

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

2

ANNO XVI 2008

EDUCATT - UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

L'ANALISI  
LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

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ANNO XVI 2008

*SPECIAL ISSUE*

Proceedings of the IADA Workshop  
*Word Meaning in Argumentative Dialogue*

Homage to Sorin Stati

Milan 2008, 15-17 May

VOLUME 2

edited by G. Gobber, S. Cantarini, S. Cigada, M.C. Gatti & S. Gilardoni

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA  
Facoltà di Scienze linguistiche e Letterature straniere  
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore  
Anno XVI - 2/2008  
ISSN 1122-1917

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Pubblicazione realizzata con il contributo PRIN - anno 2006

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.72342235 - fax 02.80.53.215  
*e-mail:* editoriale.dsu@unicatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@unicatt.it (*distribuzione*);  
*web:* www.unicatt.it/librario

*Redazione della Rivista:* redazione.all@unicatt.it - *web:* www.unicatt.it/librario/all

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di dicembre 2009  
presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

# ARGUMENTATION IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION. TEACHING AND LEARNING ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

SILVIA GILARDONI

## 1. *Introduction*

This paper aims at considering the role played by argumentation in teaching and learning languages, by focusing on metalinguistic sequences about grammar and word meaning in classroom interaction.

From the theoretical point of view the study is based on two approaches to research: a) an approach to discourse analysis, which underlines the relevance of the argumentative dimension in verbal communication in a semantic-pragmatic perspective (Rigotti 1998; Rigotti et al. 2003, 2004), and b) a social interactionist approach to language acquisition, which uses the methodology of conversation analysis, taking into account the essential role of interaction in the process of formation and development of language competence (Mondada & Pekarek Doehler 2000, 2001; Pekarek Doehler 2000, 2006)<sup>1</sup>.

Following this theoretical and methodological framework, we suggest two levels of analysis:

1. an analysis at the macro level, which focuses on argumentation as a basic dimension of classroom interaction, with specific reference to language teaching;
2. an analysis at the micro level, in order to examine how argumentative discourse emerges from language teaching in different types of classroom activities and interaction sequences. With this purpose, the research is based on a *corpus* of oral classroom interactions collected in different contexts while teaching Italian as a second language to adult learners in Italy and abroad.

The general aim of this research is then principally descriptive, but the analysis also tries to evaluate the different ways of argumentative discourse from the point of view of language teaching and learning, thus giving some methodological suggestions for teaching practice.

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<sup>1</sup> As Pekarek Doehler states (2000: 8-9), the core of this approach can be identified with three fundamental postulates: 1. the constitutive role of the interaction as a structuring factor of the language development process; 2. the contextual sensitivity of the language competences, which depend on the conversational and socio-interactional conditions; 3. the situated and reciprocal character of the discourse and of the cognitive activity, which are situated in the context of action undertaken by the interlocutors and have an interactional nature.

## 2. *Argumentation in classroom interaction*

In order to better understand the role played by argumentation in language teaching and learning we will briefly consider the concept of education to define the specificity of pedagogic communication in the teaching context.

Education is achieved through the communicative interaction among people, a teacher and a student in the case of a teaching context. In this communicative exchange the teacher takes on the task of providing knowledge, abilities, values, suggesting an interpretation of reality; the learner sees the teacher as an authority because of his/her store of knowledge and competence.

The classroom interaction, like other kinds of interaction in institutional settings, is characterized then by an asymmetry in the relationship between the interlocutors, which contributes to define the discourse organization and the presence of recurrent interactional structures, as the well-known three-part “initiation-response-feedback” sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975)<sup>2</sup>. This asymmetric relationship is normally regarded as a relationship based on the power of social roles, and this fact has led to debate the forms of this kind of interaction and the communicative and pedagogical styles of the educational contexts<sup>3</sup>.

Actually it is necessary to focus on the notion of power and it is useful to consider the origins of the word. The Latin word *potestas* is a *vox media*, i.e. a word with positive or negative meaning depending on the context: it can be understood as power based on coercion (*vis*), or power based on authority (Rigotti et al. 2003: 42; Rigotti et al. 2004: 32-33). In the first case, power makes someone do something with a form of violence. The second case is a form of power which makes someone do something to help him/her grow up; as a matter of fact *auctoritas* (authority) comes from the Latin verb *augeo*, i.e. to raise, to grow something.

