The dynamics of English as a foreign language for Italian and Croatian learners with dyslexia

Maja Kelić a Croatian speech and language therapist and **Michela Bettinelli,** an Italian specialist teacher and adviser present their research into the characteristics of their respective language orthographies and the impact this has for second language learners of English with dyslexia and literacy difficulties.

Summary

The research team of two specialists in dyslexia therapy in Croatia and Italy worked on a small action-research project looking at the dynamics of the home language (referred to as L1) and how these affected the way in which English was taught to learners with dyslexia in each setting. The tasks undertaken are described below and examples are taken from the children's work to illustrate their performance, and to draw out points that are of interest to anyone working in the field of literacy-related specialist teaching or specialist assessment. In particular the findings demonstrate the exceptionally complex issues of speech perception and production, the characteristics of different orthographies and the linguistic heritage and educational practices within different settings which combine to influence second language-learning, in both beneficial and detrimental ways.

The aim of the action-research project

In this project we wanted to explore how the Home Language (referred to as L1) shapes the way learners master writing in English as a foreign language as taught in school. Both the Italian and the Croatian languages differ phonologically from English but even more importantly they significantly differ from English in the way language sounds are captured in the written form. These differences affect the way Croatian and Italian learners cope with the complex English writing system. The children that took part in the study had a diagnosis of dyslexia (according to ICD-10[1] it is F81.0 specific reading disorder,) or language impairment (F80.1 or F80.2) in comorbidity with reading impairment. Children from the Croatian sample are all included in speech and language therapy in clinical settings.

Description of the tasks

Three tasks were used. All the target words used were taken from textbooks used by the learners in both countries and are common and frequently used by the children who participated in the tasks. It took some time to come up with the tasks and to find out how best to deliver them. Some of the things we considered were:

- Should the words be read by someone whose first language was English? This is particularly important if you consider the further variables that the teacher's accent/pronunciation can have upon learners' perception of sounds and understanding of the target phoneme etc.
- Should we use images to support understanding?
- Should we use words embedded in sentences to support understanding?

[1] International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en

- How should we support the children if they did not immediately recognise the English word? (Should they be given support in their L1?)
- How can we give sufficient support to encourage learners to form sentences and write independently?

The final description of the tasks is given below.

Task One (writing a target word):
Target words were presented by picture within a sentence. This was done so that the contextual information within the sentence could facilitate lexical retrieval. See Figure 1 for an example sentence designed to trigger the target word 'ice-cream'.

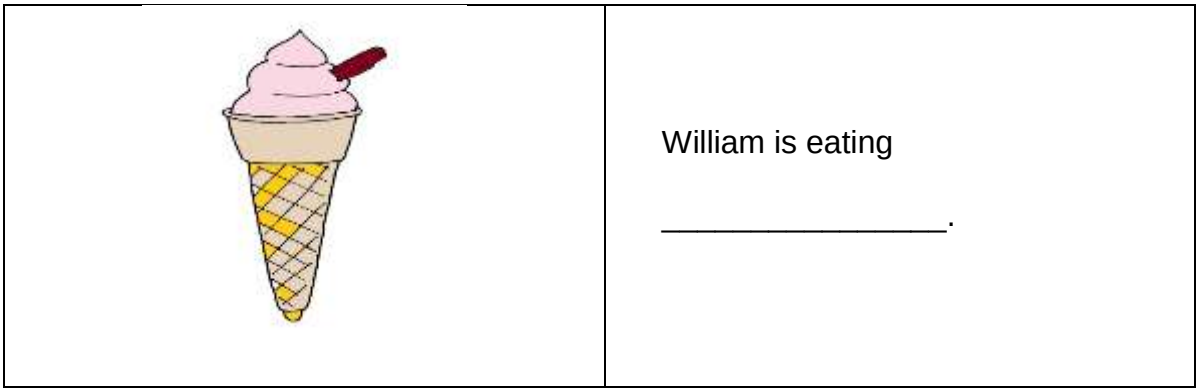

Figure 1

If the learner did not remember the target word, or did not know the word, the examiner would dictate the word to the student and check the learner's knowledge of it. Responses were classified as follows:

1. Learner wrote the word independently
2. Learner could not remember the word, but knows the word (lexical retrieval problem)
3. Learner does not know the word - the word is completely new to the learner

Task Two (writing a sentence including a target topic):
Images representing the target subject area were presented to the learner, and the learner had to describe the pictures using a sentence. If the student did not know what to write, the examiner would describe the picture in the mother tongue to give the context. The examiner also supplied the word, if the learner could not remember the word in English. Thus, the results were classified as in the first task. While the first task focused mainly on nouns, the second task allowed us to examine other words classes (verbs, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, etc.)

