

Fables and ICT:

Intercultural Communication and E-Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper presents an experimental workshop held as part of an annual university teacher training course directed at Italian teachers involved in teaching Italian as a second language in multicultural classes mainly from primary and secondary schools. Its objective is to train teachers in an intercultural methodology through the use of fables and fairy tales as they have been proven to be an educational tool with a great intercultural power in our multicultural society. They represent a universal narrative genre, which uses the same narrative techniques transversally joining different people from diverse cultures under the star-studded sky of imagination. To develop intercultural awareness, the workshop has used offline and online social tools (such as blogs and wikis) in order to teach how to operate in an innovative socio-constructivist scenario using ICT.

Keywords: university teacher training course, intercultural educational methodology, ICT, fables and fairy tales, offline and online social tools, Italian as second language

1. Introduction

In order to understand the context within which the teacher training workshop was held, it is useful to provide some data on Italian immigration. Italy, historically known as a country of emigrants, has only recently turned into a country of immigration, since this phenomenon has only come under the limelight as late as the 1980's.

Italy's population is fifty-eight million. According to the last survey reported in the *Dossier statistico immigrazione* (2003), this figure includes two and half million immigrants with regular residence permits, but the real number must be higher if illegal immigration is taken into account. The above mentioned survey recorded 186 different nationalities, of which the most significant are Moroccan (172.834), Albanian (168.963), Romanian (95.834), Filipino (65.257) and Chinese (62.314), with the highest concentration in Northern Italy (59%), followed by Central Italy (28.3%), Southern Italy (9%) and the bigger islands such as Sardinia and Sicily (4%).

The incidence of foreign pupils (4%) on the total national school population reflects the aforementioned data: it is higher in the North, lower in the centre, in the south and in the islands. More than half of foreign pupils attend primary school.

Since a very high number of foreign immigrants (60 %) stated their intention to remain in Italy permanently, the need to work towards a socio-cultural integration has become imperative, considering how massive the phenomenon has become.

As the cosmopolitan and multiethnic society is at our door-step, many institutional initiatives have been promoted by Italian educational institutions. They are mainly based on teaching Italian as a second language. These initiatives are often intertwined with educational intercultural training projects in order to prepare foreign pupils for an effective cultural integration.

In this connection, an experimental workshop has been organized at the language centre of the 'Orientale' University in Naples, addressed at school teachers involved in teaching Italian as a

second language in multicultural classes. Its objective was to train them in an interactive and creative way of intercultural teaching combining the use of fables and fairy tales with ICT.

2. Inspiring principles

As already mentioned, one of the core priorities of the experimental workshop was to familiarize the teachers with the theoretical pedagogical intercultural assumptions. In order to develop their intercultural sensitivity, the following inspiring principles were taken into account (Wallnofer, 2000; Demetrio-Favaro, 1992):

- *sense of belonging*, as awareness of our own identity and as feeling part of a social group;
- *decentralisation capacity*, as awareness that our own point of view is not the only point from which reality can be observed;
- *awareness of conventions*, as cultural rules are not absolute but culturally determined and modifiable according to the cultural changes;
- *tendency towards unity*, to overcome differences and to identify common aspects in different cultures;
- *interaction capacity*, to be able to put ourselves in other people's shoes, exchanging experiences, co-operating, working together, and achieving common goals;
- *awareness of diversity*, which does not mean creating divisions and hierarchies of values, but rather recognising diversity as a positive element.

The above mentioned intercultural principles, steady points of reference during the teacher training course have been rooted on a constructivist scenario, as learning has been conceived as a dynamic process in which teachers had to construct "*learning by doing*" new ideas or concepts on their current/past knowledge and in response to the instructional situation (Bruner, 1990).

Teachers worked in groups, putting their thoughts together and tackling complexities. Collaboration was seen as the act of shared creation and/or discovery.

3. Why fables?

Fables and fairy tales represent a universal narrative genre. They have been proven to be an educational tool with great intercultural power. They can be used to build up learners' awareness that their own society has become multicultural.