Power based on authority is related to persuasive discourse and argumentation practice; it can be interpreted in this way, as Rigotti et al. state (2004: 32): “another person does something because I have persuaded him to do so on the basis of good reasons”.

Now we can make some observations on the teaching context.

The teacher has an authoritative role because he/she carries out a function of mediation and co-construction of knowledge, in order to help the learner grow up, accompanying him/her into the relationship with reality, and the learner needs this mediation to grow up and *to be* in a properly human sense<sup>4</sup>.

The authoritative mediation of the teacher is based then on persuasive communication and argumentation is its essential component.

<sup>2</sup> See also Mehan (1985), who names this three-part sequence “initiation-reply-evaluation sequence”, the so-called IRE sequence. On the asymmetry in institutional interactions and in the classroom interaction see Orletti (2000).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Fasulo & Girardet (2002) and for a review of studies in this field of research see Ciliberti (1999).

<sup>4</sup> About the vocation of the teacher as a mediator see Zambrano (2008 [1965]).

When the teacher conveys knowledge and data, he/she asks the learner to accept them and while speaking he/she has to explain the reasons: it is clear that the way of communicating requires an argumentative approach, not simply the transmission of information, in order to be adequate for the pedagogic communication itself and for the felicity of communication (Rigotti 2007).

In the learning process the learner gives credit to the teacher because he/she sees the teacher as an authority, i.e. a trustworthy witness for his/her store of knowledge and competence.

The pedagogic action of the teacher interacts then with the task of the learner, who undertakes to verify the teacher's interpretation of reality: so, the learner receives and accepts contents, explanations, data, theses, internalizes them and verifies them in his/her personal experience.

We can observe that the teaching and learning interaction is based first of all on the responsibility of each interagent, who does not have to give up his/her task<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, pedagogic communication is influenced also by other factors, i.e. the interest and the relevance, which are the core of the pedagogic interaction as well as of communication in general. Interest and relevance are the basis of an important notion of educational psychology, i.e. motivation: as everybody knows, learning is not possible without motivation, the key element that sets in motion the learning process<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.1 Argumentation in second language teaching and learning

Let us now closely examine the case of interaction in teaching and learning a second language.

As regards the content and aims of language teaching and learning it is necessary to consider the known dichotomy between competence and performance, in Chomskian ter-

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<sup>5</sup> The pedagogical relationship can be considered as a meeting place of the responsibility and freedom of the interagents, as Zambrano (2008 [1965]: 118) clearly points out: "Tutto dipende da ciò che accade in quell'istante che apre la classe ogni giorno: tutto dipende dal fatto che, nel confronto tra maestro e alunni, non si verifichi la rinuncia di nessuna delle due parti: dal fatto che il maestro non rinunci trascinato dalla vertigine, quella vertigine che assale quando si sta soli, su di un piano più alto del silenzio dell'aula, e dal fatto che non si difenda neppure dalla vertigine aggrappandosi all'autorità stabilita. La rinuncia trascinerebbe il maestro sullo stesso piano del discepolo, alla finzione di essere uno di loro, al proteggersi rifugiandosi in uno pseudo cameratismo. La reazione difensiva lo condurrebbe a dare per fatto quel che deve ancora farsi, poiché una lezione deve essere offerta allo stato nascente. Nella trasmissione orale della conoscenza si tratta di un doppio risveglio, di una confluenza di sapere e di non sapere ancora. E questo doppiamente, perché la domanda che il discepolo porta incisa sulla fronte deve manifestarsi e rendersi chiara a lui stesso, dato che l'alunno comincia a essere tale quando gli si rivela la domanda che porta nascosta dentro. Una domanda che, nel momento della sua formulazione, è l'inizio del risveglio nella maturità, l'espressione stessa della libertà".

<sup>6</sup> On motivation in pedagogical science see Titone (1977).

minology, that is to say between the system and its realization, system and use, system and text.

This distinction is clearly dealt with in the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” (Council of Europe 2001: 9), when it defines the “communicative language competences”, i.e. those competences “which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means”. The communicative language competences comprise several competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. The linguistic competence includes the dimensions of language as a system, i.e. lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills. Sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence refer to language use: sociolinguistic competence is concerned with “the sociocultural conditions of language use”; pragmatic competence refers to “the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, speech acts)” and the mastery of discourse, of text types and forms (Council of Europe 2001: 13).

