

## TEACHING COMPLEX-CLAUSE SYNTAX THROUGH TEXTS – FROM BEGINNERS TO PRE-INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS IN ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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*ABSTRACT: The paper builds on some results about the mastery of complex-clause syntax among Slovenian high school students who learn Italian as a foreign language (cf. Mertelj 2011) along with the premise that mastering syntax is an objective to be achieved at the receptive and, to some degree, the productive level, and that it has to be developed from beginners' to the pre-intermediate level. It is only in this way that learners will be able to further develop their knowledge of Italian and other foreign languages in line with their future needs. Hence, the knowledge of secondary school leavers concerning complex-clause syntax serves as a basis for preparing corresponding goals and learning materials for learners at levels A1, A2 and B1.*

*The basic language materials are texts suitable for the mentioned levels for use by university students in the humanities (at the Faculty of Arts), as well as beginners and false beginners in Italian as a foreign language. The paper will present texts of different types and different levels of difficulty appropriate for the mentioned levels (descriptive, narrative and dialogic) that share a common feature: they are all accompanied by a series of tasks to be used within a task-based process leading towards learning of the most common complex-clause syntactic patterns.*

*The tasks feature goals pertaining to intuitive comprehension, some meta-linguistic knowledge and language awareness, as well as some productive knowledge of complex syntactic structures or their parts. It is here that problems predictably arise since the syntax of Italian complex clauses is objectively difficult for Slovenian learners. It presupposes the speaker's ability to master the system and use of tenses, which – due to the considerable differences between the two languages – are perceived as particularly hard to learn. In addition, the frequency with which complex-clause patterns are used in Italian texts and their morphological and syntactic heterogeneity make it imperative to view them as an explicit learning goal.*

*KEYWORDS: complex-clause syntax, text typology, Italian as an FL, beginners' levels, transfer*

## 1. Introduction

“Oh, it is so strange and funny that complex syntax is expected to be explained just by the way, if at all, and it comes in textbooks and grammars only after so many other grammar things ...”

(a teacher of French who is also a teacher of English)

The premise that mastering syntax is an objective to be achieved at the receptive and, to some degree, also at the productive level, and that it has to be developed from beginners' level onwards as an explicit learning goal is the starting point of this paper. The idea is developed in line with some results about the mastery of complex-clause syntax among Slovenian high school students learning Italian as a foreign language (cf. Mertelj 2011) where it was shown that the gap between the mother tongue (Slovenian as L1, one of the Slavic languages) and Italian as an FL is too wide to be left to implicit, unconscious acquisition. This triggered the idea that some sort of acceleration in the form of explicit, conscious dealing with complex syntax, even if in extremely limited amounts, could help learners further develop their knowledge of Italian as an FL (and possibly, as a form of positive transfer, other foreign languages).

The idea is in line with their actual and future communication needs: the communicative approach includes quite some development of productive skills (speaking and writing) which soon presupposes syntactic knowledge, including that which cannot be simply imitated from model texts. Hence, the results about the (limited) knowledge of secondary school leavers concerning complex-clause syntax act as a stimulus to prepare corresponding goals and pertaining learning materials for learners at levels A1, A2 and B1 (levels that are supposed to be developed in about 300–400 contact hours according to Slovenian curricula).

As mentioned, the type of knowledge of some subordinate syntactic clauses Slovenian secondary school leavers had developed was tested in various groups of learners (cf. Mertelj 2011). Different types of knowledge were examined: intuitive comprehension, meta-linguistic knowledge and productive knowledge of some complex syntactic structures. The results imply that a considerable lack of appropriate knowledge has been identified, in particular at the productive level.

As far as (receptive) understanding of syntactically complex clauses is concerned and learners' linking to their L1, the results were not problematic. However, in the tasks used for testing the learners' productive mastery, many proems were identified ranging from the use of connectors and (even) of word order to a great deal as far as the appropriate use of tenses and moods in Italian is concerned (negative transfer or interference triggered

mistakes and errors).<sup>1</sup> Besides, in the written essays it was obvious that the learners (with very few exceptions) avoid using complex syntax and used clauses (connectors, tenses, moods) typical of lower levels (A1 and A2, cf. Lo Duca) and not those one might expect for an (argumentative) essay.

