

Reflections on Best Practices in Teaching Italian as a Second Language in AACUPI Programs

Some Suggestions at the End of the IN-Formiamoci Workshop

Emanuela Agostini

Abstract

The paper goes over the talks given at the Italian language workshop that ISI Florence hosted at Palazzo Bargagli on November 29th, 2024. In doing so, the author emphasizes their main features and comments on them. At the end, she focuses on what – in her eyes – is the essence of a teacher's task.

Keywords: International Education, Study Abroad Programs in Italy, Teaching Italian as a Second Language, Didactic Methods and Approaches.

When the Italian Department at ISI Florence decided to organize and host *IN-Formiamoci*, our main goal was to offer (both ourselves and our colleagues from other study abroad programs) an opportunity to exchange opinions and reflect on best practices relating to our job as professors of Italian language to foreign students. It was our hope that we would then go back to class with greater motivation and some new ideas that we could either apply immediately or use as starting points for new projects. And that is exactly what happened.

Catia Santi started the workshop with her paper *The Obvious is not Obvious*, highlighting a series of “false certainties” that we cannot (and should not) accept. Apart from Prof. Santi's specific examples, her general recommendation to us teachers is to adopt an approach based on paying attention and listening to our students' deepest needs. Those needs may

not be what students mention in their final evaluations; therefore, it is up to us (as teachers) to detect them in a precise, professional way. We should not approach them thinking they may be similar to the students we once were, or like our own children are (or used to be). Nor should we consider them similar to the foreign students who took our classes 20, 10 or even just 5 years ago. Teaching must be a dynamic process built around “real” students, that is, those who happen to be in our class each semester. It is to their problems that solutions must be found. Sometimes, this can put us in unpleasant situations, that make us look “bad”; for example, when – despite our students’ age – we have to remind them that they should behave themselves, respect the other classmates, and study.

In this regard, I believe that Piero Ianniello emphasized something very important in his talk: we should consider where we work (the territory around us) as a laboratory, using it as an opportunity to give our students the chance to meet with the real Italian language and culture, that is, with Italians. It is a fact that students improve more quickly if they manage to establish this kind of relations, not only because of direct contact with the Italian language but also because those experiences boost their motivation, thus pushing them to do more and better.

This is certainly the case in the center of our city, which has lost its original identity to such a degree that it is no longer perceived as *Firenze* but as *Florence* instead. In other words, the historic district is now a faded copy of what it used to be, having been replaced by a sort of stage whose main goal is to sell products and services to tourists. Yet, in today’s global village (as Ianniello’s paper reminds us) the issue does not only concern historic districts of artistic cities, and it cannot be solved by simply moving away from the urban center. It is always crucial to build chances for our students to meet with Italians and establish a relationship with them. Among the best practices suggested by Ianniello (which ISI Florence professors already implement) is using a textbook specifically designed around our students’ experience. To that purpose, years ago *Vorrei. Corso di lingua italiana di livello elementare* was conceived. Published in the ISI Florence Series by Firenze University Press (2016 and 2019), the

first edition was limited to ITAL 101, whereas the second included Intermediate Italian too. Under the supervision of Serena Baldini and David Marini, the whole ISI Florence Italian language faculty contributed to this book. Another important feature to include in any class of this kind is language exchange sessions with local students (whether they be seniors in local high schools or already enrolled at the Università di Firenze), as well as meetings with Italians outside the classroom. Volunteer activities and internships are also regarded as fundamental opportunities. For this reason, in the last 15 years or so ISI Florence has had Serena Giorgi serve as Community Engagement Coordinator, thus devoting a specific professional figure to these tasks.

To stimulate motivation in the classroom we must be able to engage and then lead our students. Three talks given at the *IN-Formiamoci* workshop moved in this direction. A common trait joining the papers by Elisabetta Blini, Carlo Lorini, and Tatiana Speri (despite their inevitable differences) is their practical approach. All three of them offer sound, previously tested teaching methods to involve students through games or technology (and sometimes both at once). If Saint Augustine was right in saying that “Only what we perceive as pleasant can nourish our soul”, it is our task – as teachers – to make our classes appealing, enjoyable, fun and inclusive. The conference papers provide plenty of suggestions on how to use games to create a positive and relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. This would make it possible to learn without always thinking about it, thus taking pressure off everyone’s shoulders (both faculty and students). At the same time, those three papers also offer advice on which technological tools can be used to make teaching easier and our lessons smoother, clearer and more informative.

The symposium ended with a talk by Professor Claudio Manella. Metaphorically speaking, Professor Manella opened the window for us onto potential sectors and scenarios that may become real soon. Being an experienced teacher as well as a scholar and a publisher, he immediately understood the spirit of our initiative; that is, *IN-Formiamoci* stood out among other similar events previously organized in Florence because

it was conceived by teachers for fellow teachers. This is quite unusual, since workshops of this sort are mostly organized by publishing houses, whose goals – though praiseworthy – are inevitably different from ours. In his speech Manella highlighted the changes that he has seen taking place in Italian language students in the past 25 years or so. This led him to consider what changes teachers must implement to adapt their tools and methods to this new situation, so as to help “real” students” meet their expectations and reach their goals.

I wish to end my brief summary by coming full circle to the starting point, that is, Catia Santi’s opening remarks titled *The Obvious is Not Obvious*. As teachers of Italian language in study abroad programs (mostly affiliated with AACUPI), our tasks and objectives are not limited to knowing and applying those methods, techniques, and best practices that whoever teaches a language to foreign students should know. In addition to teaching Italian language and culture we are expected to take on a broader role as educators. To that purpose, we must always start by paying great attention (and respect) to each student’s personal character and background.

Our teaching proves to be most effective if we truly listen to our students and understand their needs. That approach builds the foundation of our didactic and educational mission, which is sometimes less pleasant than we wish. Our ultimate goal lies beyond teaching Italian; our students may forget the language we introduced them to, but they will remember the lessons they have learned – while studying abroad – on how to become mindful and responsible world citizens.