

Title: Expanding the Dimensions of Learning a Language: Designing Assignments that Strengthen Intercultural Competence

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Summary:

An Italian professor seeks to enhance students' intercultural competence skills through a variety of activities and assignments designed to prompt a deep delve into questions of Italian cultural identity and a reflection on our own culture's identity.

Background:

Course Description

Italian I, ITL 121, is an introductory course designed to equip students with linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and critical thinking skills. With regard to language, students learn to use the present tense and relevant vocabulary to talk about daily routines, family and friends, likes and dislikes. The majority, let's call it 90%, of class time is dedicated to developing linguistic proficiency. The majority of that time is spent speaking in the target language, practicing the target language. With regard to intercultural competence, in that other approximate 10% of the time, I am experimenting with students reading and discussing, in English, the travel writings of an Italian journalist who lived in the US. These activities are conducted in the majority of students' native English language so that we can delve deep into questions of Italian cultural identity and reflect on our own culture's identity. Often, this discussion leads to critical thinking, too, the kind of thinking that students cannot easily achieve in Italian at this elementary level. Most students take the course to fulfill the first of the two-course language requirement at Elon, in this case ITL 121 and ITL 122. For some students it acts as the foundation for continuing with the Italian Studies Interdisciplinary Minor. Students range from first-year to fourth-year and almost always have little to no background with Italian. The course is capped at 22 students.

Intellectual Goals

The intellectual goals I have for my students revolve around strengthening the intercultural competence dimension of the course. These goals are established for all language classes in the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Elon. The department's goals at this course level are adapted from the AAC&U "Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric":

1. **Knowledge (Cultural worldview frameworks):** Students begin to demonstrate awareness of the elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.
2. **Knowledge and Skills (Cultural self-awareness and openness):** Students begin to demonstrate awareness that cultural rules and biases exist in the target culture (C2) and home culture (C1). Students express some openness to cultural difference, but typically respond with own worldview.

3. **Skills (Verbal and nonverbal communication):** Students begin to identify some cultural difference although rarely incorporate them in verbal and nonverbal communication. Students begin to show awareness that misunderstandings can occur based on those differences.
4. **Skills (Connecting linguistic difference to cultural difference):** Students begin to show awareness of different patterns between languages and see the target culture on its own terms, rather than a completely separate “other.”

Implementation

Student Understanding and Performance

In my course redesign, I examine more closely students' development of intercultural competence skills. More specifically, I'm interested in helping students achieve the aforementioned departmental goals by having students:

1. Name and discuss at least two elements of Italian culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.
2. Identify and engage in discussion about some cultural differences/similarities between the culture they are studying and their home culture.
3. Articulate the value of and reason for a specific cultural practice within the target culture.

These learning outcomes address our departmental goals regarding intercultural competence, and they come directly from Elon University's Core Curriculum language requirement expectations. Prior to this redesign, language acquisition was the primary, and nearly exclusive, goal of the course. Almost all lessons focused on linguistic, grammatical, and vocabulary content. When cultural concepts came up they came up incidentally in class based on textbook readings or grammatical discussions, but there was no deliberate effort to evaluate intercultural competence. Assessments, too, were focused primarily on linguistic, grammatical, and vocabulary content. The ITL 121 syllabus from Fall 2014, the baseline course I taught the year before my redesign, shows this singular focus, and is organized exclusively by grammar points and vocabulary themes. In this scheme, student understanding was judged by how well they understood grammar and memorized vocabulary:

“B+” Exam from ITL 121 Fall 2014

“B-” Exam from ITL 121 Fall 2014

“C” Exam from ITL 121 Fall 2014

In my course redesign, I included a variety of activities in the fabric of the course that allowed students to engage and be evaluated on intercultural competence. I wanted students to understand that language learning is not just conjugating verbs and memorizing vocabulary. Rather, language learning at Elon focuses, too, on critical thinking vis-à-vis activities that stimulate intercultural discussion and lead to intercultural competence. That is, understanding not just how Italians speak, but who are the Italians? What are important, distinctive Italian cultural elements? What are some similarities and differences between Italian culture and students' home culture? And, finally, the most challenging and important aspect, how can we teach students to think about and articulate the value of and reason for those cultural elements? These questions are extremely important – and often neglected, in my experience as a student and teacher at several higher education institutions – in language classes. Through this work in the Collaborative Humanities Research Project, I have learned that they are equally important to the linguistic questions we raise and the language we teach our students, no matter the target language. For me and my students, intercultural competence is a skill transferable to any country, any culture in the world. Even if, and certainly I hope for just the opposite, students are not able to continue studying Italian at Elon and beyond, they will have learned some basic skills for thinking, talking, and describing any other cultures in general with respect and some nuance.