In the domain of foreign language teaching (FLT) at lower levels (A1, A2, and B1), the teaching of complex-clause syntax<sup>2</sup> in Italian seems to have been largely neglected (Mertelj 2005b: 5-11, 157-218). The problems learners have with such structures are not just an issue in the teaching of Italian; the same or very similar problems can be encountered in the teaching of most Romance and other languages to Slovenian and other Slavic learners, to some extent also learners of other linguistic origins. There are quite a few, predominantly contrastive studies concerning the teaching/learning of complex syntax of Italian and of Spanish to Slovenian students (Skubic 1991; Miklič 1992a, 1992b, 2003, 2004; Miklič and Ožbot 2001, 2007; Lenassi 2004; for Spanish, see Markič 2004 and 2006), or to learners with a Serbian and a Croatian linguistic background (Samardžić 2006; Moderc 2003, 2005). Slavic learners share persistent difficulties with three aspects:

- in recognising the suitable syntactic pattern in their first language (L1, mostly mother tongue) and realising which should be used in their foreign/second language (in our case Italian as an FL), considering the appropriate clause patterns and connectors,
- in choosing the appropriate tense and/or mood in subordinate clauses in which *concordanza dei tempi e dei modi* should be applied and where the learners usually do not overcome the interference with their L1; and
- in using implicit subordinate clauses in cases where they are required: again, they do not overcome the influence of their L1 (which does not have an implicit subordinate clause, or only to a very limited extent) and instead tend to use (far too many) explicit subordinates (cf. Lenassi 2004).

Teachers have not observed any differences between learners studying Italian as their first Romance language and learners who have already studied another Romance language: Slavic learners have the same interference problems with any Romance languages they learn (in Slovenian high schools these are Italian, Spanish, French), although it is presumed that a longitudinal study should be conducted in this regard. It is also presumed that only a

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<sup>1</sup> It is here that problems are quite well known since the syntax of Italian complex clauses is objectively difficult for Slovenian learners. It presupposes the speaker's ability to master the foreign system of tenses and moods (cf. Miklič, Ožbot, Markič) which is – due to negative transfer (interference) – perceived as particularly hard to learn.

<sup>2</sup> Complex-clause syntax, defined in Italian as *sintassi del periodo* (or similar), is regarded in this paper as comprising linguistic structures composed of a principal and one or more explicit or implicit subordinate clauses (Ital. *ipotassi*) and two or more coordinate clauses (Ital. *paratassi*).

certain level of grammar awareness helps. In some cases, learners tend to use positive transfer among Romance languages and with English, and this aspect is also foreseen to be experimentally analysed. As far as complex-clause syntax is concerned, the presumptions arise from the teaching experience of the author at the A1 level).

## 2. Aims

The present paper focuses on some future application aspects that emerge from the teaching of Italian as a foreign language to 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year students who choose to learn some basic Italian as an elective subject within other humanistic studies at the Faculty of Arts and have not previously studied any Italian at (Slovenian) high schools. Specifically, it aims to:

- firstly, present seven theses on teaching & learning complex-clause syntax from beginners' level onwards, triggered by my own learning and teaching experience and developed according to some theoretical backgrounds in the field of foreign language teaching in the last 20 years;
- secondly, outline a model for dealing with certain basic aspects of the teaching of Italian complex-clause syntax, which *could* also be 'positively' transferred to other (Romance) foreign languages; and including also a possible example a series of tasks (as so far designed) for understanding complex syntax from contexts and using it in short texts.

### 2.1 Theoretical (hypo)theses

The following 'seven theses' are based on my own learning and teaching experience during the 20 last years when a gradually developing awareness of the fact that some explicit, although basic information introduced or dealt with 'theoretically' and/or extracted from co(n)texts as well as followed by some 'syntactic' tasks are of the utmost importance for all four abilities which are developed in the foreign language teaching (FLT). They are also based on some theoretical studies and empirical analyses focusing on contrastive aspects with Slovenian, an L1 of most learners, and English as an L2. The seven theses are meant for four levels, namely from elementary A1 to upper intermediate B2, where the distinction between receptive and productive, i.e. 'to know to understand' and 'to know to use', is made for each level. The seven theses are as follows:

- 1) to ensure the mastery of complex-clause syntax, partly at the receptive and partly at the productive level, it will be necessary to invest time and effort explicitly (as both schoolwork and homework, hence part of the learning material is also meant to be used in autonomous learning);
- 2) the mastery will be possible on the basis of well-developed language awareness (awareness of syntactic issues and characteristics of the system) where some basic contrastive awareness about syntactic similari-

ties and differences among L1 and ‘the other language’ (L2 and/or FL) is necessary;

- 3) the mastery can be achieved through the active participation of learners according to the goals that they should learn to apply grammar rules to understand others’ texts and to use them in proper texts;
- 4) the receptive understanding of complex-syntactic structures means fully understanding connectors and the use of tenses/moods in contexts, relevant to the chosen level;
- 5) the productive use of complex-syntactic structures means that learners use them when writing their own texts (appropriate to their levels);
- 6) to develop the ‘receptive’ mastery of syntax, it is necessary to use contrastive comparisons partly elaborated by learners themselves: syntactic structures will be searched for in texts, recognised, their usage fully understood and compared to the L1; and
- 7) to develop ‘productive’ knowledge, learners should progress through a series of tasks designed for the gradual development where learners are first strongly guided and later less so.

It is hypothesised for the future research and analytical work in line with the seven theses that a systematic approach to the teaching practice, i.e. some limited time for ‘syntax only’ in the overall teaching hours a learner undertakes during the whole process of learning Italian as an FL, should guarantee that some interference problems in the use of connectors and tenses/moods in complex-syntax clauses largely disappear as a result of conscious learning (and partly also of unconscious acquisition). However, this can only be shown after it has been experimented with in some courses and final testing is evaluated in a longitudinal 3-year study from autumn 2013 to autumn 2015.

## 2.2 Some reflections on the seven (hypo)theses

Of course, the *Common European Framework for Languages* (CEF 2001) does not provide answers to specific language teaching questions in (individual or common) cases of some languages. Despite this, since the communicative approach and its varieties have been gradually replacing the relatively grammar-oriented teaching approach in Italian as an FL, a very common question asked by Slovenian language teachers of Italian as an FL is: *Which grammar structures (including tenses and moods) should be taught at which level?* This question implicitly includes a variety of other questions which arise for practical reasons since they influence and condition the learning goals of the (explicit) teaching of grammar, as a primary and secondary goal, and hence it is, *volens nolens*, an important part of the assessment of learners’ abilities.

Although the common descriptors for each level seem to be clear and as such give evident indications (including) for grammar structures, it is well

known that they are ‘recognised, interpreted and/or understood’ in different ways. There have been doubts in Slovenian schools in the last few years about how to address this issue: in fact, it is only on the basis of the national curriculum (which fully adopts the CEF) and textbooks<sup>3</sup> published in Italy that some agreement has been reached on grammar structures to be taught at each level, albeit without much reflection on which structure to which extent (or with which limitations).

However, Slovenian teachers of Italian as an FL feel confused since there seem to be two interpretations of the CEF in Italy: some authors include *all* grammatical structures in levels from A1 to B2 inclusive (some textbook editions of Guerra and of Edilingua appear to adopt such a stance), while others believe that certain grammatical structures (e.g. the *periodo ipotetico*, unreal comparative clauses) belong to levels C1 or even C2 (e.g. some textbook editions of Guerra and of Alma). According to Lo Duca (2006), in line with the CEF grammar structures with complex-clause syntax included are distributed at all six levels.

Further, it is known that Italian and Slovenian teachers as well as language teaching experts argue that certain complex-clause structures are difficult even for mother-tongue Italians who tend to avoid them in order not to produce them incorrectly (due to the influence of their Italian dialect or because the language itself has changed in the direction of ‘some simplification’ as proven by studies showing that the personal lexicon of Italian grammar school students is three times smaller than years ago) and it is presumed that a similar study of grammatical structures would point to a similar phenomenon.

For example, when Italians themselves use the *periodo ipotetico* when referring to the past it is almost always simplified (in oral speech and in informal writing) for the simple reason that its ‘syntactic rules’ (referring to the use of tenses and moods) are too complex. Therefore, many teachers of Italian as an FL ask themselves why they should expect foreign learners to learn and use it (unless they are at highest levels C1 and C2) since learners can communicate in Italian (at lower levels) without producing complex syntactical constructions, or they believe that recognising and understanding certain syntactic structures may be sufficient – an attitude also shared by many teachers of Italian as an FL in Slovenia, and often elsewhere in Europe where Italian as an FL is taught.

