

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

# ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ



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# SOME ASPECTS AND CASE STUDIES ABOUT TEACHING ITALIAN COMPLEX-CLAUSE SYNTAX TO SLOVENIAN LEARNERS

**Abstract:** *The paper presents some results about the mastery of complex-clause syntax among Slovenian high-school students who learn Italian as a foreign language. The author starts from the premise that the mastery of syntax is an objective to be achieved at the receptive and, to a degree, also at the productive level. Hence, what knowledge mostly secondary school leavers have developed is shown according to various groups of learners. Different types of knowledge were tested: intuitive comprehension, metalinguistic knowledge and the productive knowledge of complex syntactic structures. The results seem to imply that a considerable lack of appropriate knowledge has been identified, in particular at the productive level. It is here where problems arise, since for Slovenian learners the syntax of Italian complex clauses is objectively difficult. It presupposes the speaker's ability to master the system and use of tenses, which are perceived as particularly hard to learn.*

**Keywords:** *teaching Italian as a FL, complex-clause syntax, Slovenian learners, transfer, levels of knowledge.*

## 1. Introduction

In the domain of foreign language (FL) teaching at lower levels (A1, A2, B1), the teaching of complex-clause syntax in Italian seems to have been largely neglected (Mertelj 2005b: 5–11, 157–218). Complex-clause syntax, defined in Italian as *sintassi del periodo* or *ipotassi* or similar is regarded in this paper as comprising linguistic structures composed of a principal and one or more explicit or implicit subordinate clauses. The problems learners have with such structures are not just an issue in the teaching of Italian; the same or very similar problems can be encountered in the teaching of most Romance and other languages to Slovenian and other Slavic learners.

The phenomenon is not isolated: there are quite a few, predominantly contrastive studies concerning the teaching/learning of complex syntax of Italian and Spanish to Slovenian students (Skubic 1991; Miklič 1992a, 1992b, 2003, 2004; Miklič and Ožbot 2001, 2007; Lenassi 2004; for Spanish see Markič 2004 and 2006), or to learners with a Serbian and/or Croatian linguistic background (Samardžić 2006; Moderc 2003, 2005). They have two aspects in common:

- Slavic learners have persistent difficulties choosing the appropriate tense in subordinate clauses in which *concordanza dei tempi e dei modi* must be applied and the learners usually do not overcome the interference with their mother tongue within productive abilities;

- Slavic learners have persistent difficulties using implicit subordinate clauses in cases where it is required: again, they do not overcome the influence or interference of their mother tongue which does not have an implicit subordinate clause (or only to a very limited extent) and instead tend to use (far more) explicit subordinates (Skubic 1991; Miklič 1992b; Samardžić 2006; Lenassi 2004).

Teachers and researchers have not observed any differences between learners who study Italian as their first Romance language and learners who have also already studied another Romance language: Slavic learners have the same interference problems in the Romance language they are learning (in Slovenian high schools these are Italian, Spanish or French), and it seems that only the level of grammar awareness helps (in rare cases learners already know another Romance language at the complex-clause syntax level).

The present paper focuses on some aspects that emerge in the teaching/learning of Italian as a second/foreign language in Slovenian high schools. Specifically, its objective is to discuss certain aspects of the teaching of Italian, in particular the teaching of its complex-clause syntax, based on my own teaching experience, theoretical studies and empirical analyses, focusing on contrastive aspects:

- It is hypothesised that the mastery of complex-clause syntax, partly at the receptive and partly at the productive level, is supposed to be a necessary goal of teaching/learning Italian as a foreign language in a foreign county (i.e. Italian outside Italy, such as in Slovenia).

- It is also hypothesised that a certain number of teaching hours which a learner undertakes during their whole process of learning Italian as a FL should also guarantee that interference problems in the use of tenses in complex-syntax clauses largely disappear as a result of both con-

scious learning and unconscious acquisition.<sup>1</sup>

The empirical analyses presented in the paper aim to indicate some possible answers to these questions and are primarily based on the testing of high school learners, focused on complex syntax, in which some contrastive problems arise, and to a smaller extent on the role of teachers' attitudes and methods of teaching complex-clause syntax (using structured oral interviews). In order to place the analyses and possible answers they suggest in context, first the question of actual and expected levels of attainment is examined.

