Beyond

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Teaching Italian to North American Students

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ABSTRACT

In a humanistic language learning approach, the learning-teaching process is centered around the student. It is therefore essential, for the teacher who guides the learning process, to consider a fundamental psychological and emotional dimension in the mechanisms of linguistic acquisition: motivation. Motivation or, more precisely, the motivational framework, is a complex and dynamic system that is formed and evolves thanks to the interaction of factors related both to the student's subjective characteristics and to the specific coordinates of the learning context.

In this article, we briefly analyze some traits present in the motivational framework of our students and then describe the interventions proposed in the management of the classroom and in everyday teaching. The interventions aim to improve the students' motivational framework by developing instrumental and extrinsic motivation (which are always present in formal learning environments), integrative and cultural motivation and, in particular, intrinsic motivation.

KEYWORDS: Italian language, skills, communication, university teaching, culture

Firstly, I would like to begin with some brief considerations on motivation, an essential factor in determining and influencing the language acquisition process. Secondly, I would like to illustrate in greater detail some of the interventions proposed in class management and daily teaching.

In a humanistic approach to language learning, the learning–teaching process is centered around the student. For this reason, the instructor who guides the teaching must consider one following fundamental

psychological and emotional dimension in the mechanisms of language acquisition: motivation.

When we speak of motivation, we should (more precisely) speak of a framework consisting of various kinds of motivations. Their different natures often co-exist and tend to accumulate, since each subject usually pursues multiple goals at the same time. Motivation is a complex system that is formed and evolves thanks to the interaction of multiple, intertwined factors. First of all, motivation is connected to the student's subjective characteristics on the one hand and to the specific learning context on the other. For this reason, the teacher (who acts as the facilitator and director of language acquisition) can also take on the role of motivator. In doing so, they build and prepare (by means of targeted strategies) a series of educational conditions that can positively influence the existing motivational frameworks.

As we shall see, it is a matter of developing motivation that stems from a desire to integrate with the host community. In addition to these factors (which we may call a cultural and intrinsic kind of motivation), there exist instrumental and extrinsic motivations, which are always present in formal learning environments. Motivation in young adult learners is a complex and dynamic reality. However, we can highlight some features present in the motivational framework of our students, who are in Italy for academic reasons. First, let us focus on a good initial motivation: students spend a whole semester in Florence. Consequently, they wish to interact with the host community. We also observe a good cultural motivation, which stems from an interest in Italian culture (understood as everyday lifestyle) and from the curiosity to discover the new environment in which they are living. There is also an intrinsic motivation, particularly in students who have a strong interest in language and culture and who want to major in either Italian or literature.

Having said this, I would like to pause for a moment on intrinsic motivation. This is a dimension based on desire and interest, linked to the pleasure that comes from the activity of studying a language in itself. It proves to be the most stable motivational dimension over time and the

most effective for the purposes of language acquisition. The reason for it is that the drive to learn both comes upon the subject and depends on the subject. In other words, it is not dictated by external elements, such as positive or negative judgments. Moreover, this motivation is linked to the development of higher levels of autonomy and awareness of the students' own educational path.

Another key component that we have observed is a poor instrumental motivation for studying languages in learners with majors that are not related to Italian studies.

Finally, some individuals possess a strong extrinsic motivation, which is typical of formal learning contexts; I'm speaking of the desire to achieve specific results, such as receiving good grades and academic credits. Since at our Institute (ISI Florence) the Italian language course is compulsory, this type of motivation can be predominant at the beginning of the semester.

As teachers, therefore, we asked ourselves what methods of intervention we could use to make positive and significant changes to our teaching practice, thus improving our students' motivational framework. Basically, we identified three areas of intervention and proposals, whose aims are as follows:

a. Creating a positive atmosphere in class and encouraging students to be active participants in their studies.

b. Strengthening both the motivation to integrate with the host community and cultural motivation.

c. Developing the intrinsic dimension of motivation.

With regard to the first point, in order to create a learning context that allows students to experience positive emotions and (consequently) reduce emotional filters, we focus a lot on the atmosphere and on how we manage the class. This is particularly true in the preliminary stages

and the initial meetings with the class, i.e., the first two weeks of the semester. As already mentioned, we immediately explain that, the purpose of any language is mainly to communicate and act in a social context. In our course we do not pursue an ideal of grammatical perfection; making mistakes is an integral part of language acquisition. We emphasize that learning a language requires both time and commitment.

In the classroom we prefer cooperative learning, so students often work in pairs, groups, and teams. Their learning activities are meant to create meaningful relationships among them. In this way it is the group as a whole that becomes the "learner." Also, this methodology can help reassure shy or less self-confident students. In an activity like discovering grammatical mechanisms, students are not alone, as they share ideas and collaborate with their peers to build what is – at once – new and mutual knowledge.

Another crucial point I would like to talk about is the negotiation process, which is the basis for establishing a meaningful relationship between teacher and group / class. One of its benefits is to effectively involve students (from the very beginning) in the decisions that define their own educational path. Our students are young adults in a university context. Therefore, a fundamental educational goal in their case is precisely to develop greater autonomy and a stronger ability to manage their own educational project.