On the other hand, until recently in many Slovenian high schools (learners aged approximately 15–19 years) the view that *all grammatical structures must be included at levels A1–B2* was considered to be the correct

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<sup>3</sup> In the last 10 years, the textbook for teaching Italian as L2/FL (more or less) follows the grammar tradition (which is not necessarily an ‘unreasonable’ decision) and mostly not research results; they get labelled with different levels according to the CEF, but in fact ‘in advance’ for commercial reasons, and only after some years of experience do the labels or contents of textbooks get slightly changed.

interpretation of the CEFR and many, although not all teachers supported the idea. In the last 15 years, at the ‘Matura exam’ (state external exam) in Italian as an FL with high school leavers aged approximately 19 and after 350–400 contact hours of Italian as an FL (among school leavers living ‘inland’) *and*<sup>4</sup> after approx. (among school leavers living ‘on the coast’) 1,300 contact hours, a productive level of all grammatical structures in Italian (e.g. including all four Italian subjunctives) has been expected in explicit grammar testing, while in a formal letter and in an essay it has also been implicitly expected to score higher points.

It is therefore no longer surprising that the number of students participating in the Matura in Italian has dropped from around 500 to around 150, and that in the last few years almost all participants have come from the Slovenian-Italian bilingual part of our country, namely those who have had approx. 1,300 school contact hours of Italian teaching, while others simply have not managed to keep pace and choose an elective subject from among other possibilities (where they are more ‘equal’). However, this poorly balanced and ambiguous situation has led to the collapse of Italian as an FL.

Therefore, Slovenian teachers who regard such ‘ambitious’ goals as a challenge, along with all those who prefer to abandon them or at least differentiate them more precisely according to various curricula based on a different number of teaching hours may, from different points of view, be directly concerned with the teaching and learning of complex-clause structures. In any case, the following model, due to be proposed to them as well (after being applied in some true and false beginners’ groups, is more targeted to those working in the 350-hour curriculum.

### 3. Some factors in the explicit teaching of Italian complex-clause syntax to Slovenian learners

Several aspects must be considered when planning the explicit (of course also implicit) teaching of Italian complex-clause syntax. As seen in *Fig. 1*, several factors influence learners’ attitudes to complex-clause syntax and thus also the level of competence they attain.<sup>5</sup> Some of these factors are only briefly presented below (the Italian language itself, learners in various schools, grammars and textbooks), while others will be presented in greater detail (the role of positive/negative transfer and of teachers), although they are all regarded as key points in the process of teaching/learning complex-clause syntax.

<sup>4</sup> The conjunction ‘and’ is correct: both ‘groups’, high school leavers after approx. 400 contact hours and those after 1,300 hours, can participate to the *same* Matura exam.

<sup>5</sup> Some learners do not perceive any need to master complex clauses at all, for some an appropriate understanding of syntactically complex clauses in texts is enough, others aim to master them at the productive level: they need to know how to choose the right pattern and how to form it in proper (usually written) communication.

