Toward a Critical Teaching and Learning of National Languages and Cultures. Italian as a case study

Tiberio Snaidero[*]
Italia

Resumen
Las identidades nacionales existen. Cambian con el tiempo y están influenciadas por la globalización, la migración extensa, Internet y la velocidad cada vez mayor de la comunicación y el transporte, de la misma manera que la cultura de un país está influenciada por nuevos ciudadanos que agregan sus diferentes identidades nacionales a la mezcla. Al mismo tiempo, la identidad de estos nuevos ciudadanos se ve alterada por la cultura del país al que se han mudado. Por el contrario, la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras varía poco: si consideramos los temas culturales seleccionados por la enseñanza del italiano como lengua extranjera, podemos ver con qué frecuencia propagan una imagen exótica y poco realista de bella Italia. Como consecuencia, los estudiantes de italiano a menudo tienen una idea desactualizada de la Italia contemporánea, especialmente con respecto a su demografía y dinámica social. Existe una amplia variedad de recursos y métodos disponibles para los maestros que desean ayudar a sus alumnos a comprender este cambio trascendental en la historia italiana, desarrollar sus habilidades de comunicación intercultural y cuestionar sus propias actitudes y el grado en que la cultura en que viven defiende los valores democráticos.

Palabras clave: identidad, culturas nacionales, temas interculturales, italiano como lengua extranjera, competencias para la cultura democrática.

Abstract
National identities exist. They change over time and are influenced by globalization, extensive migration, the Internet, and the constantly increasing speed of communication and transport, in the same way that a country's culture is influenced by new citizens who add their different national identities to the mix. At the same time, the identity of these new citizens is altered by the culture of the country they have moved to. By contrast, foreign language teaching varies little: If we consider the cultural topics selected by for teaching Italian as a foreign language, we can see how often they propagate an exotic, unrealistic image of bella Italia. As a consequence, students of Italian often have an out-of-date idea of contemporary Italy, especially with regard to its demographics and social dynamics. A wide variety of resources and methods is available to teachers who want to help their students understand this momentous change in Italian history, develop their intercultural communication skills and question both their own attitudes and the degree to which democratic values are being upheld by the culture they live in.

Keywords*: Identity, national cultures, intercultural topics, Italian as a foreign language, competences for democratic culture*

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* Doctor en Didáctica de las Lenguas Romances por la Universidad Libre de Berlín. Magister en Difusión y Didáctica del Italiano por la Universidad de Venecia Ca'Foscari. Graduado en Filología Italiana Moderna por la Universidad de Trieste. Correo electrónico: tiberiosnaidero@arcor.de
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1. About my experience as a Teacher of Italian in Germany and in the U.S.A.

Ten years ago, I was working as a teacher of Italian at a German *Gymnasium* in Berlin. One day I was in the copy room with a couple of Italian colleagues when a German teacher, smirking in amusement, pointed at us and said, 'Italian *Mafia'*. Not long after, in the courtyard of the *Gymnasium*, an affably smiling student said the same thing to me. Another student, in class once called me a *'Spaghetti-Fresser*'. The German verb *fressen* means 'to eat' but usually refers to animals, not people. Living in Berlin made me aware of a number of German habits that seem strange to an Italian, like putting on a party invitation both the starting and ending time of a party, or referring to an appointment made with less than 24 hours' notice to be *'spontan'*, i.e., on the fly. I also learned that Germans tend to view Italy as a theme park. Most of my students and their families were regular visitors to my fatherland's beautiful landscapes, especially those found in areas where German is spoken. Some of them went to Italy every year. Yet they seemed to know next to nothing about Italian language, society, and culture. As a teacher of Italian, I was dismayed. I suspected that this ignorance had to do with their textbooks, their programs of study, the training of their teachers, and the scarcity of scholars doing research on the teaching of Italian. Eventually I concluded that all my suspicions were correct.

After Berlin, I had the opportunity to teach Italian language and culture for a few years at a New York City college. I noticed that students rarely talked to each other before or after class, being wholly preoccupied with their smartphones. And I had a hard time engaging them in interactive activities: they expected me to spoon-feed them the material they would later find on a quiz or test. This was different from my previous study and work experiences in Italy, Ireland and Germany. I was also concerned when I discovered that, in a class of ten students, only two knew that New York had held a mayoral election the day before, and none had voted. Furthermore, I learnt never to take any piece of historical or geographical information for granted. Most of my students knew virtually nothing about European politics and had only the vaguest idea of the Second World War. Nor were they ashamed of their ignorance.

