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Italian Language Teaching Experiences in Anglophone Monolingual Classes of Elementary Level

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Abstract

This article focuses on monolingual classes of North American undergraduate students, with specific reference to courses for absolute beginners. The development of language skills requires time and cannot be separated from the actual use of the language, a use which can cause discomfort.

It is fundamental to understand the complexity of the psychological mechanisms that are triggered between subjects involved in a relationship based on word and language.

Word and language *force us to do activities that make us human*: the forced use of these tends to shake us from the ground up. Therefore, the psychological aspect is of significant importance. It is necessary to create a specific kind of class setting (which is an eminently psychological operation) and define its limits in order to be able to develop its full potential. The humanistic affective communicative approach proposed by us, putting the *person* at the center, is the main instrument to use within the classroom setting.

Keywords: Italian language, skills, communication, university teaching

In this brief contribution I'd like to focus on monolingual classes of North American undergraduate students, whose age ranges from nineteen and twenty-one. In particular, I shall refer to absolute beginners. Yet, many of the things that I'll say may very well apply to all of the more advanced levels. These are students coming from different North American universities and studying different majors. They live in Florence and attend the language course for about three and a half months. They take

Italian four times per week, Monday through Thursday, one hour each day, totaling 60 hours in the whole semester, and earn four academic credits for this work. (Four credits are a lot and, as we shall see later, this has a fairly strong impact on how to deal with the Italian language class.) They are usually at their first study abroad experience.

For these types of learners, we cannot refer to the Common European Framework, as they come from an educational system that is different from the one that generated the aforementioned framework. Furthermore, the average North American undergraduate student does not have a “metagrammatical vocabulary,” that is, they are not able to define and distinguish, for example, the grammatical subject from the object, nor are they aware of the difference between direct objects and actions and indirect objects and actions; they do not know what it means to conjugate a verb; they are not aware, from a terminological point of view, of the meaning of pronoun or complement. Moreover, the North American learner comes from a school system that does not privilege oral exposure. All these peculiarities strongly influence the way North American students in Florence approach Italian language courses. The *Università di Siena per Stranieri* (Siena University for Foreigners) has recognized the specificity of these types of learners, creating the DITALS Interest Group for North American students. In doing so, it also confirmed the need for a separate training course aimed at teachers who want to specialize in teaching Italian to students from the USA.

For teacher training, special attention must be paid to the students’ beliefs regarding teaching-learning methods. Students already have ideas on *how to teach*, that derive from habits and previous study experiences. They prefer a *deductive* and explicit approach, which they consider practical and fast. They find the *inductive* approach (proposed by the teacher) time-consuming and feel that it does not provide immediate reassurances. Generally, students tend to consider in a positive way the *quantity* of topics covered, while re-elaboration activities (an essentially *qualitative* work) of the proposed linguistic inputs are regarded as *dispersive* and *lengthy*, because they do not provide immediately *quantifiable* results. Un-

derstandably, students also have expectations about classes: they expect to find a course with thorough organizational and didactic coordinates, a series of contact hours presenting material structured with defined and recognizable categories such as, for example, grammar and vocabulary, in which everything is planned according to a strictly progressive logic (from page 1 to page 100, from the first to the tenth chapter), otherwise learners say that the instructor's teaching style is "sloppy" or the class is "all over the place".

Of course, the average student is not aware of the difference between learning a *foreign language* (that is, in this case, learning Italian in the U.S.) and learning a *second language* (the reality in which they find themselves immersed by living and studying for a semester in Italy). Likewise, most students do not know that all this entails a substantial difference for both learners and instructors.

Teachers at the beginning of a language course often encounter resistance. This is a significant factor, because students at our institute are *obliged* to study Italian. The inability to choose the class (and, consequently, the obligation to pay for this academic service at the beginning of the semester), interfere with the class pace. Motivation, which is fundamental for the teaching-learning process, is weakened by a situation that the learners see as constrictive. At first, students consider learning Italian as a price to pay to be able to spend a semester in Florence. They would gladly get rid of it, only accepting language as part of the package. The prevailing idea is that to learn Italian it is not necessary to study and that *participation* means being in the classroom, physically present, even if totally passive.