### 1.1. Levels according to the Common European Framework for Languages

The *Common European Framework for Languages* (CEF 2001) does not provide answers to specific language teaching questions in individual cases. A very common question asked by Slovenian foreign language teachers is *Which tenses should be taught at which level?* This question arises for practical reasons since it influences primary and secondary goals of teaching and the assessment of learners' abilities, and there have been many doubts in Slovenian schools in the last few years concerning how to address this issue.

Slovenian teachers of Italian feel confused since there seem to be two interpretations of the CEF in Italy: some authors include all grammatical structures in levels A1-B2 (some textbook editions of Guerra and of Edilingua appear to adopt a similar stance), while others believe that some grammatical structures (e.g. the *periodo*

<sup>1</sup> It might also be interesting to investigate the hypothesis that learners and teachers do not have suitable textbooks for the teaching of Italian complex-clause syntax and that teachers often follow the available textbook without a consideration of the special linguistic needs of Slovenian learners (for the results of some analyses, see Mertelj 2005b: 157–201, 202–218).

*ipotetico*, unreal comparative clauses) belong to levels C1 and/or even C2 (some textbook editions of Guerra and of Alma).

Further, it is well known that Italian and Slovenian teachers and language teaching experts argue that certain complex-clause structures are difficult even for mother-tongue Italians who tend to avoid them in order not to produce them incorrectly (including some Italian dialects). For example, the *periodo ipotetico*, when referring to the past, is almost always simplified (in oral speech and informal writing) for the simple reason that its syntax is too complex.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, until recently in Slovenian high schools (learners ages approximately 15–19 years) the view that *all grammatical structures must be included in levels A1–B2* was considered to be the correct interpretation of the CEF and many, although not all teachers support the idea. Currently, at the “matura” (state external exam) in Italian as a FL at the end of high school, with leavers aged approximately 19 years old and after 450–900 hours of Italian, a productive level (not only in listening and reading comprehension) of all grammatical structures in Italian (e.g. also all four Italian subjunctives) was expected in grammar testing and in essays.

Therefore, Slovenian teachers who regard such ambitious goals as a challenge, along with those who prefer to abandon them (or at least to differentiate them more precisely according to different curricula based on a different number of teaching hours) are directly concerned with the teaching and learning of complex-clause structures.

2 Therefore, many teachers of Italian ask why they should expect foreign learners to use it (unless they are at C levels) as the learners can communicate in Italian (at lower levels) without producing some of the syntactical constructions discussed in this paper, and they believe recognising and understanding them may be sufficient – an attitude also shared by some teachers of Italian in Slovenia, and probably elsewhere.

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

Several aspects must be considered when planning the (explicit or implicit) teaching of Italian complex-clause syntax. As seen in Fig. 1 several other factors influence learners’ attitudes to complex-clause syntax and consequently also the level of competence they attain.<sup>3</sup> Some of these factors are only briefly presented below (the Italian language itself, learners in various schools, grammars and textbooks), while others will be presented in more detail (the role of positive/negative transfer and of teachers), although they are all regarded as key points in the process of teaching/learning complex-clause syntax.

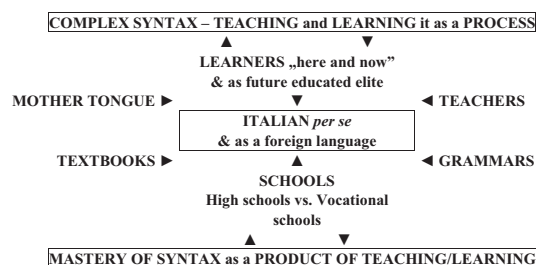


Fig. 1: Aspects to be considered in explicit teaching of Italian complex-clause syntax

The first factor is the Italian language itself: we shall look at some examples from various authentic Italian text types where complex-clause syntax is naturally used:

Such examples from everyday speech<sup>4</sup> are significant; they are examples of complex-clause syntax from everyday speech

3 Some learners do not perceive any need to master complex clauses at all, some are happy with a passive understanding of syntactically complex clauses in texts, others aim to master them at the productive level: they need to know how to choose the right pattern and how to form it in proper (usually written) communication.  
4 These examples are taken from *Corriere della Sera* (*Cor*), *Gioia* (*Gio*), *Donna moderna* (*Dm*). Further examples can be easily found in many daily newspapers and various magazines.

