills can provoke serious difficulties in dyslexic people.

This lack of automation inevitably requires a greater effort and concentration. Such effort is the reason why dyslexic students get tired very easily and are not able to complete complex tasks.

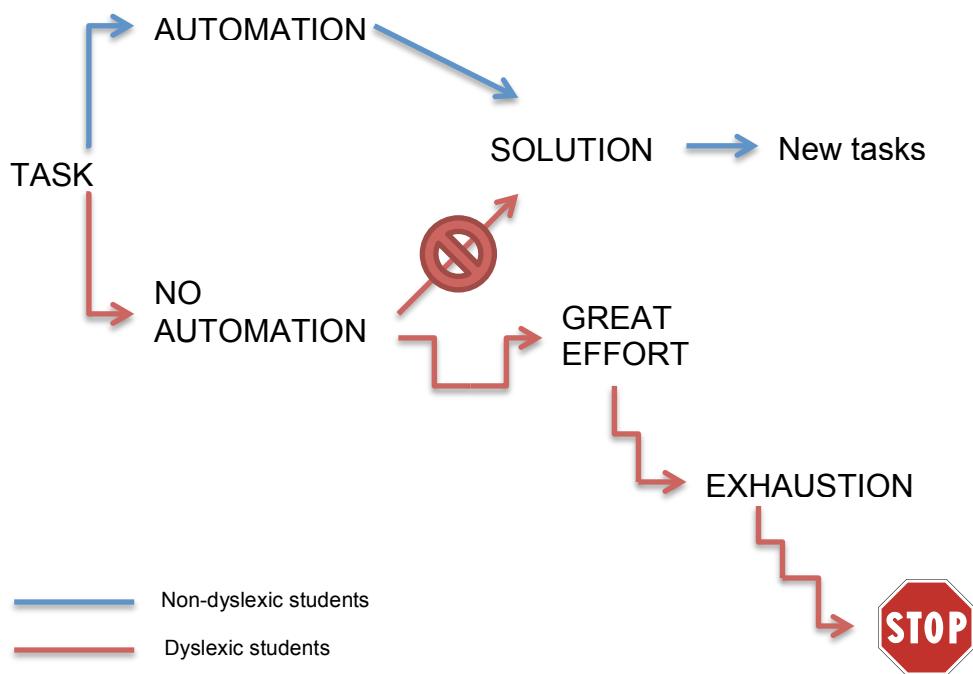


Figure 3.4 – Dyslexic and non-dyslexic students dealing with a task

The long path that dyslexic students have to deal with (figure 3.4) inevitably fuels the initial state of anxiety. What happens when a student is language-anxious? A sort of “short circuit” invades the brain and in particular a group of nuclei located deep and medially within the temporal lobes, called *amygdala*, which performs a primary role in processing emotional reactions and regulates memory consolidation. When amygdala perceives a tense situation and a high circulating level of stress it activates, releasing hormones to control it. However, this activation impairs memory retrieval and working memory.

Students that feel unable to understand basic concepts or to do easy activity often try to learn everything by heart but with language anxiety even this alternative will result useless.

“The biggest problem for me is that everything has to be learnt by heart, without giving a logical sense to things. I can see this with words, that I am not able to memorize, but also with grammar. If you have memory difficulties and everything has to be learnt by heart, you can’t appreciate learning a new language.” (Enrico, 15)

(Translated from Daloiso 2014)

3.6 How to evaluate students with Learning Disabilities

Teachers need to constantly supervise the state of the teaching process of the class and the individual progress of each student. In order to obtain useful information they can administer written and oral tests or simply observe the students while learning.

The first is a case of *formal evaluation*, the second is *informal evaluation* (Daloiso, 2011). Formal evaluation is presented as a series of exercises or activities that investigate the linguistic competence of

the learners, which are conscious to be tested in that moment. Informal evaluation is, on the other hand, a data collection through constant observation and specific instruments, about which the student is not conscious. It is impossible to define which method is the best, each context and situation will suggest the most appropriate.

Noam Chomsky (1965) made a distinction between competence and performance. Competence is the idealized capacity and involves “knowing a language”, whereas performance is the actual production and involves “doing something with the language. It is clear that in a language-testing context it is important that the two aspects coincide.

Teachers assessing a formal test judge the students' performance, but do not have direct access to their competence. The results could be influenced by the psychological state of the student in that stressful moment. In order to get the most valid data both methods, formal and informal, should be used to test students during the schoolyear.

Only in an idealized situation the performance will be a direct reflection of the students' competence. Therefore, teachers should create the right context for the students to avoid language anxiety.

In a formal evaluation context it is possible to find mostly two types of test: written or oral. Both types of test may create problems if administered in a wrong way, especially for students with Learning Disabilities.

Dealing with dyslexic students, the oral test is the most advisable method but even a written one can be adapted to avoid barriers that are not specifically related to the competence in the language studied.

In some cases diagnosed dyslexic students may have the dispensation from the written test⁴: teachers should substitute, in these cases, every written test with an oral version.

⁴ D.12 luglio 2011, n. 5669, articolo 7, comma 5.

If it is not possible to do it, the written test should be accessible in all its aspects: the form, the content and modalities of administration. The student should be allowed to take it on a computer, in order to translate the written form into audio using the *text-to-speech devices*. As an alternative the teacher could read aloud the exercises for the students who need it.

However, the use of the *speech synthesis* (or reading aloud) it is not always possible. For that reason it is important to pay specific attention to the test format (Daloiso, 2012).

The *font* should be “sans serif” (Tahoma, Trebuchet MS and Verdana are good examples), size from 13 to 16, the minimum suggested line spacing is 1.5 and the text should not be justified. If the text is long, it should be divided into paragraphs and it is also useful to highlight in bold the guidelines to the activities and the key words. In addition, images or tables could help students to deal with the text, having a general idea of what they are going to read (Daloiso, 2012 – scheda 9).

However, the format of the test is not the only obstacle a dyslexic student may find. Also the selected techniques play a very important role in the accessibility.

“Fatto salvo quanto definito nel comma precedente, si possono dispensare alunni e studenti dalle prestazioni scritte in lingua straniera in corso d’anno scolastico e in sede di esami di Stato, nel caso in cui ricorrano tutte le condizioni di seguito elencate:

- certificazione di DSA attestante la gravità del disturbo e recante esplicita richiesta di dispensa dalle prove scritte;
 - richiesta di dispensa dalle prove scritte di lingua straniera presentata dalla famiglia o dall'allievo se maggiorenne;
 - approvazione da parte del consiglio di classe che confermi la dispensa in forma temporanea o permanente, tenendo conto delle valutazioni diagnostiche e sulla base delle risultanze degli interventi di natura pedagogico-didattica, con particolare attenzione ai percorsi di studio in cui l'insegnamento della lingua straniera risulti caratterizzante (liceo linguistico, istituto tecnico per il turismo, ecc.).
- In sede di esami di Stato, conclusivi del primo e del secondo ciclo d'istruzione, modalità e contenuti delle prove orali – sostitutive delle prove scritte – sono stabiliti dalle Commissioni, sulla base della documentazione fornita dai consigli di classe.
- I candidati con DSA che superano l'esame di Stato conseguono il titolo valido per l'iscrizione alla scuola secondaria di secondo grado ovvero all'università.”

The activities chosen for the test should be similar to those administered in class during the lessons in order to avoid misunderstandings and further difficulties.

Furthermore, concerning the content of the written test it is important to be coherent with the initial objectives of the teaching program. A good language test is composed by a comprehension, a production and a meta-linguistic task (only in this last part a specific grammar activity is accepted).

The last aspect a teacher should make accessible concerns the modalities of administration. In order to obtain reliable results, in fact, students should be in the condition to prove their ability as best as they can.

Firstly, they should have additional time, if needed and specified in the diagnosis (maximum 30% extra time). Secondly, the teacher should decide which instruments the student may use, such as maps and outlines created in class in order to compensate for the lack of automatism. Thirdly, the test should be adapted also from a cognitive point of view. Tests are often full of contents and activities, requiring too many skills at the same time, that students with Learning Disabilities feel unable to manage.

Even though oral tests present fewer barriers for dyslexic students it is advisable to take into account some precautions. Oral exams and tests need to be planned in good time and the student should be informed in advance.

The impossibility to automatize knowledge may cause serious problems also (and even more) in an oral context, because of the short time to think. The student can, in this case, use compensatory instruments to recover vocabulary and structures. A good example of compensatory instrument for an oral production is the *prompt*, a graphic support that includes key-images, structures of typical dialogue or linguistic formulas. (Daloiso, 2012)

The final difficulty is to find the best way to evaluate the performance, choosing the most valuable and equitable parameters. Reflecting on the specific case of students with learning disabilities will lead teachers to pay particular attention to the general evaluation system and hopefully result in its improvement. Evaluation at school is strictly related to the personal progress of the students and should take into account not only the linguistic aspects but also the cultural, educational and relational context. (Daloiso, 2012)

If these aspects are considered and students with learning disabilities have had the necessary support during the test, evaluation will be reliable and useful for both students and teachers.

4. A study by Paola Celentin

4.1 Introduction

In 2014 Paola Celentin (DEAL, Ca' Foscari) undertook a research study at the Centro Territoriale per l'Integrazione di Cadore, a group of schools scattered throughout the area and generally composed of classes with few students.

The study aimed at analyzing how students and teachers perceive evaluation at school. Special attention was given to Learning Disabilities and the way the participants deal with them.

The researcher, in parallel with data collection, involved language teachers in a training course about evaluation perception and Learning Disabilities.

4.2 Methodology

Data were collected through different instruments.

First, a questionnaire was administered to the teachers, in order to identify the context in which the research was undertaken. It investigated the number of children with Learning Disabilities both diagnosed and suspected in each class and the possible measures adopted. In addition, the teachers were asked to give their personal idea of language testing, to present the modalities they usually adopt, the main difficulties they encounter while testing (in particular testing LD students) and the way they evaluate them. The questionnaire was administered on-line.

D.S.A e Lingue Straniere - Questionario insegnanti

Caro insegnante, questo questionario è un sondaggio che ci serve per raccogliere informazioni sul tuo atteggiamento e le tue opinioni riguardo alcuni temi che costituiscono il focus della nostra ricerca. Nessuna forma di giudizio sarà espressa in relazione alle tue affermazioni. Compilalo in tutta tranquillità e sincerità. Questo sarà d'aiuto a noi e agli sviluppi della ricerca.

Dove non diversamente indicato, la domanda si riferisce alla valutazione in generale. Solo dove specificato intendiamo fare riferimento agli allievi con DSA.