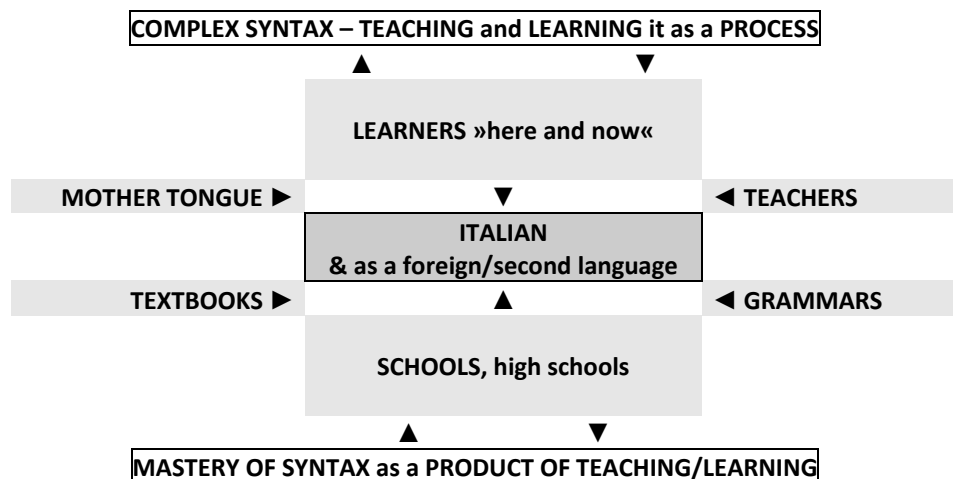


Fig. 1: Aspects to be considered in explicit teaching of Italian complex-clause syntax

The first factor is the Italian language itself: here are some examples from various authentic Italian text types where complex-clause syntax is used naturally:

Instructions for a make-up product for teenagers:

- 1a) *Italian: Metti l'ombretto più scuro vicino alle ciglia, come se FOSSE una larga riga di matita, ...*
- 1b) *English: Apply some eye shadow near the eyelashes as if it **WERE** a thick line of pencil, ...*

Comments about a potential lottery winner among blue-collar workers:

- 2a) *Italian: »Che bello **sarebbe** – butta un tizio – se il fortunato **FOSSE** uno in tuta blu ...«*
- 2b) *English: »How nice it **would be** – a guy says – if the lucky one **WERE** an ordinary worker ...«*

Such examples from everyday speech<sup>6</sup> are significant for the field of complex-clause syntax: they include an unreal comparative clause (Ital. *comparativa irreal*) and a second conditional clause (Ital. *periodo ipotetico della possibilità*), while a series of different kinds of subordinate clauses can

<sup>6</sup> These examples are taken from *Gioia* and *Donna moderna*. More examples can easily be found in many daily newspapers and various magazines, including those intended for non-academic readers.



also be found<sup>7</sup>, ranging from quite complex relative clauses to different types of content clauses (Ital. *frase relativa*, *frase interrogativa indiretta*, *frase oggettiva*, cf. Mertelj 2005b: 48-94).

In any case, the existence itself of such complex-clause patterns cannot be ignored; it is counterproductive to think them away since they are relevant to learners not due to the (relative) frequency of their occurrence, but because such complex-clause syntactic structures: i) may provide significant clues for understanding discourse and they are often used to convey a speaker's statements/attitudes (see the above examples); and ii) they may be a challenge for grammar school learners who get bored with overly simple contents and linguistic means compared to the language level they are able to understand well in their J1 and/or in their J2 (often English), a complex grammar structure can pose a challenge to fostering their intellectual satisfaction and thus their intrinsic motivation (which often also gets frustrated with the overly simple linguistic means they are challenged with before level B1).<sup>8</sup>

If such pieces of text are considered in terms of their syntax, it is incorrect to assume that Italian is an easy language to master and this goes against the popular slogan *Italiano, una lingua facile!* ("Italian, an easy language to learn!"). Many Slovenian learners believe that Italian is easy when they are beginners. It is a duty of the teacher to make them continue to think this is the case in order to strengthen their motivation, not by ignoring complex linguistic structures but by explaining them to learners and helping them to master them.

Another important factor is the various school environments (different types of public schools at primary and secondary levels, adult education, private schools) which influence decisions on how complex-clause syntax might be taught. In this study, we opted for (predominantly) high school learners and university students (other target groups are not considered in this paper), both part of the future educated 'elite' which needs a higher general level of literacy, where the teaching of syntax to them might be a matter of the teacher's responsibility in this regard.

The point of view of a high school teacher could be summed up in the following question *Do teachers know their learners need complex-clause syntax?* where complex-clause syntax and teachers' decisions come into

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<sup>7</sup> However, it must be recognised that such complex-clause structures in Italian cannot be regarded as *highly* frequent in either literary or non-literary texts (Mertelj 2005b: 48-94).