The redesigned course has three chapters of grammatical, linguistic, and cultural theme content, which is fewer than the original Fall 2014 iteration's six chapters. This decrease allowed for a "quality over quantity" experience, and made space for intercultural competence and critical thinking activities. The units come from Vista Higher Learning's *Sentieri* textbook, and are divided in the redesigned Fall 2015 ITL 121 Syllabus by cultural and vocabulary themes. At the end of each unit students read a chapter of Beppe Severgnini's *Ciao America! An Italian Discovers the US*. It is a set of witty, critical observations about US culture through Italian eyes that inevitably leads to comparison (and equally witted criticism) about Italian culture. During the end of class, about once a month, students reflected on Beppe's observations in a double-entry journal. They discussed in groups, in English, their journal entries on the review day prior to each unit exam. The first 40-50 minutes of the review day – we have 70-minute class periods at Elon – were dedicated to reviewing the grammatical and vocabulary content on the upcoming exam. The last 20-30 minutes were spent discussing the Severgnini reading and reflecting upon American and Italian cultural identity. These journal entries acted as preparatory activities that led to the final video project in which students conduct an interview of Beppe Severgnini that revisits his most important observations; compares and contrasts elements of US and Italian culture; and attempts to explain why and assign value to those elements.

Initial Focus Assignments: (i) "Double-Entry Journal" and (ii) "Final Video Project"

"Double-Entry Journal"

In column one, students will write three direct quotations from the Severgnini chapter with regard to his observations of American culture that they find most interesting, surprising, discussion-worthy, etc. In column two, students will describe briefly what each observation reveals about American culture. And in column three, they will describe what, in turn, Beppe's commentary on American culture might reveal about Italian culture and/or his Italian identity. Here is a sample chapter and the double entry journal format.

Students read for and prepare the journal entries at home. Then, in class, students gather in groups of three to discuss their observations and the meanings of them. The assignment requires them to find information that corresponds to the following learning outcomes: "Students name and discuss at least two elements of Italian culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices"; and "Students identify and engage in discussion about some cultural differences/similarities between the culture they are studying and their home culture." "Sample 1" for the Double-Entry Journal is a successful example for these to learning outcomes. In his/her first quotation, the student brings up the notion of "time." He posits that "Americans are very focused on their systematic lives and try to cram everything into one day for maximum efficiency." He hypothesizes, based on Severgnini's statement, that "Italians are much more relaxed and do not fret about overcomplicating things."

"Sample 1" for the Double-Entry Journal

These are the most accessible elements of the intercultural competence goals, and the majority of students tended to achieve them. Learning outcome three, "Students can articulate the value of and reason for a specific cultural practice within the target culture," is more difficult to reach for

students by themselves. The in-class discussion is where I guided them to go beyond the relatively superficial observations that the journal solicits and deeper into the questions of what cultural value those observations might hold, and the reasoning behind that value. During the semester, this guidance led to better observations for some students. In addition to more cautious, less generalizing observations, I also began to encourage the students to pose discussion questions to stimulate more thorough discussion with their peers. “Sample 2” for the Double-Entry Journal reflects this sort of improvement. The student chooses a quote from Severgnini’s work on the appearance of Americans. To this student, the “American Cultural Meaning” is “Although we have a stereotype of being on the larger side, Americans have been on a fitness kick for several years now. Staying healthy and heading obesity has been of the utmost importance to many.” The student wonders with a cautious “may” about Italians: “Italians may not value physical fitness as strongly as Americans.” Then, in preparation for leading a group of her peers on this topic, the student connects these reflections to the broader – and most Italian – concept of “beauty”: “How does the concept of beauty differ between Americans and Italians? Why has Italian commercialism not influenced Italians the way that American commercialism has influenced Americans in regard to body image?”