Grazie!

1. Ci sono studenti con DSA diagnosticato nelle tue classi?

- Sì
- No

3. Per gli studenti con DSA (diagnosticato e/o sospetto) usi misure compensative e dispensative?

- Sì, per tutti
- Solo per gli studenti con DSA diagnosticato
- No
- Altro:

4. In quale grado di scuola insegni?

- Scuola primaria
- Scuola secondaria di 1° grado

5. Hai mai seguito dei corsi di formazione sui DSA?

- Sì
- No

6. Cosa significa per te valutare una lingua straniera?

- attribuire un valore alle competenze dello studente
- misurare la quantità e la qualità della lingua appresa dallo studente
- dare un voto alla prestazione dello studente

7. Quali sono gli elementi che devi avere a disposizione per poter emettere una valutazione?

- conoscere l'esito delle verifiche precedenti dello studente nella tua materia
- conoscere l'andamento dello studente nelle altre discipline, oltre alla tua
 - conoscere in generale la storia scolastica dello studente
- calcolare il numero di risposte corrette della verifica oggetto di valutazione
- osservare gli errori commessi dallo studente nella verifica oggetto di valutazione

8. Quali fattori influenzano il tuo giudizio?

- l'atteggiamento dello studente (collaborativo, rinunciatario, propositivo, disfattista, ecc.)
- il tempo impiegato dallo studente per svolgere il compito
- la non conformità rispetto alle procedure note nell'elaborare le risposte
- il grado di precisione con cui lo studente risponde
- la veste grafica e la disposizione nello spazio delle risposte

9. Nella valutazione dello studente con DSA dichiarato quali aspetti ti preoccupano maggiormente?

- non essere preparato adeguatamente
- la relazione con i genitori
- l'individuazione dei bisogni specifici dell'allievo
- il rispetto della normativa
- essere sicuro di non concedere troppe agevolazioni allo studente
- gli inevitabili confronti con il resto della classe

10. Quanto gravi reputi certi errori in lingua straniera?

(Assegna un punteggio da 1 a 5 a queste tipologie di errore)
(1= errore poco importante 5 = errore molto grave)

- Morfo-sintassi
- Ortografia
- Pronuncia e intonazione
- Lessico (parole adeguate al contesto)
- Registro (stile adeguato alla situazione/tipologia testuale)
- Regole di comportamento della cultura straniera

11. Nel correggere le produzioni scritte degli alunni con DSA come preferisci comportarti?

- segno tutti gli errori e li conto nella valutazione
- segno tutti gli errori, inclusi quelli ortografici, anche se non li considero nella valutazione
- segno tutti gli errori, tranne quelli ortografici
- segno tutti gli errori, ma non considero quelli legati ad argomenti non ancora affrontati
- segno tutti gli errori che lo studente può correggere rivedendo gli argomenti
- segno solo una tipologia di errori affrontati

12. Descrivi brevemente la procedura che usi per correggere gli errori

13. Indica le due difficoltà che incontri con maggiore frequenza nella correzione degli errori in lingua straniera prodotti dagli alunni con DSA

Figure 4.1 – Teachers' questionnaire (Celentin 2014)

Before the course, teachers were invited to administer a language test to the class selected for the study.

Celentin gave two questionnaires to the students of the class involved. The first was distributed to understand the perception of students about evaluation. In particular, what they think about teachers' expectations, which their main difficulties during a test in a foreign language are, what "to be good in a foreign language" means to them, the best and the worst note they got in a language test and their opinion about the worst mistakes a student can do in a foreign language.

The questionnaire was designed to be administered on-line. However, the majority of the students completed it on papers, because computers were not available in class.

1° questionario studenti (13 - 20/01/2014)

Queste domande parlano di verifica ma non sono una verifica, tranquillo!
Le tue risposte ci servono per capire cosa pensano gli studenti prima, durante e dopo una
verifica per poterli aiutare ad affrontarla meglio.
Grazie per la collaborazione!

1. Secondo te cosa si aspetta l'insegnante di inglese/tedesco quando ti valuta nelle verifiche scritte?

- Che io risponda senza aver bisogno del suo aiuto
- Che io riesca a ripetere tutto quello che ha spiegato
- Che io riesca a usare la lingua straniera
- Che io abbia eseguito tutto quello che è stato richiesto

2. Quali prove ti piace svolgere?

- Domande con risposta a crocetta
- Domande con risposta libera in cui devo creare io il testo
- Inserire parole in un testo coi buchi
- Scrivere una lettera
- Altro:

3. Quali prove NON ti piace svolgere?
- Domande con risposta a crocetta
 - Domande con risposta libera in cui devo creare io il testo
 - Inserire parole in un testo coi buchi
 - Scrivere una lettera
 - Altro:
4. Qual è per te la cosa più difficile in una verifica di inglese/tedesco?
- Leggere le domande
 - Capire le domande
 - Ricordare le risposte
 - Scegliere la risposta giusta fra più possibili risposte
 - Scrivere la risposta
5. Durante la verifica di inglese/tedesco ti sembra che il tempo:
- Passi molto velocemente
 - Passi molto lentamente
 - Passi come al solito
6. Cosa significa per te “andar bene” in inglese/tedesco?
7. Qual è il voto più ALTO che hai preso in inglese/tedesco in quest'anno scolastico?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
8. Qual è il voto più BASSO che hai preso in inglese/tedesco in quest'anno scolastico?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
9. Qual è l'errore più grave secondo te?
- Quando non scrivi correttamente le lettere di una parola
 - Quando scrivi una parola al posto di un'altra
 - Quando pronunci male una parola
 - Quando sbagli a mettere gli articoli o a fare il plurale
 - Quando non si capisce quello che vuoi dire/scrivere
10. Quando l'insegnante di inglese/tedesco ti riporta la verifica corretta cosa fai?
- Guardi solo il voto
 - Guardi il voto e cerchi di capire da solo che errori hai fatto
 - Guardi il voto e lo confronti con quello dei compagni
 - Guardi il voto e chiedi all'insegnante di spiegarti gli errori

Figure 4.2 – FIrst student's Questionnaire (Celentin 2014)

After the first students' questionnaire, a new language test was administered, which was in part created during the training course. The participants were then asked to complete a second questionnaire about the test they had just finished. The questions investigate the acceptance of the students for the used techniques, the expected result and the preferred type of test (written or oral).

2° questionario studenti (21/01 - 28/02/2014)

Queste domande parlano di verifica ma non sono una verifica, tranquillo! Le tue risposte ci servono per capire cosa pensano gli studenti prima, durante e dopo una verifica per poterli aiutare ad affrontarla meglio. Grazie per la collaborazione!

1. Hai svolto volentieri questa verifica?
 - Sì
 - No
2. Quale esercizio della verifica ti è piaciuto di più?
3. Quale esercizio della verifica ti è piaciuto di meno?
4. Secondo te, la verifica che hai appena fatto com'è andata?
 - Molto bene (9-10)
 - Bene (7-8)
 - Così così (6)
 - Male (4-5)
5. Quali verifiche di inglese/tedesco preferisci fare?
 - Scritte
 - Orali
6. Prova a spiegare perché ti piacciono di più le verifiche scritte o quelle orali.

Figure 4.3 – Second student's questionnaire (Celentin 2014)

4.3 Results

Nineteen teachers accepted to take part in the research, whereas the students were two hundred four. Among them ten students had been diagnosed of a Learning Disability and seven have a suspected Learning Disability. The data collected allowed Celentin and the other researchers to reflect on important issues.

In particular the comparison between the answers of the students' questionnaires and that of the teachers was very interesting.

Focusing on language evaluation, items 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the questionnaire for teachers were compared with items 1, 4, 5 of the first questionnaire for students. The items aimed at identifying perception of evaluation in both groups. To obtain this kind of information the researcher formulated different types of questions, according to the sample.

For the majority of teachers (74%), evaluation means attributing a value to students' performances, for the 21% of them it means measuring quantity and quality of the language learned, and one teacher added a personal definition: measuring the acquired level of ability.

Considering the opinion of the students, teachers evaluate them on the basis of the quantity (45%) more than the quality of their abilities.

6. Cosa significa per te valutare una lingua straniera?

- attribuire un valore alle competenze dello studente
- misurare il livello delle abilità raggiunto
- misurare la quantità e la qualità della lingua appresa dallo studente

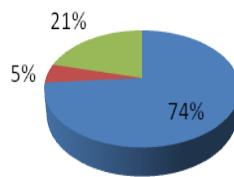


Figura 4.4 – Teachers’ answers to item 6 “What does evaluating a language mean to you?” (Celentin 2014)

Secondo te cosa si aspetta l’insegnante di inglese/tedesco quando ti valuta nelle verifiche scritte?

- Che io riesca a ripetere tutto quello che ha spiegato
- Che io riesca a usare la lingua straniera
- Che io risponda senza aver bisogno del suo aiuto
- Che io abbia eseguito tutto quello che è stato richiesto

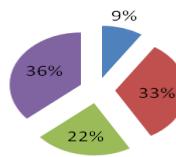


Figure 4.5 – Students’ answers to item 9 “What do you think your English/German language teachers expect from you when they evaluate your written tests?” (Celentin 2014)

Focusing only on the answers given by students with Learning Disabilities the perception is even worse. In fact, more than the half of them (56%) believe that teachers adopt quantitative criteria, a surprising 25% think they should not ask for teachers’ help to receive good evaluation and only 19% assumed that teachers’ care about how they can use the language.



Figure 4.6 – LD Students’ answers to item 1 “What do you think your English/German language teachers expect from you when they evaluate your written tests?” (Celentini 2014)

It could be interesting to compare these items with the more general question of item 6 of the non-LD students’ questionnaire (*What does it mean for you to be good at a foreign language?*). Here some examples are presented:

- *It doesn’t mean to have good grades but to understand what the teacher explains and the mistakes one makes*
- *It means to know the language and to be able to speak*
- *It means a lot...*
- *I want to learn English because I want to go to college*

On the other hand, LD students seem to have a point of view strictly related to the school context:

- *To get good grades*
- *To do everything well*
- *Nothing*

- *To pass*
- *To make few mistakes*

Through a more precise question, item 7 investigates the elements that teachers need in order to evaluate students in a language test. Teachers argue that is very important to focus on the test, but before giving a final evaluation the performance needs to be contextualized in the educational path of the student (13). Quantitative criteria, i.e. the number of correct answers (10), are less important than the qualitative ones, i.e. reflect on the mistakes (17). Also the comparison among the students in class is often taken into account (6).



