

3 Transnational perspectives in the Italian language class: the uses of non-native literature to develop intercultural competence

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Abstract

This paper explores how a transnational approach to university language classes may help develop students' intercultural competence. Researchers have shown that the integration of literature in the language class has the potential to raise intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006), especially when migrant and travel literatures are used (Matos, 2012, Paran, 2008). I present an empirical case study of the use of migrant literature in Italian in a Learning Unit (LU) for final-year undergraduate students of Italian language – Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) C1/C2 (Council of Europe, 2001). After describing the context of the LU, I explain the rationale behind its design, outline its contents, and observe that the LU helps students to improve all canonical linguistic skills as well as intercultural abilities.

Keywords: Italian, literature, migrant writing, intercultural competence, language.

1. Introduction

Recent debates on the future of Modern Languages (ML) in the UK have called for new transnational approaches to the discipline in order to respond

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to the challenges presented by a globalised world, characterised by mobility, migration, and increasingly multilingual societies (Burdett, 2018). The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) claims that “the need for understanding and communication within, between and across diverse cultures is stronger than ever” (AHRC, n.d.). It is envisaged that university education would provide students with the skills necessary to live and work in these evolving societies, including intercultural competence.

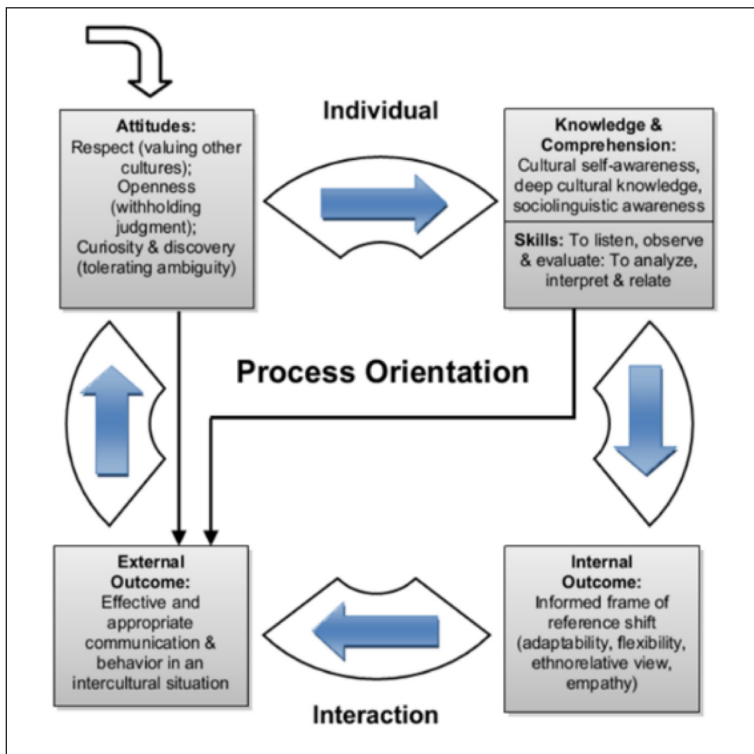
In this context, the teaching and learning of ML according to traditional divisions into national language areas are being questioned. As Kramersch (1998) notes, the notion of language as a stable, indexical reality of national cultures should be problematised, since, in a heterogeneous social world, the relationship between language and culture is co-constructed through dialogic encounters (pp. 72-77). A transnational paradigm accounting for the impact of migration on language and culture should consider “the worldwide network of the target language” (Risager, 2006, cited in Matos, 2012, p. 116).

This paper provides an example of how intercultural learning may be embedded in the Italian language class by using a transnational approach to teaching and learning. I focus on a final-year LU on ‘Literature and Interculturality’, employing non-native migrant literature in Italian as both a topic and a tool to develop intercultural competence. After describing the context, I explain the rationale behind the LU’s design, then outline its structure and content, and conclude with some observations on the outcomes. This paper argues that the use of non-native migrant literature in the language class may facilitate the improvement of both traditional language skills and intercultural competence, if appropriate scaffolding is employed.