“Sample 2” for the Double-Entry Journal

At the end of semester, after practicing throughout the semester, the final video project led them to focus specifically on the questions of reason and value.

“Final Video Project”

The final video project is the culminating point for students to review the most important elements observed from their journal entries and in-class discussions throughout the semester. It also requires them to address the more difficult aspect of “articulating the value of and reason for” those cultural practices.

Student Work:

First Redesign Iteration – ITL 121 in Fall 2015

“Double-Entry Journal”

As mentioned before, in the previous way in which the course was conducted, language acquisition was the primary, and nearly exclusive, goal of the course. Most lessons focused on linguistic, grammatical, and vocabulary content. If cultural concepts came up they came up incidentally in class based on textbook readings, but there was no systematic effort to evaluate intercultural competence. That changed drastically in the first redesign iteration of ITL 121 in Fall 2015. With the incorporation of the readings from Beppe Severgnini’s *Ciao America* and the focus on them through the double-entry journal, in-class discussions, and final video project activities, students faced head on and regularly not only linguistic and grammatical material, but also activities that required them to acquire knowledge about and awareness of elements important to Italian culture (albeit, vis-à-vis this one Italian’s point of view); differences and similarities between Italian and American culture; and, through guided class discussions, ideally, critical thinking skills helping to discuss the origin of those elements, and ask respectful and nuanced questions about another culture’s values.

For instance, one student picks the following quote from Severgnini’s work that concentrates on technology use by people in the US: “Depending on the historical context and the mood of the moment, they adore [technology], they abuse [technology], they talk about it, they fiddle with it, they laud it to the skies, or they damn it to hell. But they get to grips with it. They actually use science.” Based on the structure of the “Double-Entry Journal,” the student must then state (with some expertise, since she is, in this case, a US citizen) what meaning Beppe’s observation might hold with regard to American culture, *ita*: “Our lives depend on technology. We let technology cause many different emotions in our life such as stress, hatred, or content[ment] with ease. We always are using it.” The journal also requires the student to hypothesize as to the possible Italian Cultural Meaning, which, depending on its accuracy, I endorse, critique, challenge, or correct: “Italians do not use technology as much as Americans do. Beppe says that Italians feel like characters out of a science-fiction novel if they used it as much as Americans did. He even goes on to say Americans don’t respect science because of our overuse of it.” In this case, during class discussion I would qualify a few things: Beppe is writing in the mid-90’s, when the technology scene would have been different; he, as someone in his 40s at the time, is representing the opinion of an older Italian; and, finally, I would caution the student not to make such a sweeping statement as “Italians do not use technology as much as Americans do.” Conveniently, the textbook unit which we were working when this observation was made offered an article about the omnipresence of mobile devices in Italy. Beppe’s comment and the student’s focusing on his views with regard to Italian perceptions of technology led us to seek and find more information from the textbook.

This example indicates strengths and weaknesses that were found across student responses in the “double-entry journal” assignment. A strength and successful change can be found in that, unlike in former iterations of the course, students regularly achieve the first criterion of the aforementioned Elon Core Curriculum language requirement student learning outcomes. Namely, with every entry into their journal and follow-up discussion in class, they “name and

discuss at least two elements of Italian culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices;” and they “identify and engage in discussion about some cultural differences/similarities between the culture they are studying and their home culture.” At this course level, with little or no prior cultural or linguistic experience with Italian, students had a hard time achieving the third of three Core Curriculum learning outcomes: “Students can articulate the value of and reason for a specific cultural practice within the target culture.” That’s where the discussion in class was essential in that I, the relative expert on the subject, could help critique any oversimplifications, generalizations or erroneous statements. I also did so by reading, and, correcting when necessary, students’ journal entries.

“Final Video Project”

The Final Video Project offered to students the chance to review their observations from previous in-class discussions and Double-Entry Journal assignments. Having already discussed the elements/observations in class, they were to focus on and demonstrate to their classmates in their videos this last element: “the value of and reason for those cultural practices.” As seen above, I designed the rubric with the Core Curriculum student learning outcomes and departmental goals in mind: the bulk of the grade went toward naming and discussing at least two elements of Italian culture; a slightly smaller part of the grade went toward identifying and engaging in discussion about similarities and/or differences; and the last twenty percent, the points needed to earn a “B” or an “A” went toward the most challenging learning outcome, articulating the value of and reason for a specific cultural practice.