<sup>8</sup> But it would be a nonsense to generalise that in Romance languages complex-clause syntax occurs more naturally and is more often present than, for instance, in Germanic languages (which are the most widely taught as foreign languages in Slovenia) and have this as a reason for including explicit syntax teaching in contact hours. However, in Italian (Mertelj 2005b: 94) the complex-clause syntax is used so frequently that it cannot be ignored by experts in teaching/learning Italian as an FL/L2, nor by textbook writers or curriculum planners.

play. A precondition for a decision to include the explicit teaching of complex-clause syntax is a teacher's own linguistic awareness: if a teacher believes that *syntactic (receptive and/or productive) mastery should be included at levels A1–B1*, also from frequent contacts with the Italian language, he/she will most probably become even more convinced that complex-clause syntax is a worthwhile learning goal for learners, and *vice versa*.

### 3.1. Discrepancies in the use of subordinates, tenses and moods – the interference with L1 (Slovenian)

We need to consider that Slovenian grammar school learners and early university students have already learned through acquisition (predominantly Slovenian as the mother tongue, L1) and/or have been learning English consciously as their first foreign language. The mother tongue and the first foreign language exerts varying influences on the Italian language as a foreign language in the form of positive transfer and/or interference).<sup>9</sup>

For Slovenian learners, Italian complex-clause syntax is particularly difficult from the viewpoint of the use of tenses. In our mother tongue, there are 5 tenses (+ 2 non-finite forms = 7), whereas in Italian 15 (+ 6 non-finite forms = 21) are used in different syntactic structures (see *Fig. 2*). This discrepancy creates significant doubt about how to deal with the richness of expression enabled by the number of tenses in Italian.

Since *Fig. 2* presents Italian and Slovenian tenses without a discussion of the relationship between tenses and moods,<sup>10</sup> the following examples (4 and 5) highlight the difficulties Slovenian learners have regarding some problematic structures. They might also be regarded as problematic from an 'Italian' point of view (due to their relative infrequency and partly the inconsistency in their use), but it is no less problematic that, due to their Slavic linguistic background, Slovenian learners tend to follow the same principles of usage as with their mother tongue when structuring Italian complex clauses (cf. also Miklič 2003 and 2004; Miklič and Ožbot 2007; Mertelj 2005b: 95-105), an attitude to be prevented through the development of syntactic awareness and receptive/productive mastery.

<sup>9</sup> In the process of learning Italian as an FL, interference is generally not considered in Italian textbooks and pedagogical grammars as they are generally not created for a homogeneous target linguistic group.

<sup>10</sup> There are different views on the relationship between tense and mood. For example, is the *futuro semplice* a tense or a mood? Compare it in different pieces of communication, e.g. *Andrò in montagna quest'estate*. (Instead, Italians tend to use *Vado in montagna quest'estate*. vs. *Saranno le due*.)

Italian tenses / moods		Slovenian tenses / moods
1. Pr – il presente	≠ in =	sedanjik ‘present’
2. F – il futuro	≠ in =	prihodnjik ‘future’
3. C – il condizionale	≠ in =	pogojnik ‘conditional’
4. PP – il passato prossimo	≠ in =	preteklik ‘past’
5. IMP! – l’imperativo	≠ in =	velelnik ‘imperative’
6. IM – l’imperfetto	?	
7. TP – il trapassato	?	
8. FF – il futuro composto	?	
9. CC – il condizionale composto	?	
10. Pr’ – il presente del congiuntivo	?	
11. PP’ – il passato del congiuntivo	?	
12. IM’ – l’imperfetto del congiuntivo	?	
13. TP’ – il trapassato del congiuntivo	?	
14. PR – il passato remoto	?	
15. TR – il trapassato remoto	?	
16. INF. I - infinitivo	≠ in =	NEDOLOČNIK infinitive
17. INF. II – infinitivo composto	?	sest. NEDOLOČNIK infinitive II
18. GER. I – gerundio	≠ in =	GERUNDIJ gerund
19. GER. II – gerundio composto	?	sestavljani GERUNDIJ gerund II
20. PART. I – participio presente	?	sedanji DELEŽNIK (present) participle
21. PART. II – participio passato	?	pretekli DELEŽNIK (past) participle

Fig. 2: Italian tenses vs. Slovenian tenses

Examples 4 and 5 present different uses of tenses in the same types of subordinate clauses in Slovenian and Italian, revealing the different principles governing the choice of tense in each language. A Slovenian unreal conditional clause can be used with reference to the present or the past (a combination of the two temporal spheres is also possible); consequently, it has *more than one* possible equivalent in Italian, depending on whether we want to express a condition and a consequence of something that might still happen (4a, \*4b, 4c) or a regret that these two are no longer possible, as both refer to the past (\*4d, 4e).