Various methodologies can be used to approach the topic. Gianni Rodari, an eminent Italian author of children's literature, stated that "*it is possible to enter the house through the front door, but entering through the window is more fun*" (Argilli 1990). This idea sums up the effects of using fables, which create a more stimulating approach to learning.

Fables have many analogies and similarities regardless of the country in which they originate: the good and the bad, trials and tribulations, the hero, the princess and the evil spirits are all universal themes. Although there are different cultural representations, the collective imagery always includes essential themes of human nature: life, death, friendship, love, fear and desire. Thus, imagery has the power to simultaneously cross cultures and join peoples revealing their identities.

The Italian researcher Andrea Smorti (1994), stated that the human mind is structured in such a way that it uses either a *logical thought* or a *narrative thought*.

The *logical thought* is employed when dealing with abstract concepts and formal procedures while the *narrative thought* is used to understand social events and to interact with others by using our natural ability to create stories. The results of one of his experimental researches carried out on one hundred and eighty-two elementary school children, showed that children who use narrative

strategies are more compliant and open to interactions with their classmates. Thus, fables invented by others and by ourselves are a good training ground for forming relationships and for re-enforcing and re-evaluating original cultures.

It is the author's belief that interaction among different cultures, through creative and collaborative writing activities can give birth to new stories and new balanced melting cultures.

Fairy tales can be said to be multicultural as a genre, since they are found all over the world. The classification scheme by Vladimir Propp on the structure of the fairy tales (1927) and Stith Thomson (1964) showed that there are recurrent patterns that can be found in tales from many different cultures.

Cinderella, one of the most famous fables in the world, is a typical example of an archetype whose variants can be found in many countries, from China to Africa, from Europe to Australia (Zipe 1995). Marion Cox, in her research published in London in 1893, discovered 345 different versions of it. The oldest evidence goes back to ancient Egypt, and after that, just to quote the most popular, a Saudi Arabian, a Vietnamese, a Chinese and a European Cinderella followed. The first written version goes back to 1558. The Chinese Cinderella was written seven centuries before.

Among the most famous European variants we remember Basile's (1636), French Perrault's (1697), Grimm brothers' (1812) and Calvino's (1956). Children from our schools mostly know the Walt Disney's version, which in a child's mind can dangerously become the only authentic version as a direct effect of globalization.

Subscribing to the theory that medicine does not have to taste bad to help the patient, it is possible to go along with the rewarding approach "*educate and delight*" favoured since the seventeenth century, by the French poet Jean de la Fontaine whose fables rank among the masterpieces of world literature.

4. ICT: A tool for enhancing intercultural learning

ICT and e-learning have a part to play in fostering intercultural competence. They provide different approaches and learning styles and reinforce material delivered in other formats. Enjoyment is part of effective learning. Captivating learners' interest, increasing personal discovery, generating enthusiasm and the desire to learn and instilling an interest from within improve learners' motivation. Students like working with ICT. This approach attracts them because it is challenging. Invented and collected fables are not designed for summative (at most formative) assessment, their main purposes being feedback and discussion.

A great strength of digital tales is the opportunity they offer to weaker learners to spend time on class preparation, and perform in front of their peers with greater confidence.

Activities designed with this in mind, always disguise language skills practice and lead into a range of in-class social interactions, and performance of intercultural behavioural norms and values as :

"[...] acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding" (Krashen, 1995).

Variety as an approach to learning is both enjoyable and beneficial. Lack of variety in the teaching/learning process bothers students and decreases their motivation in learning. Using a wide range of approaches fits with multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1991). It is essential that the current practice reflects and satisfies the full range of existing learning styles. The screen as the post modern day medium, allows some students to excel online when they might not be "stars" in the classroom and this is what frequently happens with the new foreign learners.

Extending the repertoire of tools available in the learning environment may help some students to overcome barriers and, in keeping with the theory of "threshold concepts", proceed to a higher level of understanding (Meyer-Land, 2003).