Figure 4.6 – Teachers' answers to item 7 “Which elements do you need to evaluate a student?” (Celentin 2014)

Furthermore, teachers are strongly influenced by the behaviour of the students (16), the precision (13) and conformity (12) of the answers. On the contrary, time and graphic layout do not seem to be taken into account.

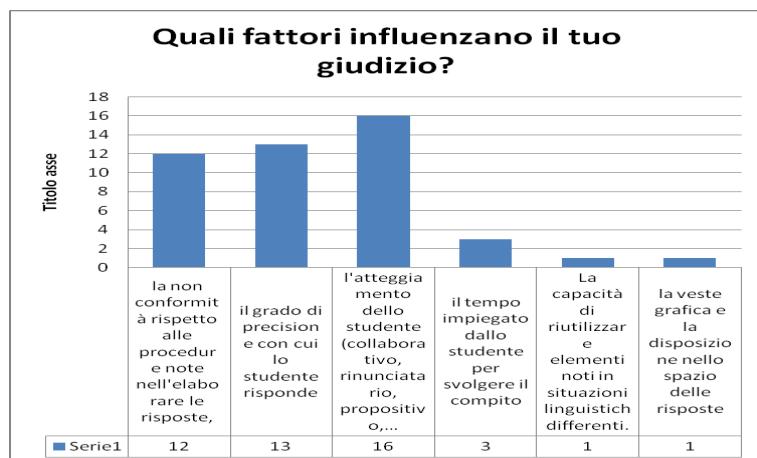


Figure 4.6 – Teachers' answers to item 8 “Which factors influenced your evaluation?” (Celentin 2014)

However, if the students involved in the test have an LD, the teachers seem to find the evaluation process more difficult. The main difficulty for the teachers is to identify the specific needs of the students (18), probably due to the lack of knowledge and information in this domain (13).

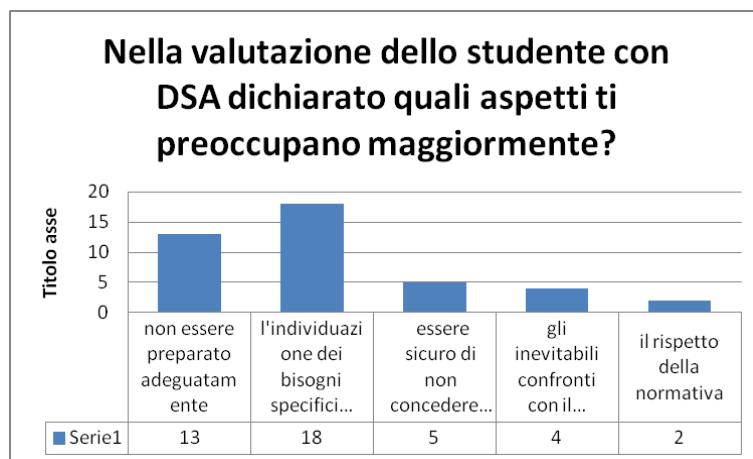


Figure 4.7 – Teachers' answers to item 9 “Which aspects of evaluating a LD students are worry you the most?” (Celentin 2014)

The questionnaire considered then on the other hand the most difficult factors for students with or without Learning Disabilities. The majority of the students of the first group have trouble with questions for

checking comprehension (44%) and writing the answers (31%). Only a small number of participants find difficulties in recalling answers (13%), choosing the right one (6%) or reading the questions (6%). From these results is possible to assume that they prefer cloze tests rather than open questions.

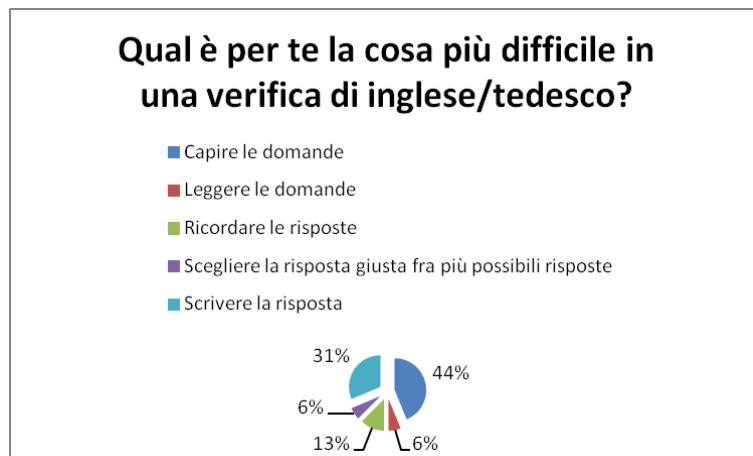


Figure 4.8 – LD students' answers to item 4 “What is the most difficult thing in a english/german test?” (Celentin 2014)

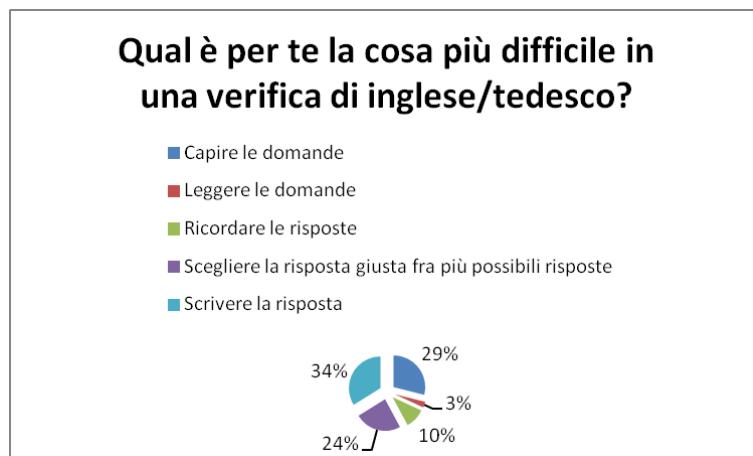


Figure 4.9 – students' answers to item 4 “What is the most difficult aspect of a english/german test?” (Celentin 2014)

This preference for cloze tests seems to be common to all students (Figure 4.9). The main difficulties for the whole sample are, in fact, understanding questions and writing an answer.

Items 2 and 3 further prove it. 84% of the students prefer a cloze or multiple-choice test and 60% claims to hate open questions or writing letters.



Figure 4.10 - Figure 4.10 – Students' answers to item 2 “Which tests do you like?” (Celentin 2014)

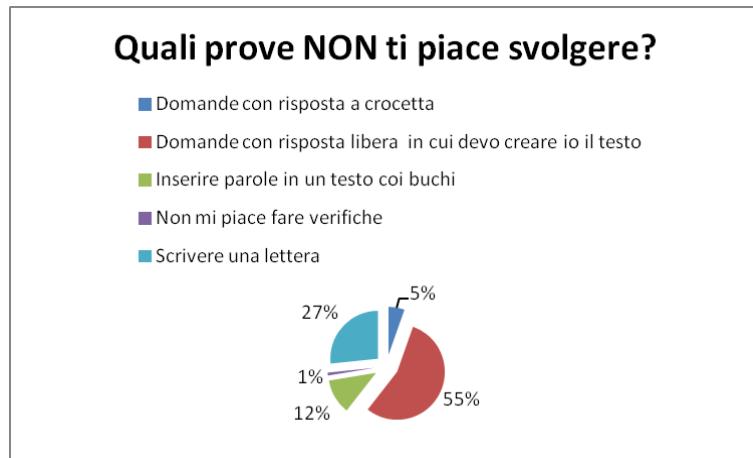


Figure 4.10 – Students' answers to item 2 “Which are the tests you do not like?” (Celentin 2014)

Focusing on participants with LD, it emerges that 93% of them prefer multiple-choice or cloze tests and 81% hates open questions or writing letters.

The second students' questionnaire investigates if the students liked doing the test or not. Their answers reveal that the majority of them appreciated it, with no remarkable difference between the different groups.

The second item concerns the preference between oral and written tests and reveals a more significant gap. 56% of the students with LD admitted preferring written tests rather than oral ones, whereas the control group reveals a general appreciation for oral tests (74%). Unexpectedly, the group composed of students that have or seem to have difficulties in reading and writing, chose the answer "written test". The factors that could influence this perception were investigated in item 6.

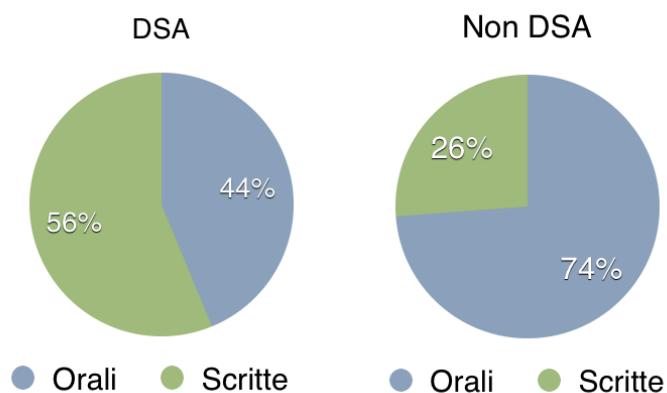


Figura 4.12 – Students' answers to item 5 of second questionnaire. "Which type of test do you prefer? Oral/written"
*(Celentin 2014)

The open answers to the last item, indicates that LD participants prefer written tests because they do not cause anxiety and because they have more time to reflect and recall information.

4.4 Conclusions

The results of Celentin's study have not been completely analysed yet. However, from the first observations it is already possible to draw some general and useful conclusions.

Firstly, teachers need to receive more specific information about Learning Disabilities because often they are not able to deal with them.

Secondly, they should be aware that the way they create and administer a written or oral test could influence the results, favouring one student over another. Specific attention should be paid to students with diagnosed or suspected Learning Disabilities.

Thirdly, it is important to clarify, at the beginning of the course, the main goals of studying a foreign language and discuss what "to know a language" or "to be good at languages" means for both teachers and students. Students often have a quantitative perception, strictly related to the test and notes, that should be change into qualitative in order to optimize their learning process and focus on real important goals.

Finally, teachers should increase the value of each student, working with specific instruments and methods that will allow them to prove their abilities.

5. Indagine tra gli studenti di Ca' Foscari ¹

5.1 Introduzione

Gli studi citati e analizzati in questa tesi (Horwitz 1986, Saito 1999, Hollandsworth 1979 e Celentin 2014) hanno mostrato molti aspetti in comune, nonostante siano stati condotti in contesti del tutto differenti. Tutti i ricercatori hanno utilizzato uno strumento simile, anche se in modalità diverse: il questionario. Il questionario è uno strumento rapido e facile da somministrare, che spesso rivela risultati sorprendenti. Il tipo d'indagine è del tutto soggettiva e non può quindi essere definita totalmente affidabile ma, volendo individuare in questo caso gli aspetti psicologici che s'innescano nell'apprendente di una lingua straniera, l'opinione soggettiva e personale dell'individuo è di fondamentale importanza.

