

# Re-thinking the Italian curriculum: Sustainability issues in the Italian classroom and beyond

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## Abstract

Post-communicative methodologies nowadays provide instructors with multiple curricular models to reimagine their syllabi, design creative assignments, and prepare their lessons. Yet, challenging topics are still often avoided, fearing students' limited language proficiency. Conversely, compelling content—carefully presented and pedagogically suitable to the students' level—is a pivotal tool to enhance language learning while increasing students' interest and critical thinking. In this article, the author will discuss how environmental, cultural, and social issues of sustainability became an important tool in developing new curricula in the Italian language program at Harvard University. She will present ways to raise cultural awareness and engage upper level-students in critical linguistic exchanges in a fourth-semester course, entirely designed following an interdisciplinary teaching approach to sustainability. Addressing these timely issues, relevant to the Italian discourse and on a global scale, can attract and empower students in the world classroom while providing the opportunity for meaningful language acquisition.

*Keywords: curriculum design, classroom instruction, planning & program design*

## Introduction

For her doctoral dissertation, the author worked on the pedagogical ideas of Franco Fortini. Better known as a poet and political essayist, Fortini was also a professor, first at the high school level and then at the University of Siena (Trebiocchi, 2021). In her thesis, she argues that Fortini's teaching experience is the key to understanding much of his literary production and political reflection. The questions raised by this research had a profound impact on the way the author thinks about her role as a language teacher and educator: How can we foster a community of peers among students? How can we enhance our diverse backgrounds and stories to learn more from each other? How should we respond to the challenges of modernity in the educational realm? Keeping in mind these questions,

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she works to offer courses in Italian that invite students to connect what is learned in the classroom with the world around them.

A clear example of this has been the redesign of a fourth-semester Italian course (Upper-Level Italian: Italian 30) as *Italiano in Verde [Green Italian]. Sustainability Issues in the Italian Classroom*. This course—divided into five modules—refines speaking and writing skills, and advances critical linguistic exchanges through the discussion of environmental, cultural, economic, and social issues of sustainability.<sup>1</sup> Through the interpretation of different kinds of authentic Italian texts and interviews with various activists (such as Yvan Sagnet who will be discussed below), students are empowered to discuss such topics, relevant both for Italian discourse and on a global scale, while revisiting and expanding vocabulary and reviewing grammar in context. Acknowledging the Modern Language Association's report (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007) on the importance of translingual and transcultural competencies, as well as of symbolic competence as defined in second language acquisition (SLA) post-communicative research (Kramsch, 2006; 2011; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008), and to create a collaborative and engaging learning community, classes are meant to encourage critical thinking and the analysis and discussion of current topics (i.e., climate change, migration, environmental justice, sustainable tourism), in a way that is pedagogically suitable to the students' proficiency level.

Current trends in SLA curriculum development are pushing educators to offer courses “that engage students in solving problems in their schools, communities, and the larger world” (Santone, 2018, p. i). In this sense, sustainability is recognized as one of the most relevant, meaningful, and compelling topics of our time, at the crossroads with the other important big questions: globalization, migration, new diseases, human rights, and social justice, just to name a few. Recent publications, such as the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL) Bulletin section dedicated to *Integrative Thinking: Foreign Languages, Environmental Humanities, and Stem* (Melin, 2021), or the collection of essays edited by de la Fuente (2021), underlined the importance of also discussing these themes in our language classrooms, both for their motivational impact and because they are “challenges in areas where language expertise pertains” (Melin, 2021, p. 9). For this reason, the author wanted to address and think about the role that Italian language courses can play in promoting a space for critical engagement and the discussion of “big ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Her intention in these pages is not to describe a ready-made model, but primarily to show how sustainability became a catalyst for reimagining the Italian language fourth-semester curriculum. It is also relevant to mention that for this ongoing project the author was very much inspired by the work and presentations on curriculum development of her colleagues in the Romance Languages and Literatures Department (in particular, by Jorge Méndez Seijas and María Luisa Parra). This was also a team effort with one of the current Italian graduate students at Harvard University, Valentina Frasisti. Our desire was to offer a new perspective on traditional topics, ever-present in the Italian language courses (i.e. Italian food culture), but too often approached in a superficial or stereotypical way (especially with the increase of immigration and thus the importance of new food cultures and traditions in Italy).