In addition, the virtuous feeling derived from doing that little bit extra can in itself be motivating, and the ensuing self-esteem can be a big step towards improved performance. The online approach conforms in many ways to best practice, enabling students to take increased responsibility for their learning. Autonomy, a powerful tool, can be an excellent way to build students' self-esteem, and be particularly helpful to teachers wishing to support new foreign students who are usually disadvantaged and not accustomed to success. Students can be reassured and encouraged, rather than scared off and if computer-phobia is detected, it is possible to overcome it through the peer-to-peer collaborative work with other students (Rollin-Harrap, 2005). The use of ICT represents a strong motivation toward electronic literacy. Digital writing allows a more intensive concentration on the cognitive aspects related to the mechanism of connection between words and sound. Furthermore, it allows a quick textual re-elaboration and revision (through delete, move, cut, copy, paste commands), and easily changeable page layouts (colours, fonts, etc.), it improves the student's motivation and pleasure (self assurance/confidence) thanks to the options offered by multimedia and ICT webtools (email, forum, blogs and wikis) and finally, it empowers communication, as in e-mailing between students and teacher, writing a personal blog for authentic readers, or participating in a collaborative project on the web, the latter being surely more stimulating than writing the traditional composition in an exercise-book which will probably be read only by the teacher.

5. The Workshop

Based on the above mentioned reasons, the workshop putting together ICT, Interculture and Italian Language Teaching through the magical world of fables and fairy tales, has experimented with the new methodology of trying to connect online and offline technology, oral cultural heritage and today's digital culture. The workshop was held at the 'Orientale' University's Language Centre in Naples during the academic year 2004-5 as part of an annual teacher training course. It lasted three months with one meeting per week of four hours. The participants were twenty Italian school teachers, 50% coming from primary schools, involved in teaching Italian as a Second Language in multicultural classes.

To make the interaction and the collaborative work easier, the twenty participants were split into four sub-groups of five people each with a supervisor, spokesperson in each group. Every group identified itself with a fable name: Snow White, Ali Babà, The Little Matchgirl, and Maga Magò.

The teachers were the actual guinea-pigs experimenting on themselves the methodology which they would then apply in their classes after the training course. The workshop was delivered in blended learning. Part of it was held in class (32 h.), and part online (50 h.). Results of an exploratory questionnaire revealed that participants did not have a good technological expertise, nor a deep experience in TELL. Thus, a computer technology warm up session was provided to familiarize the teachers with the use of the basic tools which would have been used (Word, Powerpoint, the Internet classroom Assistant Nicenet, Search Engines, CMC webtools, etc.) during the workshop.

6. Macro/micro workshop objectives

Macro objectives of the activities carried out were pedagogically and technically focused. The main pedagogical objectives were:

- learning how to operate in an innovative socio-constructivist scenario using technology;
- learning how to engage students in group project based learning while working with authentic materials;
- learning the core principles for an effective use of the web.

In order to be acceptable to the participating teachers, the workshop appealed to different levels of technical skills focusing on the manipulation of authentic materials (fables and fairy tales found on the net) for intercultural/language purposes, collaborative writing of new tales (using chat, forum, wiki) and finally on the re-designing of materials in new scenarios.

Assembling existing or invented fables in different environments (hypertexts, powerpoint presentations, wikis) enabled teachers to work according to their technical skills, their personal time investment, and to what was already available online.

The specific objective was the familiarisation with ethnic fables and fairy tales intended as an intercultural literary genre. The methodology used to reach this purpose was always based on:

- *discovery* and *comparison* of different fables;
- *understanding* of cultural differences while trying to avoid hierarchical judgements;
- *inventing* new fables to encourage cooperation, exchanges of experiences and achievement of a common goal (Gioda *et al.* 2002).

To this purpose, differences between fables and fairy tales' narrative structures were highlighted and a general survey on both biographies and bibliographies of fables and fairy tellers' milestones was provided.

