Developing reading strategies from context
Blog 5 about Erasmus+ KA2 project *How to learn a language?* (H2L2) – December 2023

Second language learners generally implement a range of reading strategies drawing on their reading experience in their first language or other languages they already know. But what if adult learners are low literate in their home language? What strategies do low-literate learners use to understand written texts while approaching a new language? Can their spontaneous strategies become the basis for a peer-to-peer exchange aimed at strengthening learners' reading skills? These questions inspired one of the blocks of strategies we implemented during the KA2 project *How to Learn a Language* (H2L2).

This blog post shares some experiences and results of the pilot group "Reading strategies from context", conducted with a group of low-literate migrant learners of Italian at the Centre for Adult Education (CPIA) in Ancona, in cooperation with the University of Macerata, Italy.

What did we do

First, we selected various simple written texts grouping them by topic, length (some words, a sentence, a short text…) and type (sign, notice, digital texts…). Then we got students to select some of them and tell us which ones they could understand better and why. With the support of a bilingual assistant, the teacher and the learners had the opportunity to reflect on how they generally manage to understand a written text or sentence during their daily life, what tools or strategies they use, if they get any help from others or from technology.

We then invited learners to practise the strategies suggested by their peers or by the teacher on the basis of a variety of short simple texts taken from real life, letting them choose the topics they were most interested in (e.g. sport, food, work…).

By modeling the strategies, we then guided learners to realize that they could use different reading strategies for different purposes. For instance, looking for visual cues or familiar words in a sign or notice could be a useful planning strategy to deduce the meaning of an unknown word or sentence, while marking an unclear phrase or sentence in a text could also be a valid strategy to ask for its meaning.

What we learned

During the pilot, we learned that it is important to proceed very gradually when developing reading strategies with low-literate learners and, most importantly, to tailor the task to their specific learning needs. In fact, there may be quite different levels of prior schooling in the classroom, but also different learning styles and varying degrees of exposure to L2 outside school. All these factors may have an impact on learners' reading strategies. Amina, for example, learns better by first focusing on visual cues and familiar words. Also, numbers and headings help her a lot to understand the text topic and try to guess its general meaning, but she always needs to share her hypotheses with a peer or the teacher to be more self-confident. Hamed, who has been living in Italy for longer, prefers to rely on his mobile phone and listen to the word or expression first, so he can assess if he already knows it and better detect its meaning.
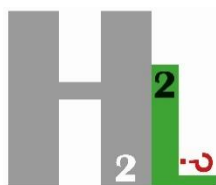
Thanks to our pilot we have also learned that low-literate learners rely a lot on their home language or a European language (e.g. French or English) they already know to understand the target language, even when this is a very partial competence. We could observe how translation was used extensively by learners at the beginning of the piloting, both to understand unfamiliar single words and entire texts, getting help from peers of the same language or by using online learner dictionaries and other translation tools (e.g. Google Translate App). That is why in the following block we decided to implement a specific cluster of strategies on how digital tools could help them in learning the language inside and outside the classroom.

During the 8 weeks of piloting learners became more and more aware of how the different strategies performed in class could help them in better understanding written texts. They were finally more self-confident with their comprehension skills and started to implement context-based strategies for understanding written texts more and more. They also seemed to be more relaxed and less afraid to approach the new language.

We also learned that, to get the best out of this type of strategies trainers should model the strategy as much as possible, especially for beginner readers. It could then be useful to make use of different kinds of short and simple real texts rich in visual cues, like signs or notices with a limited number of words, so as to get students to activate their reading strategies from context step by step.

* The names used in this blog are pseudonyms.

Partnership

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