The language system consists of structures and rules as a whole that the teacher is expected to give students as means to understand and produce texts.

The student accepts data and examples and is expected to discover rules and structures, verify and internalize them. The learner starts a process of developing hypotheses, of reflecting on language, and this process leads to the development of his/her awareness of how a language works and consequently how it is used. It is the case of the metalinguistic competence, which is implicit, operational, at the beginning of interlanguage development, while it becomes explicit and formal in the following stages (Freddi 1994: 90).

Performance corresponds with taking the risk of communication, with creativity in language use: the teacher is supposed to introduce the learner to the risk of communication, to lead him/her to experience language and to use the language system in relationship with reality, and the learner is expected to take this risk.

The motivation to learning will be linked with the personal and social need of the learner and with the attractiveness of the language itself, from a social and cultural point of view<sup>7</sup>.

As regards the practice of argumentation in this context, we can notice that argumentation is often required in language comprehension and production classroom activities: we can consider, for example, the activation of inferential processes in comprehension activities (questions, cloze tests, etc.) or the argumentative practices in production activities such as writing argumentative texts, summaries, taking part in a discussion, in role-plays, in a debate about pros and cons of an issue.

Nevertheless, there is an argumentative dimension at a deeper level of communication, which is related to the discourse of the teacher and to the interaction moves.

The teacher is expected to give explanations about language and has to give reasons about various aspects of the language system and language use.

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<sup>7</sup> On motivation in language teaching see Freddi (1994: 4-6) and Balboni (2002: 37-40). On the concept of language attractiveness with particular reference to Italian language, see De Mauro et al. (2002) and Gilardoni (2005).

The teacher also has a specific role in the interaction. Relating to some observations in Py (1990), we can state that there are two complementary moves in language classroom interaction: a “self-structuring move” performed by the learner when producing messages (on the basis of the interlanguage), and a “hetero-structuring move” performed by the native (or native-like) speaker, who intervenes in the previous move monitoring communication.

Besides, the discourse is characterized by the so-called bifocalisation (Bange 1992), that is to say the double focus on form and content which is typical of the interaction in second language classes, where the participants can focus their attention on the linguistic aspects of messages and/or on the content.

In the interactional moves, negotiation processes of meanings and forms take place between the interagents: during the interaction the teacher and the learner reach an agreement on communicative aims, meanings, procedures and forms of communication.

The monitoring activity of the teacher and the activation of negotiation processes can originate “potentially acquisitional sequences” (De Pietro, Matthey & Py 1989), i.e. sequences, which are particularly favourable for second language acquisition, because, by answering communicative needs, they facilitate the integration of new elements into the interlanguage.

### 3. *Teaching and learning Italian as a second language: argumentation and interaction*

The empirical part of this research, that is the analysis at the micro level of the argumentative dimension in classroom discourse, is based on a *corpus* of oral classroom interactions collected in different courses of Italian to foreigners. The contexts we analysed are the following:

- a summer course of Italian language and culture for adult learners, with an intermediate level of proficiency, held by an Institute of Italian language and culture in Italy;
- a course of Italian language and Business Italian for students with an upper-intermediate level at the University of Coventry<sup>8</sup>.

The analysis considers how argumentative discourse emerges in language teaching and learning. Emphasis is placed on two different types of interaction sequences, which seemed significant from the point of view of argumentation:

- sequences about grammatical questions, consisting in a metalinguistic reflection about aspects of the language system;

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<sup>8</sup> The *corpus* consists of 10 hours of audio recorded lessons at the Institute of Italian language and culture in Italy, collected in August 2007, and of 20 hours of audio recorded lessons at the University of Coventry, collected in the period between October 2007 and February 2008. We would like to thank the headmistress and the teachers of the Institute of Italian language and culture (the Tolomei Cultural Institute in Settignano, near Florence) and the teachers of the courses at the University of Coventry, who took part in the research. We also thank Paola Arrigoni and Margherita Tanca, who collaborated in collecting the data.



- sequences about use and meaning of words, consisting in cooperative activities of building, negotiating and verifying lexical hypotheses.

