

## How to enhance primary school EFL-teacher curriculum-design competences: the Competence Unit Design Model (CUD Mod)

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the development of curriculum design and methodological competences for pre-service and in-service EFL teachers in primary school, considered as essential aspects of the professionalism of teachers. In line with the national and international literature, it addresses some epistemological and methodological aspects of EFL curriculum design with particular reference to how this is dealt with in the Italian school system, even though most of the reflections and methodological proposals that are here presented could be considered useful for any school system.

The paper proposes a competence design model, called CUD Mod, based on the “competence unit” framework, experimented in a variety of action-research projects conducted in Tuscan schools at primary and lower secondary level.

**Keywords:** curriculum design; EFL teachers; primary school; competences.

## 1. Introduction

A good educational pathway, even before being implemented, needs to be thought through and carefully planned by reviewing the many variables (contextual, educational, organizational, emotional, relational, etc.) that accompany the teaching-learning process and the teacher-pupil educational relationship.

After outlining a possible profile of teacher's design competences, in line with the international literature, this paper proposes a competence design model, called CUD Mod, here presented as a functional model to:

- 1) operationally design the competence curriculum in primary school;
- 2) develop EFL teachers' competences for curriculum design, starting from a model applicable to initial and in-service training, both in Italy and other European countries.

## 2. Curriculum design competences in the teacher's professional profile

Today curriculum design competence is a key element of teachers' professional profiles and consequently improvement in the quality of pupils' learning can only be pursued investing on the empowerment of teachers' initial training and vocational skills (Commission of the European Communities, 2007).

The initial development and ongoing review of teachers' professional competences are aspects that internationally the OECD (2009, 2012, 2013a, 2013b), UNESCO (2015), the European Union (Commission of the European Communities, 2007, 2011, 2012) and other research organizations (RAND Education, 2015; MET Project, 2013) recognize as a priority, not only to raise the quality of education systems in various countries but also to increase Europe's competitiveness. However, in a highly globalized world context, such as today, concepts like "competitiveness" and "development" cannot be interpreted only in terms of financial and economic indicators, but should also be read with the aim of increasing levels of social cohesion (Commission of the European Communities, 2007) through smart, sustainable and inclusive economies (Commission of the European Communities, 2010).

The quality of teaching and teachers' professionalism are now recognized as strategic factors both for education and social growth policies, and within the range of competences that a teacher should develop, curriculum design plays a fundamental role in guiding his teaching action in an intentional, systematic and reflexive way. School curriculum design requires the activation of intellectual, operational, relational and technical resources, aimed at translating a specific vision of the world and human beings into educational initiatives. It always implies being referred to an objective, for this process cannot be considered a simple technique, transferable to different contexts, but needs to be adapted to specific learning situations,

checking to what extent it can change and improve existing reality. Designing means, first of all, starting from the analysis of the existing in order to head towards the future, towards the identification of concrete pathways for transforming reality, able to sustain a perspective oriented to continuous improvement (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2011; Reigeluth, 2013).

Within schools two principal aspects best characterize curriculum design: the conceptual, creative, constructive perspective on the one hand and the control, guidance, monitoring and evaluation practice on the other. In the first case, through a bottom-up approach possible lines of action oriented to problem solving or need satisfaction are conceived. In the second case, design allows the “controllability” of learning processes and teaching products. This increases the effectiveness and efficiency levels of teaching activities by intervening, even during construction, for the redefinition of objectives, strategies, methods and means to achieve the final result. Design flexibility plays a very important role in the success of educational activity (Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1994).

In school there are different levels of design. We can speak of a macro design level, which involves the entire teaching staff of the institution, when it refers to a variety of activities and educational services, such as the planning of the educational opportunities offered, the structure of the school curriculum, the definition of improvement plans extended to the whole school. At a micro level, design concerns the individual teacher or the team of teachers, and is referred to preparation of teaching modules, units, project work, etc. In both cases, design is always “contextualized” and “intentional”. Even when it starts just from a “creative and undefined idea”, later it must be transformed into systematic actions grounded in behaviors that have their own significance as they are applicable in a real context. Design therefore cannot be a spontaneous activity but is rather the result of well thought and rational work expressed by the collectivity of teachers (McTighe & Wiggins, 2004; Pinar, 2013).