For the project, there were five groups of two to four students. The grade distribution ended up being: 2 “A’s,” 2 “B’s,” and 1 “C.” All of the groups earned five out of five of points for naming and discussing at least two elements important to members of Italian culture vis-à-vis Beppe Severgnini’s specific commentary. The groups that earned an “A” received all three out of three points for engaging in discussion about some cultural differences and/or similarities. The “B” and “C” groups earned only two and a half out of three. Finally, the premium points for articulating value of and reason for cultural practices were distributed thus: the “A” groups earned one and a half out of two; the “B” groups earned one half a point and one point; the “C” group earned zero points.

All the groups earned all the points for naming and discussing important elements to members of Italian culture. Students did this well on the whole throughout the semester in the Double-Entry Journal and, not surprisingly, in the final project. There was some variation in quality of the discussion about cultural differences and similarities. One of the “A,” – “Sample 1 for the Final Video Project” – discussions focused on the important role of sports in the two cultures. The students parsed out how (professional) sports in the US tend to be for entertainment value, no matter how seriously people take them. The students had done some extra research (and highly productive in-office discussion with me) to discover that soccer in Italy is at times highly politicized. Political ideologies – and sometimes quite radical ideologies – are sometimes associated with certain teams. Fans can go to matches not only to be entertained, but also to vent and vaunt their political beliefs. This group was the only group to go into deep culture territory to attempt to articulate also the value of and reason for a specific cultural practice. They discussed the fragmented regional nature of Italy and Italian politics (to which we could add language, cuisine, and so much more) and the multitude of political parties that exist. This propensity for

the development of political parties that sometimes represent local and/or regional concerns helps explain how they might also attach themselves to their local soccer club. This sort of work has become the “gold standard” for what students can achieve in the way of intercultural competence when we give them the opportunity.

In order to avoid a one-sided representation of student work, I will conclude by outlining here some of what did not go as well as expected with the groups who did not do so well with the comparison-contrast or articulation of the value of and reason for a specific cultural practice. In one “B” group – “Sample 2 for the Final Video Project” – they picked good quotes to discuss in their interview with Beppe. However, when they proceeded to compare and contrast, they focused almost exclusively on a quote having to do with Italians and respecting rules and laws. They emphasized excessively – even after this same topic came up in class, after we agreed that it was a bit of a stereotype, and that such comments should be viewed with nuance – that all Italians hold the law and rules in low esteem. I encouraged the group to avoid sweeping generalizations and to recall from our discussions throughout the semester that often such opinions will change from region to region, city to city, and person to person, just as they do here in the United States. This tendency to generalize and/or not to take quotes, observations, and cultural elements beyond the topical caused students to lose points on this part.

Finally, in the case of students articulating the value of and reason for certain practices, the gold standard was set by the group discussing soccer as mentioned above. The other “A” group did just as well, though not as eloquently. They discussed some deep culture points that touched on value and explained some “why.” For instance, their video concluded with a discussion about Americans’ obsession with quantifying practically everything and (ab)using technology to do it: from calories and steps per day to GPAs and game score predictions calculated to the one-hundredths decimal place. This group also talked about cuisine and regional differences in Italy. One of the two “B” groups, for whatever reason, did not attempt to assign value or explain why. The second “B” group interrogated Beppe dramatically with “why?” questions to this end; however, the responses did not materialize. Finally, the “C” group, for whatever reason, did not address this part of the assignment at all; ironically, since the two students in the group did excellent work in all their assignment prior to the final video project.

On the whole, the implementation of these activities acted like a light switch. Before it was flipped, ITL 121 was heavily focusing on the first of the World Language and Cultures Department’s three goals: language proficiency. The second two goals – intercultural competence and critical thinking – were sometimes realized incidentally, as a result of language discussion, but were not programmed into the course. With the switch flipped on, activities focusing on intercultural competence came to take place regularly. And students engaged them in ways that resulted time and again in students actualizing the Elon Core Curriculum learning outcomes of intercultural competence: naming and describing elements important to the target culture; comparing and contrasting those elements with regard to one’s own culture; and articulating the value of and reason for them. The light has been turned on, and I have seen many improvements in my students’ learning in just the ways I hoped for and which were only visible as incidental sparks in prior course iterations. However, upon careful reflection, I have thought of some ways in which I might be able to improve these activities.

