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Inhabiting the Hybrid: Art, Visual Thinking, and Pedagogical Engagement in the Initial Education of Language Teachers*

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Abstract: This exploratory study examines how teachers and prospective teachers interpret art- and visual-thinking-based approaches when designing language-learning activities within an Italian teacher qualification programme. Thirty-four participants completed a five-item questionnaire after an online workshop embedded in a broader hybrid programme. Open-ended responses were examined through qualitative content analysis, supported by descriptive frequencies for perceived barriers. In 24 proposals, students were expected to construct visual representations to organise or communicate linguistic meaning; direct interpretation of artworks was comparatively rare. Seventeen participants maintained a shared task while differentiating scaffolding, whereas other adaptations varied in their aims and formats. Group work, gradual exposure and acceptance of error were frequently proposed to support participation. Limited curricular time (28 of 34 respondents) was the most commonly reported barrier. The findings suggest that methodological proposals are selectively adapted to anticipated classroom conditions rather than transferred unchanged. Instructional design offers a lens for examining professional interpretations of training; neither improvements in teaching competence nor pedagogical engagement were directly measured.

Keywords: hybrid learning; pedagogical engagement; visual thinking; language teacher education; inclusive education

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1. Introduction

Teacher qualification programmes increasingly combine digitally mediated sessions, interaction and autonomous work, yet their pedagogical value cannot be inferred from delivery modes alone. The Community of Inquiry framework identifies cognitive, social and teaching presence as interdependent features of meaningful educational experience (Garrison et al., 2000). What matters here is whether training allows participants to question methodological ideas and reinterpret them in relation to

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practice. The wider qualification programme provides a hybrid context, but the workshop examined in this study took place synchronously online. Accordingly, the research addresses the instructional proposals produced after that workshop, not the independent effects of hybrid delivery.

The transition from encountering a teaching methodology to making justified instructional choices is a central challenge in professional education. Teachers must relate methods to particular learners, linguistic goals, resources and institutional constraints. For Schön (1983), reflection informs professional judgement in problematic situations; Mortari (2015) emphasises the situated interpretation of experience. Laurillard (2012) similarly treats teaching as design, involving deliberate choices about tasks, interactions and support. These positions resonate with a pedagogical understanding of education as intentional and relational action rather than the mechanical application of procedures (Bertolini, 1988; Bellingreri, 2005). Instructional proposals therefore provide a window onto professional interpretations, though not direct evidence of improvement in competence.

Art and visual thinking offer a revealing field for examining this passage, especially in language education. Images can prompt discussion but also structure vocabulary, narrative sequence and argumentation before verbal expression. Meaning is constructed through interacting semiotic resources rather than language alone (Kress, 2010); the question is how teachers make those resources serve a linguistic purpose. A distinction is essential: Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) centre on dialogic interpretation of images and justification through visual evidence (Housen, 2002; Yenawine, 2013), whereas visual thinking also encompasses maps, storyboards and multimodal productions without interpretation of artworks (Battaglia & Melchiori, 2026). Conflating these practices would obscure what teachers actually select from their training.

The inclusive value of visual and artistic mediation depends on design, not simply on using images. Different learners may need distinct linguistic and organisational supports while sharing a common activity; yet assigning visual resources only to those seen as less proficient risks making multimodality a compensatory label rather than a common means of expression. Participation also has a relational dimension: speaking a new language or presenting a creative product entails uncertainty and possible judgement. Cooperative activities, respectful feedback and acceptance of error may support involvement without removing expressive challenge. A pedagogy of recognition helps illuminate these choices beyond their technical aspects (Bellingreri, 2005).

Engagement connects these concerns without being reducible to attendance or task completion. Research distinguishes behavioural, cognitive, emotional and contextual dimensions (Kahu, 2013; Bond et al., 2020). In teacher education, a pedagogical reading may also consider how participants interpret formative experiences and assume responsibility for instructional choices (Sirignano et al., 2008). However, an assignment completed after one workshop is not a measure of engagement or its development over time. The available evidence concerns intended educational actions and representations of participation, not experienced involvement or subsequent classroom outcomes.