Ethnic tales were used by participants to build up language activities and develop Italian language competence in L2 learners. Teachers produced grammar, vocabulary, listening exercises, reading comprehension questionnaires, anagrams, crosswords and webquests .

7. Description of the activities

The workshop's purpose was to provide participants with "cultural literacy" as new versatile basic skills for acquiring, managing and communicating information, all of which are necessary for the right development of multicultural dialogue. Participants acquired numerous online/offline technical skills. The most significant achievements are described below.

7.1. Class/student blog

Blogs can develop a beneficial sense of unity and belonging. A Class blog, intended as a multicultural online community of learning, offers the opportunity to cohesively express the identity of a virtual group while supporting actively oriented, cooperative and self-organized learning and research (Cordisco 2003).

Students' blogs have a great intercultural potential being both a tool of public democratic self-representation and the original expression of their personal profile and biography. They give underrepresented learners, self-determined and self-assured access to technology and virtual readers.

Blogs break the ice of communication and facilitate interactions. Teachers, in this workshop, enthusiastically created their personal blogs linking them to the class blog which represented their main meeting arena.

The blog-ring thus created an informal interactive space of cooperation and exchange of experiences. Blogging opened a new learning scenario and was a very stimulating experience for participants, as they had never experienced the feeling of being part of a community where a common interest is virtually shared and information exchanged online.