Task Three (independent writing):
This was a free writing task where learners were asked to describe their family. If the learner did not know what to write, the examiner provided some ideas in the mother tongue to elicit a written response from the learner. If the learner was not able to write a sentence, they were encouraged to write at least a couple of isolated words connected to the topic.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

Although our action-research project focused upon the writing skills of language learners in Italy and Croatia, the results do demonstrate the readiness and willingness of the children in the sample to communicate in English in both written and spoken form. To contextualise some of the results from our research it is worth looking briefly at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)[2]. The framework was developed from over twenty years of research into second (foreign) language learning. It was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive foundation for:

- The development of syllabuses and curriculum guidelines
- The design of teaching and learning materials
- The assessment of foreign language proficiency

The global representation of three CEFR levels (Basic User, Intermediate User and Proficient User) is given in Table 1 below. This table has been developed to give reference or orientation points for teachers and curriculum planners.

Table 1

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal

[2] See https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions

		interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

The Italian Ministry of University, Education and Research (MIUR[3]; 2012) makes direct reference to the framework when stating the competences children must have at the end of primary school for 'scuola media'[4] English language:

At the end of primary school MIUR affirms in the document that the competences of English language must be on the level A1 (p. 39).

At the end of "Scuola media" MIUR affirms in the document that the competences of English language must be on the level A2 (p. 40).

The Croatian National Educational Standard (2005, p.82) explicitly states that children after eight years of studying foreign language, thus at the end of what is in Croatia elementary school, should achieve competences at the level A2.

Current teaching methods of teaching English as a second language in Italy

In Italy at present, children learn words and phrases by heart, not by any type of phonological instruction. They copy new words from the board (please see Figure 7 and Figure 8 in the Appendix) or books or learn through mnemonics and/or songs. Most children, when they are learning how to write, will pronounce an English word as if it is an Italian word: for example, if they have to write *'beautiful'* they will say bay/a/oo/tifol. This way of writing, although methodologically wrong for all students, is even more confusing for learners with dyslexia as it does not give any direct, explicit systematic route for converting English speech sounds to graphemes. As Costenaro, Daloiso & Favaro, (2014) put it: "… *it is common practice for some primary teachers to have students copy long lists of words in order to enhance the memorization of word*

[3] http://www.miur.gov.it/

[4] 'Scuola media' is a type of middle school for pupils aged 11 - 14

spelling, which is a very painful and ineffective task for pupils with dyslexia" (p. 209). There is no explicit attention to phonological, morphological or syntactic elements in teaching. Methods primarily assume that learners will spontaneously pick up language skills without explicit instruction. The MIUR sets out the expected implicit methods that teachers should adopt "*…Teacher will take into account the ability of the child to develop spontaneously model of pronunciation and model of intonation. This process will be integrated into the language used at school and into any other languages the learner knows, extending and implicitly differentiating the various linguistic components (phonic-acoustic, articulatory, syntactic and semantic aspects) …" (2012,* p. 38).

Current teaching methods of teaching English as a second-language in Croatia

In Croatia the CEFR is also being used as a reference point: The Primary Education Syllabus defines the level of English language proficiency according to CEFR levels (Mohammadi & Golaghaei, 2017). In Croatian schools, during the first two years of learning English, oral communication is highlighted and students are only rewriting a selection of the words they are introduced to orally. As stated in the Croatian National Educational Standard (2012), during the first year of learning learners are "remembering the images of the words and isolated sentences at the level of previously acquired oral examples". In the second year, students are starting to rewrite isolated words and sentences according to orthographical patterns.

It is important to note that the Croatian terms used in the document imply that this process is still more connected to drawing symbols than to the actual writing process. In the second grade, specific English letters not present in the Croatian alphabet are introduced (x, y, w, q). During the third grade, learners are expected to write a small text according to the previously learned examples – usually a description of an object or a person. At this stage the standard guidance document is explicitly advising that learners should be encouraged to notice the differences between the written form and the pronunciation of high frequency words.

Dictation is introduced in the fourth grade, while recognising and reading of phonetic symbols is introduced in the fifth grade. Thus, during the fifth or sixth year of studying English the transcription of the language is introduced, but still there is no systematic teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences and the writing system is acquired mainly at the global level, remembering the orthographical representations of the frequent words. Similar to the way Italian learners learn English, Croatian students also try to remember the way English words are written by pronouncing them in a Croatian way, adding new burdens to an already overwhelmed working memory. This of course, is especially taxing for learners with dyslexia.