Il questionario utilizzato per questo studio è stato creato prendendo come modello quello di Horwitz (1986) e quello di Celentin (2014), adattati in base allo specifico campione che s'intendeva analizzare, composto interamente da studenti attualmente iscritti a uno dei corsi di laurea dell'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia.

L'obiettivo iniziale è quello di indagare tra gli studenti, con Disturbo Specifico dell'Apprendimento (DSA) e non, quali siano le sensazioni provate durante una lezione o un test in lingua straniera, e quali siano gli effetti che tali sensazioni provocano.

È stato notato che spesso gli studenti italiani sono poco propensi a esprimersi davanti agli insegnanti o ai compagni in classe, assumendo atteggiamenti che evidenziano uno stato d'insicurezza e

¹ Il presente capitolo è stato redatto in italiano in conformità con il contesto in cui è stata condotta l'indagine. Il questionario è stato, infatti, presentato interamente in italiano, a studenti di un'università italiana.

ansia. Tali situazioni non sono invece state osservate, o in misura molto minore, frequentando lezioni all'estero.

Questo sentimento di ansia potrebbe aumentare quando lo studente si ritrova a essere giudicato o sottoposto a test scritti o orali, ossia nel momento della valutazione. In soggetti DSA l'ansia è spesso anche maggiore perché s'innesta già relativamente ad alcune delle abilità primarie di chi studia: leggere e scrivere.

Questi fattori condizionano lo stato psicologico dell'alunno in classe e il suo approccio allo studio, anche dopo anni di esperienza in ambito scolastico.

Lo studio mira a identificare se e quando gli studenti sono sottoposti a uno stato di ansia linguistica e se tale stato sia equivalente in studenti con e senza DSA. Inoltre, si vuole comprendere se tale approccio possa influenzare l'esito della valutazione nei due gruppi e se sì in quale misura.

Il questionario è stato distribuito a studenti dell'ateneo veneziano che hanno già compiuto un lungo percorso di studi in Italia o all'estero, e frequentano ora i corsi universitari. In particolare è stata posta l'attenzione sulle lezioni e gli esami in Lingua Straniera.

5.2 Metodo

Il questionario è stato somministrato esclusivamente in formato digitale e diffuso tramite diversi canali, in particolare Facebook e posta elettronica. È stato, infatti, condiviso dagli amministratori delle pagine Facebook "Università Ca' Foscari Venezia" e "Radio Ca' Foscari", e in alcuni gruppi creati da e per gli studenti.

La partecipazione all'indagine e la compilazione del questionario è stata dunque completamente volontaria e spontanea. Hanno risposto

371 studenti di diversa età, anno di corso e facoltà. Il questionario è stato anche inoltrato dall'Ufficio Disabilità e DSA di Ca' Foscari a tutti gli studenti che al momento dell'iscrizione all'università avessero consegnato una diagnosi di DSA. Il campione è dunque eterogeneo ma permette di avere una visione d'insieme sugli aspetti che questa ricerca vuole analizzare.

Il questionario è stato così presentato:

Questionario per gli studenti di Ca' Foscari

Ciao!

Mi chiamo Beatrice, sono una studentessa di Ca' Foscari come voi e sto scrivendo la mia tesi di Laurea Magistrale, per questo avrei bisogno del vostro aiuto.

Si tratta di rispondere a semplici domande, nel modo più sincero possibile, riguardo a voi stessi e alla vostra esperienza con lo studio delle lingue.

Il questionario rimarrà in forma del tutto anonima, se però avete piacere inserite il vostro indirizzo email, così potrò condividere con voi gli sviluppi della mia ricerca... per me sarebbe molto importante!

Se avete bisogno di qualche informazione invece potete scrivermi all'indirizzo giuliano.beatrice@gmail.com

1. Sei italiano?

- Sì
- No

2. Dove hai svolto il tuo percorso scolastico?

- In Italia
- All'estero
- Altro:

3. Hai mai ricevuto una diagnosi di Disturbo Specifico dell'Apprendimento?

I Disturbi Specifici dell'Apprendimento includono la dislessia, la disgrafia, la disortografia e la discalculia.

- Sì
- No, ma ho il sospetto avere questo disturbo
- No, senza alcun dubbio
- Altro:

4. Con che frequenza segui le lezioni di lettorato (o del corso di lingua universitario)? *

Indica la tua risposta in una scala da 1 a 5.

1 2 3 4 5

Mai Sempre

5. Che cosa provi durante una lezione di lettorato (o un corso di lingua universitario)?

- Sono tranquillo
- Sono un po' agitato
- Sono terrorizzato
- Altro:

6. Ti senti sicuro quando devi parlare in lingua straniera in classe?

Indica la tua risposta in una scala da 1 a 5.

1 2 3 4 5

Per niente Molto

7. Durante la lezione quanto spesso intervieni?

Indica la tua risposta in una scala da 1 a 5.

1 2 3 4 5

Mai Sempre

8. Preferisci un esame orale o un esame scritto? *

- Esame orale
- Esame scritto

9. Perchè?

10. Che rapporto hai con il tempo durante l'esame? *

- Finisco sempre prima del tempo
- E' giusto
- A volte non mi basta
- Non mi basta quasi mai
- Ho sempre bisogno di più tempo

11. Sei agitato prima di un esame in Lingua Straniera? *

Indica la tua risposta in una scala da 1 a 5.

1 2 3 4 5

Per niente Molto

12. Com'è solitamente il risultato di un tuo test in Lingua Straniera? *

- Insufficiente
- Sufficiente
- Buono
- Ottimo

13. Secondo te, quanto influisce il tuo livello di agitazione sull'esito dell'esame? *

Indica la tua risposta in una scala da 1 a 5.

1 2 3 4 5

Niente Molto

14. Hai intenzione di studiare altre Lingue Straniere? *

- Sì
- No

Figura 5.1 – Item del questionario

I quesiti presentati sono quattordici, volutamente inferiori per numero rispetto a quelli proposti agli studenti dell'ateneo texano (Horwitz, 1986) per diminuire il tempo richiesto per la compilazione e potersi focalizzare esclusivamente sugli aspetti interessanti al fine della ricerca. Dei quattordici quesiti, tredici sono a risposta chiusa, mentre solo uno è a risposta aperta (item 9).

I primi due quesiti (“Sei italiano?” e “Dove hai svolto il tuo percorso scolastico?”) sono stati inseriti per capire quanto le osservazioni fatte in precedenza sulla partecipazione degli studenti

italiani in classe siano vere. Il terzo è stato inserito per dividere il campione in due gruppi, studenti con e senza DSA, e confrontarne le risposte. Si è pensato inoltre di inserire una terza scelta per indicare chi, nonostante non abbia mai ricevuto una diagnosi certa, abbia il sospetto di avere un disturbo dell'apprendimento. Gli item 4, 5, 6 e 7 (“*Con che frequenza segui le lezioni di lettorato?*”, “*Che cosa provi durante una lezione di lettorato?*”, “*Ti senti sicuro quando devi parlare in lingua straniera in classe?*” e “*Durante la lezione quanto spesso intervieni?*”) riguardano la partecipazione e la condizione degli studenti in classe. Le relative risposte verranno poi messe a confronto per individuare le cause e gli effetti del comportamento assunto durante la lezione.

Le domande dalla 8 alla 12 (“*Preferisci un esame orale o scritto*” e “*perché?*”, “*Che rapporto hai con il tempo durante l'esame?*”, “*Sei agitato prima di un esame in lingua straniera?*” e “*Com'è solitamente il risultato di un tuo test in Lingua Straniera?*”) invece riguardano il momento dell'esame e della valutazione e mirano a far luce sulle sensazioni degli studenti prima, durante e dopo.

L'item 13 (“*Secondo te, quanto influisce il tuo livello di agitazione sull'esito dell'esame?*”) vuole indagare quanto gli studenti siano consapevoli dell'effetto che lo stato psicologico può avere sulla performance in lingua straniera.

L'ultima domanda (“*Hai intenzione di studiare altre lingue straniere?*”) riguarda invece l'effetto ultimo che la condizione analizzata può avere, sia in positivo sia in negativo.

5.3 Risultati

Tra i 371 studenti che hanno risposto alle domande del questionario, solo sette avevano una diagnosi di DSA. I due gruppi

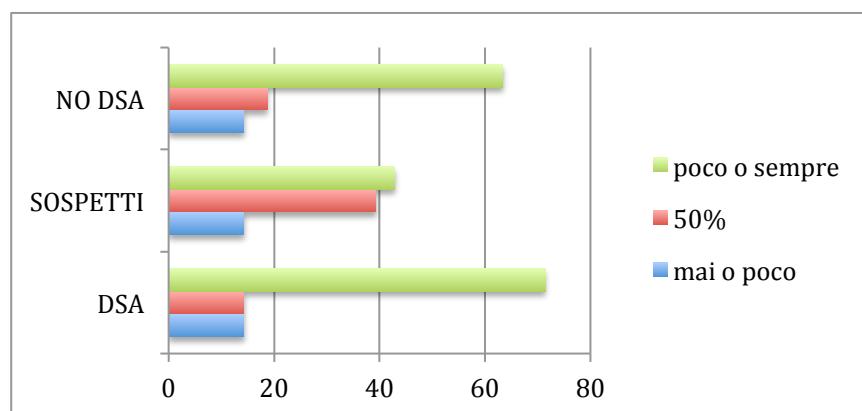
appaiono dunque sproporzionati, ma potrebbero rispecchiare i numeri della realtà. La percentuale dei soggetti con DSA in Italia, infatti, cala radicalmente se si considerano solo gli studenti universitari. Inoltre, ventotto studenti hanno ammesso di non essere mai stati riconosciuti DSA ma di avere dei dubbi a riguardo. Il campione è stato dunque suddiviso in 3 gruppi: i DSA (7), i sospetti (28) e un gruppo di controllo (336).

Le risposte degli studenti vengono riportate di seguito, tra parentesi sono indicate le percentuali.

4. Con che frequenza seguì le lezioni di lettorato (o del corso di lingua universitario)?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
1 mai	-	3 (10,71)	21 (6,25)
2	1 (14,28)	2 (7,14)	37 (11,01)
3	1 (14,28)	11 (39,28)	63 (18,75)
4	3 (42,86)	6 (21,43)	86 (25,59)
5 sempre	2 (28,57)	6 (21,43)	127 (37,80)

Da quanto emerge dalle risposte a questa domanda, gli studenti in generale tendono a frequentare le lezioni di lingua abbastanza frequentemente e non appaiono particolari differenze tra gli studenti con DSA, diagnosticati o sospetti, e il gruppo di controllo.