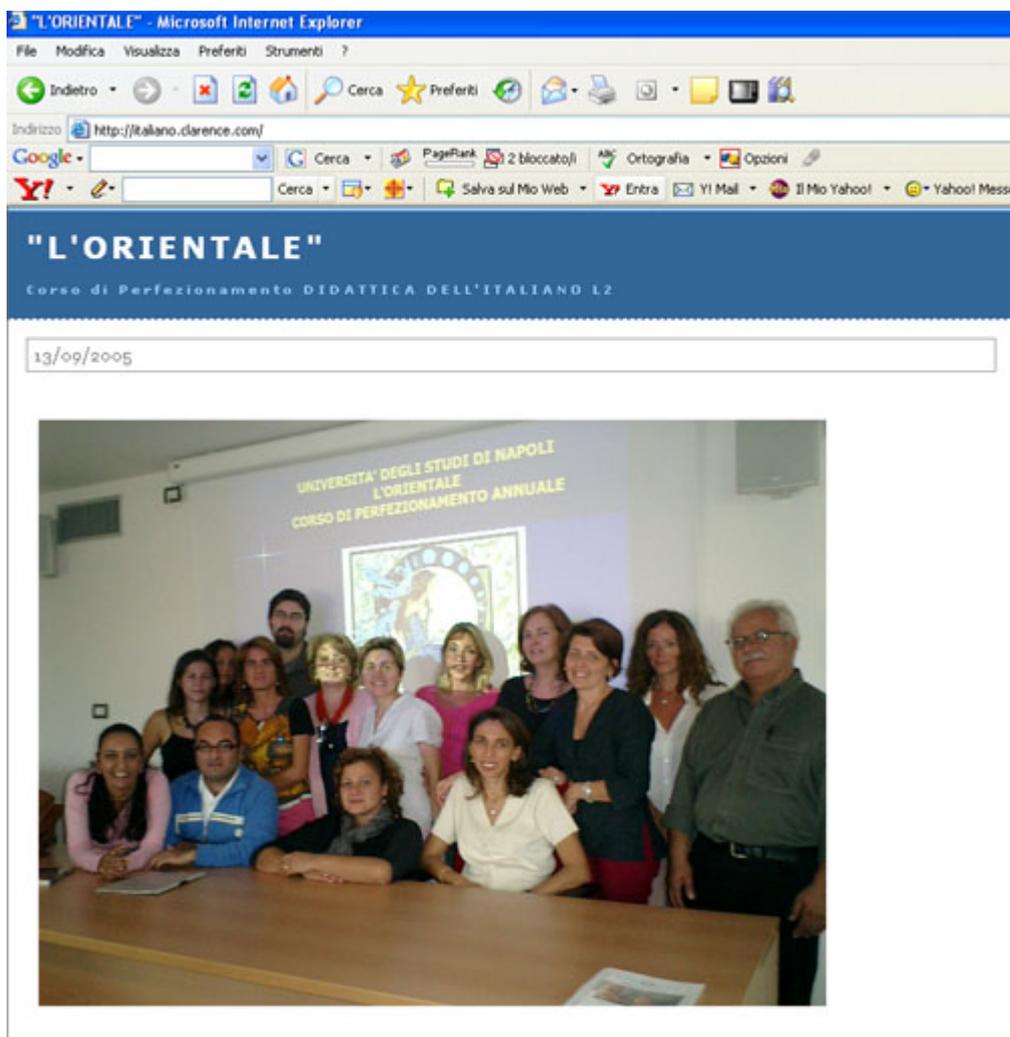


Fig. 1 - Class-blog homepage

7.2. WikiFables

As awareness of wikis has grown, people in education have become increasingly interested in using them for CSCL .

Wikis enable a socio-constructivist learning (Schneider *et al.* 2002) and embody in many respects, the paradigm of personal empowerment and communication between learners. For the above-mentioned reasons a wiki named *WikiFable* was created, to set an environment where all users, students and teachers could have some power and flexibility (Guzdial, 1999).

The aim of the next activity was to collaboratively write modern fables using chat and wiki.

After an in-class presentation on the narrative structure of fables, each group member participated in remote, to a chat session. The aim of the activity carried out in this first *design-phase* was:

- the negotiation of fable guidelines (scenarios of modern fables which each group had to create collaboratively online);
- the practice of new communicative strategies in an online CMC synchronous environment.

The teacher/e-tutor carried out a key-role as moderator and mediator of the communicative and decisional process in the *design-phase*.

The final scenario resulting from the chat session had to include the description of both the title and the central characters, the goal in the story, the environment where the story took place, etc.

The resulting guidelines were uploaded in a dedicated wikipage ⁴ and they acted as *scaffolding* (Calvani-Rotta 2000) for the narrative plot.

In the following creative *writing-phase* each group completed the story collaboratively using the wiki. Participants were given a demo showing how to write and upload images onto the wikipage dedicated to their fable. They were also told they could draw the images themselves or search for appropriate images using Google.

Three weeks were dedicated to re-elaborating the basic guidelines into a modern fable. Teachers, home connected, created the textual/image content of their fables.

The teacher/e-tutor was a neutral observer in this *writing-phase*. Most of the responsibility was delegated to group supervisors in order to promote autonomy in the collaborative writing process.

The observation of groups' behaviour resulted in an asymmetrical participation, as posts were not homogeneously distributed among the group members.

