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## The impersonal sentences: a proposal for a teaching unit

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### Abstract

This study proposes a framework to develop a teaching unit for a group of Italian speaking students of E/LE (*Español Lengua extranjera*), in order to deepen one of the most complex linguistic topic: the impersonal expressions.

Moreover, these structures represent a central issue, of any language system, as they may become even indispensable to communicate in certain contexts and real situations. Basing on the *enfoque por tareas* approach, and through a comparative-contrastive perspective with Italian language, our proposal aims at choosing the best way to transmit to our student certain basic skills in using such forms.

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**Keywords:** impersonality, E/LE, italiano, *enfoque por tareas*, didactic unit.

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### 1. Methodological premises

A crucial operation for the success of any educational plan is the preliminary detection of students' needs. The literature concerning this issue, in fact, is wide, and there are also very different ways to define the concept of need. Anyway, without presenting the different taxonomies and interpretive hypothesis, we share the consideration of Robinson, who defines the needs analysis something strongly contaminated by the vision and ideological

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convictions of the person conducting it (in Aguirre Beltrán, 2005: 648).

The target of our research is a class of students attending the first year course of Spanish Language and Translation at the Department DISTU of the University of Tuscia (Viterbo). This course consist in 75 hours of frontal teaching, which are complemented with more than one hundred hours of a Language Spanish course, taught by the linguistic associates.

Considering the amount of time dedicated to learning the foreign language, we believe that students may be faced, at least during the second semester of the academic year, with the topic of the impersonal sentences.

Moreover, considering the traditional vocation of our department and our course of study -modern languages and cultures-, to train experts, instead of simple users of foreign languages, aspiring to jobs such as languages teaching, translation and interpreting, the needs analysis, here, has to consider this specific professional purpose.

The educational need in our case is twofold: on the one hand, a training to deep awareness of the Spanish language structures, and on the other one, developing comparative-contrastive mechanisms between these structures, and, in particular, between Spanish and Italian impersonal expressions.

Before proceeding with the target situation analysis, it should be advisable considering the current conditions of the class, evaluating its starting level: linguistic knowledge, learning skills and experiences will be analyzed. Several tools such as questionnaires and tests, interviews and observation, will be used to calibrate properly the activities to be implemented.

Another clarification regards the method that we intend to use for our teaching unit, specifying that we are talking about a concept that, despite the general belief, has no unequivocal meaning.

Sánchez Pérez, for example, suggests to assess the role of all elements that contribute to define the teaching method. According to the Author, there are three key-elements: the theoretical component (principles and beliefs); content; and activities, through which the selected content is practiced (Sánchez Pérez, 2005: 669).

We share this consideration, believing, however, that it is not possible to identify in a preliminary way the different factors composing a certain method, still less for an activity in continuous definition like as didactics, where many unexpected factors may come into play, conditioning it.

A second element that we would like to emphasize is the opportunity to adopt a contrastive perspective, considering Italian students of Spanish language, we cannot underestimate the element, extremely influencing, of affinity between these two very close languages.

A very wide and authoritative literature states that this closeness, at least in the initial phase of learning, is misleading, finding that after an initial phase of very rapid learning, students tend to produce very little and slowly.

Carrera Díaz focuses on a similar issue, considering in particular the opposite case, concluding that also a Spanish student of Italian language perceives how much the two languages are, actually, away from one another (Carrera Díaz, 2007: 2).

The author comes to exalt the role of contrastivity in the teaching/learning process of related languages, especially when considering an adult audience that will inevitably conditioned by the mother tongue. Rejecting the idea that the learning process of a L1 is the same as the L2/foreign language one, it should be highlighted that in the second case there will be also other factors, such as previous other linguistic experiences, that will influence the acquisition process.

This idea, now widely accepted, led to the production of many language teaching methods, depending on the mother tongue of the recipients, and certainly a pioneer in this regard has been Saussol, which has devoted a great effort to the problems of Spanish language acquisition by Italian students.

In addition, as stressed by Carrera Díaz, the error, resulting from the negative influence by L1 on the learning mechanism, is not something negative, as proposed by the Contrastive analysis, but rather it has an educational value, as a tool to develop critical thinking and autonomy.

Also Calvi defends the centrality of contrastivity in the teaching foreign language process, even more when the languages are related:

teniendo en cuenta los actuales conocimientos sobre el proceso de aprendizaje y la oportunidad de incentivar el protagonismo del alumno en la práctica didáctica, resulta aconsejable utilizar la reflexión consciente en el aula, siempre y cuando resulte didácticamente productiva. Pero no se deberá interpretar la noción de enfoque contrastivo de manera estática, como confrontación de estructuras, sino dinámica, como toma de conciencia activa por parte del aprendiente de la distancia interlingüística, que refleja, al mismo tiempo, la distancia entre el horizonte cultural de la L1 y el de la L2.

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