- 4a) Slovenian: Če *bi ga vprašal, bi ti odgovoril.*  
Če *you asked him, he would answer.*
- 4b) \*Italian: Se *glielo \*chiederesti ti risponderebbe.*
- 4c) Italian: Se *glielo chiedessi ti risponderebbe.*

or also

- Če *you had asked him, he would have answered.*
- 4d) \*Italian: Se *glielo \*chiederesti ti \*risponderebbe.*
- 4e) Italian: Se *glielo avessi chiesto ti avrebbe risposto.*

When applied to Italian clauses, the principles of tense use in Slovenian cause interference: this negative transfer mechanism also occurs, for example, in unreal comparative clauses (5a, \*5b, 5c), where a Slovenian learner can also make an erroneous choice of connective (\**come che* vs. *come se*) and of tense:

- 5a) Slovenian *Gledal me je, kot da me ne razume / me ne bi razumel.*  
*He looked as if he didn't understand.*
- 5b) \*Italian *Mi guardò \*come che non mi \*capisce / \*capirebbe.*
- 5c) Italian *Mi guardò come se non mi capisce.*

Similar examples of errors caused by the negative transfer of tense choice can also be easily found in some other types of subordinate clause (Miklič 1992a, 1992b; Miklič and Ožbot 2007, Mertelj 2005b: 106-138). The structural divergences between the Italian and Slovenian language as the learners' mother tongue strongly affect their learning and ability to master complex-clause syntax. Generally, in brief, a learner's syntactic competence should comprise knowledge of:

- 1) how various types clauses are constructed, with special emphasis on implicit subordinate clauses;
- 2) (all) connectors;
- 3) the use of (appropriate) tenses in principal, coordinate and subordinate clauses; and
- 4) the interrelationship of clauses in a text.

In any event, *complex knowledge* is necessary; the issue is which syntactic structures should be taught, at which level in the range A1–B2 (cf. Lo Duca 2006), and which at a receptive level and which at a productive level.

It is necessary to develop a well-thought-out approach to the teaching of complex syntax in which both cognitive and affective aspects of the learning process are taken into account. The leading question is how to help learners master complex clauses in an active way in both the reception and production of language. It happens too often that there is a lot of teaching of language rules which remain weakly or unclearly connected to a thorough comprehension of authentic texts or to productive language skills.

#### 4. A possible series of tasks for dealing with complex-clause syntax at beginner's levels

The basic language materials are texts, already present in textbooks and in some additional texts as learning materials, for the chosen level and for use by university students in the humanities (at the Faculty of Arts), in our case specifically beginners and false beginners in Italian as a foreign language. Some short texts (approx. 150-200 words) of different types (descriptive, narrative, argumentative, dialogic) for both levels of difficulty (A1 and A2) will be worked out<sup>11</sup> with regard to the goals about coordinate and subordinate clauses (content, relative, causal, temporal, final subordinate clauses).

The texts (about young people's experiences, attitudes and personal ideas about globalised world, differences and similarities between peoples and personal intercultural attitudes) share a common feature: they are accompanied by a series of tasks to be used within a shorter task-based process (five times 30 minutes plus homework towards the end of the A1 level) including general reading comprehension, than some tasks for the development of language awareness and of receptive knowledge/competencies about complex-clause syntax (mostly as homework, but later verified during contact hours) and later tasks leading towards conscious learning of the complex-clause syntactic patterns.

The tasks feature goals pertaining to intuitive and analytic comprehension connected to some contrastive meta-linguistic knowledge and language awareness in both languages (foreign and mother tongue or English as *lingua franca*), as well as to the development of some productive knowledge of complex syntactic structures or their parts<sup>12</sup> where also a technique of 'learning translation into an FL' is applied. It is highly appreciated by learners as such 'translated' pieces of communication (many of them feature 'formulaic' parts) combined from the texts dealt with previously (see above) help them in the next step: a more demanding productive task where they write about their own experiences and attitudes.

As it presupposes the user's ability to master the system and use of tenses and moods which – due to the considerable differences between the two languages – are perceived as particularly hard to learn (especially those at the higher B1 and B2 levels, but also many from A1 onwards), the whole path features tasks dedicated not only to connectors but also to tenses and moods.

