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L2 textbook design for intercultural learning in semester study abroad

Abstract

Research in the field of language learning in study abroad contexts has demonstrated that international experience alone is often not enough for students to reach higher levels of L2 proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. To optimize the potential of study abroad it is essential to provide specific curriculum, methodology and language teaching materials that allow both foreign language acquisition and personal development. In this article we describe our recent experience of creating tailor made teaching materials for beginners—while attempting to reconcile the Italian *sillabo* and the American *syllabus*, or rather the European and North American approaches to creating a linguistic program—including activities that empower students to immerse themselves in the host community, to learn how to do things with language in a way appropriate for the given social situation, to increase their intercultural competence through critical reflections about the encounter with the foreign language and the new culture.

Keywords

Study abroad; L2 Italian; Intercultural Communicative Competence; curriculum design; language teaching materials

1. *Second language study abroad programming*

American university students taking courses at educational institutions in countries other than the United States are heir to both the occasional studies that English Grand Tourists undertook starting in the sixteenth century, as well as a nineteenth-century American tradition of finishing one's studies in Europe.[1] From an expensive undertaking limited to the wealthiest in the nineteenth-century U.S., study abroad in the last four decades has expanded to include a far larger number of American undergraduates. Roughly one in twenty U.S. undergraduates spend at least a month abroad for study purposes.[2] On the values of study abroad, see Mollica (2015) and Dolci (2015) in an important issue on the subject in *Insegno*. "This

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number, while seemingly small, is notable given the absence of a coherent system or state subsidies, such as the Erasmus program in Europe (DePaul and Hoffa 2010, 2).

While Americans may study abroad, it is not a given that they will have had class instruction in the language of the host country, nor even that they will necessarily even take a class to learn that language while there. In an important 2003 article, Engle and Engle proposed a classification system of study abroad programs (primarily those serving American students) in which they first distinguished between "culture-based" and "knowledge-transfer" programs. The latter offer instruction in the language of the students, rather than that of the host country; the goal is providing content *in* the host country, instead of content *about* the host country, and language instruction is rarely part of the curriculum. This is especially true of summer or other short-term study abroad experiences. The other category — "culture-based programs" —includes a variety of sub-categories. Some are merely conduits for students to enroll directly in the universities of the host country; instruction is entirely in that country's language, and students are surrounded by other students from that country. Other programs require a course in the language of the host country but the other content-classes, while perhaps focusing on the host country, are taught in English. Finally, some programs (which Engle and Engle somewhat dismissively define as "service providers of scenery") do not require language instruction but do offer at least some courses about the host country. Engle and Engle's seven-variable classification takes into account, for example, types of student housing and the length of the student's sojourn, language is clearly a key criterion for their classification system: "target-language competence" and "language used in coursework" are two of the seven variables (Engle and Engle 2003). Confidence in foreign language skills is a key issue in intercultural development, since it correlates with more willingness to initiate conversations with local people and with the feeling of self-efficacy in a multicultural environment (Jackson 2015, 87).

The Umbra Institute is an American study abroad program located in Perugia, Italy, a university city with 165,000 residents and almost 30,000 Italian and international students at its two universities. While the American students who spend three and a half months studying at The Umbra Institute are not primarily Italian majors, all students enroll knowing that an Italian language and culture class is required despite the fact that the other content courses are in English. In Fall 2021, the academic administration program undertook an assessment project to evaluate the effects of students' time at The Umbra Institute. One part of the assessment was aimed at evaluating the utility of the mandatory Italian class; specifically, The Umbra Institute's administration was considering changing Italian language instruction from mandatory to optional, given that only a tiny percentage (normally 1-2%) of the students each semester are Italian majors, and most students have never studied Italian before (consistently more than 80%). The data were both a survey asking the students to rate the importance they assigned to learning Italian that semester (on a scale of 1 to 6), as well as several open-ended questions, and (later in the semester) a focus group with a representative sample of students.

The results were surprising: despite the fact that a tiny percentage of the students were Italian majors, and that few (in the focus group) reported that they intended to study Italian when they returned to their home institution, the students in Fall 2021 ranked learning Italian as a 5.25 out of 6, or a "very high priority" (the three subsequent semesters have all been around this 5.25 number). Both in the anonymous responses to the open-ended survey questions and in the subsequent focus group, many students expressed a desire to get to know Italians and to immerse themselves in the local community—many implied or said explicitly that they saw the language as a vehicle to that desired cultural integration. In fact, one of the main reasons why students look to study abroad is the belief that an experience abroad would be a transformative learning experience that would positively impact their lives, a belief that has been found in other studies of education abroad (Plews and Misfeld 2018, 166). One problem, though, that focus group participants identified was that the Italian language textbook used; the students considered it inadequate for the type of immersion they desired.

