# Operational models for class work: module, teaching unit, learning unit

History has bequeathed two teaching models that have been sanctified over the centuries, the *maieutic conversation* and the *lecture (lectio ex cathedra).*

In the first model, Socrates assisted (in the *mid-wife* sense of this term) in the maturation of the cognitive and critical autonomy of his pupils; travelling from the porticos of Athens to the present time, this form of conversation-based teaching may be used in the metalinguistic reflection of the mother tongue or at very high levels of competence in other languages, it can episodically be part of a course, but it can not constitute its pivot.

The second model, the lecture (*lectio,* "to read aloud") is typical of religious education: it places the sacred text at the centre of attention and the priest-teacher, at the front of the class, communicates and interprets it directly to the pupils, who accept it on faith. It is a gratifying position for the teacher and this explains why lecture-based teaching survives even when the text is no longer a "sacred" one and the students are no longer disposed to take on faith the words of their teacher…

These two ancient models are inapplicable to contemporary language teaching. Counter wise, the 20th century has bequeathed three operational models, one of them developed in Venice, that are synthesized in the following section.

## 1. Three models inherited from the 20th century

The "Teaching Unit" (hereafter, TU) has been part of tradition since the sixties: the name focuses on the teaching process. In point of fact, a TU, as we know it and as it is used in manuals, requires many hours and comprises a series of single "lessons," or individual work sessions, that from the student's point of view can be perceived as an unitary block, a "Learning Unit" (hereafter, LU).

In more recent times, the emerging importance of the certification processes, connected to the exchange value of knowledge, has required the development of another model of didactic organization, the "Module", that makes it possible to identify certain blocks of competence or knowledge and to accredit them to a personal portfolio. It is therefore a model centred on the object of study, on disciplines.

The didactic model described in the pedagogical literature is made of a three pole "space" defined by the roles of student, teacher and the subject to be taught; it is readily evident that each of the just mentioned models focuses the attention on one of the three poles of the didactic action:

Student: *Learning Unit*

Language: *Module*      Teacher: *Teaching Unit*
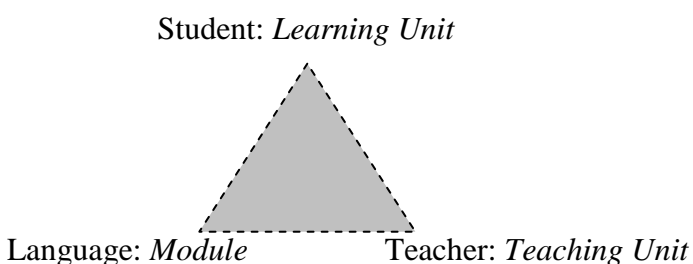
The TU, proposed in 1931 in Winnetka for the education of immigrants and children with learning difficulties, has its origins in the activist pedagogy of John Dewey and there is a consolidated critical literature about it.

The LU was developed by the Venetian School of language teaching methodology in 2000.

The Module, in its turn, has theoretical, but not practical applications in accordance with the European Language Portfolio, and also has concrete applications in certain sectors of language education.

## 2. Learning Unit and Teaching Unit

The LU (putting aside for the moment Krashen's distinction between "acquisition" and "learning") originates from the interaction of two components:
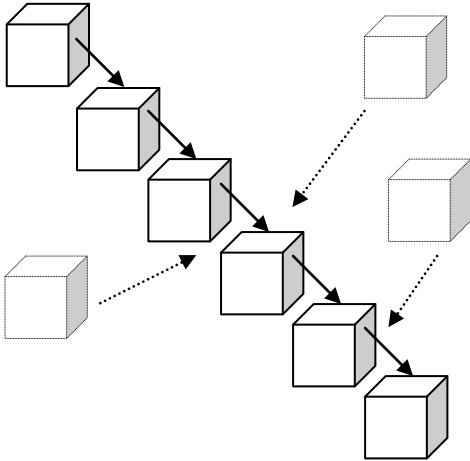
   a. a *neurolinguistic* consideration grounded in two functional principles:
      - "bimodality": the functional division of the two brain hemispheres, the right one assigned general, holistic and analogical activities, and the left one assigned rational, sequential and logical activities;
      - "directionality": although there is a continuous cooperation between the two brain modalities, the emotional and holistic activities precede the rational and analytical ones;
   b. a *psychological* consideration, derived form the Gestalt psychology, that defines perception as a sequential process of globalising → analysing → synthesising.