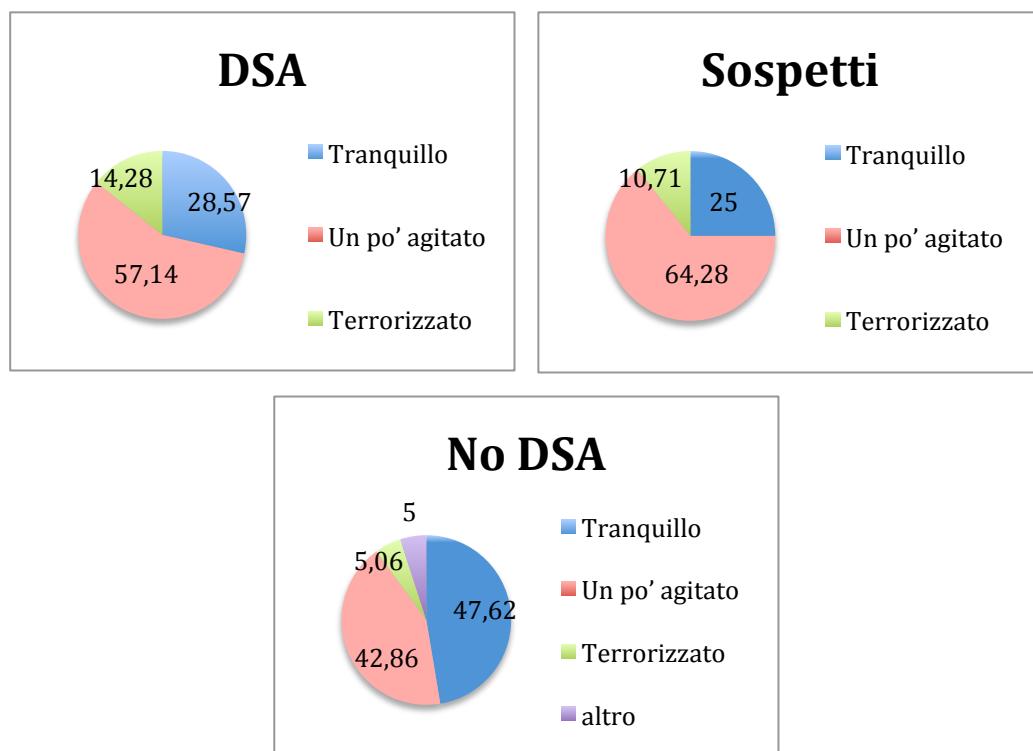
5. Che cosa provi durante una lezione di lettore?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
Tranquillo	2 (28,57)	7 (25)	160 (47,62)
Un po' agitato	4 (57,14)	18 (64,28)	144 (42,86)
Terrorizzato	1 (14,28)	3 (10,71)	17 (5,06)

A questo item 321 studenti del gruppo di controllo hanno scelto una delle opzioni indicate, gli altri 15 hanno aggiunto dei commenti nell'opzione "altro". In particolare possiamo raggruppare tali commenti in quattro categorie di risposta:

- *Dipende dalla lingua*
- *Mi annoio*
- *Sono emozionato*
- *Non frequento*

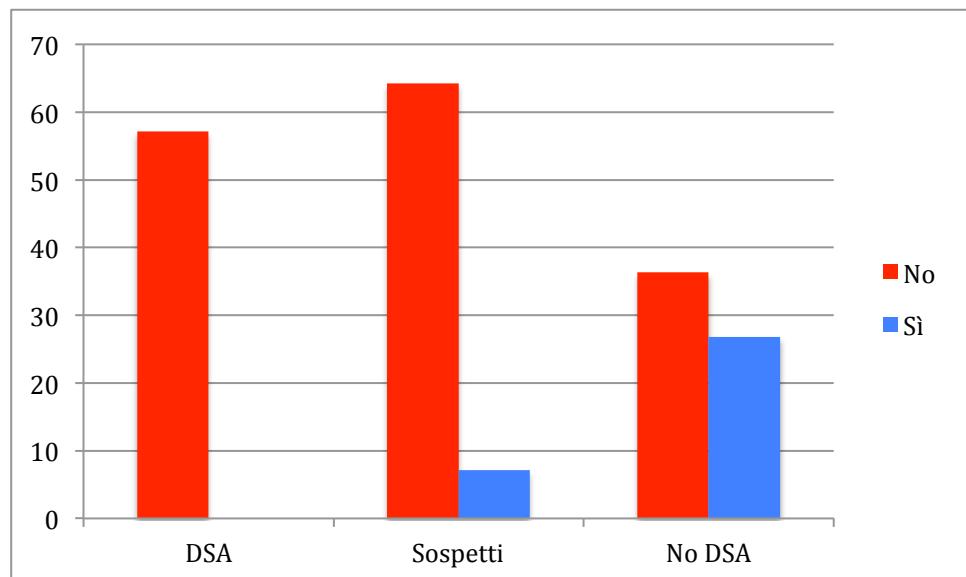
Più della metà degli studenti DSA (diagnosticati o sospetti) è "un po' agitato" durante la lezione, solo nel gruppo di controllo prevale invece la scelta "tranquillo".



6. Ti senti sicuro quando devi parlare in lingua straniera in classe?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
1 per niente	2 (28,57)	6 (21,43)	50 (14,88)
2	2 (28,57)	12 (42,86)	72 (21,43)
3	3 (42,86)	8 (28,57)	124 (36,90)
4	-	2 (7,14)	68 (20,24)
5 molto	-	-	22 (6,55)

La risposta a questo quesito prevedeva la scelta tra 5 opzioni in una scala crescente. Le opzioni sono state analizzate tenendo in considerazioni solo gli estremi, le risposte 1 e 2 verranno quindi raggruppate in “no”, 4 e 5 in “sì” e la risposta 3 non viene qui tenuta in considerazione.² Dai dati ottenuti si nota che solo due studenti tra i DSA diagnosticati e quelli sospetti si sentono sicuri a parlare in classe.

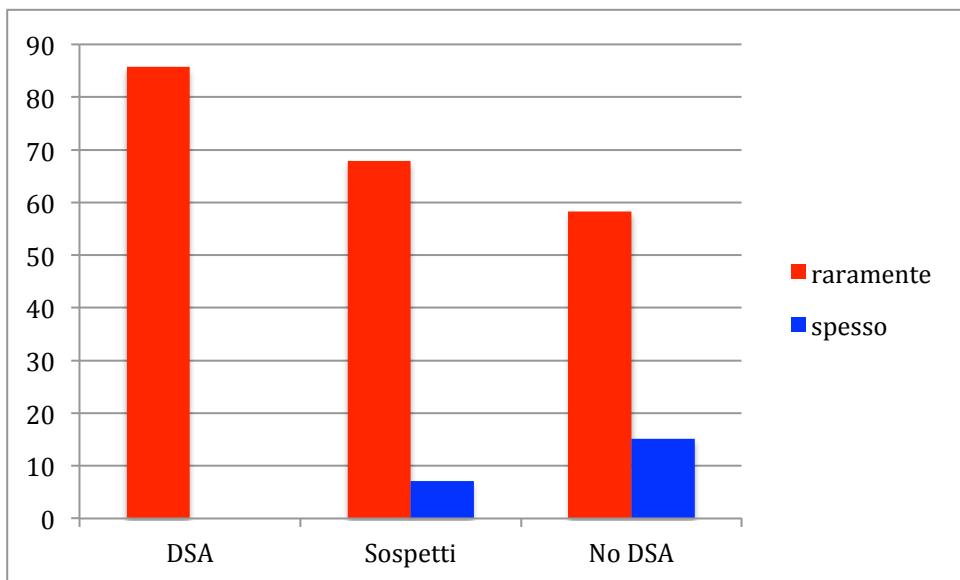


² Questa strategia viene mantenuta per tutte i quesiti con struttura simile a questa.

7. Durante la lezione quanto spesso intervieni?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
1 mai	5 (71,43)	14 (50)	76 (22,62)
2	1 (14,28)	5 (17,86)	120 (35,71)
3	1 (14,28)	7 (25)	89 (26,49)
4	-	1 (3,57)	44 (13,09)
5 sempre	-	1 (3,57)	7 (2,08)

Questo quesito è stato inserito come diretta conseguenza di quello precedente. L'andamento è simile, i DSA mostrano una percentuale molto bassa di partecipazione in classe. In generale si nota che gli studenti che hanno partecipato all'indagine siano poco propensi ad intervenire durante le lezioni.



S'ipotizza che questa tendenza sia tipica degli studenti italiani, questo quesito viene allora analizzato tenendo presente quanto dichiarato dagli studenti nei quesiti 1 e 2, a proposito della loro provenienza o del Paese in cui hanno svolto la propria formazione.

In realtà, il risultato è inaspettato. Trentadue partecipanti hanno dichiarato di non essere italiani o di aver svolto il proprio percorso scolastico almeno in parte all'estero e tra essi il 64,28 % ha ammesso di intervenire raramente durante la lezione. Ci rendiamo però conto che tale comportamento può essere portato dall'attuale condizione di studente, tutti frequentano l'università italiana di Venezia. Si rimanda a una futura indagine per un confronto più accurato con un campione di studenti di un'università straniera.

8. Preferisci un esame orale o un esame scritto?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
Scritto	4 (57,14)	18 (64,29)	238 (70,83)
Orale	3 (42,86)	10 (35,71)	98 (29,17)

260 studenti sui 371 intervistati preferiscono un esame scritto a uno orale. L'analisi delle risposte dei gruppi di studenti con DSA (diagnosticati o sospetti) è sorprendente. Nonostante questi studenti abbiano (o dichiarino di avere) difficoltà a leggere e/o scrivere preferiscono l'esame scritto. Le risposte fornite alla domanda 9 ne chiariscono la motivazione.

9. Perché?

Gli studenti con DSA hanno fornito le seguenti risposte:

Preferisco un esame orale perché

- “sono lento a scrivere e mi agito di meno”;
- “riesco a gestirlo meglio rispetto allo scritto”;
- “ho la possibilità di dimostrare al docente la mia conoscenza. Generalmente l'ausilio di slide o di una mappa concettuale è di

vitale importanza per indirizzare il concetto che voglio e devo esprimere”.