Thinking of teaching action as an intentional act requires the adoption of a rigorous methodology, characterized by phases, in order to predict *ex ante* the pathway to accomplish, so as to be able to implement it if necessary. These phases, which in practice are not regulated by a sequential logic, involve: 1. needs analysis, 2. goal setting, 3. general structure of the contents, 4. teaching strategies and techniques, 5. learning assessment. To each phase of the design cycle can be associated specific competences related to teachers’ professional profiles. Pedagogical literature (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Morin, 2000; White, 2003; Midoro, 2005; Danielson, 2011; Toch & Rothman, 2008; Perrenoud, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2010; Feistritzer, Griffin & Linnajarvi, 2011; Bandini et al., 2015), the works produced by the European Union (Commission of the European Communities, 2007, 2011) and those elaborated by the Ministries of Education of different countries in the world (Ministry of Education and Science of Spain, 1990; US Department of Education, 1992; Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l’Éducation, 2001; OECD, 2003; General Teaching Council for England, 2006; Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2007, 2008; Unità Italiana di Eurydice, 2012) have all provided

various interpretative models of teacher's professional profiles, and each of them stresses the importance of design competences as a distinctive feature of teachers' work.

### 3. Teaching English in primary school: curriculum design and innovation

The development of curriculum design competences is a key activity in teaching English as a foreign language in primary school, as emphasized in many studies conducted in Europe and other parts of the world (Grenfell, Kelly & Jones, 2003; Kelly, 2015).

As proposed by the Italian school legislation, such curriculum design competences must respect the provisions outlined in the *National Guidelines for the curriculum* published by the Ministry of Education, University and Research in 2012 (MIUR, 2012). These constitute the national curriculum that all Italian schools at primary and lower secondary level are called upon to implement. Therefore, they are a constant reference point for the instructional design.

In order to provide common guidelines to support teachers' work, the *National Guidelines* have clearly defined two aspects, which will be detailed in the following sections:

1. purposes and epistemological foundations of teaching English in primary school;
2. identification of specific competences, knowledge and skills to be promoted over the five years of compulsory English language teaching in primary school.

#### 3.1. TEFL purposes and epistemological foundations

As regards the cultural framework of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), the *National Guidelines* identify some general criteria designed to guarantee the unity and equity of the education system, as well as to support teachers' work. In emphasizing the educational value of teaching English in primary schools, the *National Guidelines* assign to learning English, together with the mother language, two specific purposes:

1. develop multilingual and multicultural competences within a complex, multiethnic and globalized society;
2. acquire the first tools to exercise an active citizenship in the context where pupil lives and even beyond the borders of the national territory.

In line with the achievement of the objectives mentioned above, the following proposed criteria are taken from the *National Guidelines*.

*1. Competences in foreign languages and European citizenship.* Thanks to encountering other European languages, a pupil is able to deepen awareness of European citizenship, so that owning a diversified repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources becomes a tool to interact

with others, even when “the other” belongs to very distant cultural and geographical contexts. In fact, studying different languages, a pupil learns to recognize the existence of different linguistic and cultural systems and experiences the variety of means that every language has to think, speak, communicate, convey emotions (Garrido & Álvarez, 2006; Sercu, 2006).

2. *Horizontality and verticality of teaching and learning EFL.* To make sure that learning becomes a highly educational activity, to the extent that it contributes to a person’s growth and development considering the local and global context in which the pupil lives, it is necessary that teaching EFL is not an episodic event, fragmented, disconnected from the rest of the curriculum. It is essential that it is designed through identifying horizontal connections with other subjects and developing vertically the progression of knowledge and competences needed to pass from one level of schooling to another. The horizontality and verticality of the English curriculum must also be seen from the perspective of building a synergistic connection between the formal learning, that the pupil acquires in school, and non-formal and informal learning, with which he comes into contact in everyday life. Particularly regarding the English language, this lifewide dimension, that links the contexts of life and children’s learning, is very strong. Indeed, in everyday life the child interacts, even unconsciously, with linguistic expressions, terms, phrases, idioms in English, conveyed mostly by mass media and internet, which for him are absolutely familiar because they already belong to his linguistic heritage. All this does not represent a *linguistic shock* for the child, a refusal of all that he doesn’t understand fully *of* and *about* the new language. The habit of using words borrowed from other languages assumes an absolute naturalness and spontaneity, so they are not perceived as “strange” because they are related to the common lexicon used in activities, situations and forms of interaction that are constantly present in everyday life (Tomlinson, 2011).