Other factors to consider: orthographic features of L1 and 'teacher features'

We will now look at some other factors we need to take into account when considering learners performance on second-language tests and their progress with second-language learning. Firstly, we will briefly consider some aspects of Italian and Croatian orthographies relative to English.

Italian orthography

In Italian although the mapping from phonology to orthography is considered to be transparent, it is not totally regular, as there are some phonemes that have word-specific realisations. Of the twenty-one letters that make up the Italian alphabet:

- <a>, <b>, <c>, <d>, <f>, <l>, <m>, <n>, <p>, <q>, <r>, <t>, <v>, have one-to-one grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences.
- <h> is either silent or used as a diacritical grapheme[5] (for example, <g> is sounded as /dʒ/ in 'il getto' meaning 'a jet' versus /g/ in 'il ghetto' meaning 'ghetto').
- <c>, <g>, <i>, <u>, <s> have different sounds depending upon context-sensitive rules
- <e> <o> <z> have two possible pronunciations depending upon the words they appear in (lexical knowledge is required to pronounce them correctly) (Job, Peressotti, & Mulatti, 2016).

The letters <j>, <k>, <w> <x> and <y> are only used in 'loan words' from other languages or, very occasionally, in proper nouns, so are not strictly considered to be part of the Italian alphabet[6]. The seven vowel sounds in Italian, are generally represented by single-letter graphemes and there is not the range of possible spelling choices for complex vowel sounds that is found in English.

[5] i.e. used to change the sound associated with the grapheme to which it is added.

[6] For further information see, for example, http://aboutworldlanguages.com/italian

Croatian orthography

The Croatian language has thirty phonemes (Volenec, 2013) which are all represented by individual graphemes, thus Croatian orthography is very transparent. There are twenty-five consonants in the Croatian phonemic inventory, but it lacks complex vowel sounds. It has five simple vowels: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. None of these map directly onto English vowel sounds; even the Croatian /e/, which is represented by the same International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbol as with the English vowel /e/, has a markedly different quality (Smojver, 2010). Two vowel sequences are not found in the Croatian primary phonological system, although contacts of vowels can be found in foreign words (e.g. 'kakao', 'aorta') or at the borders of morphemes (Maksimović, 2011).

With the exception of the sequence <*io*>, in Croatian the phoneme /j/ is inserted between two vowels, especially if the first phoneme in the sequence is /i/ (cf. Croatian version of names: *Lucija*, *Antonija*, *Marija*). So, the main differences between the Croatian and English languages are the number of vowels and their orthography, especially regarding diphthongs; while English shows great diversity of complex vowel sounds and the way they are orthographically represented, Croatian arguably has one or no diphthongs.

The length of vowels is not described at the segmental (phonemic) level: no short and long vowels are considered separate phonemes. However, distinctions are made at the suprasegmental level (in descriptions of prosody, intonation etc.) because length is a feature of the Croatian prosodic system. For example, the Croatian phoneme sequence /pas/ with short stress means 'dog', whereas with a longer duration the meaning changes: /pa:s/ means 'waist'). So, you can see that the length of the vowel unlike in English, is not represented in the Croatian orthography. These sorts of differences are metalinguistically explained and taught at the end of elementary school[7].

Additionally, the Croatian phonological system lacks some consonants present in English: the dentals */θ/* as in ***th****in, /ð/* as in ***th****is* and the labiovelar */w/* as in ***w****ait.* These consonants are often, especially in beginner and intermediate level learners, substituted with /t/, /d/ and /v/, respectively, those being their closest Croatian correlates. Another, possible area of confusion lies in the grapheme <h> which has a different phoneme link in Croatian i.e. /x/ (as in the Scots word 'loch'), whereas in English the associated phoneme is /h/ (Smojver, 2010). However, in comparison to English the full range of consonant phonemes are mapped onto unique graphemes in Croatian – so spelling choices are far clearer than in English, where it is relatively common to have many spelling alternatives for the same phoneme. One final difference, is that in English consonant gemination (doubling of the same consonant within a word as in 'rabbit') is frequent, whereas in Croatian consonant gemination appears very rarely.

One final point to note is that when learning to read and learning the alphabet, Croatian children do not learn letter names since transparent orthography implies that every letter has only one possible sound, i.e. grapheme-phoneme correspondences are very consistent. Accordingly, the Croatian alphabet[8] is the same as the Croatian

[7] There are eight grades in Croatian elementary school: from the age of 6-7 to the age of 14-15.
[8] Further details about the Croatian orthography can be found at http://aboutworldlanguages.com/croatian

phoneme inventory, thus children name the letters pronouncing the corresponding phoneme. The idea of letters having names as well as sounds is therefore not one that comes easily to learners used to a transparent orthography.