Giuseppe Formato has recently published two interesting essays addressing this matter, almost as a “call to action for educators of Italian” (Formato, 2018, p. 1117). In his work, Formato (2020) suggests, for example, that “by drawing upon images of the Arte Povera movement, concepts of eco-justice and eco-pedagogy can occur through paradigms of art-based education to not only discuss the impact of the climate crisis in Italy, but also achieve Italian-language acquisition critically” (p. 1501). Spanish curriculum makeovers across the

country, for example, are proving to be successful in responding to this new challenge that we must confront as educators (at Harvard University see Méndez Seijas & Parra, 2022). Addressing these timely issues can offer innovative ways to update our curricula, providing the opportunity for meaningful and effective language acquisition in the Italian classroom as well. Conversely, while some Italian language textbooks might now include a unit on sustainability, a more structured and comprehensive presence and use of such topics in the Italian language curricula is still missing.<sup>3</sup> Expanding to various topics and texts, this was then the author's goal in redesigning the fourth-semester of Italian. Keeping in mind the "understanding by design" approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and their backward design steps, she first started by identifying desired results, goals and objectives of the course and then planning assignments and lessons. Below are the course goals, shared at the beginning of the syllabus and during the first-class meeting:

- Demonstrate critical understanding and engage effectively in conversations and debates on contemporary issues, such as climate change, the slow food movement, environmental justice, sustainable tourism, migration, and activism.
- Narrate, describe, imagine, negotiate meaning, express opinions, make hypotheses, and share and evaluate points of view constructively with openness and curiosity.
- Articulate thesis, use quotes to support ideas and interpretations and clarify statements, and draw coherent conclusions, in written and oral accounts.
- Identify, analyze, and compare different sustainability practices by activist groups, governments, and average citizens through authentic Italian materials (videos, documentaries, texts, articles, etc.).
- Reflect on and explain the relationship between human beings and the earth through close reading and analysis of authentic Italian texts, while considering how you may wish to nurture this relationship.
- Describe and demonstrate critical understanding of the impact of our daily decisions on the environment in Italian.
- Discover non mainstream Italian communities and projects (both local and abroad) committed to deepening connections to the environment.
- Identify, investigate, and reflect on the main sustainability challenges Italy is facing in the fashion, food, and touristic industries.
- Compare and discuss the Italian and American responses to the sustainable challenges of our times and the UN Sustainable goals.
- Be an agent of change for your communities.

The course is divided into five modules, and includes a diversity of activities, multimedia assignments, and texts of various genres, from more literary pieces to music, films, podcasts, essays, and graphic novels. The author also wanted to render content meaningful beyond the classroom, pushing students to explore the community around them. For this reason, at the end of each biweekly module, students are asked to put into practice what was discussed in class with a "practical assignment" ("i compiti pratici") that assesses their understanding of specific Italian structures while guiding them to think more in depth about the environmental, cultural, economic, and social issues of sustainability discussed in that module. Each unit is designed to "integrate context-based instruction of language and culture/content, encourage the use of interpretative, interpersonal, and presentational communication, and guide students toward a critical understanding of its "big ideas" (Katz Bourns, Kruger, & Mills, 2020, p. 242). In the table below, the practical assignments and the five class modules are briefly summarized:<sup>4</sup>