**Comments about a potential lottery winner:**

2a) Ital. »Che bello **sarebbe** – butta un tizio –  
(Cor 45)

**se** il fortunato **FOSSE** uno in tuta blu...«

2b) Engl. »How nice it **would be** – a guy says –

**if** the lucky one **WERE** an ordinary worker...«

**Interviews with some Italians about being single:**

3a) Ital. Fino a poco tempo fa, **a chi** mi **avesse chiesto**  
**avrei risposto** con orgoglio romantico  
(Gio 52)

**se** ero contento di essere single

**che** il mio ego **basta** a riempire l'intero mondo.

3b) Engl. Until recently, **if** someone **had asked** me **if** I was happy to be single

I **would have answered** with romantic pride **that** my ego is enough to fill the entire world.

and include a second conditional clause (Ital. *periodo ipotetico della possibilità*), an unreal comparative clause (Ital. *comparativa irreal*) and a series of different kinds of subordinate clauses (including relative and content clauses, *frase relativa*, *frase interrogativa indiretta*, *frase oggettiva* in Italian). Such examples are even more frequent in literary texts (Mertelj 2005b: 48–94)<sup>5,6</sup>

In any case, the existence of such complex-clause patterns cannot, in my opinion,<sup>7</sup> be ignored; it is counterproductive to wish them away since they are rele-

vant to learners not only due to the frequency of their occurrence but also because such complex-clause syntactic structures may provide significant clues for understanding discourse, as they are often used to convey a speaker's statements (as in the above examples).<sup>8</sup>

Another important factor is the various school environments (different types of public schools, at primary and secondary levels, adults in private schools) which influence decisions on how complex-clause syntax should be taught. In this study, we opted to test predominantly high school learners (other target groups are not considered in this paper), in particular since they are future university students and part of the future educated elite – the teaching of syntax to them might be a matter of the teacher's responsibility.

The point of view of a high school teacher could be summed up in the following two questions *Do learners know they*

5 Although I used the word "frequent", it must be recognised that such complex-clause structures in Italian cannot be regarded as *highly* frequent in either literary or non-literary texts (Mertelj 2005b: 48–94).

6 Although some experts might believe that Italian is learned in order to read literary texts, a regrettable observation must be added here: Slovenian high school learners do not learn Italian in order to read literary texts. An informal survey found that literary texts are not brought into the Italian FL classroom by teachers or learners themselves, except when preparing for the "matura" external state exam.

7 It is unsafe to generalise that in Romance languages complex-clause syntax occurs more naturally and more frequently than, for instance, in Germanic languages (which are the most widely taught as foreign languages in Slovenia). However, in Italian (Mertelj 2005b: 94) complex-clause syntax is used frequently enough and it cannot be ignored by experts in teaching/learning Italian as a FL / L2, nor by textbook writers or curriculum planners.

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

need complex-clause syntax? and/or Do teachers know they need it? (cf. Mertelj 2005a: 44–51). In both cases, complex-clause syntax and teachers' decisions come into play, for example a precondition for a decision to include the explicit teaching of complex-clause syntax is a teacher's own linguistic awareness: if a teacher believes that *all grammar structures should be included in levels A1–B2* they will, also from their contacts with the Italian language, most probably become even more convinced that complex-clause syntax is a worthwhile learning goal for learners, and *vice versa*.<sup>9</sup>

We need to consider the languages students have already learned through acquisition (predominantly Slovenian as the mother tongue, L<sub>1</sub>) and/or have been learning consciously as the first foreign language (in Slovenia this is mostly English, less commonly German). The mother tongue, in particular, exerts varying influences on foreign languages taught in Slo-

venian schools in the form of positive transfer and/or interference).<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Major difficulties with complex-clause syntax for Slovenian learners

### 2.1. Discrepancies in the use of tenses: the interference of Slovenian

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

9 The teacher's role will briefly be discussed later in this article (for further information, see Mertelj 2005a: 44–51).