Based on these two components, particularly the psychological one, Renzo Titone (1976) and Giovanni Freddi (1970, 1979: specifically devoted to language teaching) defined the TU as a "unit" involving a certain number of hours, and characterised by three phases that recall the three moments of perception described above in point "b," plus an initial motivational phase and a concluding one of testing and evaluation.

In the nineties, the tendency to shift the attention to the learning process as a base from which to develop teaching methodologies lead the Venetian School (Balboni 2000 and 2002) to dismembering the TU into a series of LUs, each one lasting for a single session (or lesson/period: usually between 45 and 90 minutes); this *learning* unit is where the student perceives his/her own learning: "today I studied…, I learned to…". Conversely, a *teaching* unit is a more complex linguistic-communicative *tranche*, realized by bringing together cultural models, communicative acts, language expressions and language structures, all linked by a situational context (TUs in language textbooks usually have situational titles: "At the station", "At the restaurant", and so on) or by a grammatical context (manuals for an extensive study of the mother tongue have such TUs as "The subject", "The predicate", "The gender", etc.)

The TU is represented in the diagram.

This idea of TU is characterized by its extreme flexibility in organising the teaching; its structure is articulated in three phases, analytically described in the following three paragraphs.

| INTRODUCTION | NET OF LEARNING UNITS | CONCLUSION |
|---|---|---|
| - *Presentation* of the contents of the unit that is about to commence<br>- basic *Motivation* for the whole unit<br>- *Positioning* of the unit in relation to the preceding and succeeding<br>- *Operative Instructions* |  | - *Testing*<br>- *Recuperation* of slower students<br>- *Deepening* specifically for students that excel<br>- *De-conditioning*, activities detached from TU contents. |

## 2.1 Introductory phase of the TU

It is during this introductory phase (which can last as little as ten minutes, yet is the keystone of the whole TU) that the basic motivation of the students is revived, as it has to last for a longer period of time than that of a single lesson, and furthermore, is not connected to what will occur during the single hour of each lesson or LU.

This phase introduces the contents of the TU that is about to commence, and they are partly negotiated with the students: on the one hand, the teacher explains the logic of the TU that he or she is proposing (usually supported by a manual), on the other hand, the students themselves propose possible changes or request integrations. The teacher can further propose to the students that they search, during the TU, for materials with which to construct and integrate the LUs they have previously proposed (represented faintly in the above diagram because they can also be absent).

In the typical model of group work analysis, this introductory phase corresponds to the "chaos" and the "rules negotiation" phases that begin the work of every productive group.

This is also the moment to give specific instructions for activities that need to be programmed in advance: finding authentic documents, establishing contacts with a foreign school for future chat-line sessions, etc.

## 2.2 The net of LUs

The LUs are available to the teacher from manuals or from his personal data bank of activities, and he/she can use (with the entire class or only some of the students) all the ones he has planned to present, or part thereof, based on the initial negotiation or on his evaluation of the level of the class, postponing some of them until later or recalling other from previous TUs.

The teacher usually follows the LU sequence recommended by the teaching material or he can opt for different sequences, suggested by his analysis of class-needs, by his students reactions, and so on. In self-learning courses the student himself can decide, at least in part, on the sequence, aided by advice from the tutor.

As language learning follows acquisitional patterns and most LUs imply the knowledge of lexicon, acts, structures presented in previous LUs, a TU usually has a pre-ordinal sequence of LUs, but it can also be thought of as a "net" of LUs, and therefore it acquires a flexible structure that uses the original sequence as a scaffolding and can unexpectedly expand into non-didactic materials (internet sites, videos, newspapers, etc.), or supplementary LUs that are created *ad hoc* by the teacher, by a group of colleagues, or by a group of excellent students while the teacher is engaged with the slower

members of the class, and so on: these LUs are represented faintly in the diagram because they can also be absent.

Each LU largely follows the Gestalt path mentioned above, and in turn is constituted by a tri-partite formation that on the surface coincides with the "three Ps" of the English model, *presentation / practice / production*, but underneath is profoundly different: the "three Ps" model was the product of very traditional teaching whereby the teacher introduces the contents or the input, the student performs the exercises and then demonstrates what he has learned. Conversely, the model *globalising / analysing / synthesising / reflecting* does not originate in pedagogy but in psychology and it concerns the human mechanisms of perception and mental representation. In different terminology but substantially parallel to the Gestalt one, the model *globalising / analysing / synthesising / reflecting* has been described by Chomsky as the functioning mechanism of the *Language Acquisition Device* (*LAD*) in terms of *observation / creation and verification of hypotheses about what has been observed / fixation and use* of the "rules" that have been observed, hypothesized and confirmed.