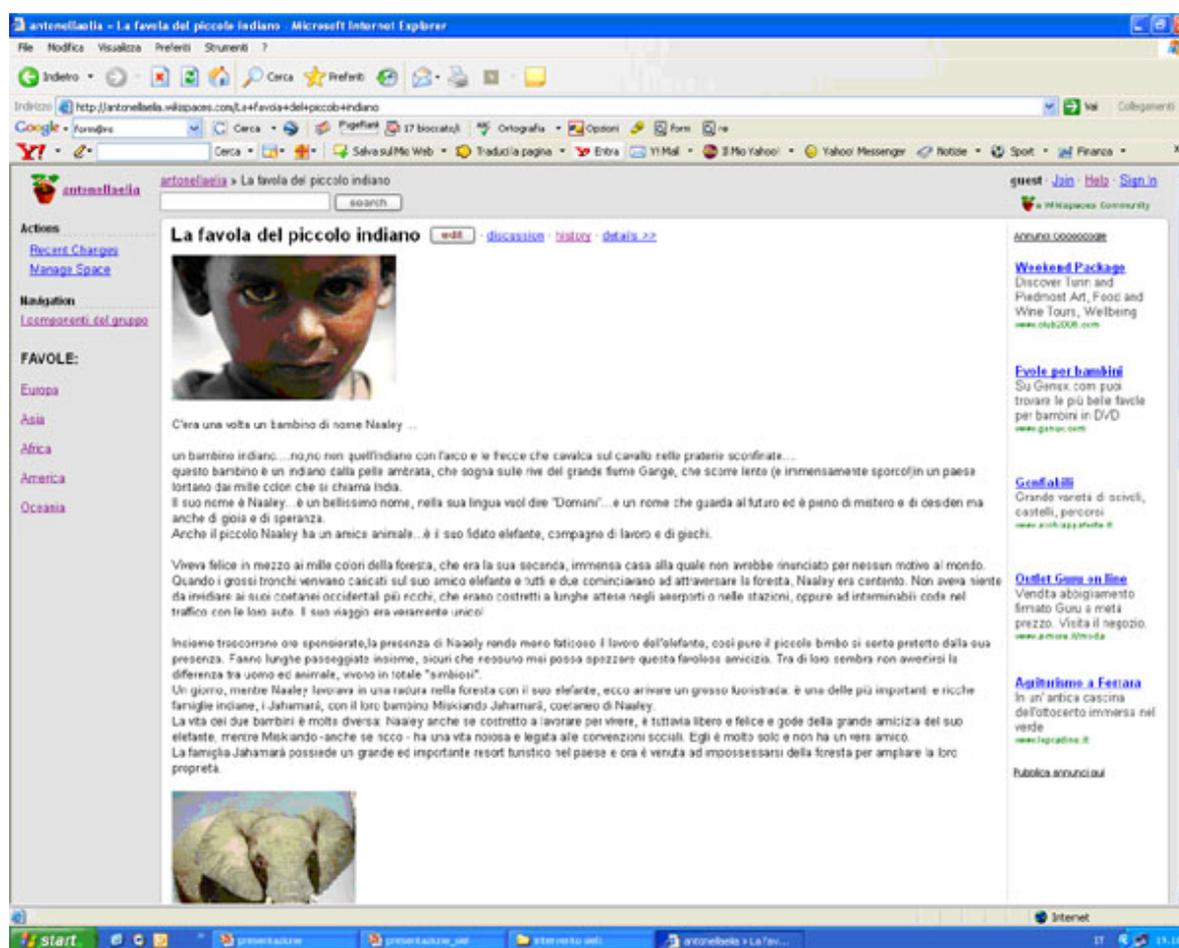


Fig. 2 - A WikiFable: The fable of an Indian child

The supervisor's active role was crucial in this phase, as he connected the texts produced by each group member and gave fluency to the narrative plot. He corrected mistakes, incongruencies and gave coherence to the collaboratively produced text. The wiki talk pages were used by each group to exchange ideas and information.

Fig. 2 shows a WikiFable, *La favola del piccolo indiano* (the fable of an Indian child) complete with text and images, produced by the group *Snow White*.

7.3. Powerpoint audio-fables

In this *re-elaboration phase* the teachers' groups re-elaborated the fables, collaboratively created online, in a new offline environment through a re-organization in slides of the wiki fable content.

The shift between online/offline had the objective of carrying out a blended learning and to reinforce in this phase a "physical contact" collaborative work.

Every single slide was further enriched with hand-made drawings, or images found on the net. Original characters were used and audio vocal recordings were added.

The final fables resulted to be very colourful, multi-modal and eye-catching. Finally, the audio-fables produced were presented to the class.

The first and the last slide of an African fable created by the teachers, "Il Sole e i Bambini" (*The Sun and the Children*), is shown in Fig. 3 a/b.

IL SOLE E I BAMBINI



Allora il sole diventò rotondo e con la sua luce ed il suo calore, ancora oggi, illumina e riscalda tutti gli uomini.