Preferisco un esame scritto perché:

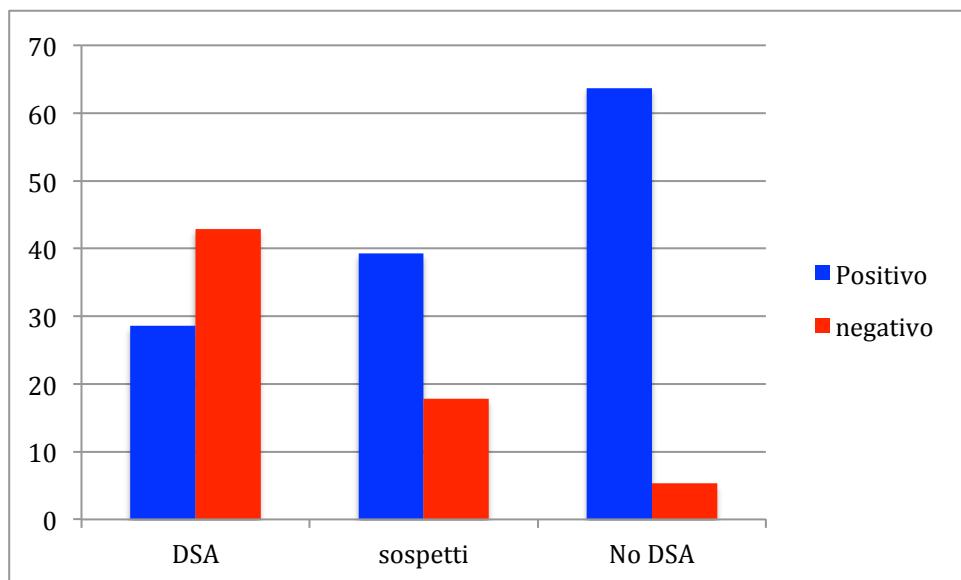
- “anche se per me è più faticoso scrivere, con uno scritto non devo confrontarmi direttamente col professore e sono più tranquilla”;
- “sento meno pressioni”;
- “posso rileggere le domande e modificarle in seguito, ho più tempo per pensarci e non è necessaria una risposta immediata”;
- “Lo preferisco”.

Le risposte degli studenti che potrebbero avere un disturbo dell'apprendimento (sospetti) sono state raggruppate in due categorie di risposta. Chi tra loro ha scelto l'esame scritto, lo preferisce perché “provoca meno ansia” (66%) o perché “permette di riflettere sulle domande” (33%).

10. Che rapporto hai con il tempo durante l'esame?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
Finisco sempre prima	1 (14,28)	5 (17,86)	71 (21,13)
È giusto	1 (14,28)	6 (21,43)	143 (42,56)
A volte non mi basta	2 (28,57)	12 (42,86)	103 (30,65)
Non mi basta quasi mai	3 (42,86)	5 (17,86)	13 (3,55)
Ho sempre bisogno di più tempo	-	-	6 (1,79)

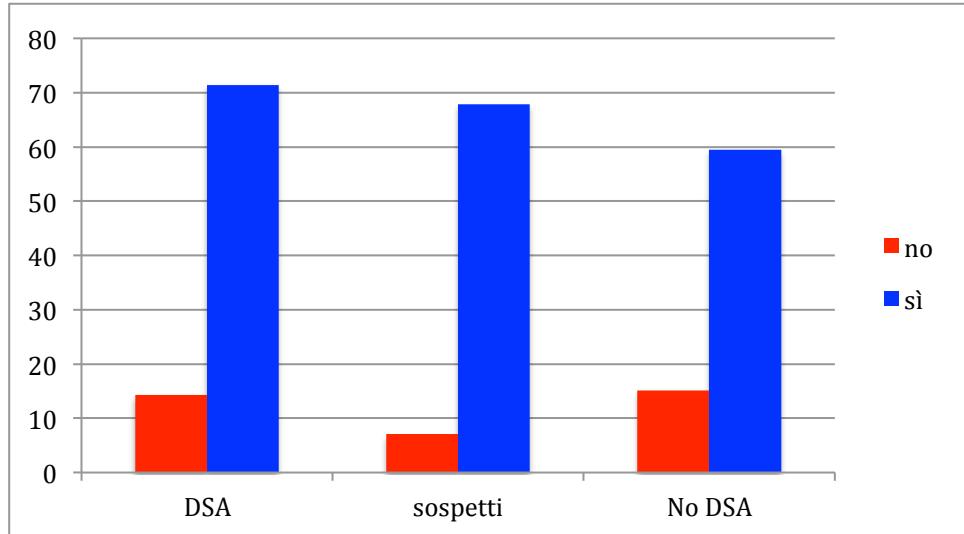
Dall'osservazione delle risposte al decimo quesito emerge che gli studenti DSA potrebbero avere maggiori difficoltà rispetto agli altri a gestire il tempo a disposizione per la prova d'esame. Tempi aggiuntivi sono infatti previsti per loro dalla legge 170.



11. Sei agitato prima di un esame in lingua straniera?

	DSA	sospetti	No DSA
1 per niente	-	-	17 (5,06)
2	1 (14,28)	2 (7,14)	34 (10,11)
3	1 (14,28)	7 (25)	85 (25,29)
4	2 (28,57)	6 (21,43)	94 (27,97)
5 molto	3 (42,86)	13 (46,43)	106 (31,55)

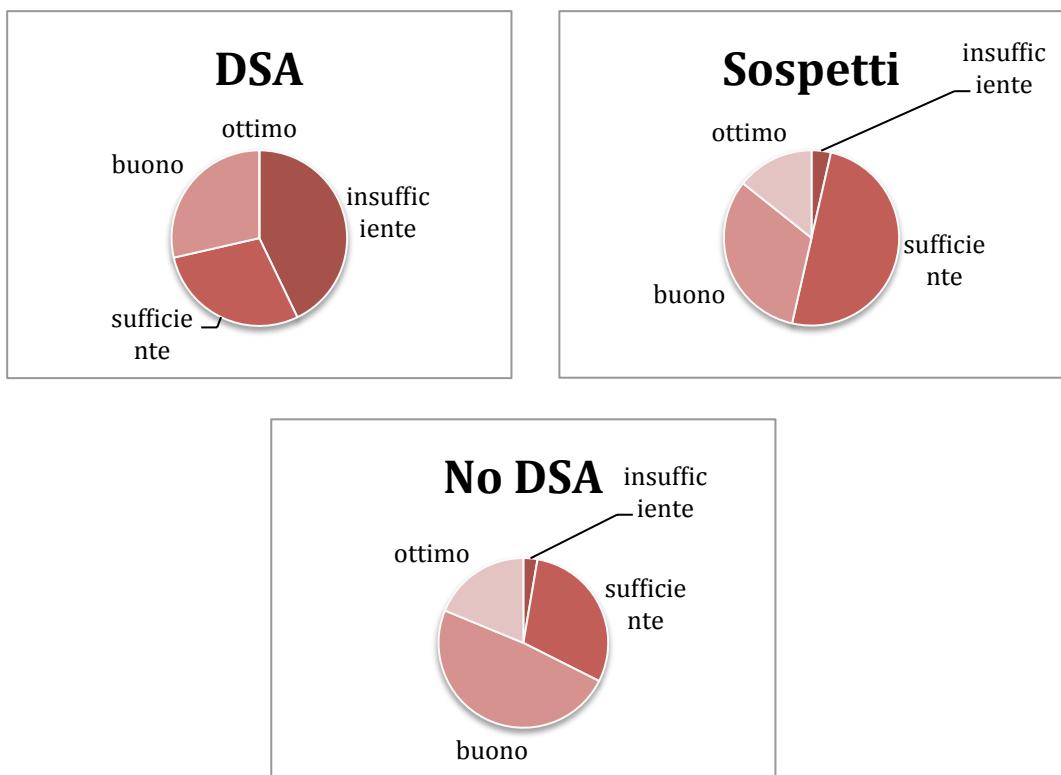
La domanda 11 indaga il grado di agitazione degli studenti nel momento che precede la prova d'esame. La maggior parte dei partecipanti ha ammesso di sentirsi particolarmente agitato, la percentuale sembra aumentare tra gli studenti DSA.



12. Com'è solitamente il risultato di un tuo test in lingua straniera?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
Insufficiente	3 (42,86)	1 (3,57)	10 (2,97)
Sufficiente	2 (28,57)	14 (50)	74 (33,02)
Buono	2 (28,57)	9 (32,14)	182 (54,17)
Ottimo	-	4 (14,29)	70 (20,83)

Il quesito 12 invita gli studenti ad indicare la valutazione (una media approssimativa) che ricevono per le proprie prove d'esame di lingua straniera. Qui la differenza tra i gruppi è piuttosto marcata: la maggior parte degli studenti DSA ha dichiarato di ricevere solitamente esito negativo, il gruppo di controllo presenta invece una situazione decisamente più positiva.

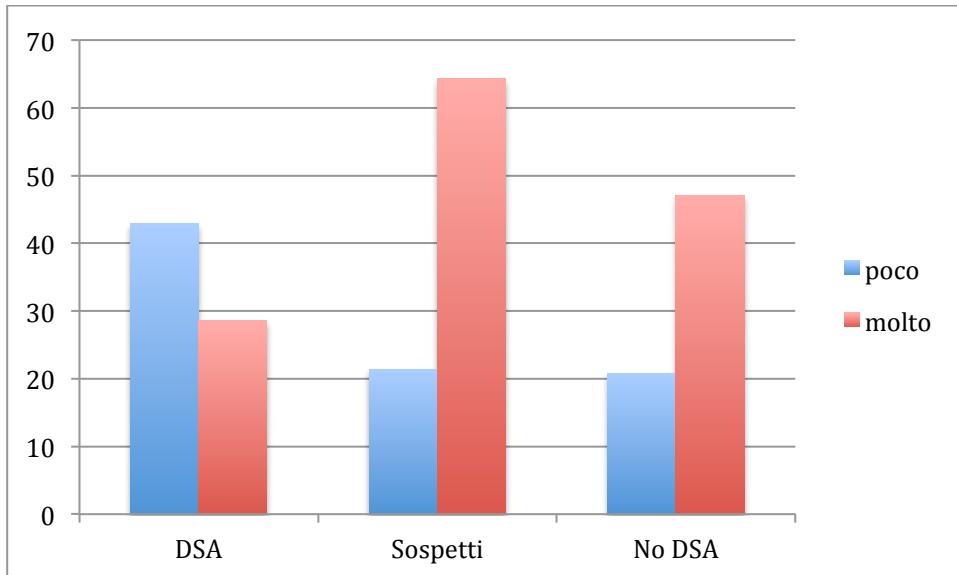


13. Secondo te, quanto influisce il tuo livello di agitazione sull'esito dell'esame?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
1 per niente	-	1 (3,57)	18 (5,36)
2	3 (42,86)	5 (17,86)	52 (15,48)
3	2 (28,57)	4 (14,29)	108 (32,14)
4	2 (28,57)	11 (39,29)	96 (28,57)
5 molto	-	7 (25)	62 (18,45)

