

***Using Literary Texts in the Teaching of Italian as a Foreign Language***  
Putting Theory into Practice: the *Unità Didattica* and Alessandro Baricco's *Oceano Mare*

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Using authentic literary texts in L2<sup>1</sup> classes is a pedagogical choice that allows the elaboration of a student-centred language-teaching methodology. This article discusses the usefulness of working on the specific features of this text-type to optimize the target language (TL) learning process through the constant movement from a focus on form to a focus on meaning, and vice-versa. The use of a literary text specifically for language-teaching purposes also facilitates the active participation of learners during the learning process through a focus on both their own personal experience and cultural knowledge to fully understand the meaning of the TL literary text. In so doing, an intercultural approach to the target language is facilitated and it is also possible to elaborate numerous student-centred didactic activities based on this text-type.

Authentic literary texts in L2 classes, when exploited through task-based and interpretation-task-based approaches (Nunan, 2004; Ellis, 1995), foster a direct connection with, and interaction between, the students and the TL. The literary text, with its often vivid imagery and the carefully chosen vocabulary and morphosyntactical structures frequently used to describe situations or characters, is not only a finely-worked gateway to the world presented by the author, but also constitutes an important source of cultural elements. As Carroli (2008: 1) states, this text-type has 'the potential to promote language and culture learning [...]. The pedagogical premises are that the object of learning, in this case literary texts, is inseparable from the approach taken to teaching and learning; in the same way that language is inseparable from culture, of which literature is a part'. This inextricable language-culture-literature nexus, when brought to the fore and made visible to students, facilitates the activation of motivation-related dynamics through the feeling of discovery experienced by students exploring the multiple layers of which the text is composed. Crucially, as Carroli points out,

'When reading a literary text in a non native-language, [...] learners need to focus simultaneously on the words and the meaning of the text. Atomist and holistic, and surface and deep approaches are complementary, since the L2 literature learner needs to shift constantly from one approach to the other in order to grasp both language form and text meaning [...]' (2008: 21).

This constant shift between a focus on form and a focus on meaning starts with the careful attention paid to the language form through which the meaning is conveyed and involves a constant switching between the 'atomist and holistic'/'surface and deep' approaches to the text highlighted by Carroli; a similarly continuous movement between the two approaches can also be found in the neurolinguistic principles of 'bimodality' and 'directionality', applied to the L2 learning process in particular by Danesi (1998), and in the 'efferent' and 'aesthetic' reading process conceptualized by Louise Rosenblatt (1938; 1978). The bimodality theory is based on seminal neurolinguistic studies carried out in the late 1960s and early 1970s on the left and right hemispheres of the brain, which function in a complementary

way and both deal with sophisticated cognitive and symbolic functions. Each, however, uses different ‘modes of processing’ (Edwards, 1979: 33), defined by Edwards as ‘left-mode’ and ‘right-mode’, which can be summarised as follows (Edwards, 1979: 44):

<b>L- MODE</b>	<b>R- MODE</b>
<b>Verbal</b> <i>Using words to name, describe, define.</i>	<b>Nonverbal</b> <i>Using non-verbal cognition to process perceptions</i>
<b>Analytic</b> <i>Figuring things out step-by-step and part-by-part.</i>	<b>Synthetic</b> <i>Putting things together to form wholes.</i>
<b>Symbolic</b> <i>Using a symbol to stand for something. For example, a drawn form stands for the eye, the sign + stands for the process of addition.</i>	<b>Actual, real</b> <i>Relating to things as they are, at the present moment.</i>
<b>Abstract</b> <i>Taking out a small bit of information and using it to represent the whole thing.</i>	<b>Analogic</b> <i>Seeing likenesses among things; understanding metaphoric relationships.</i>
<b>Temporal</b> <i>Keeping track of time, sequencing one thing after another: doing first things first, second things second, etc.</i>	<b>Nontemporal</b> <i>Without a sense of time.</i>
<b>Rational</b> <i>Drawing conclusions based on reason and facts.</i>	<b>Nonrational</b> <i>Not requiring a basis of reason or facts; willingness to suspend judgment.</i>
<b>Digital</b> <i>Using numbers as in counting. Spatial seeing where things are in relation to other things and how parts go together to form a whole.</i>	<b>Spatial</b> <i>Seeing where things are in relation to other things and how parts go together to form a whole.</i>
<b>Logical</b> <i>Drawing conclusions based on logic: one thing following another in logical order – for example, a mathematical theorem or a well-crafted argument.</i>	<b>Intuitive</b> <i>Making leaps of insight, often based on incomplete patterns, hunches, feelings, or visual images.</i>
<b>Linear</b> <i>Thinking in terms of linked ideas, one thought directly following another, often leading to a convergent conclusion.</i>	<b>Holistic</b> <i>(meaning ‘wholistic’) Seeing whole things all at once; perceiving the overall patterns and structures, often leading to divergent conclusions.</i>