3. *Interdisciplinary connections and “new humanism”.* It is important to build common curriculum design spaces between English and other subjects (Gibbons, 2002), implementing the concept of “new humanism” present in the *National Guidelines*. This means that the school is called upon to enable pupils to recognize the relationships between one’s personal microcosm and the macrocosm of humanity and the planet, because what happens in the world affects everyone’s life and at the same time every person is responsible for the future of humanity (MIUR, 2012: 11). In order to educate children to develop this awareness and responsibility, it is necessary to build an adequate store of knowledge, which, however, does not coincide with the accumulation of lots of information in many areas, but rather requires full mastery of single subjects and, simultaneously, the ability to process multiple connections at interdisciplinary levels. Common curriculum design can become an area of intervention aimed not only at language development but also at cognitive development and the construction of cross-curricular competences such as *bridging* (Feuerstein et al., 2006). In this sense, it stimulates a reticular thought development through which the child uses knowledge learned in different contexts and subjects to structure and solve problems. It no longer operates within single subjects but in a broader perspective of learning to learn.

4. *Build relationships between the mother language and EFL.* Referring to the relationship between English and the mother language, special care must be given (from the very first years) to phonological peculiarities and differences of pronunciation, so as not to generate difficulties in understanding and speaking. In this regard it is appropriate for the teacher to stimulate a child's ability to develop control of multiple pronunciation and intonation patterns so as to activate in as natural a way as possible a multilingual system (Celce-Murcia & McIntosh, 1991; Guerin, 2017).

5. *Methodologies for teaching EFL: communicative approach use.* From a methodological point of view a communicative approach to language learning should be privileged, considering the different coding systems of phonemes into graphemes existing between English and Italian language. The use of spoken language should be introduced by the teacher in a systematic way, proceeding with graduality according to the complexity of the language structures presented. On the other hand, speaking English for the child has to become a natural activity, preferably integrated with the use of creative and interactive games that can be supported by other non-verbal languages (music, movements, images, etc.) to promote participation and involvement in cooperative learning activities (Shin, 2006). At primary school level a grammatical approach to learning English is not recommended since, in addition to compromising child's learning motivation, this may generate confusion between different grammatical and syntactical systems (Herrell & Jordan, 2015). In fact, the *National Guidelines* indicate grammatical knowledge as reserved for lower secondary school, where pupils can gradually recognize, rework and internalize modes of communication and rules of a foreign language, thereby being able to understand much more easily the way of functioning of the new language. It is instead important to promote a gradual integration of the elements of the new language in the native language system (or any other language spoken by the pupil) expanding implicitly the ability to manage various language components (phonetic, phonological, syntactic and semantic aspects) (Hiep, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

6. *Gradual development of writing competences.* Special attention, correlated to the increasing importance to be given to oral language, has to be paid to writing. This should be presented in a gradual way and preferably from the third grade onwards. Initially writing will be limited to keywords to insert in conceptual maps and diagrams, simple expressions related to child's experiences, leading at the end of the fifth grade to brief descriptions and presentations. Among the multiple language competences to be promoted, writing has definitely the lowest priority in primary school, also in consideration of specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography) that usually emerge at this level of school and that may be, in some way, also increased in the mother language by an approach to English overly centered on writing (Applebee, 2000).

7. *Teaching EFL, ICT and international learning experiences.* From the outset of primary school, it is recommended to accompany active and participatory teaching methodologies with the use of ICT (computers, tablets, white interactive boards, interactive tables, educational software,

etc.), which in many cases are often used by children at home. These can be useful to expand space and time for learning, creating opportunities to get in contact even out of school and promote informal social interaction between individuals, school groups and local communities (Mumtaz, 2000; Holbert & Karady, 2009). In this regard it is very important for the school to participate in European projects such as Comenius, Erasmus+, E-twinning, etc., that may facilitate the exchange and interaction with schools and pupils coming from other countries, joining in activities and partnerships where English is used as *lingua franca*, a language to communicate with everybody. By doing so, pupils can move step by step from an interaction centered essentially on their own needs to a communication oriented towards other stakeholders, peers and adults, experiencing cultural differences and similarities, personal habits and traditions of other countries, as well as starting to develop an intercultural sensibility (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