Questa domanda del questionario mirava a indagare la consapevolezza degli studenti rispetto al ruolo dello stress sull'esito di un esame in

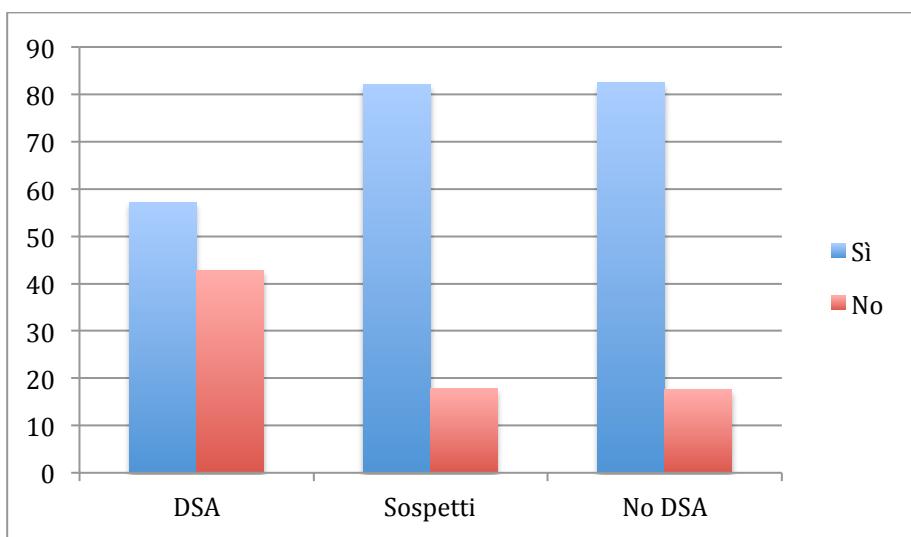
lingua. Dalle risposte emerge che gran parte degli studenti ne siano particolarmente consapevoli, i DSA invece rivelano un andamento contrario.



14. Hai intenzione di studiare altre lingue straniere?

	DSA	Sospetti	No DSA
Sì	4 (57,14)	23 (82,14)	277 (82,44)
No	3 (42,86)	5 (17,86)	59 (17,56)

L'ultimo quesito ha l'obiettivo di far luce sull'intenzione degli studenti, DSA e non, di proseguire lo studio delle lingue. Tutti i gruppi hanno risposto affermativamente alla domanda, anche se la percentuale dei DSA diagnosticati è inferiore rispetto agli altri.



5.4 Conclusioni

L'indagine condotta presso l'Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, ha coinvolto quasi quattrocento studenti, con l'obiettivo di analizzare le principali cause e conseguenze dell'ansia linguistica in un contesto universitario. Particolare attenzione veniva posta sul confronto tra gli studenti con Disturbo Specifico dell'Apprendimento (DSA) e quelli che non presentavano invece tale disturbo. Solo sette studenti DSA hanno risposto alle domande proposte, ma altri ventotto hanno dichiarato di avere il sospetto di esserlo, senza aver però mai ricevuto una diagnosi. Questo primo dato permette di far luce su un aspetto importante: molti studenti, infatti, pur avendo già svolto almeno tredici anni di percorso scolastico ed essendo ora iscritti a un corso universitario sospettano di avere un disturbo dell'apprendimento, senza essersi mai sottoposti a una diagnosi adeguata. Questo suggerisce la necessità di una maggiore e specifica informazione tra gli studenti e gli insegnanti riguardo ai disturbi dell'apprendimento.

Lo studio evidenzia inoltre una generale difficoltà degli studenti DSA durante gli esami o le lezioni in lingua straniera, essi in particolare dimostrano una scarsa partecipazione in classe e un esito negativo nelle prove d'esame.

La situazione delineata potrebbe essere causata da una maggiore ansia linguistica rispetto ai colleghi che non presentano alcun disturbo diagnosticato o sospetto. I DSA hanno ammesso di essere molto insicuri durante la lezione in lingua e di provare forte agitazione prima di un esame.

Il fattore ansiogeno li porta addirittura a preferire un test scritto rispetto a uno orale, nonostante il loro disturbo li penalizzi proprio nella letto-scrittura.

Dalle informazioni ottenute dal questionario, emergono dunque alcune importanti riflessioni. Innanzitutto, anche in un contesto universitario, è necessario che vengano fornite chiare informazioni sui Disturbi Specifici dell'Apprendimento, le relative cause ed effetti e le modalità di diagnosi e di intervento. I docenti dovrebbero inoltre elaborare delle modalità di esame accessibili che permettano agli studenti di esprimere al meglio le proprie potenzialità e di ottenere dei risultati affidabili.

6. Comparison between studies

6.1 Language anxiety in university students of two different Countries

The studies mentioned in this thesis investigate perception of evaluation in different contexts. This last chapter aims at comparing them with the results of the Ca' Foscari's questionnaire in order to observe their commonalities, on the one hand, and their differences on the other.

It has been already demonstrated that the context in which the educational process takes place plays a very important role in language learning and testing.

The questionnaire administered to Ca' Foscari's students was based on previous studies that focused on language learning.

The first is the questionnaire developed by Horwitz & Horwitz (1986) and administered to the students of a Spanish Course of the University of Texas. The contexts of administration are very different. One was taken by 1986's students in Texas, whereas the other almost thirty years after in an Italian university. However, the items proposed aim in both cases at investigating foreign language anxiety in university students. The first questionnaire presented 33 classroom-anxiety specific items, whereas the items of the second one were only 14.

Horwitz did not make any distinction among students (with or without learning disabilities), for this reason the data obtained are here compared with the entire sample of Ca' Foscari's study.

Four Horwitz's items (1, 18, 24 and 27) concern how students feel during language classes, in particular when they are asked to

speak. Their answers reveal that 62% “never feel sure of his/herself when speaking in foreign language class”, 47% of the students does not feel “confident”, 54% does not feel “self-conscious” and 37% of them “gets nervous and confused”. Such data were compared with item 6 of Ca’ Foscari’s Questionnaire that investigates how much students feel secure when speaking in the foreign language class. 40% of them admits to feel anxious or very anxious in this situation and 24% feels self-confident.¹

Considering the mean of the first data, the trend appears as in the following graph.

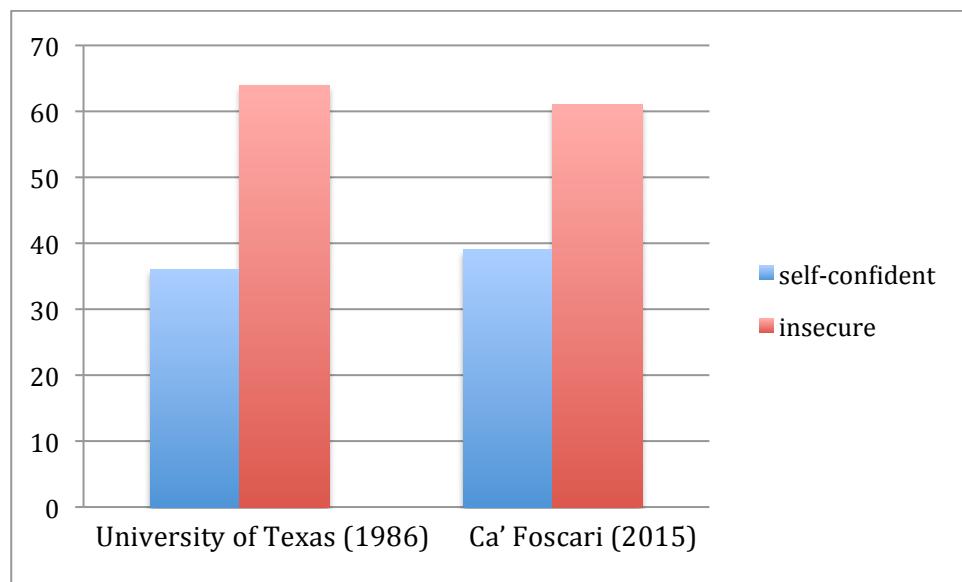


Figure 6.1 – How students feel while speaking in foreign language classes

Considering how students feel during a test, item 8 of the first questionnaire and item 11 of the second one should be observed.²

¹ Average answers are not taken into account.

² However, in one case the item investigates feelings “during” the test and the second “before” the test.

While the other comparisons show in general a similar trend, here particular differences in the two contexts of investigation emerge. Ca' Foscari's Students in fact seem to be much more anxious (80%) compared with those interviewed by Horwtiz in Texas (20%).

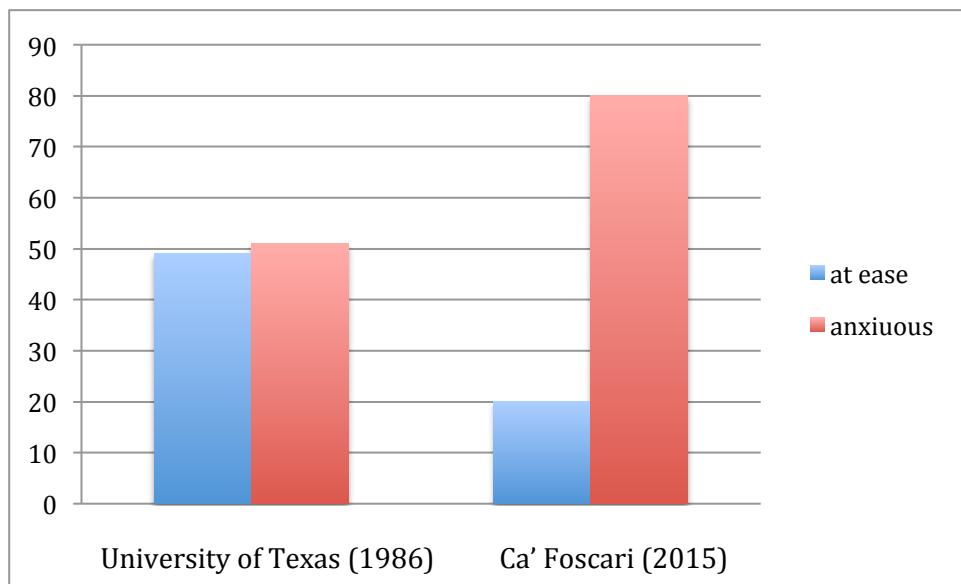


Figure 6.2 – How do students feel during/before a language test

Horwitz's item 5 and Ca' Foscari's item 14 investigate the intention of the students about further language studying. 68% of the students from Texas would have willingly continued studying foreign languages. The percentage of Ca' Foscari's students who have the same intention is 81%.