Table 1

Marco Mezzadri (2003: 6) provides a description of this process of bimodality: ‘L’emisfero destro, attraverso le particolarità della sua modalità di funzionamento, aiuta nell’acquisizione della lingua. La fase della percezione globale è gestita dalla modalità destra, mentre l’analisi successiva alla percezione globale è appannaggio della modalità sinistra’ [The right hemisphere, through the peculiarity of its functioning, helps language acquisition. The phase of ‘global perception’ is

managed by the Right Mode, while the analysis phase following global perception is the preserve of the Left Mode]. Regarding directionality, he adds: 'Alla teoria della bimodalità si associa quella della direzionalità secondo la quale le informazioni arrivano al cervello passando dall'emisfero destro a quello sinistro. Ciò implica in glottodidattica una serie di accorgimenti e di scelte metodologiche ben precise, ad esempio, l'utilizzo di strategie di tipo induttivo o [...] di modelli operativi quali l'unità didattica' [Associated with the theory of bimodality is that of directionality, according to which the information arriving at the brain passes through the right hemisphere before reaching the left. The implication of this for applied linguistics in language teaching is that a series of cognitive leaps and very careful methodological choices must be made, such as the adoption of inductive strategies or of structured models such as the *unità didattica*]. (2003: 6)

### **Theory into practice: the *Unità Didattica (UD)* and *Oceano Mare***

The structure of the UD<sup>2</sup> was chosen as the basis of four experimental classes for the practical part of a research project developed for the *Itals* Master's thesis.<sup>3</sup> The project aimed to observe how an integrated use of authentic literary texts and hypertexts in L2 classes facilitates the acquisition of grammatical topics; the four classes were delivered to final-year students of Italian (BA of Arts at NUI, Galway) during the academic year 2007-08. The students had an intermediate-advanced level of competence of the target language (LT) in line with the level B2-C1 defined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. Several communicative and grammar objectives had been drawn up while preparing the UD:

The **communicative goals** were the following:

- The improvement of students' ability to express their own emotions, impressions and opinions about an authentic Italian literary text;
- The expression of ideas and opinions in a clear, coherent and cohesive manner during debates and discussions, using complex morphosyntactic structures and new lexicon accurately and appropriately.

The **grammar goals** were the following:

- Revision of conditional mood (all tenses) and revision of the subjunctive mood as preparation for the introduction to the *periodo ipotetico*;
- Introduction and reuse – in context – of new literary and non-literary lexicon.

The UD is structured in the following six phases: 1. motivation; 2. globality; 3. analysis; 4. synthesis; 5. aware reflection; 6. testing.

During the 'motivation' phase, students' attention was captured with a brainstorming activity based on Géricault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, an image closely related to the subject matter of the literary text. In this phase the R-Mode was first engaged through an activity based on visual perception and visual memory (see **Table 1**). During the 'globality' phase, the students were asked to read a hypertext in Italian (**Appendix I**) relating to Géricault's painting on *Wikipedia*. In this phase a gradual shift towards the L-Mode was activated through

increasing attention to language, verbal memory and intellectual activities (see Table 1).

During the 'analysis' phase the students were asked to re-read the authentic literary text (*Appendix II*) they had already read at home. After the first reading in class they were asked to highlight the key-words or expressions that in their opinion were relevant for a deeper comprehension of the text. At the beginning of this phase, the L-Mode had been principally involved because of the attention paid to words (focus on form) in order to create meaning. Gradually, students' focus changed as they were asked to point out words that in their opinion were crucial to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the text, moving their attention towards a focus on meaning. The R-Mode was engaged again when students were asked to use their intuition in expressing their own view on important words in the text: students began to direct their attention towards the metaphoric language used by the author. The next task was for students to explain, in Italian, their choices of key-words or other linguistic expressions, on the basis of their own personal interpretation of the text: this activity again allowed a shift from the R-Mode to the L-Mode as students were asked to focus on a more analytical explanation of their choices. This activity also allowed for a continuous shift between focus on form and focus on meaning and vice-versa, optimizing the chances of acquiring both new vocabulary and morphosyntactical structures in the texts thanks to the immediate contextualization of the new lexicon and structures in a meaningful oral production relating to the literary text itself. The 'efferent' reading done at home by the students was complemented by an 'aesthetic' reading in class when they were asked to read the text and interact with it, and attempt to offer an interpretation of it at a deeper level. Rosenblatt (1938: 30-31) states:

'The special meaning, and more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text'.