I would now like to focus on the specificity of a language class. Often, this specificity is the main cause of discomfort and irritation for students: the basic issue being that studying only before an exam will not prove to be a good strategy for them. The development of language skills cannot be separated from the actual use of the language, a use which, in itself, is a source of fear. On the other hand, students understand that without real, effective participation, the class does not exist. It is, then, the very nature of a language class that clashes against the typical attitude of

students who tend to approach learning in watertight compartments (i.e., distinct, separated units of learning): “Today I study this subject and I get rid of it. Tomorrow I will dedicate myself to that other subject, so I won’t think about it right away.” With *languages* this behavior doesn’t work, because courses meet every day, and every week there is a goal to reach: a test, an essay, a conversation with Italian students and so on, not just midterms and finals. All these biases are an obstacle to correct learning, especially from a psychological point of view. Furthermore, the fact that even our approach – which in a broad sense can be defined as communicative, humanistic, affective, where the psychological and affective dimension of the human being is ever more relevant – goes against many of the (pre-established) expectations of the students who, as we mentioned earlier, value much more the *quantity* rather than the *quality* of the work done. It should also be remembered that the Italian language grade, as I said above, has a lot of influence on the student’s GPA, because of the high number of credits of this course. Students know it, and they know that a failure in the language class would carry a lot of weight for them. In short, students psychologically find themselves caught in a crossfire, so to speak: they do not want to talk, because their direct exposure makes them feel uncomfortable, but if they do not speak, they know they will receive a low grade in participation. How can one get out of this predicament?

First, it is fundamental to encourage students to trust, to entrust, and to understand the cornerstones of the approach proposed by us, that is *globality* (it is not important to comprehend everything, it is enough to understand the general context, as there is always time to make adjustments) and *communication* (it is not necessary to produce perfect sentences. Communicating means *surviving*, satisfying needs: if you are thirsty, you only need one word, perhaps accompanied by a gesture). Thus, we begin to build language skills, first developing the passive ones of listening and reading, and then the active ones of talking and writing.

In addition to linguistic objectives in the strict sense, one of the long-term educational goals must always be kept in mind; I’m speaking of cultural education and, in turn, knowing that the culture has a strong

motivational drive for language acquisition. The first representative of this culture is, fortunately, the teacher. Students (who are not a blank slate when they arrive) are often curious and full of expectations about this other Italian. They already have a wealth of knowledge, stereotypes, and theories they want to test and verify. Curiosity is a fundamental tool. Teachers must use themselves, first of all, as objects of the desire for knowledge.

Putting aside initial reticence, students begin to consider Italian as *their class*, where they meet every day with the same people (unlike the other courses that do not include daily lessons). When things work well, the class-group is formed, and the Italian class becomes something like a shelter where one is pushed to get out of passivity and is *required* to intervene and interact. In that special context, the participation *requirement* becomes pleasant, too: students are not judged or called on only to be questioned. In the Italian class, it is possible to learn and use the same linguistic and cultural tools that students can use again in the “real world.” In class there is an open dialogue among classmates and teacher, thus transforming them all into members of a new group. Students are eager to learn about their instructor, and they are willing to let the instructor know about themselves: the result is a powerful, motivating involvement. Psychic energy is linked, directed towards a purpose: *communicating*. Successful communication gratifies, reassures, pushes you to go on, to break the ice, to get out of the shell.

For all these reasons, the language course should not be regarded as a traditional space dedicated to learning theory, with a professor at the center who exhibits and *professes* their knowledge before an audience of learners who listen and write. Generations of language instructors have already shown that a class must be like a laboratory where you experience and try to learn (pragmatically, by using them) the tools to be reused outside. The psychologically skillful teacher must constantly emphasize that what happens in the classroom is *already* true and can also happen in the real context if you try to *communicate*.

As it appears obvious from what has been said so far, the psychological aspect has a preponderant weight. It is necessary from the beginning

(because the first contacts are fundamental for the structuring of any human relationship), *to create the class setting* and define its borders in order to be able to fully develop its potential. The creation of a setting is, in itself, an eminently psychological operation. Factors such as being forced to communicate in a language you don't know and forced to express yourself with the same tools of a child, push one to get involved. In fact, these same features may even stimulate resilience and resistance, if the *setting* has not been set properly, defined, mutually approved, and shared by all participants. This is the core of the problem. All this becomes even more burdensome if we consider that the learners we are dealing with come from the U.S. educational system, which, in principle, is not accustomed (as I mentioned above) to challenging students with oral tests and exams.