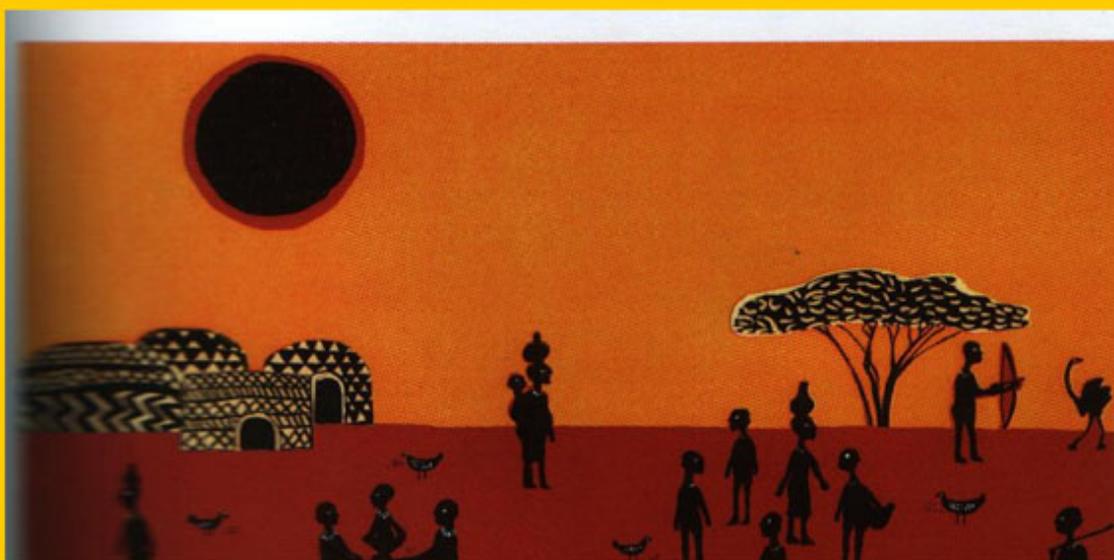


Fig. 3 a/b - PowerPoint audio-fable: an example

7.4. WikiFables anthology

A further challenging goal of the workshop was the use of the wiki as a multicultural fable repository. Five different wiki pages were created in the wikifable, for each continent (Europe,

In order to contribute to the building of a multicultural fable anthology, named *WikiFables*, each participant collected five different fables from the world using online search engines.

Each group collected a total of twenty-five fables, which were illustrated and posted on the wiki. Every teacher produced a set of grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension exercises, anagrams, crosswords, and webquests related to each tale.

Much like wikis this project is a work in progress. Based on wiki philosophy principles, a future project will be the opening of the *WikiFables* anthology to wider collaboration. The project could be implemented thanks to the collaborative work of students and teachers from all over the world, and could see fables translated in other languages and enriched with audio recordings and images.