A LU is centred on a text (dialogue, authentic material, publicity, literary text, reading, song, video, e-mail, web page, etc.), that is tackled

a. first of all *globally*, with comprehension tasks, graded from the simplest to the most complex, that involve the right hemisphere of the brain and are mainly based on strategies such as the maximum exploitation of text redundancy and the formation of socio-pragmatic hypotheses that are based on the person's own knowledge of the world;

b. then *analytically*, in terms of both a profound comprehension of the input and by creating linguistic, socio-cultural, pragmatic hypotheses: this can include some phases of explanation by the teacher, however constructive and cooperative teamwork is what leads the students toward discovering the mechanisms of the language; recalling Chomsky: it is the *Language Acquisition Device* that creates hypotheses, and the purpose of the teacher is not to replace the students' LAD but, according to Bruner, to provide them with a *Language Acquisition Support System (LASS)*. This procedure turns students from listeners into protagonists and puts them at the summit in the triangle shown above;

c. next, by a *synthesis*, by a consolidation of what has been discovered (point "a") and analysed (point "b"), and which is now applied in exercises and creative activities of problem solving, simulation, creation of texts, etc.;

d. and finally, by a *reflection* that is metalinguistic and – in order to pursue the objective of learning to learn – also metacognitive in character: a reflection on what has been done, on how the discovery of the meaning of an unknown word, or a grammatical mechanism, or an implicit cultural item, has been achieved; a reflection on the interactions within the class, on why a certain group performed well or badly, on why an activity has required too long a time to be organized, and so on. Whenever the occasion arises, this phase can also be employed at different moments in the LU, however, it is worth stressing that it is precisely this phase of reflection that overcomes the "three Ps" model by pursuing educative purposes (self-promotion, learning to learn) and not only instrumental ones.

*2.3 Conclusive phase of the TU*

This section has a "Y" shape: the part in common is the phase of testing of the objectives set at the beginning of the TU; then two paths emerge:

a. the group of *students with medium-low results* can lift their respective levels through "stratified and differentiated" LUs: this is the model elaborated by three young Venetian scholars, Fabio Caon, Barbara D'Annunzio and Francesca Della Puppa (published in Caon 2006) which pays particular attention to foreign students attending Italian schools and put into

classes on the basis of their age, independent of their level of mastery of the Italian language, but it can also be applied to all language education contexts. One of the characteristics of the "stratified and differentiated" LU is that activities are collocated in degrees of difficulty and therefore each student carries out activities autonomously up to a certain point, and from that point on he/she then works together with whomever can reach the higher levels; at the end of the process, and under the guidance of the teacher, it is only by working all together, rather than in pairs or small groups, can the students complete the path. This is an attempt to operationally realize a path based on Vygostky's zone of proximal development or, in more familiar terms, to recuperate the sequences *i+1* missing from the natural order constituting Krashen's version of the acquisitional sequences;

b. the group of *students with medium-high results* can improve its excellence with activities of further study: language games, webquests, research of materials that can eventually be proposed to the class in the interlude phase described in 4.2.4.

In this remedial work phase the class is therefore divided into two parts which, with regard to the respective levels therein, can in turn be divided into couples or small work groups. It is an operative response to the necessity, always felt but rarely responded to, of adapting the teaching procedures to the different levels of acquisition and performance.

*2.4 Interlude phase*

In the diagram of the TU, above, this phase is depicted, solely for graphic convenience, as inside the TU. However, in point of fact, this work session is external to the TU even if the teacher easily links it, and even if the excellent students find materials and propose activities during the phase that follows the test (cf. 2.3.b).

This interlude phase between the just concluded TU and the one starting in the succeeding session is actually an hour *without (an explicit) teaching purpose,* is one *whose sole purpose is taking pleasure in using the language*: the pleasure of observing oneself learning, the pleasure in playing with the language, in listening to a song or watching a scene in a film, in chatting with foreign classes, and so on.

3. Module

Since the nineties, the increasing mobility of people, the complexity of formative paths that are becoming ever more personalized, and the necessity of having these paths recognised by certification, has lead to the development of a model of "modular" planning, wherein every section is self-sufficient and can be certified.