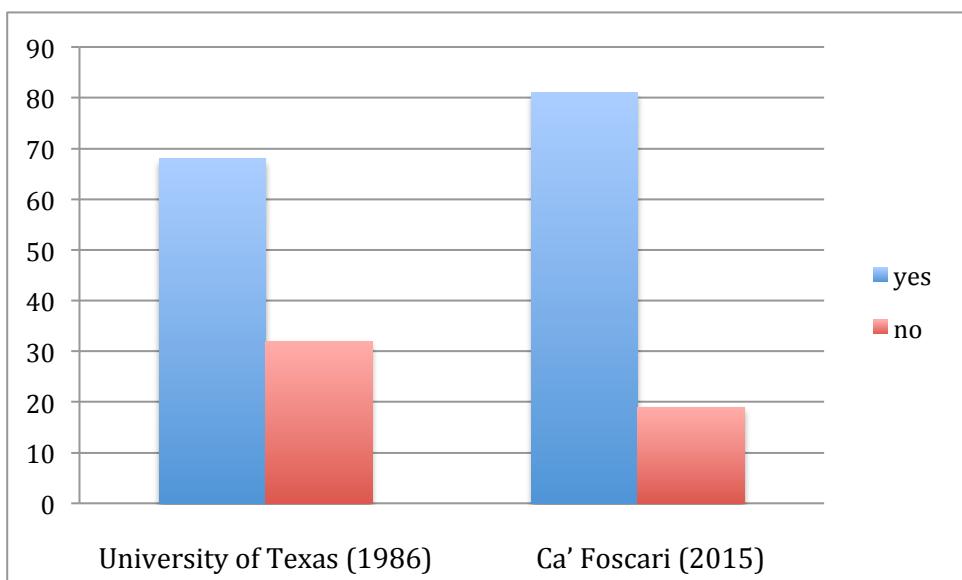


Figure 6.3 – Students who want to continue studying languages.

6.2 Evaluation perception in different school grades in Italy

Item 8, 9 and 10 of the questionnaire were adapted from Celentin's study (2014). The mentioned items concern language testing, in particular the preferred test type, written or oral, and time perception.

Given that both research studies focus on students with LD, it is interesting to compare their answers at different points of the educational path, primary school (Celentin 2014) and university.

From the results it emerges that the majority of the LD participants preferred taking written tests in both contexts and the trend is almost identical.

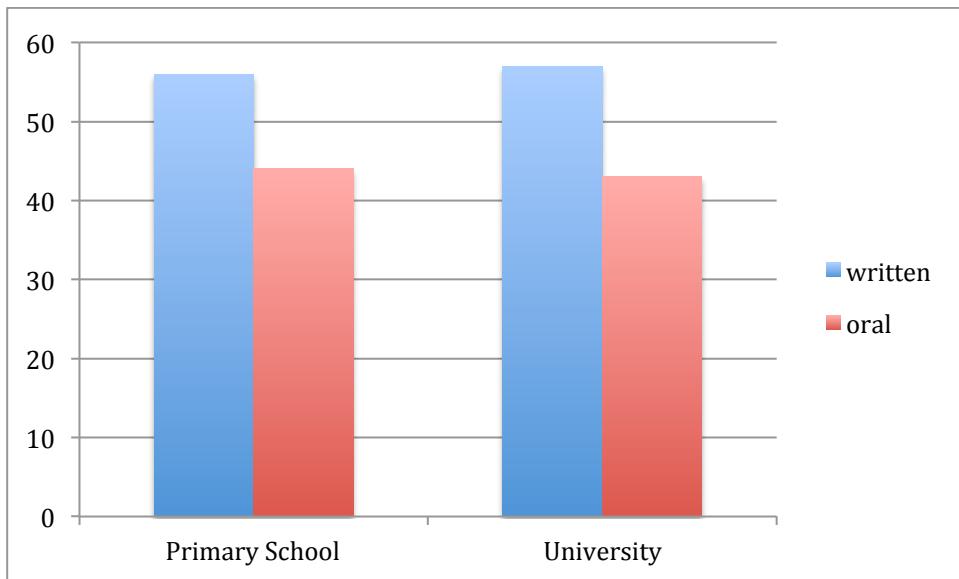


Figure 6.4 – Test type preferences

Also the motivations given by the different students are very similar. In both cases, in fact, they indicate written test as their favourite one because it does not involve facing teachers/professors, it permits to think and reflect without pressure and consequently causes less anxiety.

In addition, the two questionnaires give interesting information about how both groups consider the amount of time available for a test. Students with LD at Ca' Foscari University express general difficulties in time management during a language test. Three participants claim that there is never enough time; two of them would need more in some cases and only other two reveal that it is usually enough.

The question about test time developed by Paola Celentin (2014) was formulated in a different way:

“During English/German tests time passes:

- a. Very fast*
- b. Very slowly*
- c. As always.”*

93 children chose answer *c*, 89 chose answer *a* and 29 chose answer *b*. The graph below illustrates how results appear in the different groups.

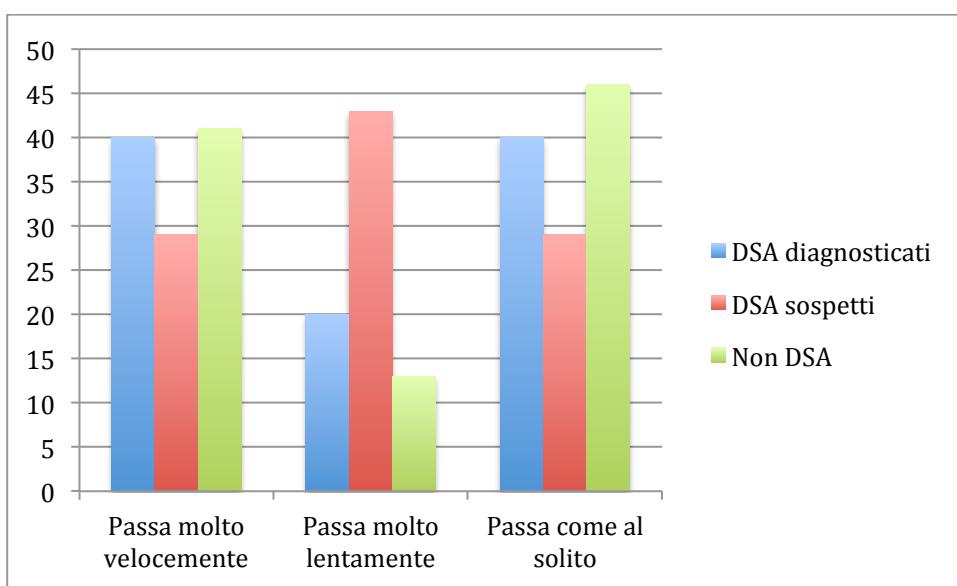
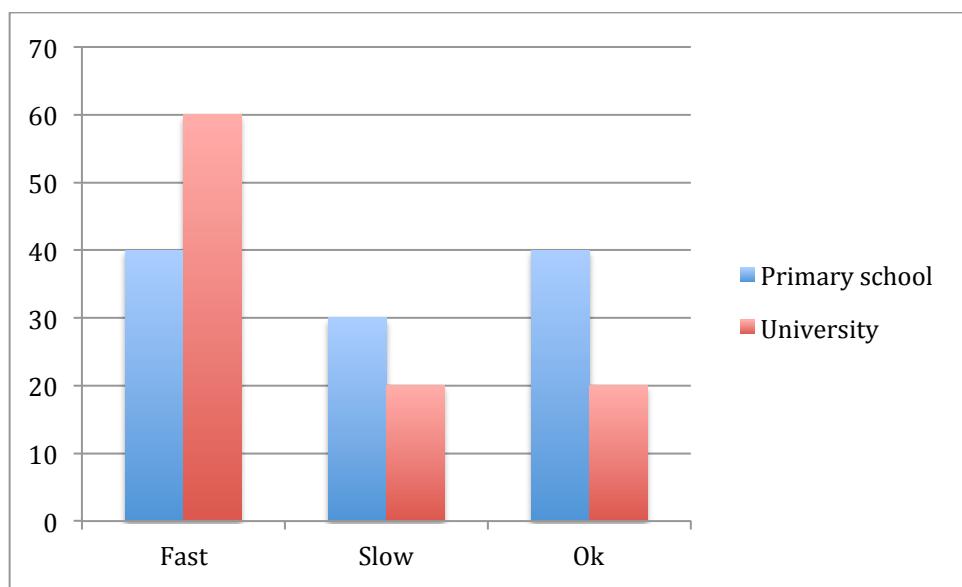


Figura 6.5 –item 5 results of Celentin’s questionnaire.

Even though the two questionnaires present two different approaches to investigate the participants’ perception of time, it is possible to compare the answers of the diagnosed dyslexic students in order to have a general overview. In particular results were differentiated into three types of answer: *time passes fast* (or it is not enough), *time passes slowly* and *time is ok*.



However, it can be noticed that whereas in the case of the university questionnaire the fact that time goes fast means that there is not enough time to finish the test, in the case of the primary school it could mean that doing the test is not boring.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed at giving a general overview about language anxiety in different contexts of language learning, where LD students were involved. The bibliography collected and analyzed in the first chapters led formulating realistic hypotheses and constituted the basis of further developments.

In fact, starting from the results of previous research studies a new investigation was proposed. Such investigation did not have the ambition to illustrate the reality of the situation of language anxiety in Ca' Foscari University. The main goal was to observe how the LD students that accepted to participate deal with everyday language lessons and exams and how their impressions differ from those of their colleagues.

The obtained results and their comparison with already existing studies allowed some interesting reflections and encouraged to deeper research in the field of language anxiety and LD students.

In particular, it could be interesting to further investigate the specific moments in which anxiety arises and why. For example, many students admitted to be anxious while speaking in front of the class, but it has not been clarified if the negative feelings arise before being asked to speak, during the act of speaking itself or if they last also after that moment.

Furthermore, it has been supposed that the educational context of the students and their habit of intervention in class since primary school may influence their behavior as university students.

An aspect that emerged in all the research studies is that further information about LD characteristics and the related regulation are needed, because:

“There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people” (Thomas Jefferson)

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