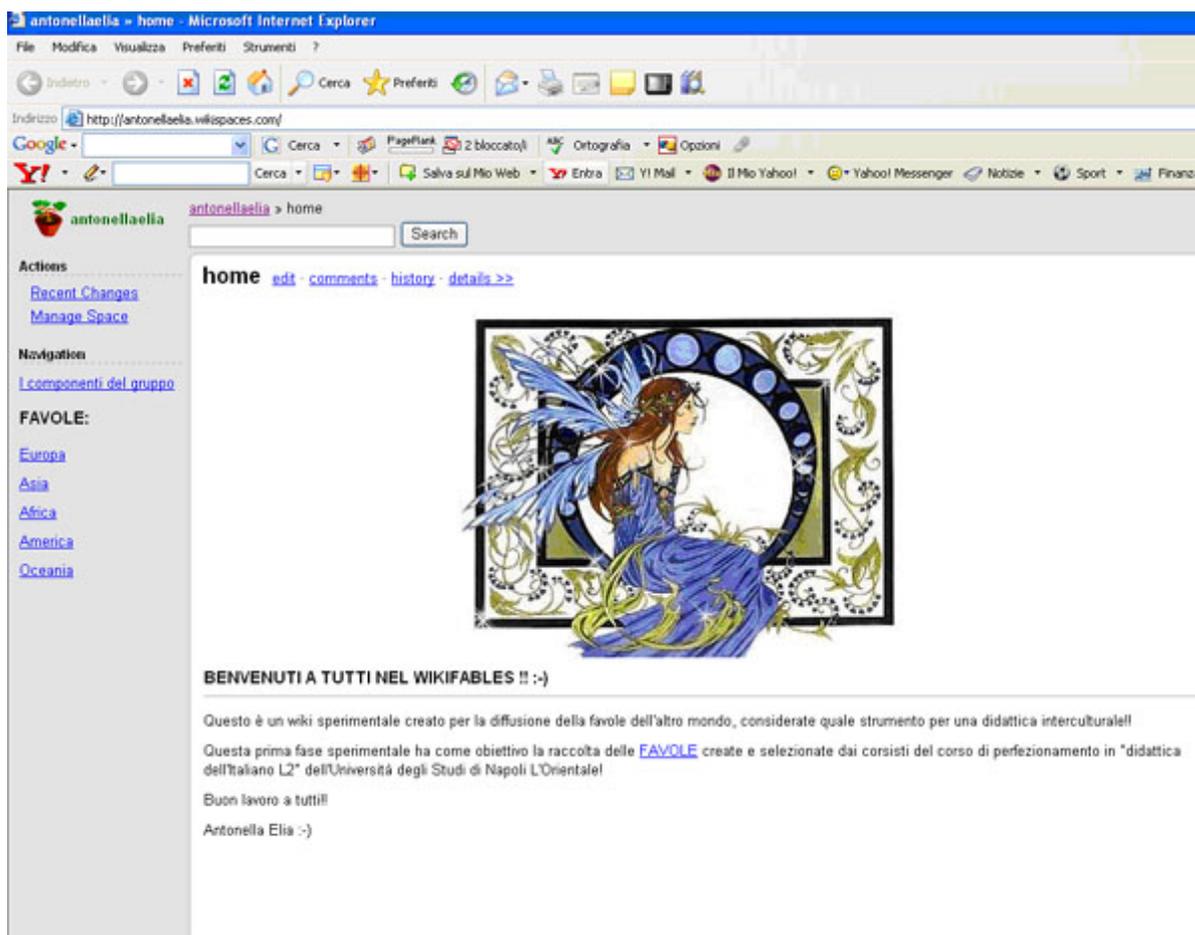


Fig. 4 - WikiFables homepage

7.5 Online international projects of cooperation and exchange

The final workshop objective was to familiarize teachers with the opportunities offered by international projects which encourage a collaborative model promoting real co-operation, reflection and exchange between Northern and Southern schools. New technologies bring the populations of the global village closer together, ensuring respect for the principles of equal opportunity, pluralism and interaction of cultures.

Many international projects on multimedia communication, have the purpose of bringing diverse cultures together developing an intercultural approach and making children more interculturally aware, by giving them the opportunity to know their peers' lives in other countries and getting in real touch with one another. *Giangukai* and *Harambee* are two intercultural projects with which teachers came into contact during the workshop.

8. Conclusions

ICT has opened a new channel of information distribution and made possible the intercultural communicative dialogue. A new media culture is emerging in which people need a new type of "cultural literacy" in addition to the traditional reading and writing skills.

Trained teachers are now applying the acquired skills in their classes. They are using blogs, powerpoint, wikis and international collaborative projects on the web and are participating with their classes by enriching the original *WikiFables* anthology.

As confirmed by informal interviews and a final questionnaire, the workshop had a very positive feedback among teachers. They appreciated the method of considering the traditional world of fables in an intercultural perspective, as well as providing electronic literacy in a socio-constructivist scenario when teaching Italian as a second language.

This could also be a successful method towards bringing back and preserving what would be an otherwise lost oral tradition in an unavoidable digital future.

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Biography

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