It will be of value at this point to describe separately these two qualifiers so as to understand if and how the "module" is an operational model adequate for language education:

*a. a module is self-sufficient, conclusive in itself*
In second, foreign, classical, and ethnic languages we cannot speak of "self sufficient" portions if we want to avoid falling into the arbitrariness of "survival", "waystage", "threshold" modules, etc.: namely, constructions that are deprived of socio-pragmatic, linguistic, and cultural foundations. This does not mean that it is unnecessary to establish a threshold of language mastery that is indispensable for all concerned (the lower section of the columns comprising the curriculum), but we have to be aware that such thresholds are arbitrary and conventional decisions (see point "b"). Modularization, in the sense of identifying "self-sufficient" sections of knowledge and competence, becomes possible in some aspects of language education once a high enough level of mastery is

reached, high enough to be able to work on particular language varieties or on the metalanguage description. For instance, a modular organisation is possible,

- in *languages for specific purposes*: i.e., there can be a basic module of the microlanguage of economics, followed by specific modules for the microlanguages of banking, importing-exporting, marketing, etc.;
- in the *language of literature*: i.e., a basic module of analysis for literary texts can be given as a starting point, followed by modules for genres or authors or historical periods, depending on the formulation of the course (for an example, see point 4);
- in *language analysis* of the mother tongue or at very high levels of other languages: i.e., modules of the "morphosyntax of the verb," "pronouns", etc., can be carried out;

*b. a module can be certified and therefore accredited*
The fragmentation of competences on the one hand, along with globalisation and the mobility of people on the other, require a sort of "common currency" with which to exchange information on competences and knowledge: the concept of "credit," based on the Bologna process that homogenizes advanced education in the European Union, is an example of a common currency that affirms knowledge. Just as a coin must be certified by a Central Bank, so too a "credit," to have international circulation and recognition, has to be certified according to shared logics: the European Language Portfolio is one possible forms of certification. However, to then propose as the next logical step a full module organisation of the language curriculum based on the levels of the Portfolio is unjustified: to say that there are six levels (or ten or four) is very useful, but to confuse the certification levels with modules that are self-sufficient and able to be certified is ill-advised.
Linguistic competence is a continuum, therefore it cannot to be put into modules, even if it is divided into levels for the convenience of certification.

It was noted in point "a" that in mother tongues and at high levels of other languages it is possible to have modular organisation.
That being the case, the problem is how to guarantee the continuity of the curriculum, how to join the modules to each other, as well as respecting their self-sufficiency and accreditation. The connections can be of three types:
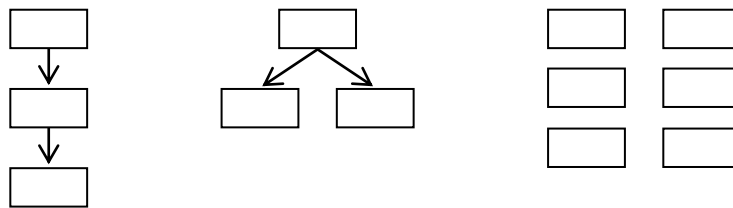


In the left-hand graph, the modules are in obligatory succession: in mathematics it is possible to plan an "arithmetical" module (operations and fractions), an "algebraic" module (literal calculation and equations), a "functional" module (integrals, derivatives, etc.). They are self-sufficient modules that are separated into the familiar school stages of primary, secondary, and high school, and they can be certified (whoever advances from primary school to secondary school is certified as able to perform additions, subtractions, divisions and multiplications). *In language education this model is not applicable.*
In the central schema, a succeeding module can be chosen after having developed a basic, propaedeutic module, that must be accredited to the student before he can progress to the next one. A case in point is the above mentioned LSP teaching: after having been accredited a basic module on economic-commercial Japanese, the student can choose, according to his or her needs, to progress to a module on commercial correspondence, or on banking Japanese, or on insurance Japanese, etc.

In the right-hand schema, the student can start from any module and progress to any other: this is possible, for instance, in a physical education curriculum where different modules correspond to different sports. The curriculum can ensure that each student follows one module of team-playing and one of individual athletics, leaving to the student the choice of which sport in each category to practice intensively during that academic year; this model:

- cannot be applied to a continuum, such as the acquisition phase of a language by beginners and intermediates;
- can be applied to language analysis for advanced students: for instance, certain academic courses require a sociolinguistics module (leaving the student free to choose, for example, among "diachronic varieties of German", "geographical varieties of German," or "juvenile German"), or a metalinguistic module (to chose, for example, between "French verbal system", or "French pronouns", "French lexical system" and so on).