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

Italian Tenses			Slovenian Tenses
1. Pr – il presente	≠	and =	1. sedanjik ('present')
2. F – il futuro	≠	and =	2. prihodnjik ('future')
3. C – il condizionale ('conditional')	≠	and =	3. pogojniki
4. PP – il passato prossimo	≠	and =	4. preteklik ('past')
5. IMP! – l'imperativo	≠	and =	5. velelnik ('imperative')
6. IM – l'imperfetto		?	
7. TP – il trapassato		?	
8. FF – il futuro composto	?		
9. CC – il condizionale composto	?		
10. Pr' – il presente cong.	?		
11. PP' – il passato cong.	?		
12. IM' – l'imperfetto cong.	?		
13. TP' – il trapassato cong.		?	
14. PR – il passato remoto	?		
15. TR – il trapassato remoto	?		
16. Inf.I – l'infinito ('infinitive')	≠	and =	6. nedoločnik
17. Inf.II – l'infinito composto	?		
18. Ger.I – il gerundio	?		
19. Ger.II – il gerundio composto	?		
20. Part.I – il participio presente	≠	and =	7. deležnik ('participle')
21. Part.II – il participio passato	?		

Fig. 2: Italian tenses vs. Slovenian tenses

Since Fig. 2 presents Italian and Slovenian tenses without a discussion of the relationship between tense and mood,<sup>11</sup> the following examples (4abcde, 5abc, 8 and 9) highlight the difficulties Slovenian learners have regarding some problematic structures discussed in this paper. They might also be regarded as problematic from an “Italian” point of view (because of their relative infrequency and the inconsistency in their use), but no less problematic is the fact that, due to their Slavic linguistic background, Slovenian learners tend to follow the same principles of usage as with their mother tongue when structuring Italian complex clauses (cf. also Miklič 2003 and 2004; Miklič and Ožbot 2007; Mertelj 2005b: 95–105).

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

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

#### OR ALSO

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

<sup>11</sup> There are different views on the relationship between tense and mood. For example, is the *futuro semplice* a tense or a mood? Compare it in different pieces of communication, e.g. *Andrò in montagna quest'estate.* (Instead, Italians tend to use *Vado in montagna quest'estate.*) vs. *Saranno le due.*

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

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

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

Generally, in brief, a learner's competence should consist of knowledge of: a) how clauses are constructed, including subordinate clauses of various types; b) connectives; c) the use of appropriate tenses in principal and subordinate clauses; d) the interrelationship of clauses in a text; and e) other factors (such as lexis, encyclopaedic knowledge). In any event, *complex knowledge* is necessary; the issue is which syntactic structures should be taught, at which level in the range A1–C2 (cf. Lo Duca 2006), and which at a receptive level and which at a productive level.

Since one of the major concerns was to find out the extent to which Slovenian high school learners manage to overcome negative transfers and/or are successful in applying grammar/syntactic rules (as conscious knowledge) or intuitively acquired knowledge of Italian, the most pertinent cases are presented below.