In both Berlin and New York, I had very diverse classes. A lot of my students in Berlin had families originally from Turkey, Russia, or Croatia, and my students in New York, the city of immigrants par *excellence*, were even more diverse. Culturally speaking, however, they clearly had become Germans and Americans. It was also clear that they saw me as an example of, respectively, *Italienischkeit* and Italianness.

2. *Transcultural* vs. *National Cultures* Approaches in Foreign Language and Culture Pedagogy

Over the last few decades, many scholars (Giddens, 1991; Hannerz, 1992; Bhabha, 1994; Welsch, 2000; Risager, 2007; Kramsch, 2009; Holliday, 2011) who do research in social sciences or applied linguistics have written about so-called 'transcultural societies' and 'transcultural pedagogy'. According to these scholars, globalization, extensive migration, the Internet and related technologies, and the constantly increasing speed of communication and transport make notions like 'national culture' obsolete; in their view, all cultures and identities have become fluid and hybrid. Well, I disagree with this stance, at least in its more radical forms.

In my attempt to explain my vision of a critical teaching and learning of national languages and cultures, I will focus on school syllabi and the cultural content of foreign language textbooks. Nationally oriented curricula *do* exist, because national identities exist. These identities are not set in stone; they change over time and are influenced by all the above-mentioned factors, in the same way that a country's culture is influenced by new citizens who add their different national identities to the mix. At the same time, the identity of these new citizens is altered by the new culture. Think, for instance, of the phenomenon of translingual writers: If you analyze novels written in Italian by translingual writers (Butcovan, 2006; Lakous, 2006; Wadia, 2007), you detect certain similarities of style and content –like the use of irony, or multifocal narrative perspectives (Moll 2015)–, whereas if you analyze novels written in German by translingual writers (Trojanow, 2007; Özdamar, 2011; Zaimoğlu, 2011), you find a different set of similarities - like metalinguistic

reflections, or code-mixing (Thüne, Leonardi, 2009). The reason is that the writers live in different societies, use languages with different structures, and confront different cultural and historical frameworks.

Going back to national school curricula, they contain subject syllabi whose content has a lot to do with the relevant national school traditions. Literary canons, for example, are very different in Italy, Germany, Ireland and the United States, each country emphasizing its own literature. The way history and geography are taught also varies from country to country, and I suspect there are differences even in the way subjects like biology or math are approached. By contrast, foreign language teaching varies little, at least in my experience: culture is generally not integrated with language in foreign language classes. This is hardly news, of course, but it is surprising that so many years of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) discourses and practices have not changed things. I have seen this in both English as a Foreign Language and Italian as a Second Language classes taught in Italian schools.

I have seen this, moreover, in Italian classes in both *Grund-* and *Leistungskurse* in German *Gymnasien*, as well as in foreign language departments at American universities.

Many books have been written about teaching and learning culture in foreign language classes, and some teachers read these books, adopt the practices they recommend, and participate in intercultural projects. But not many. Not all teachers are also researchers, and many feel it is not up to them to innovate or to question the directives of their school system. Most of them just want to do the work expected of them, so they stick closely to curricula, syllabi, and textbooks.

3. Cultural topics in Italian textbooks

If you consider the cultural topics selected by foreign language textbooks, for example textbooks for teaching Italian as a foreign language (Esposito, Grandi, 2002; Bali, Ziglio, 2008; Mezzadri, Pederzani, 2007; Lazzarino, 2011), you can see how often they propagate an exotic, unrealistic image of *bella Italia*: 'Pizza and Dolce Vita', 'La Famiglia', 'In Vacanza a Venezia', and 'Andiamo all'Opera!' ...

Italian is a good case study, since those who study the language link it to a single country, Italy, even though it is also spoken in the Canton of Ticino, parts of the former Yugoslavia, Malta, Albania, Corsica, and Italy's former colonies –Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia– as well as North and South America and Australia, to which a huge number of Italians immigrated.

Italy was for more than a century a country of emigrants: between 1876 and 1985 more than 26 million Italians lefheir fatherland for the Americas, Australia, or other European nations. Nowadays, by contrast, at least five million immigrants are living in Italy, which has changed into a multicultural society but still has trouble accepting its new identity. In Italy, as well as outside the *bel Paese,* one finds Italians (people descended from multiple generations of Italian citizens) and Italics (people who go there often because of a strong attraction to Italian civilization), but also those whom the Italianist Armando Gnisci has labeled *Itagliani* (Gnisci 2003): people holding permanent visas, new Italian citizens, and people descended from only one generation of Italian citizens.