In conclusion, a module is a self-sufficient, meaningful, self-enclosed thematic block that gathers together contents that were traditionally distributed among many TUs; for the acquisition of such contents a "module" is articulated in a series of TUs, each one based on a net of LUs.

## 4. The hierarchy among Modules, Teaching Units and Learning Units

In this essay three models have been presented with which to organize teaching, to plan the implementation of a curriculum. In point 2 a hierarchy was proposed between TU and LU: a TU is the context wherein there is a net of LUs, which can be presented sequentially or, sometimes, non-sequentially, with the possibility of postponing a particular LU to a future date, or to eliminate it for a group of students, or to integrate LUs that were not part of the original plan but were based on students' requests and proposals or based on extra-scholastic events that, due to their authenticity, can contribute to the motivation, to the pleasure, to further studying by the group of students (or part thereof).

It is obvious that the Module is hierarchically situated in relation to the TU: whatever the nature of the Module, it is articulated in a series of TUs, that in turn are composed of a series of LUs.

To exemplify the hierarchy we can ponder a context wherein all the three operational models can be applied, including the Module; an example can be an introductory module to a literature course, specifically, the analysis of literary texts. A typical introductory module of this kind is the following:
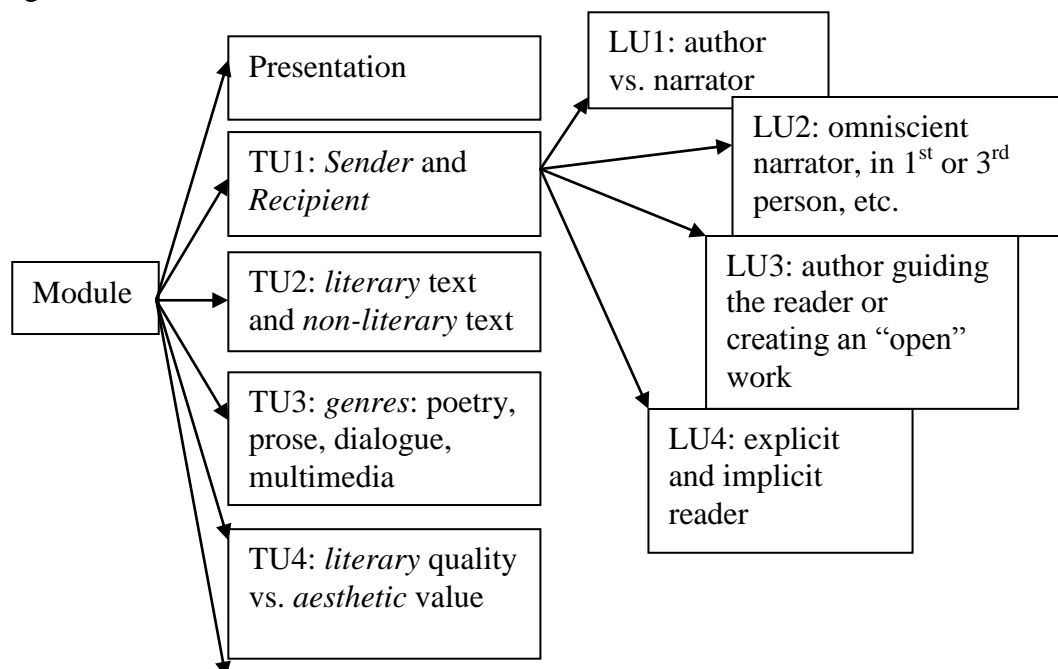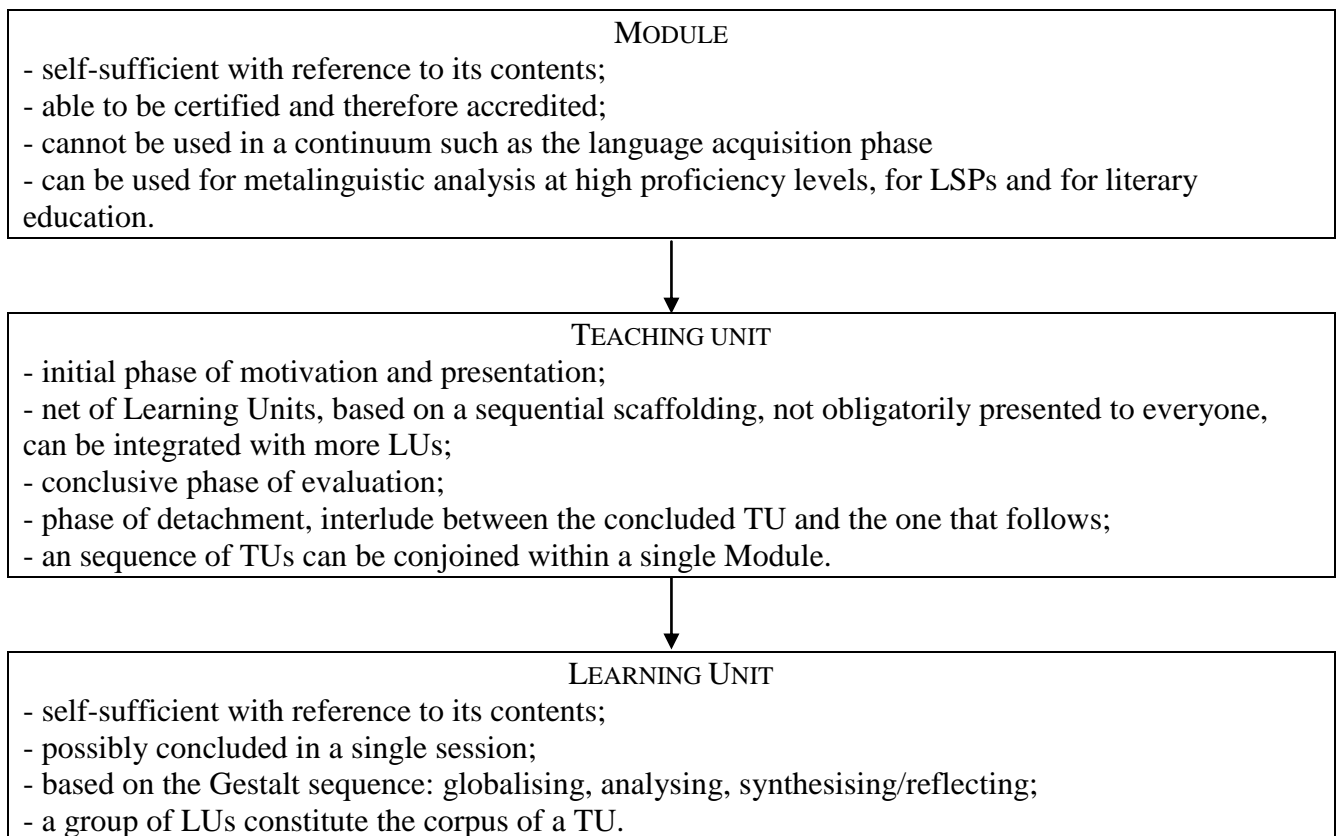
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┌─────────────────────────┐
│   Test                  │
└─────────────────────────┘
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The above diagram is only complete in the TU column, whereas the LUs shown are only for TU1; the LUs of the TU2 concern the phonological, morphosyntactical and lexical characteristics of a literary text; the LUs of the other TUs are easy to imagine.