## 2.2. Testing of high school learners

The following three figures (Figures 3, 4, 5) present some of the results obtained by testing secondary/grammar school learners' mastery of complex-clause syntax. The results show the productive level of knowledge, measured by using highly guided productive tasks (learners had to translate from Slovenian into Italian). For example, a real conditional clause (1<sup>st</sup> conditional) with the conjunction "se" was opposed to the content clause (indirect question) with "se":

**Real conditional clause (1<sup>st</sup> conditional) with the conjunction "se" (see A in Fig. 3)**

- 6) *Če je Peter doma, je Marko zelo zadovoljen.* →  
*Se Pietro è a casa, Marco è molto contento.*  
*If Peter is at home, Marko is very happy.*

**Content clause with a "se" (see B in the Fig. 3)**

- 7) *Marko vpraša Ano, ali je Peter doma.* →  
*Marco domanda ad Anna se Piero è a casa.*  
*Marko asks Ana if/whether Peter is at home.*

For most of the learners, who had just completed their third year of studying Italian in a high school, this was a simple task – they showed a relatively good productive level, at least 50% in most classes (an exception was one high school from Ljubljana).

In the analyses (some results are presented in Figures 3, 4 and 5) a distinction was made between high school learners from the Italian "border" and "non-border" areas of Slovenia: the "border" area comprised the officially bilingual Slovenian-Italian territory of Slovenia on the coast as well as some areas close to the Italian border where learners grow up with the presence/influence of the Italian language also outside school, and the "non-border" area parts of the Republic of Slovenia further away from the Italian border where learners do not have such possibilities (cf. Merlelj 2005b: 107-138).

A general expectation was that the levels of productive mastery would differ: the border-area learners would solve the tests better on the basis of their acquired command of the language (outside school) and would also show a lower degree of negative transfer (interference) in their command of Italian.

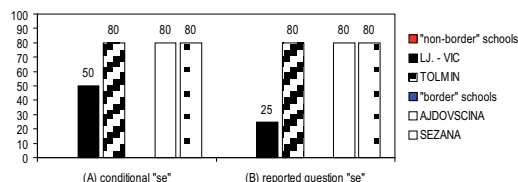


Fig. 3: Two different syntactic functions of "se": (A) real conditional clause (1<sup>st</sup> type) vs. (B) reported question introduced by "se"

As Fig. 3 demonstrates, such a simple clause and an indirect yes/no question did not cause much trouble for learners from the "border" schools (learners with a relatively good command of language due to their frequent contact with the language by virtue of living near the border with Italy). The learners from "non-border" schools were less successful: if they managed to form the verb, they failed to find the right connective. In this case, a positive transfer could help as there are "near parallels" here in the use of tenses in Slovenian and Italian.

However, when it comes to the past sphere, where the transfer from Slovenian in terms of tense choice cannot be positive, the results were expected to differ in the "border" and "non-border" schools, but not to be altogether disappointing. Examples 8) and 9) (also see Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) were too difficult as the learners had to overcome a negative transfer from Slovenian. They had to translate a content clause where "se" referred to the past, therefore in a subordinate clause a sequence of tenses and moods had to be observed, and in the second conditional (not referring to the past) they were expected to apply the use



of *congiuntivo dell'imperfetto* in the protasis of the *periodo ipotetico*.

### Content clause with “se” which referred to the past

- 8) *Slov.* *Spraševal sem se, če si bolan ali le zelo utrujen.*  
*Ital.* → *i domandavo se eri / fossi malato o solo molto stanco.*  
*Engl.* *I was wondering if you were sick or just very tired.*

The results show the dominance (in language interference) of Slovenian principles of usage over the Italian *consecutio temporum*, among learners from both the “border” and “non-border” areas (Fig. 4), and this is the case after their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of learning Italian! Better results were expected among learners in the “border” high schools but surprisingly the best results, albeit not excellent (about 30% got the relevant tenses right), can be observed in results from one of the “non-border” schools, namely Tolmin High School.

The explanation for this might be that their Italian teacher believes his learners should thoroughly learn the grammar system of Italian in order to become independent users of the language (see Mertelj 2005a: 44–51), yet such a conviction causes him to pay less attention to the other skills and abilities learners at high school also need to develop (in terms of the CEF 2001). It is a question of priorities when applying the CEF but the direct influence of the explicit and structured teaching of complex-clause constructions in this case proved to be a successful tool for overcoming negative transfers.