The relevant question is not whether art or visual thinking works in general, but how teachers make these approaches usable in anticipated classrooms. Drawing on 34 questionnaires collected after a workshop in an Italian qualification programme, the study asks: How do teachers and prospective teachers translate an arts-based training proposal into situated instructional designs for language education? The analysis

examines the functions assigned to visual resources, strategies for differentiation and participation, and perceived constraints on implementation. By considering recurring choices alongside hesitations and divergent cases, it explores the selective interpretation of methodological knowledge without attributing causal effects to training.

2. Materials and Methods

This exploratory qualitative study includes a descriptive quantitative component (Trinchero, 2004). Participants' proposals are examined as texts expressing instructional intentions and professional representations. The analysis concerns visual mediation, differentiation, participation and anticipated transferability; enacted teaching, training effectiveness, change in competence and measured engagement are outside its scope.

2.1. Training context and participants

Data were collected within the 30/60-CFU teacher qualification programmes delivered by IUL Telematic University in the 2025/2026 academic year. A six-hour synchronous online training day took place on 10 March 2026 within a wider programme described as hybrid. Four theoretical segments alternated with four individual laboratories using Google Forms. Workshop 3 followed a session on visual thinking and integrated artistic languages, including argument maps, storyboards, photo galleries, lexical rap, bilingual comics and performative and audiovisual examples. The principle of a common task with differentiated scaffolding was taught before the questionnaire. This online workshop, not the broader hybrid programme, generated the data analysed here.

The convenience corpus includes all 34 questionnaires submitted on 10–11 March 2026, with no exclusions. Twenty-nine respondents reported experience in secondary education: eight mainly in lower secondary school, nine in upper secondary school, eleven across both levels and one recently beginning lower-secondary teaching. Five reported other trajectories or no consolidated teaching experience. Most designs concerned English language teaching, across CEFR levels A1–C1.

2.2. Questionnaire and data collection

The online questionnaire contained five tasks: designing a visual- or arts-based language activity with aims, context and procedures; adapting one task through differentiated scaffolding; proposing conditions for safe creative participation; selecting perceived barriers from multiple responses; and identifying a priority concern and useful supports. Thirty-one questionnaires were returned within approximately thirty minutes and three later.

Because the prompts already emphasised differentiation, classroom safety and examples of argumentation, their appearance in responses was not considered spontaneous emergence. Analysis focused on how these ideas were developed, adapted or left unresolved. Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of the research and potential publication purposes and provided informed consent. Answers were treated confidentially and assigned anonymous identifiers P01–P34 in submission order.

2.3. Qualitative content analysis

Open-ended answers were analysed through qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Both researchers first read all 34 questionnaires separately, then compared their

preliminary interpretations. Responses were segmented into units of meaning addressing the research questions. Four macro-categories followed the questionnaire domains—visual mediation, differentiation, participation and transferability—while subcategories were progressively refined against the original answers. Ambiguous, incomplete and divergent formulations were retained and discussed. This was independent reading followed by joint interpretation, not a quantified inter-rater reliability procedure.

Segments were checked against the original answer, complete questionnaire and corpus. Table 1 illustrates the path from excerpt to code and category. Each of the 34 proposals was assigned a dominant visual or artistic function, although it could contain secondary features; participation strategies could receive multiple codes. All frequencies describe only this non-probability convenience corpus, without statistical inference. Excerpts were translated from Italian. Since most questionnaires were completed shortly after the workshop, shorter answers were not treated as evidence of weaker teaching competence.

Table 1. Illustrative coding framework: from excerpts to codes and categories.

Participant excerpt (translated)	Analytical code	Category
P20: "opinions, reasons and counterarguments with arrows, colours and symbols"	Visual organisation of argumentation	Visual mediation
P10: "describe artworks in the tourists' language"	Artwork as prompt for description	Visual mediation
P21: "model sentences, more images and less text"	Visual and linguistic support	Differentiation
P22: "three panels ... five panels"	Product variation by drawing preference	Differentiation
P05: "comment on the ideas, not on the drawing"	Respectful feedback rule	Conditions for participation
P28: "I show imperfect examples"	Normalisation of artistic error	Conditions for participation
P20: "integrate artistic activities directly into the curriculum"	Curricular integration	Transferability
P31: "we have only three hours of English"	Time constraint	Transferability

Note. Excerpts are translated from Italian; participant identifiers are anonymised.