The written form of graphemes not found in L1

In both Croatian and Italian schools, because there is no structured, cumulative teaching of phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences the formation of letters that do not occur in the learner's L1 are not explicitly taught. This places a further burden on learners as they may be struggling to decide how to join letters whilst trying to keep the phoneme-to-grapheme links (or the memory of the visual representation of the word) in mind. The additional difficulty of learners deciphering English words written in script from the board must also be considered as a potential barrier to learning. Because of the difficulty that learners have in deciphering teachers' script from the board and deciphering their own copies of the words that they have transcribed, some Italian language specialists have recommend that block capitals should be used by teachers and learners to write English words, to give them a clearer perception of the actual letters within the words they are learning.

Teachers' knowledge of the pronunciation and prosody of English

Finally, we should consider the pronunciation of English phonemes by teachers of English. Wheelock (2016) makes the point that pronunciation is often neglected or considered to be the least important of the basic language skills in second language teaching. She states: *Native speaker pronunciation is widely believed to be unattainable, and many instructors find pronunciation difficult to teach due to inadequate skills and/or materials.*

Analysis of the Learners' Spelling Representations

We will now give some examples of the ways the children in our research sample represented English words. Some of the points link more to one orthography than the other, but some patterns occurred in both the Croatian and the Italian learners' writing. There is not space within the article to discuss the whole of the findings in detail, but some more examples are available in the Appendix.

Order of the graphemes

There were several examples that showed that the learners knew all/most of the letters within the word but had problems with sequencing the letters 'fruits' was written as <fru**ist**>, or <juc**ie**> for 'juice'. There were also examples where you can see that the learner knows there is a double letter string somewhere, but is not sure of its location within the word. So, for example, 'door' is written as <dorr>). Since our pilot research included children with dyslexia or dyslexia and language impairment, it would be interesting to see if this a specific feature appearing in the clinical group or if it could be considered a developmental stage in learning to write in English. We know that dyslexia is often connected to difficulties in sequencing and remembering order particularly when there is a heavy burden on memory (e.g. Friedmann & Gvion, 2010; Kohnen, Nickels, Castles, Friedmann, & McArthur, 2012; Helland, 2007; Plaza & Guitton, 1997).

Voiced and unvoiced phoneme pairs

It is quite common for Italian learners with dyslexia to have trouble in Italian with distinguishing and representing the sounds /c/ and /g/ and so we see that 'cat' was spelt <gat>. In this example we can also see the influence of the mother tongue because 'gatto' means 'cat' in Italian, so we could speculate that both the semantic representation and the phonological representation of the Italian word interfered with the spelling of 'cat' in English. Errors in voicing[9] are also one of the most frequent errors of students with dyslexia in Croatian. These errors are transferred also in subtle ways to English: e.g. writing <dring> for 'drink'.

Representing Vowels

The lack of overlap of any vowel sounds between Croatian and English led to some interesting representations. For example, 'bus' was spelt <bas> in three cases – but this is not surprising as there is no similar vowel sound to /ʌ/ in Croatian - /æ/ is the closest vowel sound to it. This can explain why we see the use of <a> for /ʌ/ in 'bus'. Far from showing poor discrimination, this actually shows good phoneme discrimination and an evolving representational skill set. In 'shoes' the vowel sound was often represented by the Croatian learners as <u>. Again, this is not surprising if we consider that this is the English phoneme that equates most closely with the <u> /uː/ grapheme-phoneme pair in Croatian. There are several spelling choices for this phoneme in English – compare for example, ('juice', 'group' 'rule', 'crucial').

Both sets of learners had problems with diphthongs – such a variety of spellings is possible in English (English learners with dyslexia also have problems with the representation of these sounds). The /aɪ/ (vowel sound in 'bike') can be spelt in a wide variety of ways in English. It is a diphthongal vowel glide (complex vowel sound), if said slowly we can feel the movement made when saying /j/ (as in the first phoneme in 'yob'). Perhaps this is why it was often interpreted as containing the <j> grapheme (<bajk>) by the Croatian learners and as containing the <y> grapheme (<bayk>) by the Italian learners. 'Eyes' was also written as <ais> in the Italian sample. The word 'ice-cream' – showed incredible variation – with more than 18 different representations. This is not surprising when you consider the representation of /s/ by <c> (followed by <e>) as well as the two long vowel sounds. Furthermore, the actual pronunciation of 'eyes' and 'ice' can be very similar in natural, rapid speech.