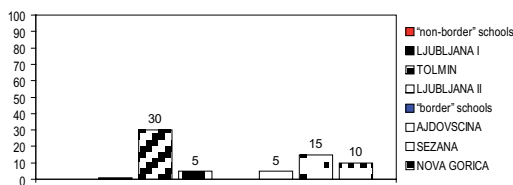


Fig. 4: Indirect question introduced by “se”, referring to the past

The last example was an unreal conditional with “se” (2<sup>nd</sup> conditional). In Slovenian in both parts of the clause (it. *periodo ipotetico della possibilità*) a “simple” conditional (*pogojnik* in Slovenian) is used so in this case the learners could rely on a positive transfer in the main clause (it. *l'apodosi, la reggente*), but had to overcome the negative transfer in the subordinate clause (it. *la protasi, la subordinata*):

### Unreal conditional with “se” (2<sup>nd</sup> conditional)

- 9) *Slov.* *Če bi bilo okolje manj onesnaženo, bi lahko pili vodo iz vseh studencev.*  
*Ital.* → *Se l'ambiente fosse meno inquinato potremmo bere l'acqua da tutte le sorgenti.*  
*Engl.* *If the environment was less polluted we could drink water from any spring.*

Here (see Fig. 5) the case of the Tolmin Grammar School is also interesting: the teacher instructed his learners *not* to attempt the conditional clauses in the test as they had not learned them yet, and almost all learners obeyed (Mertelj 2005b: 120–136), although they could have used the *same* verbal form *fosse* as in the previous clause!<sup>12</sup>

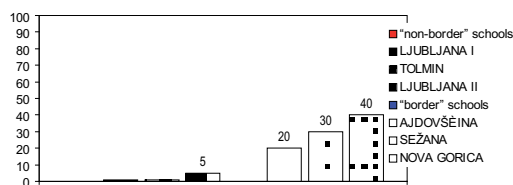


Fig. 5: Unreal conditional clause with “se” (2<sup>nd</sup> conditional)

The results for the unreal conditional clause with “se” (2<sup>nd</sup> conditional) also reveal some other patterns (cf. Fig. 5):

- Comparing the results from the “border” schools vs. those from “non-border” schools

12 This is an excellent case to observe how the knowledge of forms in isolation is of no use unless the learners are instructed how to use them (in this case: in which subordinate clauses).

der” schools it is noted that in this case frequent contact with the language seem to be decisive: if learners know “more language” (acquired outside school) they can master *certain* difficult structures earlier and slightly better: teachers in those schools start with *periodo ipotetico* earlier, but not with *consecutio* (cf. example 8 with a content clause with “*se*”, referring to the past);

- the results are not excellent even in the “border” schools: the use of tenses in conditional clauses is obviously not easy to master, even after the explicit instruction and practice in school which the learners from the “border” school had received during their 3<sup>rd</sup> year (this is certain as all teachers from the “border” schools confirmed this in the structured interviews about teaching complex-clause syntax, cf. Mertelj 2005a: 44–51);

- teachers in the “non-border” schools seem to introduce this grammatical content in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of learning and not earlier (see the practically zero scores for Vič, Tolmin, Plečnik), and therefore the results are not surprising (very few learners are able to use them correctly, on the basis of private lessons/courses they attend);

- the results also show that explicit instruction helps and probably could have helped even more: the learners had learned to use *fosse* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> conditional, therefore they would have been able to also use the same form in a content and an unreal comparative clause if they had been instructed about other complex-clause structures where it can be used.

The results are similar for other types of subordinate clauses (Mertelj 2005b: 106–138, 148–156): the degree of mastery of complex-clause syntax among Slovenian high school learners depends strongly on the possibility of a positive transfer when choosing the tense in a subordinate clause.

### 2.3. Testing of freshly admitted university students of Italian Language and Literature

Another analysis (Miklič 1992a and 1992b; Mertelj 2005b: 139–147) focusing on freshly admitted students to studies of Italian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana found that the general level of their mastery of conditional clauses over the last 15 years has been decreasing: in 1992 about 70% were able to translate all types of conditional clauses (real, potential, unreal, i.e. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> conditional) from Slovenian into Italian without errors in tense usage, but today the share of such freshmen is 50% and lower (see Fig. 6).