Table 1

<b>Module 1: <i>Inquinamento, riciclaggio and sostenibilità</i> [Pollution, recycling, and sustainability]</b>	
Grammar in context	Making plans: imagining and hoping Futuro semplice e futuro anteriore; <i>piacere, mancare</i> e co.
Sample of class activities and Assignments	- Italo Calvino, “Leonia”; and “La nuvola di smog” - Marianna Mea, TedEx on the “Zero waste” project - Focus on “La terra dei fuochi:” Roberto Saviano, <i>Gomorra</i> ; and documentary <i>Biùtiful cauntri</i>
Practical assignment	Relying on the different forms of activism and engagement with environmental issues both in Italy and at Harvard University we discussed in class, design a wish list using the future tense where you state your sustainability intentions /goals for this semester. You can write a list, record an audio, draw a poster, create an infographic, design a flier to be read by your communities. Also, remember to be conscious of the environmental impact that the creation of your artifact has and explain how you tried to reduce it as much as possible.
<b>Module 2: <i>Tra città e natura, ecosistemi da proteggere</i> [Between city and nature, ecosystems to be protected]</b>	
Grammar in context	Explaining: paraphrasing, summarizing, and arguing Pronouns (direct and indirect; use of <i>ne</i> and <i>ci</i> ; relative)
Sample of class activities and Assignments	- Filelfo, <i>L'assemblea degli animali</i> - Salvatore Settis, excerpts from <i>Paesaggio Costituzione cemento. La battaglia per l'ambiente contro il degrado civile</i> - Focus on Taranto and Ilva: comic book <i>Ilva. Comizi d'acciaio</i>
Practical assignment	Choose and visit a farmers’ market close to campus. Observe the products and notice the differences between the choice of vegetables and fruit in comparison to supermarket offerings. Take time to observe the variety of shapes and colors of the goods and when you find something that captures your curiosity, ask the farmer or vendor about it. Now imagine you have to advertise in Italy the product/the activity you chose. Where do you envision these products to be sold? Who would be your target customers? How do you plan to advertise it, and where? Create your advertisement and add a short paragraph (100-150 words) to explain why you recommend it.
<b>Module 3: <i>Turismo e moda sostenibile</i> [Sustainable tourism and fashion]</b>	
Grammar in context	Describing and comparing Aggettivi, comparativi e superlativi (regolari e irregolari); avverbi
Sample of class activities and Assignments	- Michela Murgia, <i>La guida turistica come atto politico</i> - Vanity Fair “Revolution” and green influencers - Apps on sustainable tourism - Podcast “Intrecci etici”
Practical assignment	Take a piece of clothing or an accessory you don’t use anymore and instead of throwing it away, transform it into a new object. Be creative and make an Instagram/Tiktok/Facebook post with your creation. Make sure to conform your language to the Italian of social media and to use a variety of <i>aggettivi, comparativi, superlativi</i> , and <i>avverbi</i> to describe your clothes/accessory.

**Module 4: *A tavola senza sprechi* [Eating without waste]**

Grammar in context	Narrating: past times Imperfetto e passato prossimo; Passato remoto e trapassato (prossimo e remoto). Combinazione tempi passati
Sample of class activities and Assignments	- Focus on tomatoes: history and production; the <i>caporalato</i> system in Italy - Video and articles on “GAS. Gruppi di acquisto solidale” [Solidarity Purchasing Groups] and Italian permaculture - the Mediterranean diet and Italian “antispreco” [anti food waste] recipes
Practical assignment	Find a recipe you would like to try and make sure the ingredients you need are seasonal and that you are able to purchase/find them avoiding plastic packaging. You could then record a video where you describe your choices, and the difficulties of finding ingredients without plastic packaging and the decisions or compromises you took. Finally, try to make the recipe and share your result! Make sure to narrate what you have done using all the Italian past tenses used in class. If you can do so, you can also record yourself while you go through the cooking process and/or share a picture of your creation.