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<sup>11</sup> Some techniques of teaching complex-clause syntax to learners from level A1 inclusive have so far been applied in my own teaching practice (cf. Mertelj 2008).

<sup>12</sup> It is often here that problems predictably arise since the syntax of Italian complex clauses is objectively difficult for Slovenian learners, but it should be researched whether such phenomena might be prevented by systematic work on them, suitable learning steps and similar, as is the intention of future applied work of the author.

## 5. Conclusions

The future empirical examples aim to indicate some possible answers to questions pertaining to the applied field of foreign language teaching methodology, and are primarily meant for the process of learning and not for some supplementary testing after the achievement of certain levels. However, some additional testing will be prepared that will focus on complex syntax, examining receptive and productive proficiency/knowledge, as well as the awareness of some contrastive problems/features. A (future) questionnaire for learners will enquire about the role of teachers' attitudes and methods of teaching complex-clause syntax and about their experiences and perceptions (also involving semi-structured oral interviews among some students).

Some experts might argue that complex syntax has a role here, inappropriate for A1 and A2 levels, and that general knowledge of the target language must be developed first, at least up to level B1. In other words, they would propose not investing time and effort into teaching how to understand and use syntactic structures (except for advanced-level students, as mentioned). Instead, they might claim, some teaching of avoidance strategies should be preferred to spend time on, since much of complex syntax can be 'simplified' into simpler, shorter parts (two or more single sentences), while the complex clauses should remain a receptive learning objective (i. e. recognising them).

There is a high level of awareness of some 'critical' contrastive aspects of teaching Italian as an FL to Slovenian learners at the university level (Miklič and Ožbot 2001), but unfortunately its application has not been worked out yet, especially not for the lower and lower middle levels (A1, A2, B1). Because Italian pedagogical grammars and textbooks do not provide a systematic way to acquire the knowledge needed to construct complex clauses (cf. Mertelj 2005b: 157-201), where it is not expected to find additional specific information for individual linguistic groups (such as speakers of Slavic languages), this non-simple task is left for secondary, especially high school teachers, as is (also) the case in Slovenia.

However, while high school teachers do encounter problems related to complex-clause syntax in their teaching, their awareness of this critical aspect of teaching Italian as an FL to Slovenian learners is not high (cf. Mertelj 2005a: 44-51): most teachers focus on 'simple' language and/or strongly simplified texts, preferring not to use authentic texts and follow a chosen textbook. Some even feel unhappy with modern 'contents and communicative elements' intruding on their quite grammatical approach to the teaching of Italian as an FL.<sup>13</sup> They often give priority to the quantity of drilling grammar exercises than to tasks which would integrate the usage of grammar

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<sup>13</sup> It is not rare that after the approx. 350 hours of Italian as an FL learners are at level A1, not even reached by most learners.

structures, including of complex clauses, with productive skills (sketched out from Mertelj 2005a and 2005b).

To support the efforts of interested teachers in maintaining relatively high objectives of teaching and learning Italian as an FL in Slovenian high schools, and consequently higher levels of receptive and productive command among learners, complex-clause syntax should be introduced as a minimal, but regular and explicit goal of conscious learning/teaching:

- 1) The presence of complex-clause syntax in authentic Italian texts of various types will remain a challenge for teachers and learners: some explicit knowledge to understand and to use (to a certain extent) syntactically demanding clauses is needed.
- 2) To achieve this goal, Slovenian learners should become aware of their specific needs due to the differences in the use of tenses/moods in subordinate clauses in Slovenian and in Italian. An additional input will be offered by tasks involving authentic texts containing complex syntax.
- 3) The learning materials for complex-clause syntax should include various tasks to enable learners to attain the highest possible mastery at the receptive level (according to the motto “*to recognise and to understand appropriately*”) and also a reasonably early, but appropriate passage to teaching complex syntax at a productive level at A1 and A2 by imitating and/or elaborating text models as a way towards proper texts.
- 4) In such tasks – also designed according to the communicative needs of learners – appropriate cognitive and affective stimuli would help them learn the language effectively.
- 5) The idea “*less and earlier is better*” should be applied from the beginning of the teaching/learning process.

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