Double letters or not?

There may be further reasons why Italian learners make mistakes with double letters, because of features of their native language and their learnt perceptions of teachers' pronunciations. It is common practice for teachers in Italy to emphasise the presence of double consonants in the middle of some words (like 'paLLa'; 'maMMa', 'coLLa'). So, for example, teachers may also subconsciously emphasize certain sounds within English words to help learners hear the sounds, but this may mislead the learner into thinking that they need to use a double letter string. So, when there is an English word with an unexpected phoneme-grapheme pairing (like <ow> to represent the phoneme /əʊ/) the teacher may be pronouncing the word with undue emphasis to try to make

[9] Voiced and unvoiced pairs differ in that one features vibrations in the vocal folds when uttered and the other does not. In English, for example: /s/ and /z/; /f/ and /v/; /p/ and /b/ etc.

the presence of two letters clear… but the child mixes the hint with the Italian strategy, so he thinks there is a double letter somewhere. It is likely that this is why you can find 'window' written <windool>. This shows how complex L1 issues can combine to lead the learner to use the wrong strategy in spelling in English. It also shows that spelling that looks bizarre can actually have a complex, but understandable rationale when analysed fully.

Sometimes spellings that look bizarre have a commendable rationale

Some of the representations in our sample showed us that we need to consider what is success in language acquisition and what skills contribute to gaining mastery of a language (written and spoken). Sometimes the rationale of learners was commendable, but it was difficult to spot. The case of 'window' being spelt <windool> already mentioned above falls into this category. Another spelling of the first syllable of 'window' shows an interesting rationale based on the orthography of the learner's L1 (Italian). The learner spells 'window' as <uindool>. The phoneme /w/ in Italian is relatively rare. When it occurs, it is usually written using <u> paired with <o> as in 'uovo' ('egg') and 'fuoco' ('fire') - so what looks like a bizarre spelling is actually a close approximation to the target string of phonemes (in the first syllable) using <u>, which is found in some Italian words to represent /w/.

Maybe in this section on apparently bizarre spelling we can also put an example of the use of <h> in what seems an odd position, that is, when children are writing <hai have> for 'I have'. See Figure 2 for details of the present tense of the Italian auxiliary verb 'avere' (to have).

Verb: *avere (to have)*	
I have	io ho
You have	tu hai
She / it has	lei ha
He / it has	lui ha
We have	noi abbiamo
All of you have	voi avete
They have	loro hanno

Figure 2

It is interesting to unpack the process that leads to this representation since it is one of the most common mistakes that occurs in English and it's deeply connected to the Italian language. It appears to be a generalisation from the Italian auxiliary verb 'to have': the regular 1st person present tense of the verb in Italian is 'io ho' (but the <h> is not sounded). So, when the learners need to write the phrase 'I have' in English, it

seems that they may not appreciate that 'I' is the subject of the verb. They have this knowledge of syntax/word class in Italian, but it appears that they have a problem with multi-tasking. As it is generally difficult for Italian learners with dyslexia to remember to put the <h> in when writing 'io ho' in Italian, this habit of mind transfers to situations when they are writing in English: they are incorrectly generalising and becoming confused. They know they should keep in mind the <h> grapheme because of its silent presence in Italian, but since the verb 'to have' already has 'h' inside it, learners tend be put the <h> where there is a place. Therefore, the misrepresentation of <ai> for 'I' becomes <hai>. See Figure 3. As you will also note, 'hai' also forms the familiar 'you have' ('tu hai') in Italian.

IO **H**O - I HAVE → **H** AI HAVE

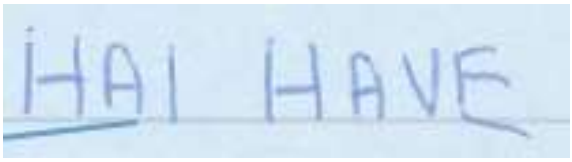

Figure 3

This inconsistent writing of the grapheme <h> in English words is one of the most common errors of Italian learners of English. Since this error appears also in the oral production, thus 'apple' is not only written <happle> or <happl> but also pronounced with the /h/ in the initial position of the word, this should also be considered as a phonological and not only orthographical error. Phoneme <h> is not a discriminative phoneme in Italian. As mentioned earlier, <h> is either silent or used as a diacritical grapheme. When starting to learn a foreign language, Italian speakers attune their perception for the new phonological system, similarly to Japanese speakers when learning the discrimination between /l/ and /r/. However, while Japanese speakers lack the first step in this process – discrimination, Italian speakers discriminate and perceive the new phoneme, but while learning the new phonological forms (i.e. new words) they over-generalise the usage of the phoneme. This error should decrease with the expansion of the mental lexicon: more phonological forms, especially minimal pairs (e.g. air – hair) make the representations more stable and errors become less frequent, or at least observed by the speaker and corrected.