It must be pointed out that the command of different types of *periodo ipotetico* was tested at a productive level; it cannot be excluded that freshly admitted university students would have been able to understand it correctly in both its temporal and modal aspects (such an analysis has yet to be done). However, the results show that overcoming negative transfers from the L<sub>1</sub> (Slovenian) is becoming an ever more difficult task,<sup>13</sup> probably due to less attention being paid to explicit grammar instruction and giving priority to the development of other linguistic abilities.

	1992-93	1998-99	2003-04
Če bom to izvedel, ti bom povedal. <i>Se lo saprò, te lo dirò.</i> <i>If I know that, I will tell you.</i>	/	65%	50%

<sup>13</sup> Another area of interest is the question whether the general decline in grammatical command has in fact been balanced out by a compensating rise in the command of Italian as far as other abilities, on both receptive and productive levels, are concerned. However, this could also be the subject of a further study.

<p>Če bi bilo (zdaj) lepo vreme, bi šli ven.</p> <p><b>Se facesse bel tempo, usciremmo.</b></p> <p><i>If the weather was fine, we would go out.</i></p>	70%	50%	30%
<p>Če bi bilo (včeraj) lepo vreme, bi šli ven.</p> <p><b>Se avesse fatto bel tempo, saremmo usciti.</b></p> <p><i>If the weather had been fine, we would have gone out.</i></p>	70%	35%	40%

Fig. 6: *Productive knowledge of conditional clauses among 1<sup>st</sup> year university students*

### 3. Conclusions and discussion

The 1<sup>st</sup> hypothesis, namely *the mastery of complex-clause syntax, partly at the receptive level and partly also at the productive level, is supposed to be a necessary goal of teaching/learning Italian in a foreign country such as Slovenia*, has not been borne out by this study: knowledge of complex syntax is no longer consistently attained, especially not at a highly productive level (B2 or C1).

It can be inferred that all three groups of results illustrate the ongoing gradual transition from a strongly structure-oriented to a more communication-oriented approach to the teaching of Italian as a FL in Slovenia over the past decade:<sup>14</sup> learners in high schools seem to be expected to learn to communicate orally more fluently than used to be the general aim in the past (when the biggest aim was to get to know and use *all* Italian grammatical structures), but they do so using relatively simple language: complex-clause structures are avoided and alternative strategies are used.

<sup>14</sup> A point not to be excluded: these results also reflect the fact that less able learners opt to study Italian; there has been a relative marginalisation of this foreign language in the last two decades.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> hypothesis (*a certain number of teaching hours to which a learner undertakes during the whole process of them learning Italian should also guarantee that interference problems in the use of tenses in complex-syntax clauses largely disappear*) is also not supported by the data: the results, especially those from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> groups show that interference-related difficulties do not disappear, although it has been noted in some cases that persistently increasing learners' awareness of the problem can help overcome negative transfers.<sup>15</sup>

Some professionals might argue that in this paper a complex syntax is given a role which is inappropriate for students, at least on the productive level up to B2. In other words, they would propose not investing time and effort into teaching how to use structures that even native Italian speakers avoid (except for advanced level students, where they would be relevant); for the rest, teaching avoidance strategies should be preferred to spending time on many aspects of complex syntax, while the latter should remain a learning objective for the receptive level (recognising them may be enough).

In many high schools, teachers share the view of university teachers (from the department of Italian, cf. Miklič and Ožbot 2007) that the traditionally high level of mastery of grammar should be maintained, at least at the highest possible receptive level and at a relatively high productive level (B2), despite the general decline brought about by a probably incorrect interpretation of the CEFR (2001).

#### *The role of high school teachers*

The awareness of the critical contrastive aspect of teaching Italian to Slovenian learners is high at the university level

<sup>15</sup> More advanced learners who have already studied French or Spanish or other Romance languages can develop their prior knowledge of Italian further/faster if they have consciously learned and/or acquired the adequate complex-syntactical patterns in these languages.