I follow Deardorff’s (2006) definition of ‘intercultural competence’ (see Figure 1 for a model). According to Deardorff (2006), “the attitudes of openness, respect (valuing all cultures), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity) [...] are] fundamental to intercultural competence”, with the potential for affecting both internal and external outcomes (p. 255). Intercultural competence occurs as a “continual process of improvement” (Deardorff, 2006, p. 257) going from

knowledge and comprehension of one's own culture and culturally specific socialisation and limitations (internal outcome), to a shift in one's own frame of reference, changing the way an individual interacts (external outcome), thus achieving effective communication and behaviour in an intercultural situation. When intercultural competence is most developed, an individual shows empathy, respect, and values other cultures. All elements are mutually informing each other, but can be present in the absence of others.

Figure 1. Process model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006)², originally from Deardorff (2004)



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2. Context

The LU has been devised to fit within the context in which Italian is taught at Durham University (DU). DU's teaching and learning strategy is based on a research-led approach³. In the final year, after returning from a period of study or work in Italy in Year 3, students are taught in a single cohort. Students attend two weekly seminars and are expected to reach level C1/C2. All skills are practised in every seminar, although with a varied emphasis: the first seminar focuses on writing and reading comprehension skills, the second on oral skills.

Several themes are chosen to enhance students' knowledge of Italian language and culture from a transnational perspective, e.g. cultural heritage, multilingualism, history, politics, life in and outside Italy, as well as migration and cultural identities. Learning activities comprise:

- **in-class learning activities** supported by materials such as newspaper articles, academic and literary texts, TV and film clips, and music;
- **research-led learning activities** e.g. group projects, presentations, and research tasks; and
- **independent learning** supported by extra material uploaded on the virtual learning environment (Blackboard).

The LU on 'Literature and Interculturality' is the third of a tripartite teaching unit on interculturality in which students investigate aspects of nationality, cultural identity, and migration. Each LU spans over a week. In LU 1, students focus on the topics of tradition and identity. In the writing/reading seminar, they produce an analytical summary of a text on the concept of cultural roots and its uses in the Italian public discourse vis-à-vis waves of migration. In the oral seminar, students discuss tradition and its relationship to cultural and national identities. LU 2 is on the topic of immigration in Italy. Students carry

3. Cf. DU's website: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/study/ug/learning/>

out writing and translation exercises on this topic, in preparation for a final debate. LU 1 and 2 cover topics, vocabulary, and linguistic structures that provide scaffolding for approaching the final LU⁴.

3. Design

The design of the LU on ‘Literature and Interculturality’ takes into consideration recent scholarship on the potential of literature as a teaching tool in ML. Research shows that the integration of literature – fiction, poems, and creative writing – in the language class may raise intercultural competence, especially with non-native and travel literatures (Matos, 2012; Paran, 2008)⁵. Literary texts stimulate students’ intellectual and emotional participation (Kim, 2004 cited in Hall, 2015, p. 218; Paran, 2008), encourage exploratory transformative talk (Boyd & Maloof, 2000, cited in Hall, 2015, p. 218; Paran, 2008), and boost the development of self-awareness and knowledge of the world by immersing the reader into a different context. Literature’s ability to stimulate self-awareness through comparisons with ‘the other’ and to question established notions of identity may therefore be instrumental for the improvement of intercultural skills in the classroom.

In this context, non-native migrant and diasporic writings, which often reflect on otherness, displacement and intercultural experiences, are particularly apt teaching tools. On the one hand, they stretch the boundaries of what constitutes ‘national’ writing. On the other, they allow for a combined teaching approach to the theme of interculturality: teaching *with* non-native literature as a tool for improving linguistic and intercultural competence, and teaching *on* non-native literature as content, providing an opportunity to discuss the meanings of intercultural expression and interculturality itself.

For the purpose of the LU, I selected an excerpt of a literary text in Italian by Algerian writer Tahar Lamri, entitled *Il pellegrinaggio della voce* (The Voice’s

4. On the need for scaffolding to teach languages with literary texts see Paran (2008, p. 475).

5. On definitions of literature and literary language, Hall (2015, pp. 1-46).

Pilgrimage), the author's autobiographical account of living and writing in a non-native language after migrating to Italy (see [supplementary materials](#), Appendix 1). The learning objectives were to:

- reinforce and expand the vocabulary related to cultural identity and migration, building on previous knowledge;
- develop an appreciation of the use of figurative language in literary texts in Italian; and
- develop aspects of cultural understanding and cultural self-awareness in relation to the migrant condition, encouraging cultural empathy.