So, what do we do in practice? Together with our students we analyze their needs, we present and discuss methodological principles, we explain the linguistic objectives of the course as well as the aims of the didactic activities. All of this is done at the beginning of the semester and then repeated throughout the semester. To better illustrate this, I shall use an example relating to linguistic objectives. Considering the peculiarity of the class group, it is certainly possible to negotiate some competences to be acquired, while remaining within a consolidated program. For example, in a class of architecture students, part of the vocabulary activities can concentrate on the development of a sectorial language that is of immediate interest to the students.

Now we come to the second point, concerning strategies that can be used to strengthen motivation towards the external environment. In this case we intervene substantially by creating new linguistic needs, such as the need to interact with the environment outside the classroom. To create a significant interrelationship between the study of Italian in the classroom and the external context, we have developed multiple opportunities for cultural and linguistic exchange. An example of this is conversations between our students and Italian university peers; these meetings are an integral part of the semester program.

It is important to emphasize that, during these activities, the attention and energy of the students is focused on interacting with the group of native speakers. As such, this experience loses (at least in part) the meaning traditionally associated with a teaching activity. It becomes, instead, an opportunity to communicate with peers, to receive useful information (names of restaurants, places and shops where to go) and to begin discovering some cultural aspects (e.g., the lifestyle of the peer group, the Italian university system, and the role of the family in our society).

Cultural motivation is a valuable resource for the teacher. How can we make the most of it? Through our experience we have understood that it is essential to create a contact between the students and the city where they live for a semester. To this end, in the first two weeks we present simple yet not banal information about Florence, the main monuments and places of interest (squares, districts of the historic center, and markets). All of this information is accompanied by an essential thematic lexicon, suitable for an elementary level.

To keep this motivation alive throughout the semester, Florence becomes a linguistic and cultural laboratory. Among other activities, we propose interviews with native speakers, visits to university departments, markets, significant places in the urban context, and treasure hunts with different tasks to perform. In this way, students must" communicate and interact in a real context, respecting social rules and using an appropriate linguistic register (for instance, formal vs. informal).

With regard to the third area of intervention, i.e., the development

of intrinsic motivation, we work in two main directions: on the one hand, by intervening on the materials, the activities, and the methodologies we propose, while on the other hand, by trying to develop greater autonomy for the students, so that they can improve their ability to analyze needs and objectives and manage their own educational path.

If we consider the materials, activities, and methodologies proposed, it becomes of fundamental importance to stimulate pleasant emotions linked to the daily practice in the classroom. From our experience, these are the strategies we recommend: expanding and varying the typology of exercises; assigning tasks that involve different learning styles; carrying out new and interesting activities; exposing students to various kinds of feedback and materials; using forms of cooperative work and providing a playful method that offers fun challenges, which all work towards creating a more relaxed atmosphere.

At this point I would like to consider an absolutely key area in educational activities, namely, the sphere of conversation and oral production. In this case, to carry out pleasant and meaningful activities, it is important to replace the type of conversation often present in teaching situations (structured according to start-response-comment sequences, which do not allow for a real exchange of information) with more communicative activities and interactions similar to forms of spontaneous conversation. In the classroom we try, as far as possible, to avoid false pragmatism and to propose a more authentic conversation, for example by asking "real" questions, questions to which the teacher and other students do not know the answer. In concrete terms, we propose two types of interaction, in which language regains its natural value as a *medium* of communication and meanings, i.e., the general discussions and questions that students ask teachers.

Discussions on a specific topic can be enjoyable because they convey useful information and improve communication skills. In elementary level courses (as opposed to more advanced levels), conversation generally focuses on students relating personal experiences, such as travels, meetings, "adventures", and discoveries. Being stimulated by curiosity

and an interest in the teacher, the student-teacher interaction can produce a real exchange of information. Likewise, it can contribute to building a positive relationship between the teacher and the class group.

As for ideas to stimulate higher levels of autonomy, this is what we try to achieve:

> have students develop a real sense of participation in their studies, as noticed when talking about the "sphere of negotiation"; encourage learners to reflect on their own learning path, guiding them to become aware of the progress they make and the results they achieve; empower learners by delegating to them certain tasks traditionally performed by the teacher. In this last regard, for instance, we often prefer to provide the solutions to the assigned questions instead of correcting the answers in class. It is then the students' responsibility to compare them with their own answers and consult with the teacher in case they are having difficulties. We could say that when the teacher turns away, the student can and must take control of the situation.

I would like to conclude with a brief thought for your consideration. As teachers, by testing ourselves through daily practice and in the reality of the classroom, we have begun to understand that our work can and should always be guided by a handcrafted *modus operandi*. I believe we can be considered similar to artisans who, despite having a stable approach and reference models, modulate their work with creativity and flexibility, always using strategies and procedures that can be adapted on a case-by-case basis. In my opinion, a "handcrafted modus operandi" has a twofold advantage. On the one hand, it makes it possible to respect the peculiarities of the various subjects in the class group. On the other hand, it helps teachers break away from standard and pre-packaged teaching practices, favoring (on the contrary) personal qualities, strategies, styles, and resources, all of which contribute to sustain their own motivation.

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