Reflections:

Based on the results of the instructional redesign of ITL 121 in Fall 2015, it might be helpful to expand the intercultural discussion aspect of the course (double-entry journal and otherwise) and discontinue the final video project.

Both worked well enough in ITL 121 of Fall 2015, however, the video project was: 1) somewhat redundant, as it repeated conversations which had already taken place earlier in the semester, albeit with some new comments; 2) challenging from a technological point of view for some students; and 3) came about at the end of semester, when, in fact, I wanted that kind of student learning to be taking place throughout the semester. In an effort to increase student accountability, as well as decrease the quantity and increase the quality of observations, it might be helpful in the future to implement a system by which, on each of the three review/discussion days, the class is divided evenly into groups of three or four with rotating leaders. The leader might plausibly bring: 1) a single quality quote from Severgnini's book or the day's film with analysis of the "American Cultural Meaning," and the "Italian Cultural Meaning"; 2) a discussion question; and 3) an answer to that question focusing on possible deeper cultural meaning with which to engage their peers. This change would shift emphasis from quantity of quotes to quality of quotes and analysis, and also require the students to lead their peers, effectively co-teaching small segments of the class. Group members might only need to bring in a quote and question in preparation for the discussion.

The notion of asking questions would be an important addition to the improvement of the redesign. It could take the reading journal assignment beyond passive observation to active interrogation and discussion of Italian and/or American culture. This addition might also prompt me to adjust slightly the grading rubric, putting a premium on good, cautious questions that do not generalize excessively or stereotype and that hypothesize directly about possible deep cultural implications. Student responses, like in "Sample 2" for the Double-Entry Journal" found above, inspired in part a possible change for future redesigns.

As described above, I want future iterations of the course redesign activities to focus on quality and not quantity. In doing so, I want to help students avoid, in observations and in questions about other cultures, simplistic, overly-generalizing, and/or stereotypical observations. This shift can come about by having them focus from the outset on one good observation, comparison/contrast, and asking them explicitly to attempt to articulate value of and reason for some cultural element. Finally, I believe the activities could be enhanced by including more authors and texts, and preferably in the target language. I knew Beppe Severgnini the best, and had read and assigned his book off-and-on over the years. A translated portion of Mario Soldati's *America primo amore* could show another perspective and time period of an Italian viewing the US. Then, it would be helpful to include perspectives of foreigners writing about living in Italy. In this vein, *Italian Neighbors*, by Tim Parks, comes to mind as an accessible and fun text for the 100 level. If authentic Italian texts would be preferable, I envision using films with Italian audio and English subtitles. Students would watch the films at home, and quote the transcript (provided by the instructor), as opposed to quoting a text translated into English. The film scene and transcript quote would act as the basis for preparing an observation, a comparison, and a question for group discussion.

Having witnessed good intercultural discussion and critical thinking as a result of this course redesign, my perspectives on teaching have shifted somewhat. I realize that students, especially at the 100 level, need the chance to speak in English occasionally to think more deeply and critically about the complex subject of intercultural competence. This realization goes against the grain of the robust pedagogical preparation I received in graduate school regarding the communicative approach, an approach which in theory requires 100% of class to be conducted in the target language to simulate immersion. The Department of World Languages and Cultures and the Core Curriculum at Elon University identifies intercultural competence and critical thinking alongside language proficiency as fundamental to the education of our students as global citizens. So, I still teach the majority of my class in Italian, however, I now do not fear or resist using low-stakes, high-impact activities in English to stimulate deep thinking and discussion with my students. Indeed, I now embrace it, recognizing that students might not speak Italian for the rest of their life. However, it is likely that they will travel to other lands or encounter people from other cultures at home or abroad. The lessons of intercultural competence – identifying significant elements, comparing and contrasting with nuance, and critically thinking about the reasons for these elements and the values of the target culture – can and will serve them no matter where they go, no matter what languages they speak, no matter what they study.