The use of <c> in spelling representations of <shoes> at first seems bizarre. But there are two things to consider from learners' L1. Firstly, the Italian word for 'shoes' is 'scarpe' (so the letter string <sc> is clearly present in the word in F1); secondly, if you consider that in Italian the letter strings <sci> and <sce> both generally contain the phoneme /ʃ/, then the choice seems much more understandable. Here is a selection of the spellings with an analysis of the rationale/ comments about the spelling choices the learner makes:

SCUS → missing the <i> from Italian orthography

SUUOS → missing the <sci> sequence that would create a soft sound (in Italian).

SCUSE → missing the <i> from Italian orthography

SCOSE → missing <sci> sequence that would create a soft sound (in Italian).

SCYUS → the use of <y> to represent /j/

SHOOS → partial visual representation; also <oo> is a possible representation for /u:/

SCIUSE → almost correct in Italian phonology

SCIUS → almost correct in Italian phonology

SHUS → partial visual representation

SCHUS → partial visual representation.

SUIIS → missing a correct representation of /ʃ/ in both Italian (e.g. <sci>) and English (e.g. <sh>)

Use of L1 grapheme-phoneme pairing to represent a second-language grapheme-phoneme pairing

The word 'shoes' was spelt with great variety within the Croatian sample, however there was less variation than with the Italian learners' representations. Croatian learners were more prone in general to use phonetic spelling, thus the majority of children used phonetic spelling including Croatian letter Š to represent <sh> /ʃ/ and <u> to represent /u:/. We can observe the progress in learning the visual representation of the word: <Š> is replaced with <sh>, <z> at the end of the word with <s>. See Figure 4.

ŠUS
ŠUZ
SUZ
SHUZ
SHUES

Figure 4

The biggest problem for Croatian speakers is the vowel because the vowel string <oe> is not only not present and contra-intuitive in Croatian, but also not so frequent and consistent in English, compared to some other combinations as, for example <oo>.

Readiness to Write in English

Interestingly, using the native language orthography when writing English words, or in the case of Croatian, basically phonetic spelling, allowed Croatian learners to express

themselves better and be more successful in the free writing task than the Italian learners. Half of the Croatian children were able to write a short text about their family. See Figure 5 for two examples. These are quite easy for an English reader to make sense of, as long as the English speaker realises (or knows) that <j> is being used to represent /j/ (as in the opening sound in 'yell') and <v> is being used instead of <w> in some cases.

Maj dad olvejs go tu farm večetobols. Maj mom vorks a lot and rid. Maj sister stadis ol najt.

Maj najm is Mark ij liv vid maj granji grandad and maj dad is a diliveri gaj and maj mom is a bajker.

Figure 5

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that some of the Croatian children are more aware of the errors they make and while they try to cope with the word spelling and writing short sentences, they refused to write the short text about their family as they were conscious that they would be unable to complete the tasks without errors. The Italian learners were generally far less ready to write independently. To illustrate the errors of Italian learners we attach the example written by Italian student while writing homework. This example is not part of the data collection for this action-research project, however it gives a good insight into writing skills and errors.