### 3.1 Grammar and argumentative discourse

A metalinguistic reflection on grammatical questions can be managed by the teacher on his/her own initiative or at the learner's request, during the different activities and stages of the lesson.

In the following example the teacher is correcting the students' written texts together with them, in order to point out the most common grammar mistakes; a typical mistake regards the use of combined prepositions with the definite article:

Extract 1 (Se2\_130807\_39.10)

- 1 T: fai una frase con .. eh . l'espressione di: l'avverbio di luogo . vicino\ .. inventa una frase usando .. magari  
 2 pensa alla: .. la descrizione di un luogo non lo so\  
 3 S1: la nostra casa è: . vicino . al- alla chiesa\  
 4 T: bene . brava .. perché qui fate bene e quando scrivete fate male/  
 ((laughs))  
 5 T: <la nostra casa è vicino (4s) alla chiesa > ((T writes on the blackboard)) okay\ eh molti di voi molti=molti di voi  
 6 si dimenticano/ ... si dimenticano la preposizione articolata si dimenticano l'articolo\ .. la regola di uso  
 7 dell'articolo .. della preposizione articolata la regola è: la stessa che eh: . la regola della preposizione articolata  
 8 è la stessa dell'articolo\ . cioè io vivo A settignano\ .. no/ . senza articolo quindi la nostra casa è vicina A  
 9 settignano . ma eh con le parole e i nomi comuni usiamo l'articolo\ . quindi la nostra casa è vicino Alla chiesa\  
 10 tante persone si dimEnticano l'articolo\  
 11

The teacher reminds the students that the rule of combined prepositions with the definite article is the same as the rule of the article (l. 6-9). This is explained through examples: one example is elicited from a student (l. 1-4), another example is offered by the teacher (l. 8-9). The examples allow to infer the rule, which is then made explicit (l. 9: “we use the article with common nouns”).

This excerpt exemplifies a recurrent style of grammar explanation, which is conducted through examples and enunciation of rules: in this way the teacher shows his/her authority and competence and tries to guide the learners in the discovery of language, in the construction of knowledge and in the development of language awareness.

The interaction goes on with a question by a student, who asks the difference between “vicino” and “vicina” (“near”), both used by the teacher in the examples:

Extract 2 (Se2\_130807\_39.15)

- 1 S1: è è vicinO o vicina?  
 2 T: brAva\  
 ((laughs))  
 3 T: questo è un problema cioè . eh: mh in questo caso puoi dire in=in entrambi i modi cioè . così questa parola è  
 4 un avverbio\ . se metti . vicina diventa l'aggettivo\ . ma è uguale la nostra frase in questo caso sì ... eh mh . la  
 5 maggior parte delle volte però lo usiamo come avverbio quindi sempre con la o\  
 6 S1: ah  
 7 T: sì è più usato\ . mh/ . la nostra casa . è vicina alla chiesa la nostra casa è vicino alla chiesa .. sono abbastanza  
 8 intercambiabili\  
 9

The teacher answers that the difference between “vicino” and “vicina” is a problem. She explains that they are two different parts of speech, “vicino” is an adverb, while “vicina” is an adjective (l. 3-4). But the argumentation goes on in a slightly weak way: she says that there is no difference in use (l. 4: “it is the same”), then she corrects herself and says that the two words are nearly interchangeable (l. 7-8).

The teacher wants to find a criterion for the choice and uses as an argument the frequency of use, a statistical criterion. The reasoning is: let’s use “vicino” because it is used more frequently (l. 4-7). Actually the frequency criterion does not seem valid enough in this case, it has to be checked.

The choice between “vicino” or “vicina” is an aspect of the system, which is variable and linked to use. A reasoning which could be helpful for the learner could rather be the following: let’s use “vicino” because it is easier, it always ends in “-o”, and you have no problems with agreements.