I would like to conclude with three very brief considerations, two of which (the first and the third) are quite personal. First of all, I would like to say that the need to manage discomfort, both of the students (when they do not respond and are neither involved nor motivated) and of the teacher (when learning appears to be particularly difficult for the students), has been the reason I undertook a process of analytical training. Years of educational and personal analysis, coupled with training in conscious (analytically oriented) listening, made me understand the complexity of the psychological mechanisms that are triggered between subjects involved in a relationship, especially when the relationship is based on word and language; the reason being, *word and language force activity and that very activity makes us human*. That is, *word and language are what make us eminently human*: it is inevitable that their *forced* use tends, potentially, to shake us from the foundations.

Secondly, it is crucial to reiterate there is no recipe, no given *method*, that is codified and always valid. Sooner or later, every codification, every stiffening, especially when speaking of a *subject* (i.e., language) whose mode of being is fluid and *in progress* par excellence, reveals itself as a "Procrustean bed." However, there is always the possibility of getting in tune with our students, trying to weaken the so-called affective filters, the emotional resistances that prevent a real linguistic acquisition. This is

done by creating the *setting*, as we said earlier, by shaping and reshaping, whenever it becomes necessary, the rules of this *setting*, with an artisanal *modus operandi*, thus being ready to use all that we need and to throw away (if need be) what at first seemed necessary, without fear of change. Students must also be encouraged to speak Italian from the beginning because its use in the real context (e.g., walking in the street, sitting inside a café, shopping at the supermarket, eating in a restaurant) has the effect of breaking the ice and showing, in a practical, clear way, that people do understand you. However, *pushing* to communicate can provoke anxiety.

This leads me to the other side of the issue, namely, *waiting* for the word to emerge spontaneously. But time is short, there are stages in every academic journey, evaluations (tests, exams, etc.) that the student must be able to sustain. So, does it become appropriate to push? One finds oneself in a *tragic* situation: *to wait* for the students to be psychologically ready or *to push* them to break the ice as soon as possible. What we should do, once again, is to work as artisans, without preconceived rigidity, with *caution*, because the way (the method) is not there, the way is done by going. To use a common simile, it's as if we were in the middle of the ocean on a leaking boat: to stay afloat we can and must use all that is available to us.

Thirdly, I realized *a posteriori*, after twenty years of teaching, the importance of two fundamental theoretical assumptions that have always guided me, both as a teacher and as an author of teaching materials: the first is the *spiral* (ascending) *movement of the way knowledge functions*, theorized by Hegel and made up of returns and recurrences, but always at a higher level, precisely a level where the syntheses are made. The practical translation of this gnoseological model is nothing other than the mode of operating of each teacher in a language class, in which, a linguistic *input* is given, so that to proceed from superficial and temporary learning to deep and real linguistic *acquisition* is always constituted by a series of returns to the same point. Yet, each return is characterized by a higher stage of awareness. Graphically put, this way of operating looks like a rising spiral. The other theoretical assumption I alluded to is the *hermeneutic comprehension-pre-comprehension cycle* theorized by Heidegger. According

to this theory, no subject involved in a linguistic relationship is a *tabula rasa* (an absence of preconceived ideas or goals). Suffice it here to recall famous works by *expectancy grammar* theorists and the whole notion of “grammar of anticipation,” namely that special grammar guiding predictive processes, as Balboni argues.

Having said this, I’d like to add a short, conclusive, and reassuring note: discussing the idea of “misunderstanding,” Cacciari holds that, in the end, *mis-understanding* (not understanding each other immediately) implies the creation of a *common* space, i.e., *communis*. It is from the Latin adjective *communis* that the word communication derives. As mentioned above, communication and globality (the true cornerstones of the affective and humanistic communicative approach proposed by us) are ultimately based on these two authoritative philosophical assumptions.

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