8. *Reflection on language and self-assessment of EFL learning.* Only in rare cases and especially with pupils who have a high level of competence, or in cases where children themselves highlight specific linguistic aspects, about language conventions and linguistic rules, syntactic structures, similarities and differences between Italian and English, the teacher will deal with a certain caution and graduality simple aspects of linguistic reflection (Byram, 2008). Such activities, in a certain way, may be also used to enhance the ability of self-assessment and awareness of how pupils learn, an ability which is important to develop with all pupils since primary school (Little, 2005; Goto Butler & Lee, 2010).

### 3.2. EFL curriculum organization

According to the guiding criteria mentioned in the previous section, the EFL curriculum design must be focused on the achievement of specific results declined in terms of knowledge, abilities and competences. In line with the structure of the *National Guidelines* (MIUR, 2012), the competences to be promoted are indicated principally in the *Student profile (PS)* and then in the *Outcomes for competence development (OCD)*. The knowledge and abilities of each subject are instead expressed in terms of *Learning objectives (LO)*.

The *Student profile* describes, in a basic form, general competences related to all teaching subjects as well as those linked to citizenship education that a pupil should possess at the end of the lower secondary school (at the age of 14). Recently the Ministry of Education Act no. 742/2017 concerning the certification of learning attainment has provided an intermediate level of the *Student profile* competences at the end of primary school, thus highlighting the extent to which those competences have to be developed within an eight-year period of education (see Table 1).

The *Outcomes for competence development*, which are prescriptive and common to all private and state schools of the Italian education system, are provided at the end of the fifth grade of primary school and constitute essential references for teachers, insofar as they indicate cultural and educational pathways to follow and help to finalize educational action

**TABLE 1**

Student profile competence indicators related to EFL teaching

TYPE OF SCHOOL	STUDENT PROFILE COMPETENCE INDICATORS
<b>Primary school</b>	The pupil is able to express himself in English at elementary level and to communicate in an essential way in simple everyday situations.
<b>Lower secondary school</b>	Meeting people of different nationalities, the pupil is able to express himself in English at elementary level and to communicate in an essential way in simple everyday situations, using a second European language. He/She uses the English language to work with information and communication technologies.

towards pupil's integral development. In primary and lower secondary schools the *Outcomes* represent criteria for assessing the expected competences, and schools must work to ensure that every pupil can achieve them, to guarantee the unity of the national system and the quality of the educational service. They correspond to the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2**

Outcomes for competence development at the end of primary school

The pupil comprehends oral and written messages related to familiar areas.
The pupil describes orally and in written form aspects of life, the context where he lives, matters related to immediate needs.
The pupil plays an active role in group games, communicates in an understandable way, even using pre-structured phrases and sentences, in simple and routine information exchanges.
The pupil performs tasks following the instructions given by the teacher in a foreign language, makes demands and asks explanations.
The pupil identifies some cultural elements and understands relationships between linguistic forms and foreign language uses.

The *Learning objectives* represent the knowledge and abilities functional to achievement of the *Outcomes for competence development*. They are not prescriptive, so those proposed in the text of the *National Guidelines* can be taken as they are or adapted by each school according to its own specific instructional offer and pupils' needs. They are provided at the end of third and fifth grade of primary school (see Table 3) (Capperucci & Cartei, 2010).

### 3.3. The Competence Unit Design Model (CUD Mod)

As illustrated in previous pages, competence curriculum construction in the Italian school system is based on the achievement of the *Outcomes for competence development*, that