3.1 Intercultural Competence and Contemporary Italy

'How can we avoid essentializing cultures and teaching stereotypes?' Claire Kramsch asked in her article *Culture in foreign language teaching*. And furthermore: 'How can we develop in the learners an intercultural competence that would shortchange neither their own culture nor the target culture, but would make them into cultural mediators in a globalized world?' (Kramsch, 2013). Prof. Kramsch's goal of transforming students into cultural mediators is fascinating but somewhat utopian. For my part, I would be content to make students critical thinkers, ideally ones who are able to think and reason effectively in a foreign language.

In Germany and the U.S, students of Italian often have an out-of-date idea of contemporary Italy, especially with regard to its demographics and social dynamics. Even as many Italians once

again go abroad in search of work, Italy itself continues to absorb a wave of immigrants, who over the last thirty years have transformed the *bel Paese* from a monocultural into a multicultural land. The unsuccessful integration of immigrants is one of the issues facing contemporary Italy, which because of its geography is used as an 'open gate' to Europe.

In present-day Italy, temporary employment is spreading, purchasing power is weakening, and women are almost excluded from the labor market (Capati, 2006; Donolo, 2011). Women seem, in fact, to be one of the groups that suffer the most. They are victims of a 'pornographication' of the public sphere, instigated by Silvio Berlusconi's media empire (Benini, 2013). His television channels propagated a one-dimensional ideal of femininity: young, ignorant, pretty, and slutty. For many years Berlusconi dominated political life in Italy, as leader of a political party and as prime minister. His control of Italian public and commercial television (RAI and Mediaset) allowed him to assert his ideal of femininity very aggressively (Zanardo, 2009).

Some of his showgirls even became ministers, demonstrating that if you conform to a powerful man's stereotype you do not need to be competent. This has deeply marked Italian society. Berlusconi, who is still on the scene, is a populist, something that twenty years ago was virtually unknown to Italian politics. Now his opponents –the democratic Renzi, the Five Star Movement leader Di Maio, the right-wing extremist Salvini– share his populist approach.

Italians feel their country is experiencing a serious political, institutional, economic, social, and ethical crisis (Cazzullo, 2009; Floris, 2009; Sofri, 2011). Racism, intolerance, anxiety, and depression are some of the consequences. This paralysis of a society that is ruled by a gerontocracy has led to two other phenomena: the *fuga dei cervelli* (Cucchiarato, 2010), or brain drain, and *Lega Nord*, a political party known for its racism and opposition to initiatives designed to help immigrants integrate into Italian society.

Why are these good topics for an Italian class? First of all, they give a current and realistic (as opposed to touristic) view of Italy. Second, they allow students to reflect on problems that are also found in their countries and to see these problems from a different perspective. After all, the integration of immigrants is a vexed issue in Germany and the United States as well. How do the three countries respond to similar problems? Do 'new Americans' and 'new Germans' really feel welcome? As for pornographication, aren't there striking examples of it in the U. S. and Germany as well as in Italy (Snaidero, 2014a)?

4. Conclusion

A wide variety of books (both fiction and nonfiction), blogs, articles and movies are available to teachers who want to help their students understand this momentous change in Italian history. These resources can be used not only to bring students' knowledge of *il bel Paese* up to date, but also to develop their intercultural communication skills (Snaidero, 2014b).

In order to develop the competences "which enable an individual to participate effectively and appropriately in a culture of democracy" (Council of Europe, 2016), educators have to transmit values like pluralism, foster attitudes like civic-mindedness, and train skills like flexibility. Knowledge is the fourth broad category of the *Competences-for-Democratic-Culture* model proposed by the Council of Europe. I understand that in this and in previous COE documents, as well as in Byram's intercultural competence model (Byram, 1997), *knowledge* is more a matter of helping learners understand how intercultural interactions take place than transmitting information about a foreign country (Byram, Gripkova, Starkey, 2002), and I subscribe to this point of view. However, if one of the main goals of the competences reference framework is to assist curriculum and pedagogical design, then knowledge, in the form of up-to-date information about the studied culture, has to be the foundation of the whole project. Without carefully selected, up-to-date cultural topics, chosen because they encourage students to question both their own attitudes and the degree to which democratic values are being upheld by the culture, a critical understanding of culture, politics, law, human rights, religion, history, media, economics, and the environment simply cannot be attained by students.

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