A deeper delving into the literary text became even more important during the 'synthesis' and 'aware reflection' phases when students were asked to look again at the text and point out when, in the narration, the author stops using the *indicativo* mood and starts using the *congiuntivo*. In doing so, students themselves had the chance to summarize the grammar notions (whether new or previously encountered) complementing this activity, through a metalinguistic reflection on the use of verb tenses and moods. This task facilitated the act of 'noticing' (Schmidt 1990, 1992) while enhancing 'awareness' during the comprehension process. In these two phases, the shift from L-Mode to R-Mode was active again since the metalinguistic reflection (despite requiring an analytical and rational elaboration of information) also required students' involvement in different intuitive hypotheses and linguistic 'guessing'-games.

In the final 'testing' phase, students were asked to participate again in a more creative oral production activity. They were asked questions like: 'Cosa farebbero se fossero in quella situazione?', 'Cosa farebbero se vedessero arrivare una nave in lontananza?' [What would they do in the same situation?; What would they do if they saw a ship in the distance?] and were invited to give original answers. In the

previous class they had been asked to produce a set homework (a role-play exercise in which, working in pairs, they had to invent an imaginary dialogue between the two main characters of the literary text they had read). The results were interesting as, surprisingly, several intertextual interferences emerged.

### ***Pinocchio...***

Several students were, at the time of the project, also enrolled on a course offered by the Italian Department on Children's Literature. Two students re-adapted one character in the literary text under study to the character of the Cricket in *Pinocchio*. Interestingly, however in their imaginary dialogue, the character who mirrored the Cricket in *Pinocchio*, while behaving in a very similar manner to the character in Collodi's work, had completely different intentions – he was now the bad counsellor.

### ***... and Cappuccetto Rosso***

Another pair of students mocked the famous dialogue between Cappuccetto Rosso [Little Red Riding Hood] and the Wolf disguised as the grandmother: 'Che grandi occhi hai!' 'Per vederti meglio, [...]', 'Che grandi mani hai!' 'Per strangolarti meglio', 'Che grande coltello hai!' 'Per ucciderti meglio' ['What big eyes you have!' 'All the better for seeing you', [...] 'What big hands you have!' 'All the better for strangling you', 'What a big knife you have!' 'All the better for killing you with'].

### **Project outcomes**

1. From evaluation questionnaires distributed at the end of the fourth class, it emerged that the students considered the classes very motivating and challenging. Thanks to the structure of the classes based on the UD scheme, the shift between L-Mode and R-Mode was constant and students' attention was at a high level most of the time. The atmosphere in class was positive, the affective filter (Krashen, 1985:3) was rarely high and this allowed students to express their impressions and opinions freely.

2. A systematic re-use of words – in context – identified in the initial brainstorming (*sofferenza, stanchezza, angoscia, disperazione, speranza*) or found in the hypertext ( *naufragio, zattera, naufraghi, superstiti, sopravvivenza*) and in the literary texts (mainly *incubo* and *orrore, follia, pazzia, cimitero*) was visible both in oral activity productions and in the imaginary dialogues. Some sentences in the dialogue: 'Penso che la fame ti abbia dato alla testa' [I think hunger has gone to your head], 'se tu volessi aiutarmi, forse potremmo aiutarci insieme' [if you wanted to help me, maybe we could help each other?], 'Perché non dovrei mangiarti?' [Why shouldn't I eat you?], 'Se lo lasciassi qua qualcuno lo ruberebbe e con questa fame chissà cosa farebbero gli altri!' [if I left it here someone would steal it and what with everyone being so hungry there's no knowing what the others might do'] show students re-using conditional and subjunctive moods and *periodo ipotetico* in the imaginary dialogues produced in the final written activity.

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation L2 will be used in this article to indicate both second- and foreign-language acquisition / learning.

<sup>2</sup> The *Unità Didattica* is a 'modello operativo' [structured teaching model] (Porcelli, 1994: 149) divided into six phases which has its theoretical basis in *Gestalttheorie*. One of its main principles is that: 'quando siamo posti di fronte a un'entità complessa prima la percepiamo nella sua globalità e poi cogliamo i singoli dettagli' (Porcelli, 1994: 82) [when faced with a complex entity we first perceive it in its globality and then we pick out individual details].

<sup>3</sup> The *Itals* Master thesis focused on teaching Italian as a foreign language through literary texts and hypertexts (Magnoni, 2007; 2009); in this paper, our attention is mainly focused on the use of literary texts.