**TABLE 3**

Learning objectives at the end of third and fifth grade of primary school

<b>LEARNING OBJECTIVES AT THE END OF THIRD GRADE</b>	
<i>Listening (oral comprehension)</i>	Understand words, commands, expressions and everyday phrases, spoken clearly and slowly referred to the pupil, to his classmates, to the family.
<i>Speaking (oral production and interaction)</i>	Produce meaningful sentences concerning objects, places, people, known situations.
	Interact with a classmate to introduce himself and/or play, using structured phrases and sentences appropriate to the situation.
<i>Reading (written comprehension)</i>	Understand postcards, cards and short messages, preferably accompanied by visual or sound recordings, catching words and phrases already known at oral level.
<i>Writing (written production)</i>	Write words and simple phrases related to everyday classroom activities and personal group interests.
<b>LEARNING OBJECTIVES AT THE END OF FIFTH GRADE</b>	
<i>Listening (oral comprehension)</i>	Understand short dialogues, instructions, everyday phrases and sentences when pronounced clearly and identify the general theme of a speech about familiar topics.
	Understand short multimedia texts by identifying keywords and the general meaning.
<i>Speaking (oral production and interaction)</i>	Describe people, places and familiar objects using common words and phrases already met in listening and/or reading activities.
	Report simple information related to the personal sphere, integrating the meaning of what is said with mime and gestures.
	Interact in an understandable way with a classmate or an adult who is familiar, using phrases and sentences appropriate to the situation.
<i>Reading (written comprehension)</i>	Read and understand short, simple texts, preferably accompanied by visual aids, grasp their overall meaning and identify words and familiar phrases.
<i>Writing (written production)</i>	Write in an understandable way short and simple messages to introduce himself, to wish, to thank or invite someone, to ask or give information, etc.
<i>Reflection on the language and learning</i>	Analyze pairs of similar words for sound and understand their meaning.
	Analyze words and expressions in their use context and grasp the relations between different meanings.
	Analyze the sentence structure putting into relation language constructs and communicative intentions.
	Recognize what it has been learned and what has still to be learned.

should represent a constant point of reference for teachers' work. The unity and progression of the curriculum depends on the degree of cohesion, reciprocity and gradualness of these "outcomes", which, on the one hand, characterize pupils' educational path and, on other, orient teachers' curriculum design towards precise learning standards to reach. In this sense the "outcomes" can be read as an analytical framework of competences to promote. Their achievement is entrusted to the daily work that teachers conduct with their pupils, which requires design tools oriented towards qualified and specific interventions, according to the general educational plan defined by the school.

This section presents a teaching design model, called Competence Unit Design Model (CUD Mod), aimed at competence development and centered on a specific framework named "competence unit".

Competence units represent units of work centered on a unitary educational path, with a given conclusion but at the same time open to subsequent developments. It is aimed at a competence acquisition that can be recognized and certified.

The same term, "competence units", indicates that a competence cannot be acquired once and for all, to the extent that there always exist possible margins for improvement. Each competence is both an end-product referred to a specific class or age group, but also a starting point for following acquisitions of increasing levels of difficulty. The concept of "unit" is connected to an idea of "competence", considered as a complex framework that requires a constructive path to be built gradually with all the adjustments and modifications necessary. Competence is characterized in terms of meaningful, authentic and progressive learning, which is always situated, because it is the result of the interaction existing between an individual's capacities and the resources of context (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1996). Competence can therefore be seen as a long-term achievement that requires different and growing levels of mastery, reachable through specific work units that have their own autonomy, sequentiality and interconnectivity (Bottani, 2007; Le Boterf, 2000; Pellerey, 2010; Perrenoud, 2010).

At the end of a competence unit, at least within the school context, it is difficult to foresee certifying the achievement of a competence as a whole, but it is however possible to certify a significant part of it, one of its components, a peculiar aspect which guarantees the degree of development of the competence to which it refers. Structuring teachers' curriculum design for competence units facilitates the transition between the different stages of the school system through the construction of a vertical, progressive and unified curriculum. In this sense, the curriculum becomes the instrument through which educational continuity can be experienced and competences become something that may be capitalized and used in many contexts and situations. Competence units present some peculiar characteristics, which can be summarized as follows:

1. *Systematicity*. Sharing the same educational design model and common planning instruments for all school classes.
2. *Self-consistency*. Each competence unit foresees the achievement of specific competences (related to citizenship or to school subjects) that can be used in educational, professional and social contexts.
3. *Modularity*. Each competence unit can be joined to others with which logical, experiential, operational, content connections can be shared. In this sense, a competence unit can also be read as part of a wider educational pathway characterized by competence progression and the need to proceed gradually.
4. *Authenticity*. For competence assessment the use of authentic tasks (or reality tasks applied in situation) is preferred, in that they are able to verify whether and to what extent the pupil can mobilize its knowledge and problem-solving skills.
5. *Interdisciplinarity*. Competence units can encourage interdisciplinary teaching, even though they also pay attention to the promotion of knowledge and skills related to specific subjects. The interdisciplinary approach begins by sharing a common project/problem and promoting the interaction between different kinds of knowledge, getting pupils involved within the perspective of research and discovery.
6. *Personalization*. Competence units are units of work functional to learning personalization, to the extent that they can provide differentiated teaching interventions and activities for every single pupil, small groups, the whole class.
7. *Significance*. Competency units must focus on achieving significant learning. Learning is significant not only when it can be employed more or less widely, but because the child feels it important for himself. It is the result of participation and commitment, of being active in searching for answers or problem solving. It is this personal connotation that makes learning lasting and meaningful over time. Ausubel (1963), in fact, says that we can recognize significant learning when a new content becomes part of the knowledge already possessed by the individual, thereby enlarging his learning.
8. *Metacognition*. Thanks to competence units, pupils strengthen their self-reflexivity about cognitive and learning processes commonly used, developing a greater awareness regarding the way of functioning of their minds. All this gradually allows children to understand and self-guide their own learning processes, recognizing strengths and weaknesses, and empowering the competence of learning to learn.
9. *Transferability*. The acquired and certified competences can be used within the school system for further studies and out of school, such as in vocational education courses or in

the labor market. They represent a prerequisite for more complex and articulated learning and qualifications.

10. *Capitalization*. This latter criterion refers to the capacity of a competence unit to determine, at the end of some educational activities intentionally designed, what the learning outputs are that, once certified, can be optimized and recognized in multiple contexts: school, university, training, work, daily life experiences.

Designing for competence units, like any other designing action, is a rational act aimed at achieving specific objectives, and it is a process that can be articulated in different phases. We can, in fact, foresee a pre-active, active and post-active phase, referred, respectively, to the activities that teachers should put into practice *ex ante*, *in itinere* and *ex post* for any educational intervention.

*Pre-active phase*. This step refers to two main design processes: 1. identification of the competence to develop and definition of different levels of mastery in relation to which the competence has to be ascertained; 2. planning of the pathway to construct, broadly defined at this stage. In this phase teachers are committed: a) to the definition of competence descriptors, to selecting learning objectives (knowledge and abilities), to choosing assessment tests and evaluation criteria; b) to instrument construction able to identify pupils' previous knowledge and competences as well as their needs, interests and motivation to learn, the identification of authentic tasks, the choice of contents (Capperucci, 2018).

*Active phase*. This starts from the use of the instruments developed in the previous phase. It is characterized by teaching mediation that takes place at several levels: 1. between the core competence curriculum previously defined and its adherence to pupils' needs; 2. between the initial learning pathway designed by the teacher and the interest manifested by pupils. Concrete realization of the competence unit actually starts from this point onwards. It can not only be conceived within the teacher's mind but also has to deal with the plurality of situations and individuals that are present in the school. A competence unit does not entail recourse to a specific methodology but rather requires the use of multiple techniques and teaching strategies depending on the competence to promote (Lopes & Ruiz-Cecilia, 2018).

*Post-active phase*. This is characterized by being a reflexive moment, following the teaching intervention and competence unit implementation, that involves both the pupil and the teacher. The pupil is encouraged—under the teacher's guidance—to conduct a sort of flashback on the work done and the steps that have led to its completion, with the aim of identifying possible strengths and weaknesses. This can be accomplished by helping the pupil ask himself what kind of knowledge he believes he is able to handle now and how it might be used to solve tasks, what are the methods of knowledge organization that he habitually uses (conceptual maps, summaries, diagrams, schemes, notes, charts, etc.), recall the use of various self-assessment systems (rubrics, diaries, portfolio, etc.). After the implementation

of a competence unit, the teacher can critically evaluate the educational effectiveness of what has been done, by verifying the relevance of the identified competence and its articulation in descriptors and mastery levels, the degree of homogeneity and integration between competences and learning objectives, the adequacy of tasks, time, space, tools, assessment instruments (Tzagari & Banerjee, 2016).

This cyclical reflection process on which competence unit design is based provides a constant reviewing process within the perspective of continuous improvement and raising the quality of interventions aimed at competence acquisition.