4. The LU

The LU on 'Literature and Interculturality' is divided in a writing/reading seminar and an oral seminar. For the first seminar, preparatory work includes: finding information on migrant literature in Italian and writing a definition; watching a video-interview with Italian-Ethiopian writer Gabriella Ghermandi and taking notes⁶; and reading Tahar Lamri's text and completing comprehension and writing exercises (see [supplementary materials](#), Appendix 1). In-class seminar activities start with a brief discussion of migrant literature and of the interview with Ghermandi. Work on the literary text follows: first, a workshop-style session inviting students to 'reread' the text and discuss their interpretations in class. As [Matos \(2012\)](#) argues, the process of guided re-reading is fundamental in enabling students' "intercultural reading" (pp.133-134). Secondly, in pairs, students analyse and interpret figures of speech present in the text, with attention to the use of metaphors. The session concludes with a series of open-ended questions to elicit initial responses from students, based on comparisons with their personal experiences of living abroad and using a non-native language. This is aimed at encouraging self-reflection on the topic.

6. See the interview here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIZmEEKEDa0>

For the oral class, students are invited to take the discussion initiated in the first seminar further by working on creative group projects reacting to Lamri's text and the topic of interculturality. Creative responses are encouraged (see [supplementary materials](#), Appendix 2). Research suggests that multicultural exposure can enhance creativity, "allowing one to see new perspectives on familiar things" (Bee Tin, 2013, p. 388). At the same time, by stimulating the construction of new meaning, creative activities help learners stretch their language (Bee Tin, 2013, p. 387). In the seminar, students showcase their group projects in ten minute presentations, followed by questions from peers. In the academic year 2018/2019 and 2019/2020, projects included a student-produced video on Italian communities in Durham, in-class dramatisations of a talk-show on migration and the migrant condition, TV news on the migrant crisis in Italy, and students' experiences in their year abroad.

5. Observations

My own observations in class and module evaluations revealed an overall positive student response to the LU on 'Literature and Interculturality'.

Coursework and assessment showed that students fulfilled the LU learning objectives (see [supplementary materials](#), Appendix 3): the majority were able to write about migration and interculturality in Italy, some in relation to their own condition, and to recognise and contextualise metaphorical language. Class observation suggests that students developed critical awareness of cultural difference and of one's own culturally specific socialisation. The autobiographical aspect of Lamri's text was particularly impactful, kindling discussion on the migrant condition, rootlessness, and the effects of operating in a non-native language on one's own personal identity. Conversations reacting to the text often employed cross-cultural comparisons between students' own experiences and Lamri's account, as well as discourses valuing migration, multilingualism, and multiculturalism. These developments coexisted with world-views sometimes firmly anchored on 'national paradigms' and on binary oppositions between 'culture of origin' versus 'foreign culture', or 'native' versus 'migrant'.

In module evaluations, the group-project presentation was often singled out as the favourite element of the whole module. In class, students showed interest in the topic and all learning activities chosen. As often when literature is employed in L2 classes, most student discussions focused on comprehension, fewer on interpretation and evaluation (Kim, 2004, cited in Hall, 2015, p. 219). Oral reports from students evidenced that the analytical work on the literary text was sometimes perceived as difficult. This suggests that, depending on the cohort's abilities, further scaffolding and contextualisation may be needed to use literature in the language class.

6. Conclusions

This paper has described a LU that employs a transnational approach to the teaching of Italian, addressing the AHRC's (n.d.) call for a novel teaching environment that fosters intercultural exchange. As this paper has argued, non-native migrant literature may successfully be employed in university Italian classes to develop both linguistic and intercultural competences, if appropriate scaffolding is provided. While developing all canonical linguistic skills, students also cultivated transferable skills such as cultural understanding and cultural self-awareness, as well as project management and creative skills.

7. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/ncsoxcgi2mn44sssbnbhly0iqlxucp>

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