3. Results

3.1. Visual mediation and language-learning design

Each proposal received a dominant visual or artistic classification. In 24 of 34 designs, students produced a visual representation: fourteen used maps, timelines, storyboards or similar organisers to structure subsequent verbal work; ten treated the visual construction as a multimodal product. P20 proposed a Visual Argument Map linking "opinions, reasons and counterarguments with arrows, colours and symbols"

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before debate, whereas P28 used a holiday storyboard before writing sentences in the past simple. The two cases illustrate visual mediation within different linguistic tasks.

Of the remaining ten designs, two centred on artworks: P10 envisaged museum guides describing works in the target language, while P27 prompted personal interpretation. Four foregrounded performance, including role-play, dramatisation or rap, and four left the visual component marginal or unclear. This mutually exclusive classification (24 + 2 + 4 + 4 = 34) concerns the dominant function, not the full range of resources in a proposal. Art interpretation was therefore much less frequent than visual organisation or multimodal production.

Comparing the proposals with workshop examples suggests selective uptake: maps, storyboards and bilingual comics often resembled models presented during training, while some respondents introduced collage or diamond ranking. Photography-based interpretation, podcasts and video were less prominent. The correspondence shows what participants selected, but cannot establish why they made those choices.

3.2. Differentiation and conditions for participation

Despite instructions to preserve a common task with differentiated support, proposals varied. Seventeen participants kept the activity shared while modulating linguistic or organisational scaffolding. P34 described "the same activity but with different scaffolding", proposing model phrases and vocabulary for A2 learners and extended argumentation for B2 learners. In ten of these designs, images were used particularly for learners considered less proficient; P21 proposed "ready-made model sentences, more images and less text".

Other participants varied the expected product, objectives or peer grouping, or expressed uncertainty. P22 altered the number of comic panels according to preference for drawing, whereas P24 proposed different objectives. Such alternatives cannot be ranked as more or less competent without contextual criteria. They nevertheless disclose differing interpretations of the relationship between common purposes and individual needs.

Paired or small-group work appeared in 25 answers concerning participation. Other proposals used gradual sharing, respectful feedback and deliberately imperfect examples. P05 recommended "comment on the ideas, not on the drawing"; P28 used imperfect models to show that artistic talent was unnecessary; P32 assigned fictional roles to reduce personal exposure. Only five explicitly gave students choices of topic, role or format. P23 expressed uncertainty about creating safe conditions without teaching experience. These variations matter because classroom safety was already prompted by the questionnaire.

3.3. Transferability and perceived barriers

Lack of curricular time was selected by 28 respondents (82.4%), followed by programme rigidity (17; 50.0%) and anticipated student resistance or discomfort (14; 41.2%). Less frequently indicated barriers were unavailable technological resources (8; 23.5%), insufficient experience (6; 17.6%), assessment difficulties (5; 14.7%) and teacher embarrassment (1; 2.9%). Respondents could select more than one barrier, and one respondent selected none. The final open-ended item, in which participants identified a priority concern and possible supports, was interpreted qualitatively rather than presented as an exhaustive categorical distribution.

The open-ended responses clarify different interpretations of feasibility. Participants requested more curricular time, short adaptable activities, ready-to-use

examples, assessment rubrics or opportunities to work with experienced teachers. P20 proposed integrating art "directly into the curriculum". By contrast, P05 described nine weekly hours of English in an international school, making longer projects seem practicable. For some novice teachers, obstacles were anticipated rather than experienced. The findings therefore concern perceived transferability, not observed implementation.

Table 2. Perceived barriers to classroom implementation (N = 34).

Barrier	n	%
Insufficient curricular time	28	82.4
Curricular rigidity	17	50.0
Student resistance or discomfort	14	41.2
Unavailable technological resources	8	23.5
Insufficient previous experience	6	17.6
Assessment difficulties	5	14.7
Teacher embarrassment	1	2.9

Note. Multiple responses were permitted, so percentages are not additive; one participant selected no barrier. Values describe only these 34 questionnaires from a convenience corpus. They do not provide population estimates, statistical inference or evidence of barriers actually encountered in implementation.