**Module 5: *Migrazioni e cambiamenti climatici* [Migration and climate change]**

Grammar in context	Expressing opinions, emotions, and ideas Il condizionale; Indicativo vs. congiuntivo; i tempi del congiuntivo
Sample of class activities and Assignments	- Documentary <i>The Climate Limbo</i> - Focus on Lampedusa: Alessandro Leogrande, <i>La frontiera</i> ; Emanuele Crialesi, <i>Terraferma</i>
Practical assignment	Option 1: Observe a spot in your environment for at least an hour or for a shorter time throughout the week (for a total of an hour at least). Stay still. Look. Notice the change in the colors, the temperature, the sounds, your emotions. Don't take notes. After the hour has passed, at a time of your convenience (don't feel pressured to do it immediately after your observation) write a poem, a song, a short tale, a journal entry where you talk about your experience and what it means to be - or not - connected with our environment/surroundings. Try to connect your reflection to the concept of permaculture discussed in class.  Option 2: Inspired by the discussions over the semester, take a photo, record a short video, or make a drawing/painting meant to capture what you learned during the course and what you want to make your audience aware of. Post your creation on Canvas Discussion (without explanation). Comment on at least two of your classmates' posts. Present your work in class explaining the process behind your creation.

In addition to the practical assignments, the final project is also meant to push students to go outside of the classroom and to be in touch with Italian activists in the fields. The instructor provided a list of names and contacts, facilitating students' introduction via email. The Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 final project was then called “*i fattori del cambiamento*” (factors/farmers of change; this is a word pun, since in Italian *fattori* can mean both factors and farmers) and was conceived with the instructor who was teaching the course in the Fall semester, Valentina Frasisti, since she had a personal connection with some of them. We prepared students in advance (also using asynchronous activities on

Canvas and VoiceThread), and asked them to interview one Italian farmer of their choice in a 30 minute zoom session. We shared information and contacts of farmers who grow their products paying close attention to their environmental impact. These farmers and activists are also dedicated to organizing cultural activities and educational projects, experiencing forms of community life. Obviously, they gave us their availability and support for this project in advance, as well as their permission to record students' interviews.<sup>5</sup> Topics such as permaculture, biodiversity, sustainable farming, and food justice had already been discussed as part of the curriculum during the semester. Students had already acquired the linguistic and communicative skills necessary to prepare the interview questions and carry out a meaningful conversation. After the oral interview, students had to write a report, including a personal reflection of this experience, and finally present their work to the class. The final project provided opportunities to use the language in meaningful interactions, both engaging in interpersonal, authentic, and spontaneous conversations, as well as in self-expression in the interpersonal and presentational modes of communication. The final grade was based on both the written report and the oral activities (the interview and the final presentation). In this way, it was a full-rounded assignment in which we could evaluate their linguistic and communicative progress as well as their reflection on the "big ideas" discussed in the course. In addition, while the author had not designed the final project keeping in mind the Community Engaged Learning (CEL) framework, this activity also reflected some of its key principles. In fact, for the final project we combined our diverse expertise in the classroom before carrying out the individual interviews; we were in touch (even if virtually) with members of the agricultural community in Italy; students were pushed to continue exploring and researching on their own, based on their interest (there were options to interview farmers, honey producers, people in the viniculture world, permaculture experts etc.). The project also included a "structured, documented critical reflection," so the final project responded to many CEL criteria (described, for example, by the Center for Community Engagement at Cornell University <https://oei.cornell.edu/resources/community-engaged-learning/>). Our goal is to expand the community engagement model in future iterations of this final project, hopefully creating more and more partnerships in Italy, and in response to students' interest, activism, and positive comments on this specific activity.<sup>6</sup>