In the following extract we find another example of metalinguistic reflection within the activity of correcting exercises; the argumentation is problematic again:

Extract 3 (Se2\_130807\_1.06.20)

- 1 S1: voglio: gli voglio bene . voglio loro bene\ .. gli o loro/  
 2 T: brava questa è una bella questione\ qui c'è sempre la differenza parlato scritto\ .. eh faccio solo un accenno a  
 3 questa cosa poi la incontreremo: eh ... allora eh ...< voglio . bene . voglio bene alle mie: amiche\> ((T writes on  
 4 the blackboard)) volere bene amare essere amico no/ . <voglio bene (2s) loro .. sarebbe voglio bene loro ..  
 5 oppure A .. loro> ((T writes on the blackboard)) questa è la forma corretta . è la forma dello scritto\ .. la  
 6 REGOLA vuole che tu non usi un gli una=una: particella pronominale . ma usi direttamente il pronome  
 7 personale\ .. voglio bene a loro=voglio bene loro\ .. NEL parlAto parlando . quindi una una regola non proprio  
 8 correttissima .. usiamo gli voglio bene <gli voglio bene> ((T writes on the blackboard)) anche se sono donne e al  
 9 plurale\ ... questa è la FRASE .. che usiamo parlando\ . questa è la frase CORRETTA .. è la frase che usiamo  
 10 nello scritto è la frase che spiega la regola\  
 [...]
 11 eh questo è strano perché questo gli: . di solito . cioè questo gli secondo la regola è maschile singolare\ .. ho  
 12 un fratello . GLI voglio molto bene\ . è corretto . A LUI\ mh/ .. e parlAndo questo GLI . lo usiamo <sia per .. loro .  
 13 a loro maschile ... a loro femminile\> ((T writes on the blackboard)) ... quindi questa non è la regola .. ma è  
 14 l'uso\  
 [...]
 11 eh questo è strano perché questo gli: . di solito . cioè questo gli secondo la regola è maschile singolare\ .. ho  
 12 un fratello . GLI voglio molto bene\ . è corretto . A LUI\ mh/ .. e parlAndo questo GLI . lo usiamo <sia per .. loro .  
 13 a loro maschile ... a loro femminile\> ((T writes on the blackboard)) ... quindi questa non è la regola .. ma è  
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 [...]
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 13 a loro maschile ... a loro femminile\> ((T writes on the blackboard)) ... quindi questa non è la regola .. ma è  
 14 l'uso\  
 [...]

A student asks a question about the use of the pronouns “gli” or “loro” (“them”) for the third person plural of the indirect object pronoun (l. 1). The teacher explains that there is a difference between the written and the oral form (l. 2). There is a correct form, which is the form used in writing and follows the rule, i.e. the use of the pronoun “loro” (l. 4-7 and 9-10). When you speak there is a form which is not really correct (l. 7-8): “gli”, which in accordance with the rule is the masculine form of the third person singular, is used instead of “loro” as the masculine and feminine form of the third person plural (l. 8-9 and 11-13).

We can observe that the teacher appears a bit uncertain about the explanation. First she says that in speaking there is a “rule” which is not really correct (l. 7-8), then she states that it is not the rule but the use (l. 13-14).

The example shows the persistence in teaching practice of the idea of rule as norm, prescription, correctness, in opposition to use, which can also be incorrect. But, why should a learner follow the rule, if the use is different? Actually, the problem is simply to acknowledge that in the system of the language and also in language teaching, there is a distinction between a variety for formal writing and a variety for speaking<sup>9</sup>.

In the next extract the teacher is explaining the negative structure of the imperative form:

Extract 4 (Se2\_130807\_1.00.56)

- 1 T: quindi ricordate sempre la negazione è NON più .. eh infinito per quanto riguarda il TU noi stiamo parlando del  
 2 TU va bene/ . <imperativo ..imperativo ... mh/> ((*T writes on the blackboard*))  
 3 S1: ma se devo dire: voi noi/ metto:/  
 4 T: benissimo . okay ora facciamo: vi faccio uno schema\ .. allora ... <TU . e VOI questi sono gli imperativi più usati  
 5 ovviamente\ ... mh/ . tu ... positivo e negativo\ eh quindi positivo è METTI> ((*T writes on the blackboard*)) ...  
 6 negativo/  
 7 S2: non=non mettere\  
 8 T: <non mettere\> ((*T writes on the blackboard*)) ... il voi/ chi: voglio sentire qualcuno che mi risponde:/  
 9 S3: mh voi/  
 ((3s silence))  
 10 T: questo è semplicemente: . il verbo all'indicativo\ ... voi/ questo è tu METTI voi/ ... met- [te te . mh/  
 11 S3: [mettete  
 12 T: la negazione/  
 13 S3: non mette- . non mettete\  
 14 T: brava mh/ <non . mettete\> ((*T writes on the blackboard*)) .. quindi l'Infinito è solo per il tu .. questo è strano\ ...  
 15 okay\