The opening presentation of the Module has to arouse motivation, has to let the fact emerge that the students need to know how to analyse a text before starting a literature course, etc.

At the conclusion of the Module there is a test that "certifies" the acquired competence in the procedures relating to textual analysis: with this credit the student can access literary education modules (that relate to Literary Education but that are outside the sphere of the LTM; a special *Document* will be dedicated to this subject in order to deepen the understanding regarding the above mentioned introductory module for reading a literary text).

This diagram can easily make the operational model hierarchy clear to the reader.

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MODULE
- self-sufficient with reference to its contents;
- able to be certified and therefore accredited;
- cannot be used in a continuum such as the language acquisition phase
- can be used for metalinguistic analysis at high proficiency levels, for LSPs and for literary education.

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TEACHING UNIT
- initial phase of motivation and presentation;
- net of Learning Units, based on a sequential scaffolding, not obligatorily presented to everyone, can be integrated with more LUs;
- conclusive phase of evaluation;
- phase of detachment, interlude between the concluded TU and the one that follows;
- an sequence of TUs can be conjoined within a single Module.

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LEARNING UNIT
- self-sufficient with reference to its contents;
- possibly concluded in a single session;
- based on the Gestalt sequence: globalising, analysing, synthesising/reflecting;
- a group of LUs constitute the corpus of a TU.

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