While developing the course, the author was also inspired by research on intercultural competence (for a definition see Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). For example, throughout the semester, she wanted to challenge students' assumptions and trigger cognitive dissonance about their idea of the *Bel Paese* and its current reality. In the words of Aski & Weintritt (2022)—who are advocating and showing how we can use intercultural learning in the Italian curricula to respond to falling enrollments—she tried to achieve those goals "by embedding intercultural competence modules on understanding the difference between stereotypes and generalizations, the diversity of perspectives on issues of importance and how this impacts team approaches to problem-solving" (p. 145). For this reason, besides the final project, various activities in the course involved talking with native speakers or people who fluently speak the language on Zoom, always followed by class discussion, personal reflection essays and practical assignments. For example, during the Fall 2021 semester, we had the great honor to listen to Yvan Sagnet, a Cameroonian activist working in Italy to end modern-day slavery in the Italian agricultural industry (the so-called *caporalato*). His participation came at the end of our module on food and social justice where all the above-mentioned topics were already introduced and presented. In Spring 2022, another guest speaker was invited—Giorgia Palmirani—to talk about sustainable fashion in Italy and

her work on Instagram sharing useful tips on how to dress more ethically and sustainably. Her presentation happened at the end of the module dedicated to eco-tourism and eco-fashion, with a focus on the language of social media. In both cases, students were prepared to ask their own questions and to have a deep understanding of the criticalities of the Italian agricultural and fashion system and the hidden reality of the exploitation of workers, especially migrants. Preparatory activities to facilitate their presentations, as well as expansion activities, were also assigned to deepen students' understanding of these topics and their own reflections. These two presentations—and all the work connected to them—proved to be among the most successful in inspiring and empowering students to take a more active and sustainable approach in their life, as demonstrated in various comments in the final course evaluations:

I learned so much from this course! The main thing I took away was that for everything I consume (food, clothing, anything!) it is so important to know where it came from and who made it (and whether or not they were treated fairly!). It's also important to have a plan for disposing of things responsibly and reusing them whenever possible. Whenever I go grocery shopping now I think so much of Yvan Sagnet and *il caporalato* when I'm looking in the produce section and I am now trying to buy ethically harvested and organic produce (when possible). I also learned so much about the migrant crisis and real environmental justice issues in Italy. It made me want to be more active in these issues!

Prior to this course, I did not know much about sustainability. I think I learned a lot about a topic that was relatively unknown to me before, as well as improved tremendously my Italian language skills. I specifically liked the modules about food and fashion, as these are two things that I am confronted with daily in my life and I am very familiar with them. Seeing them from a new, sustainable perspective, gave me more insight about better choices I could make that I probably would not have thought about on my own.

The author's plan is to continue empowering students to discuss such topics, relevant both to Italian culture and on a global scale. As another student wrote in her final evaluation, "this course impacted the way I live my life and made me more sustainable." For me, this was the greatest achievement we could have hoped for: the essential goal of any teaching should be to have an impact on students' current and future life outside the classroom. The approach and choices made in the fourth-semester of Italian can also be applied to all the language sequence, from elementary to advanced. Obviously, it will require a careful choice and presentation of the texts, as well as scaffolding activities to provide students with the necessary linguistic tools to appreciate them, and effective transitions to present materials in a logical and coherent way. Sustainability issues—in lessons that are built around authentic texts and big ideas that give students ample opportunity to engage with their instructors and peers, to use mistakes as learning opportunities, to discuss respectfully any topic, even when in disagreement, and to give and accept constructive criticism and feedback—proved to be an important and relevant tool to use to update the Italian language program curriculum in the upper-level course. The author's hope is to continue expanding this curriculum makeover at all levels of instruction, to update all the Italian syllabi as well as to attract and retain students to the program. In fact, the range of topics presented in this article—from sustainable fashion to the migrant crisis in Europe—proved to be particularly appealing for students, motivating them to continue learning the language in advanced classes as well as in study abroad programs in Italy. In the final course evaluations,

all students expressed how the content and authentic texts discussed in class provided an effective way to learn the language as well as to feel more knowledgeable and conscious about such relevant topics. The majority of the students also stated how the course inspired them to adopt a more sustainable way of life, in the USA and abroad, and to continue learning about these themes:<sup>7</sup>

I want to be a more sustainable traveler! I am more aware of the sustainable practices that I can adopt while traveling to other countries like Italy, and while I'm at home and even at school. The hope is that a little goes a long way.