4. Discussion

Methodological knowledge appears in the proposals through selection and contextual adaptation, rather than simple reproduction. This aligns with accounts of situated reflection (Schön, 1983; Mortari, 2015) and teaching as design (Laurillard, 2012). Nonetheless, plans produced after one workshop cannot demonstrate a change in competence. Professional appropriation is used here to interpret instructional choices, not as a measured outcome.

The preferred visual devices structured meaning and verbal production, consistent with multimodality (Kress, 2010) and accounts of visual thinking (Battaglia & Melchiori, 2026). By contrast, interpretation of artworks, central to VTS (Housen, 2002; Yenawine, 2013), remained rare. Visual thinking, multimodal production and artwork interpretation thus overlap without being synonymous. Participants tended to select formats close to familiar classroom tasks, raising questions about perceived feasibility but not establishing the causes of these preferences.

Differentiation presents a related tension. Some designs varied scaffolding within a common task; others adjusted products or goals. Their appropriateness depends on learners and context. More importantly, assigning images primarily to less proficient students may give visual mediation a compensatory status rather than making it a resource shared across proficiency levels. Inclusive multimodality concerns the accessibility and significance of different modes for all learners, not the mere presence of images.

Strategies for safeguarding participation also warrant scrutiny. To reduce embarrassment, participants often downplayed artistic performance, offered imperfect models and encouraged initial work in small groups. Such choices recognise the

vulnerability of speaking and creating before others (Bellingreri, 2005). Yet reassurance that drawing will not be evaluated may also diminish the aesthetic specificity of the experience. Teacher education must therefore consider how to support expressive risk without making art a talent test or emptying it of interpretative possibilities. Limited opportunities for student choice suggest participation was framed more as relational safety than authorship.

Pedagogical engagement remains an interpretative construct, not a measured effect (Kahu, 2013; Sirignano et al., 2008): the texts describe anticipated participation and methodological choices, not involvement observed during training or in classrooms. Time and curricular constraints suggest innovation was perceived as more sustainable when integrated into ordinary teaching (Marcuccio, 2015). Since the workshop examples and questionnaire prompts shaped the responses, the findings are situated within that device. Classroom observation and follow-up interviews would be needed to assess how these design intentions are negotiated in practice.

5. Conclusions

The findings offer a pedagogical perspective on how methodological knowledge is interpreted and reorganised within initial language teacher education. The analysis of 34 instructional proposals reveals that the appropriation of arts-based approaches is neither uniform nor automatic. Participants predominantly selected visual resources that could be integrated into familiar language-learning tasks, whereas activities centred on the interpretation of artworks remained less frequent. This distinction highlights the importance of examining not only which methodologies teachers encounter during training, but also how they understand their educational possibilities and translate them into situated instructional choices.

Particularly significant are the tensions emerging between differentiation, inclusion, and participation. Visual mediation can facilitate access to linguistic tasks, but its predominantly compensatory use risks associating multimodal resources with lower levels of competence rather than recognising them as opportunities for meaning-making available to all learners (Kress, 2010). Similarly, strategies intended to reduce fear of judgement may support participation while leaving limited opportunities for students to exercise interpretative autonomy and creative authorship. These findings invite a conception of inclusive teaching that extends beyond the provision of differentiated support to consider the quality of the experiences, relationships, and expressive possibilities made accessible through instructional design.

From this perspective, the professional significance of training lies not simply in acquiring methodological repertoires, but in developing opportunities to examine the pedagogical assumptions underlying their use. Instructional design becomes a space for questioning choices, considering alternatives, and negotiating the relationship between educational intentions and contextual constraints. This interpretation resonates with Schön's (1983) conception of reflective practice and Laurillard's (2012) understanding of teaching as a design activity. Pedagogical engagement can therefore be considered an interpretative lens through which to examine teachers' active relationship with professional knowledge (Sirignano et al., 2008), without assuming that its development has been empirically demonstrated.

The exploratory nature of the study limits its conclusions to the instructional intentions and professional representations expressed by participants. Nevertheless, the findings suggest the relevance of teacher education pathways that connect

methodological exploration, critical reflection, and opportunities to revise instructional proposals in relation to actual classroom conditions. Future research should follow selected activities into school contexts, examining how initial design intentions are negotiated, transformed, or reconsidered through interaction with learners. Such an approach could contribute to understanding how artistic and visual languages become meaningful components of inclusive educational practice rather than additional techniques introduced into an already established curriculum.

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