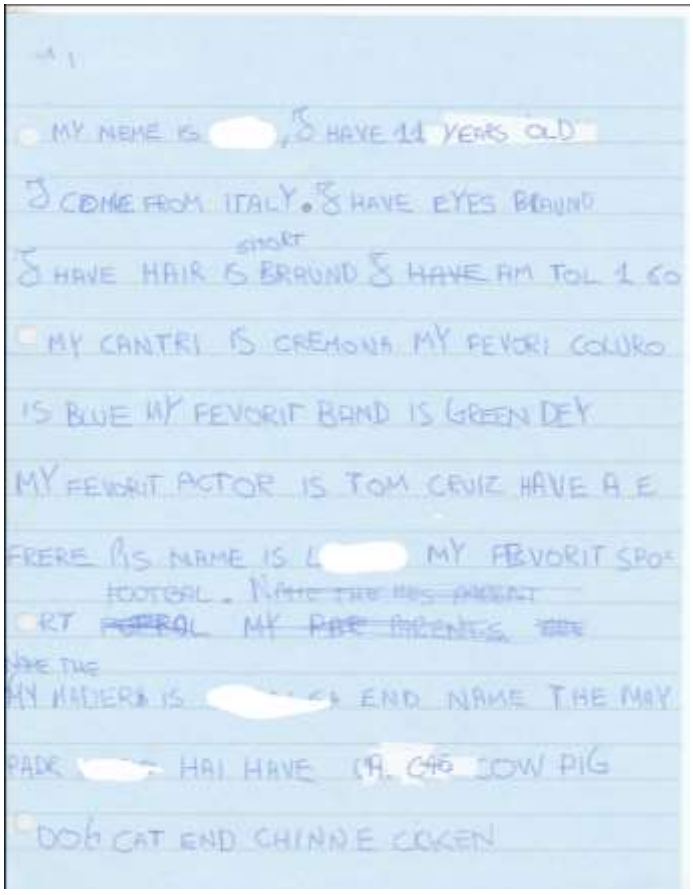

Figure 6

CONCLUSIONS

We drew some preliminary conclusions from our action-research project:

- When the Italian children did not know the target word they tended to switch from English to Italian orthography and they wrote the sounds within the word with Italian phoneme representations in mind. (For example, 'window' written as <uindol>, <vidor>). But generally, the spelling representations of the Italian children (in spite of having a relatively transparent orthography) are guided by predominantly visual strategies and not by phonology – this may well be because copying is the main teaching strategy in Italian schools.
- The higher success rate in single word spelling in the Italian sample looks like greater mastery of spelling, but it is more likely to be indicative of the rote learning methods used and the range of words chosen for the project. It should not therefore be assumed that this accuracy would transfer beyond known words. It should be noted however, that there were examples of whole word strategies in both sets of learners (Italian and Croatian).
- When learning to read and to write in the native language the child is mastering the alphabetic principle and adding to the mental lexicon new representations of words – the orthographical representation. However, when learning to write in the second language, the learner is using already learned mechanisms, rules and principles, these are leading to specific and understandable errors. Mastering orthographical representations can be seen as a continuum, from writing the words using native language orthography, even using the graphemes that are not present in English alphabet, for example, writing 'shoes' as <šuz> or 'television' as <televižin>, to the correct orthographical representations for the familiar and frequent words.

Editor's Note:

This article gives us some intriguing 'ponder points' as professionals who teach and assess learners of all ages with dyslexia.

1. *The role that accent/dialect/pronunciation plays in what we do as specialist teachers and specialist teacher assessors is complex.* How do we modify practice when our accent/pronunciation differs markedly from that of the learner? Are we aware of over-emphasising sounds in some cases in attempts to support learners, but might this work against the learners' perceptions in some cases? Do we always take the part our accent plays into account (for example when teaching new phoneme-grapheme links, when reading items in a standardised spelling test)? Do we always carefully consider the part that accent plays in standardised tests – think of CTOPP2 and its soundtracks – how can the American accent and indeed the quality of the recording in such test resources potentially bias our test findings. These sorts of questions perhaps don't occur to us as much as they should, but of course in the context of second-language learning they are much more obvious.

2. The role of written language in literacy development is something that most of us might take for granted within the specialist teaching profession: reading and writing are seen as mutually reinforcing inputs. However as Benedetti notes*: '*It

appears that the spoken language is not primary in second language acquisition (at least in instructed contexts) as it is in first language acquisition. Researchers and language teachers should therefore take the role of written language into account more than it has hitherto been the case (2008, p.9). Vickov (2007) takes a similar line in arguing for the contribution that phonemic transcription makes to learners' linguistic awareness of second languages: '… Far from claiming that good acquisition and, consequently, proficiency in English directly (or indirectly, for that matter) depends upon phonemic transcription, I still maintain that, properly taught, it helps to make learners of any age more sensitive to this aspect of learning a foreign language, especially one as irregular and as difficult in this respect as English. The basics of the English phonological system, phonemic transcription being only one of its many segments, contributes towards raising learners' awareness of this important but, unfortunately, long neglected aspect' (p.132).

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Appendix

Table 2 features a sample of the responses to Test One – a single word writing task. The Italian learners' responses are in the clear cells. The Croatian learners' responses are in the grey-shaded cells.