The Competence Unit Design Model (CUD Mod) was originally tested in a pilot project conducted by the University of Florence and the Regional School Office of Tuscany, in the years 2010-2012, as a result of the *Training Programme for National Guidelines Experimentation* (MIUR, 2012), promoted by the Ministry of Education. Thanks to the pilot project, in Tuscany, 40 school networks were set up. These networks were composed of Tuscan schools corresponding to almost all primary and lower secondary schools of the region.

The goal of the project was to build and validate—working together with the schools—a common methodological model for competence curriculum design, focused on a shared framework such as the competence unit. To reach this purpose, 54 workshops, coordinated by a tutor, were activated with the aim of constructing vertical curriculum segments in all subjects, including EFL. According to proposals coming from the majority of schools, particular attention was given to “bridge-years”, that in the Italian school system are: 1. last grade of kindergarten (5 years old) / first grade of primary school (6 years old); 2. last grade of primary school (11 years old) / first grade of lower secondary school (14 years old). Each workshop was attended by at least 9 teachers and the duration of the action-research activities was 20 hours.

The competence unit model elaborated during the pilot project, with some small changes, was further applied in other two projects. A first project was carried out in collaboration between the University of Florence and the Regional School Office of Tuscany in the period 2012-2014; in order to disseminate the new edition of *National Guidelines* of 2012, involved a sample of 35 Tuscan schools and about 1,510 in-service teachers took part of it. A second project, realized within the Degree Course in Primary Education of Florence, for the workshops of Experimental pedagogy and Theories and methods of school curriculum design and evaluation, was attended from 2013 to 2015 approximately by 750 students. Thanks to these two projects, 50 EFL competence units for primary school pupils were developed (Capperucci, 2017).

#### 4. Conclusions

The quality and effectiveness of a school curriculum are measured starting from the learning outcomes achieved by pupils. This requires a high degree of specialization in the use of curric-

ulum design competences that must be a part of the professional profile of all teachers. As we have seen in the previous pages, curriculum design provides a close relation between subject knowledge, basic competences, key competences for citizenship, as well as the ability to use different teaching strategies to make learning meaningful and ascertain both its processes and products (Tsagari, 2016).

It is important that teachers are aware of the existing multiple design models, elaborated both from educational research and practical wisdom developed within the classrooms. In this paper we have proposed the CUD Model aimed at competence development, fully recognizing that within the broad spectrum of the existing international literature many other models are equally effective. Both the pilot project and the following two projects with in-service teachers and teacher trainees have shown that competence unit framework has proved to be a useful tool for reflecting on teaching practice, strategies implemented by teachers, as well as experimenting new curriculum design approaches. Beyond the numerous competence units produced, that represent the most significant result of the projects illustrated above, the action-research carried out has achieved the objective of enhancing the discussion on curriculum construction among teachers and increasing the exchange of good practices, because the quality of education and the level of pupils' learning success depend on such issues related to educational methodologies.

To renew school curricula and increase teachers' design competences it is not enough to introduce new legislation if we do not systematically check the direct impact that the introduction of new *National Guidelines*, for example, have on curriculum design practice and the adoption of new teaching models. Innovation in education today requires overcoming the transmissive and monodirectional nature of traditional teacher-pupil communication, where someone talks and others listen, to invest in the integration of multiple teaching methods, in which the teacher acts as a guide for exploring new cognitive situations (ES = 0.6 according to Hattie, 2011), experimenting teaching approaches centered on reciprocal teaching (ES = 0.7), peer tutoring (ES = 0.5), participation in authentic tasks with immediate feedbacks (ES = 0.6), demonstrations (ES = 0.7), activity or project work designed in terms of formative assessment (ES = 0.9), etc. These distinctive features should belong to any "good teaching", but for teaching English as a foreign language in primary school, the adoption of active and participatory teaching approaches plays a role even more important, because in this case it is essential to keep at a high level the interest and motivation of pupils who have the chance to experience pleasure in learning a second language. In this respect, the school is now only one of many other possible learning contexts, which enables it to be constantly reinforced by informal learning situations that are part of children's everyday life. Good curriculum design can contribute to making this integration between the English learned at school and its use in real-life contexts even more natural and effective.

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