For the negative structure of the imperative, “non” is placed before the forms used in the affirmative structure; for the second person singular “non” + infinitive is used, as it is illustrated by the example “non mettere” (“don’t put”). In this case the teacher only states the rule (l. 1-2), she does not argue and does not explain the rule thoroughly; she says only “it’s strange” (l. 14), that is to say it is unusual, it is different from the other forms. The reason of this language form can be understood in a diachronic perspective, because the form comes from the neo-Latin negative structure of the imperative. Then the teacher decides not to give

<sup>9</sup> On the linguistic varieties of Italian language in relation to language teaching, see Sabatini (1984), Benucci (2001) and Santipolo (2002). In the mentioned extract we have to notice another problematic aspect in the discourse of the teacher: speaking about the difference between the use of “gli” and “loro” she distinguishes between “gli” as pronominal particle and “loro” as personal pronoun (l. 8-9), giving a terminological distinction which can create confusion and does not appear pertinent. As a matter of fact “gli” and “loro” are both personal pronouns; if we want to distinguish them, we can refer to their form, which in the case of “gli” is unstressed, while in the case of “loro” is considered pseudo-unstressed.

a complete explanation for a pedagogic choice, because she thinks that it is not relevant for the addressees.

The previous extract exemplifies a way of presentation of grammar, which responds to a pedagogic and teaching criterion: in the description of the language system the teacher has to refer to the notion of the so called “pedagogic grammar” (Corder 1973), that is to say a presentation of information about language with the purpose of facilitating language learning, a grammar, which has to be useful for the learner.

### 3.2 Word meaning and argumentative discourse

The focalization on the meaning and the use of words, the so-called process of noticing (Nation 2001), occurs in classroom interaction when learners have to face lexical gaps and partial or complete opacity of lexical units, or when the teacher suggests the development of vocabulary as the learning goal. This means that the teacher is expected to communicate the meaning of words, in order to solve lexical comprehension or production problems and/or to increase the learners’ vocabulary. To communicate word meanings the teacher can use various techniques, which are complementary: non verbal communication (using gesture or actions, drawing, using real objects), translation into the first language (or into another known language), and definition in the second language. We will deal in detail with this last way of communicating the meaning of a word<sup>10</sup>.

Using definitions in the second language involves an argumentative dimension of the discourse. The teacher is expected to provide or elicit the definition of a word, that is to discover and to verbally describe the content of a concept: this means explaining and justifying the use and the meaning of a lexical unit, giving relevant, clear and understandable information.

There are many ways of defining a word and different typologies of definitions have been classified. From the point of view of language teaching we think that it is useful to refer to the analysis suggested by Jakobson. Studying the functioning of language and aphasic language disturbances, he pointed out two possible ways of giving definitions, one called “predicative” and the other one “substitutive”, which are based on the two types of relations connecting linguistic units, i.e. the relation of contiguity and the relation of similarity (Jakobson 1971 [1956]). Thus, a definition can be based a) on a predicative connection, which expresses a relation of contiguity with the word to be defined, when, for example, the class of a concept or its defining characteristics are pointed out; or b) on a substitutive relation, which expresses a relation of similarity, as in the case of using synonyms or antonyms.

In the following extract the teacher has to explain the meaning of the utterance “sembrare una scamorza” (to look like scamorza cheese), here related to the appearance of a little girl, a character of a novel read by the students:

<sup>10</sup> On the various ways of communicating word meaning in teaching Italian as a second language see Gilardoni (in press).

