School, digital for learning languages: the case of the Unicef platform

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AT SCHOOL

Not just risks. Technologies can provide great help in learning languages and strengthening the **integration** of refugee and migrant children, but also for those with special educational needs. This is demonstrated by the results of the first year of testing in Italy of **Akelius** , the digital platform for learning **foreign languages** (nine in total, including Italian) tested by **Unicef** in ten countries around the world and also designed to integrate the increasingly numerous students arriving from abroad in a quick and fun way (one in ten on average in the peninsula's public schools). In the name of an innovative *blended learning* teaching approach , which combines tablets, interactive content and classroom materials.

In the first year 400 students were involved

The platform, the result of the partnership between Unicef and the Akelius Foundation and spread in Italy in collaboration with the social cooperative Agire Insieme Per l'Intercultura (Aipi), was used in the 2021/22 school year in eight schools of two comprehensive schools in Bologna and in Rome, involving **400 students** and 30 teachers and language trainers to encourage

the learning of Italian and English. On tablets it was used in English classes in primary and lower secondary schools, and in Italian classes specifically for children with a migrant background in both nursery and primary schools. In these three years, the use of Akelius has been extended to another 60 Italian schools and Ukrainian associations, together with the ISMU Foundation, resulting in the participation of over a thousand newly arrived students.

Italian and English put to the test of learning

Providing Italian language skills to migrant children is recognized as a national priority, essential to guarantee children the right to education and to facilitate their **inclusion and participation** . The Pnrr also signals the urgency of strengthening the **English language skills** of all children in Italy to provide them with the tools they need to navigate the global market. This is why A kelius was tested to support both efforts. Free, without advertising and accessible from a web browser, it does not require any prior information from the user and is able to provide **instant feedback** on the progress achieved in thousands of micro-steps, which allows for the personalization of learning.

Improve student motivation

The results of the experimentation are described in the 35-page report "New Horizons for Learning. The use of educational technology to support language learning and social inclusion of disadvantaged children in Italy", available on the Unicef website and signed by **Svetlana Poleschuk** , **Thomas Dreesen** , **Barbara D'Ippolito** , **Joaquin Carceles** and **Martinez Lozano** . Akelius was effective: it accelerated language learning and improved students' motivation, stimulated by games, interactivity and immediate "returns".

Advice to teachers and schools

There are three recommendations addressed to teachers based on the practices found to be effective: use the digital platform to encourage **peer-to-peer learning** between students (pairing a more advanced student with one at a lower level) and increase involvement and inclusiveness, above all for children with disabilities; combine digital activities in the classroom with

more traditional methods without technology, preferably creative ones such as drawing; ensure the availability of an Internet connection, because customization and the "reward" through virtual coins are otherwise not activated. More generally, the integration of digital into normal teaching practices can be unsettling for teaching staff. *"These challenges* – we read in the report – *require teachers to be flexible, open-minded and willing to dedicate time to adapting content in order to adequately prepare lessons"* .

The importance of clear protocols

Nothing is improvised. A lesson that also applies to school leaders. For digital learning to work, you need to establish clear protocols for managing digital devices with distinct **rules and responsibilities** . Protocols that deal with how to plan and book the use of tablets and headphones, how to collect and distribute them, how to return them and store them safely, how to plan periodic reviews and any maintenance and replacement needs, how to carry out software updates . Teachers are recommended to draw specific teaching plans, but also to receive the right training, including practical training, on the best ways to introduce digital learning into classes. Offering initial tutorials to students on using the platform can be a good idea.