I learned a lot about Italy that I wasn't aware of before, and overall took away that it is possible to live more sustainably. We only have one planet and we all live here; we have to take care of it and each other.

The direction and the choices made in this course have been in line with recent SLA frameworks and the fundamental principles of effective world language pedagogy in the twenty-first century (see Katz Bourns, Kruger, & Mills, 2020). As stated by Melin and Broner (2019, p. 292): “Students can be engaged in and excited about foreign languages when the endeavor is tied to a genuine need to communicate with others about big questions.” Addressing these timely issues not only offers innovative ways to update our curricula, providing the occasion for meaningful and effective language acquisition; but it also helps us empower students in the world language classroom, motivate them to explore beyond the course assignments, and ultimately guide them to become multilingual selves and informed citizens of the world. In the course presented in this article, students formed a collaborative and engaging learning community in which they were also “able to observe their progress and see how their knowledge can have meaningful real-world applications,” hence feeling “a sense of profound motivation” (Bourns, Kruger, & Mills, 2020, p. 60) toward their language acquisition journey. For these reasons, not only is the author's goal in the fourth-semester of Italian, and all the Italian courses, to replace “the two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole” (MLA 2007, p. 237), but also to make sure this continuity happens across the curriculum and the extra-curriculum, inside and outside the classroom, where students can continue to explore and engage in a meaningful way with the course material. The positive impact of such choices will be evident not only in students' Italian language learning, but in their lifelong education to become independent learners, citizens able to question others and themselves on the rightness of their actions. As written by Melin (2021, p. 10):

Ten years from now, what will our students remember about the time they spent in our classes? If the answer turns out to be that we inspired them to create a cascade of hopeful action—if, indeed, we witness them growing to become intellectually curious, truly global citizens who surpass us in their ability to integrate humanities and STEM perspectives—we will have done much more than bridge the two-cultures divide.

One of the greater purposes of a world language education course in our times should be to guide students in becoming aware of their conscience and in assuming values in real life, with autonomy and coherence. The author hopes that the course and materials here presented showed how SLA research-based practices can be—and should be—implemented in the Italian language curriculum in responding to the most urgent and relevant issues of today, encouraging critical thinking and the analysis of current topics, relevant both for Italian discourse and on a global scale, in a way that is pedagogically suitable to the students' linguistic level.

### Notes

1. In this course, sustainability is more broadly intended in relation to the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They define a new model of society, according to criteria of greater responsibility in social, environmental, and economic terms, aimed at avoiding the collapse of our ecosystem. For more information about the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development see <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>.
2. Borrowing the definition from Wiggins & McTighe (2005): “the meaningful patterns that enable one to connect the dots of otherwise fragmented knowledge [and] serve as the focal point of curricula, instruction, and assessment [and] are transferable beyond the scope of a particular unit”) (p. 338–339).
3. There are also other pedagogical reasons to justify the decision to create in-house materials and avoid the adoption of language textbooks. On the open education movement and the rise of teaching-learning ecology in the world language classroom, see Blyth & Thoms (2021). In relation to the content of the course presented in this article, see Méndez Seijas & Parra (2022).
4. All the assignments and instructions in the course are provided in Italian. The author is providing here a shorter version of the practical assignments’ prompts.
5. The author wishes to thank them here: Evan Welking and Federica Faggioli of Borgo Basino; Enrico Grandis of La Capreria; Gianluca Burani of Trebiolche Permacultura; Lucia Frigo of Antica Apicoltura Kaberlaba; Anna Pacchiarotti of La Valdanzosa.
6. Case in point, one of the students enrolled in the Fall 2021 decided to spend the summer in Italy with Borgo Basino internship program.
7. For example, after the semester ended, a student of the course from Washington, DC went to an exhibition on sustainability in the Italian design world at the Italian Embassy. She shared pictures, comments, and her personal pieces from the exhibition in an email written in magnificent Italian.

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