Extract 5 (Se3\_130807\_0.13.03)

- 1 I: barbara è bassissima è grass- è una bambina . cioè sembra dicono sembra una scamorza\ . il  
 2 formaggio scamorza . <è fatto così> ((*T draws on the blackboard*))  
 3 I: <è un formaggio: italiano> ((*T draws on the blackboard*)) ... okay/ questo si chiama scamorza\ ... è un  
 4 formaggio che ha la buccia dura dentro . dentro è tipo: mozzarella ma non è mozzarella è più secco della  
 5 mozzarella\

After drawing the shape of scamorza cheese, which the suggested comparison with the very short and fat child is related to<sup>11</sup>, the teacher also gives a verbal definition of the word, providing a term, the class word, and its characteristics, which are in a relation of contiguity with the word to be defined: explaining the word “scamorza” she says in fact that it is Italian cheese (l. 3) and it has a hard skin (l. 4). The teacher then mentions another kind of Italian cheese, “mozzarella”, which has a relation of similarity with “scamorza”, but it allows to add another characteristic of the object to be defined, i.e. the drier, harder texture (l. 4-5).

In the following example, a student asks a clarification about the meaning of the word “bassotto” (dachshund):

Extract 6 (Se3\_130807\_16.15)

- 1 T: innanzitutto volevo chiedere a voi se ci sono parole . che non avete capito\  
 2 S1: mh un bassotto è un cucciolo di cane/  
 3 T: NO il bassotto è un: eh razza .. il bassotto è una RAZZA di cane\ . <il bassotto è ((*T draws on the blackboard*))  
 4 S1: ah  
 5 T: <okay/ è fatto . così è lunghi:ssimo\> ((*T draws on the blackboard*))  
 6 S2: il bassotto è lungo  
 7 T: <ha il muso così\> ((*T draws on the blackboard*)) .. il bassotto è con le gambe corte e il corpo lungo\  
 8 S3: vuol dire che è . è un cane no/  
 9 T: sì però è una razza non è un: non è un cucciolo o:  
 10 S2: penso che bassotto perché sia: basso\  
 11 T: esatto esatto basso bassotto mh/ il corpo lungo e le zampe corte\

The student, asking a question about the meaning of “bassotto”, puts forward a hypothesis for the definition, thinking that “bassotto” means puppy (l. 2). This lexical hypothesis probably arose with reference to the concept of “basso” (short), which the word seems to derive from<sup>12</sup>; but being short is a characteristic of this dog, as suggested afterwards by another student (l. 10). The teacher corrects the student’s hypothesis by giving the predicative definition “it is a breed of dog” (l. 3) and also by drawing the dog on the blackboard; she then adds some characteristics of the animal, it is very long (l. 5), it has short legs and a long body. But it looks like another student does not understand the correction of the first hypothesis of definition (l. 8): this allows the teacher to repeat the correct definition: “it is a breed, not a puppy” (l. 9).

<sup>11</sup> To be precise, the expression “essere una scamorza” (“to be ‘scamorza’ cheese”) is usually used in Italian to define a person of weak character and who lacks personality or who is inadequate.

<sup>12</sup> Actually “bassotto” can be considered a lexicalization of the form derived from the adjective “basso” (short) and the suffix “-otto”.

In this example we can notice a way of communicating the meaning which is not really effective. We mean that the choice of the hyperonym “razza” (breed) in the definition caused comprehension problems, because the word was probably unfamiliar to the learners; using a more common and basic word like “tipo” (type) might have facilitated the comprehension.

In extract n. 6, the teacher is presenting the vocabulary related to the weather:

Extract 7 (Se2\_130807\_1.55.23)

- 1 T: queste sono le parole delle stagioni (2s) e le parole del tempo\ .. Oggi=oggi secondo voi come è/ è una  
2 giornata/  
3 S1: pioggia/  
4 T: l'aggettivo/ . piovosa .. mh/ piena di pioggia\ ... sono cose molto semplici . È sereno quindi c'è il sole È coperto  
5 ci sono le nuvole è nUvoloso\ . è coperto:/ .. ci sono delle nuvole non tanto forti non tanto pesanti\ . è nuvoloso  
6 ci sono delle nuvole\

The teacher explains the predicative content of some adjectives related to the weather, by giving the definition of their meaning. In the case of “sereno” (clear) she speaks about the condition: the weather is clear, when it is sunny (l. 4). In the case of “piovoso” and “nuvoloso” (rainy and cloudy) she considers, even if not explicitly, the semantic value of the bound morpheme “-oso”: a day “full of rain” and “when there are a lot of clouds” (l. 4-6). This example shows that the knowledge of word formation processes is an important part of lexical competence, as everybody knows, and it is also a useful strategy to elicit and to communicate the word meaning.