(Miklič and Ožbot 2001), but unfortunately its application has not been worked out yet by university teachers of Italian. As Italian pedagogical grammars and textbooks cannot themselves provide a guaranteed method (cf. Mertelj 2005b: 157–201) for acquiring the knowledge needed to construct complex clauses (e.g. by adding specific information for individual linguistic groups such as speakers of Slavic languages), this difficult task remains in the secondary, especially high school teachers' domain, as is the case in Slovenia.

High school teachers do encounter problems related to complex-clause syntax in their teaching, but still the awareness of this critical aspect of teaching Italian to Slovenian learners is not high (cf. Mertelj 2005a: 44–51): most teachers focus on “simple” language, do not use authentic texts, and follow a chosen textbook but are often unhappy with modern “elements” intruding into their grammatical approach to the teaching of Italian. They often give priority to the quantity of practice rather than to productive tasks which would integrate the usage of grammar structures, including complex clauses, with productive skills (results sketched out from Mertelj 2005a and 2005b).

#### *Ideas for some future steps*

To support the efforts to maintain relatively high objectives of teaching and learning Italian in Slovenian high schools (and consequently higher levels of receptive and productive command among learners), complex-clause syntax should be introduced as a regular explicit goal of conscious learning/teaching:

- The presence of complex-clause syntax in Italian authentic texts of various types will remain a challenge for teachers and learners: some explicit knowledge to understand and to use (to a certain extent) syntactically demanding clauses is needed.
- To achieve this goal, Slovenian learners should become aware of their spe-

cific needs due to the differences in the use of tenses/moods in subordinate clauses in Slovenian compared to Italian.

- The teaching of complex-clause syntax should include well-prepared tasks of various kinds to enable learners to attain the highest possible mastery at the receptive level (according to the motto “*to recognise and to understand appropriately*”) and also a reasonably early, but appropriate passage to teaching complex syntax at a productive level (e.g. by imitating text models).

- In such tasks – also designed according to the needs of learners – appropriate cognitive and affective stimuli<sup>16</sup> would help them learn the language more effectively.

- An additional input could be offered by the preparation of tasks on authentic texts containing complex-syntax.

- The idea “*less and earlier is better*” should be applied from the beginning of teaching/learning.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It would be necessary to develop a well-thought-out approach to the teaching of complex syntax in which both cognitive and affective aspects of the learning process would be taken into account. The leading question would be how to help learners master complex clauses in an active way in both the reception and production of language. It happens too often that there is a lot of teaching of language rules, which remain weakly or unclearly connected to a thorough comprehension of authentic texts or to productive language skills.

<sup>17</sup> Some techniques of teaching complex-clause syntax to learners from level A1 inclusive have up till now been applied in my own teaching practice (cf. Mertelj 2008).

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**NEKI ASPEKTI I STUDIJE SLUČAJA O POUČAVANJU  
SLOVENAČKIH UČENIKA SINTAKSI ITALIJANSKE  
SLOŽENE REČENICE**

Rezime

Ovaj rad predstavlja neke od rezultata o poznavanju sintakse složenih rečenica slovenačkih srednjoškolaca koji uče italijanski kao strani jezik. Autor polazi od premise da je poznavanje sintakse cilj koji se ostvaruje na receptivnom i, do određene mjere, na produktivnom nivou. Stoga je znanje koje je većina svršenih srednjoškolaca stekla prikazano prema različitim grupama učenika. Testirani su različiti tipovi znanja: intuitivno razumijevanje, metalingvističko znanje i produktivno znanje složenih sintaksičkih struktura. Čini se da rezultati upućuju na znatan nedostatak odgovarajućeg znanja, naročito na produktivnom nivou. Problem se pojavljuje budući da je za slovenačke učenike sintaksa italijanske složene rečenice objektivno teška. To podrazumijeva govornikovu sposobnost da ovlada sistemom i upotrebom vremena, koja se smatraju naročito teškim za učenje.

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