Table 2

ICE - CREAM	**FRUITS**	**SHOES**
AYSCRIN	FRUIT	SCUS
AIS GREAM	FRUITZ	SUUOS
AYSCKRYM	FRUZE	SCUSE
AI SCRIM	FRUITS	SCOSE
AIS CRIM	FRUYZ	SCYUS
ICRE CREAM	FRUIST	SHOOS
ICE CREAM	FRUITE	SUISE
AISC - RIM	FRUIZ	SCIUSE
A ISCRIN	FRUIT	SCIUS
AIS CRIM	FRIZ	SIUS (SINCERS)
AIS SCRID	FRUZ	SHUS
HAI CRIME	FRUIT	SHOOLSLE
ICE CREAM	FRUIT	SCHUS
ICE CREAM	FRUIT	SHOES
ICE CREAM	FUIT	SUIIS
ICE CREAM	FRUITS	SHOES
ICE CREAM	FRUIT	SOUS
AIS CRAIM	FRUT	SHUS
ICE - CREAM	FRUIT	SCIUS
ISCRIM	FRUT	ŠUS
ICECREAM	FRUYT	SHUES
A ICE CRIME	FOOT	SHOES
AJSKRE	FRAT	SHUZ
AJSKRIM	FRUT	SUZ
ICEKREM	FRUTE	ŠUS
ASKRIM	FRUT	ŠUZ

Table 3 features a sample of the responses to Test Two – a sentence writing task from a single image stimulus. The Italian learners' responses are in the clear cells. The Croatian learners' responses are in the grey-shaded cells.

Table 3

SENTENCE 4	SENTENCE 8
HI IS A DRINC	SHE WOCH TV
HE IS DRINS	SHE IS WOCIS TV

HY DRINK WUOTER	SCY WOCHE TV
ORANG JUIS	TV
YI IS DRINK	SCY WOOC TV
HE DRINK	SHE WATCH TVI
HE IS DRAINC THE ORANGE	SHE WAGH TV
HE DRINK	SHE IT TV
SHE DRINC	SHE WOCES TV
HI DRINK	SHE LOKK WUOH TV
HI DRINK	WAC TV
HE GRINSCH	SHE WATCH TV
HE DRINK	SHE'S WATCH TV
HE DRINK	SHE WATCH TV
HE DRINK*	SHE LOOK IS TV
HE IS DRINKING	SHE IS WATCHING T.V.
HE DRINCHING E ORANGE GUK	SHE WHATC THE TV
HI DRINK	SHE IS LOOK TV
HE IS DRINK	SHE IS WATCH TV
THE BOJ IS DRINKING	ŠI IS VACING TELEVIŠIN
THAT MAN IS DRINKING WHATER.	THAT GIRL IS WATCHING TV
HE IS DRINKING A JUCIE	SHE IS WACHING A TV
HE IS DRING	SHE IG WACING TV
A BOJS DIRING	SHI VOĆ TVI
HI IS ÐVRIKING A GLAS AF VODTER	ŠI IS VAČIN TIVI

Figure 7 and Figure 8 are showing the lists of vocabulary that Italian student is copying to his notebook.

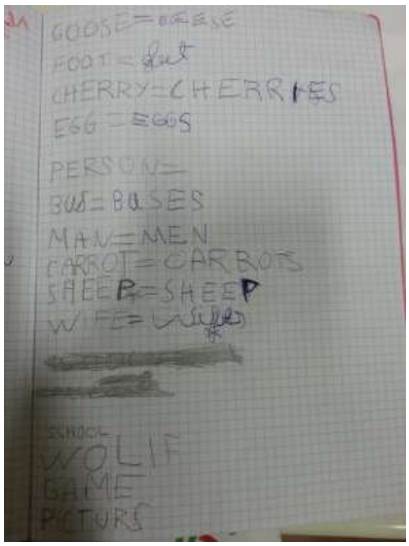

Figure 7


BOOK=BOOKS
FOX=FOXES
PENCIL=PENCILS
CHILD=CHILDREN
FISH=FISH
DESK=DESKS
PHOTO
POTATOES
OX OXEN
DIARY DIARIES

Figure 8

Meet the Team

I'm Maja Kelić a speech and language pathologist, working mainly with children with dyslexia and language disorders, undertaking assessment and delivering therapy. I have a PhD in language and cognitive neuroscience and my area of research is reading development and reading disorders. I'm one of the official lecturers of the Croatian Dyslexia Association and the author of the book "*Reading Development*", a book for Croatian practitioners and teachers describing the influence of language in reading development.

I'm Michela Betinelli, a special needs teacher trainer and parents' counsellor. I have the European Competence Certificate (European Qualification Framework 22.1) and I'm a licensed lecturer for *The Italian Dyslexia Association*. My role includes organising teacher training workshops and specific laboratories for children and parents, preparing individualised materials and providing mediation between the family and the school. I mainly work with children and young people affected by learning disabilities and associated disorders (language difficulties, behavioral difficulties and ADHD). I'm also a licensed ICT Tools Trainer for Special Education (Children, Parents and Teachers).