In the last extract, the metalinguistic work of lexical definition is used by the teacher in order to develop the lexical competence of the learner in a cooperative way:

Extract 8 (IL\_200208.39.48)

- 1 S1: ho visto un bando di concorso per un posto di: . tecnico eh dell'ambiente/  
2 T: mh . sì sì è giusto un bando\ . che cos'è il bando/  
3 S2: si trova in un: giornale\  
4 T: mh . potrebbe essere su un giornale su una gazzetta ufficiale . e che cos'è esattamente il bando/  
5 S3: eh (3s) una pubblicità . come=come pubblicità per un:  
6 T: sì:/  
7 S3: per il lavoro/  
9 T: mh sì pubblicità oppure è . viene sì dice viene .. pubblicato un bando cioè è l'annuncio [mh/  
10 S2: [l'annuncio  
11 T: l'abbiamo fatto anche quando [abbiamo fatto business  
12 S2: [sì=sì  
13 T: italian for business okay\ . il bando di un concorso cioè viene annunciato . che ci sarà un concorso\  
14 S3: sì/

While correcting some exercises, the teacher decides to verify the comprehension of the word “bando” (announcement of competition), found in an utterance, and asks the students the meaning of the word (l. 2). A student tries to define the word in a predicative way:

“you can find it in a newspaper” (l. 3). The teacher accepts only partially the definition of the word suggested by the student and repeats the question, eliciting a new definition from another student; in this case the student defines the word in a substitutive way: “bando” is like an advertisement for a job (l. 5-7). The teacher then suggests a definition with a better substitute, underlining the sense of announcement, which the concept of “bando” is related to (l. 9).

The negotiation of word meaning to find a good definition in the second language helps to develop the defining competence, which is based on the ability to infer lexical meaning from contextualized language use, making a metalinguistic operation of decontextualisation: this means, as Nation states (2001: 64), “that the word is removed from its message context to be focused on as a language item”. Defining is then a rather specialized speech genre, which requires some cognitive effort of the learners and is possible, above all, with students at upper-intermediate or advanced level. Nevertheless, we should recognize that it deserves proper attention in classroom interaction, as it is an important part of both the lexical competence and the metalinguistic competence.

#### 4. *Concluding remarks*

Through the analysis of the interaction between teacher and students in the classroom we have tried to show the essential role of argumentative discourse in the context of second language teaching and learning.

In the language classroom the task of the teacher meets the task of the learner.

The teacher is expected to be a good arguer, because he/she has to explain and justify both the use of language structures and word meaning and use. In his/her activity of supporting and monitoring language learning, the teacher has also to provide his/her authoritative confirmation about the hypotheses formulated by the learner in the process of the development of the interlanguage.

The learner is then expected to develop hypotheses on language structure and use and verify them practicing and improving the second language.

This means that the classroom should be considered as a “community of practice” (Wenger 1998), that is a context where the interagents have a shared understanding of the purposes of the interaction, of their actions and tasks and of themselves as members of the community.

In such a community of practice clear and effective argumentation is a condition to facilitate and support learning and contributes to generate potentially acquisitional sequences in the interaction. This occurs, as we have tried to show in the analysis of the *corpus*, both in the explanation of grammar and in the communication of word meaning.

After this analysis, we think that it is necessary to further examine and assess the various argumentative practices in second language teaching and learning, in order to develop

the awareness of the argumentative dimension in teaching discourse and to plan teacher training courses in this field.

As a matter of fact the skill of argumentation is to be considered as one of the characteristics of a good second language teacher; so, quoting and paraphrasing Corder (1973: 347), we can state that “a well-qualified, energetic[,] inventive” and well arguing “teacher can be a ‘living’ pedagogical grammar”.

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*Transcription conventions*

[		overlapping speech
-		cut off word or truncated speech
... ..		short pause, pause of medium length, long pause
(3s)		a pause, timed in seconds
:		prosodic lengthening
/		rising intonation
\		falling intonation
AABB		prominent speech
=		words following each other fast, without a break
(( ))	< >	features of interaction that cannot be transcribed (( )) and delimitation of the commented features < >
[...]		part omitted in the transcription

Symbols to identify who is speaking:

T: teacher

S1, S2, ...: students

Each extract is labeled with a code indicating its collocation in the *corpus*.