The existing Italian language textbooks published commercially have a series of characteristics that make them less-than-ideal for our students' cultural goals. In order to appeal to a broad market, these textbooks are written for students studying Italian anywhere: Chicago, Osaka, or Cape Town. This means that the textbooks, when they present cultural notes[2], tend to frame those in the national context, or (when they present regional idiosyncrasies) only mention a particular region or city once. These textbooks do not, then, present the opportunity for students to get to know the city they are studying in, because they are written for both L2 and FL contexts. It follows that none of this kind of textbook has any sort of tie-in with community-engaged learning: the desire (for authors and publishers) for a textbook that could be used anywhere means the absence of any sort of local connection. Even if some of these textbooks were likely written in Perugia (where there are several publishers of Italian textbooks), they were not explicitly connected the city: dialogues took place in cities all across Italy and the cultural notes referred to festivals across the country's regions. The thematic units that overlay the progression of communicative language competences in these books do not follow, in any meaningful way, the chronology of a student studying in Perugia. For example, the students begin to travel on the weekends immediately, but most textbooks have the thematic unit about travel paired with the grammatical concept of the past tense (e.g. "Dove sei stato questo fine settimana?" "Sono andato a Venezia." 'Where did you go this weekend?' 'I went to Venice'), which is not introduced immediately but rather only after a significant number of lessons.

As if these inadequacies were not enough, most of the textbooks we reviewed for use with our students also lacked the presentation of pragmatic aspects of the language use

[2] Peripheral presentation of culture does characterize textbooks of other languages as well, as evidenced by Eddy: "Textbooks tend to deliberately instruct and explain culture, while teachers often present it as facts. These snippets are relegated to the 'little blue box' located literally and figuratively on the margin of the curriculum" (2022, 44).

such as, for example, formulating requests adequately in emails according to the role and social status of addressee or react in an appropriate manner to an invitation. Most had some sort of cultural notes, but they offered – similarly to traditional textbooks for other languages – "an inaccurate and decontextualized presentation of the different pragmatic aspects examined, as well as a lack of natural conversational models representing the real use of language" (Martínez-Flor 2007, 246). The importance that students assigned to learning Italian (as a vehicle of cultural immersion), The Umbra Institute's existing commitment to community-engaged learning, and the inadequacies we found with the existing textbooks made us decide to write our own textbook (ultimately named *Allora!*). The first step, however, in that process was establishing the course design for the elementary language programs and the for the textbook students would use in those courses.

2. *Curriculum development and textbook design: American vs Italian-based approaches*

Curriculum development is an essential activity in language teaching. It focuses on determining what knowledge, skills, and values learners should acquire, what experiences should be provided to bring about intended learning outcomes, and how teaching and learning can be planned, measured, and evaluated. Curriculum development is a more comprehensive process than syllabus design, since it describes the broadest contexts in which planning for language instruction takes place (Dubin and Olshtain 1986). It includes the processes that are used to determine learners' needs, to develop aims or objectives, to create an appropriate syllabus, to establish course structure, to choose teaching methods and materials, and to carry out an evaluation of the language program (Nation and Macalister 2010). Thus, it is important to highlight the fact that curriculum development is not merely deciding what to teach, but also how to do that and with which objectives.

A syllabus is a more circumscribed document, usually prepared for a particular group of learners. There are several different ways in which a syllabus can be defined; here we consider both the organizational syllabus (referred to the language course) and the materials syllabus (structure and contents of the textbook). For what regards the organizational syllabus, there are different terms to define the educational paths proper to the U.S. tradition and those belonging to Italian teaching of foreign languages. Given that, it is imperative to resolve the tension between the American syllabus[3] and the Italian *sillabo*, in order to ensure compatibility of credits. The syllabus in contemporary language courses offered in the United States is considered a sort of a contract between the teacher and the learners, an official document to be followed verbatim. The American syllabus is not only

[3] The word *syllabus* in English and its seeming linguistic cousin in Italian, *sillabo*, have multiple definitions. The word syllabus was first used in English in 1656 to refer to a table of contents of a document, whereas the meaning of a document outlining the content of a course first appeared in 1889. Parkes and Harris point out that "the ambiguity about the meaning of the term does not seem to have dissipated in the subsequent centuries," as the word "syllabus" is used in some fields to mean "a course of study" rather than a document (Parker and Harris 2002, 55).

a description of the course, but indicates student learning outcomes, course logistics, classroom climate, course description, assignments/exams, grading and course policy, teaching methods and materials, and course calendar. The term *sillabo* in Italian, on the other hand, is a list of course content and abilities that a student is required to demonstrate for each level of linguistic competence (Soffiantini 2013). Ciliberti notes that an American syllabus corresponds better with what in Italy would be called a *curricolo*, comprehensive of the high-level objectives of a course paired with a detailed description of how those objectives will be attained (Ciliberti 2012). That said, for all of its detail about policies, assignments, and grammatical-cultural topics, American syllabi for modern foreign languages largely leave out communicative functions from their description of weekly instruction[4].

The Umbra Institute's updated elementary Italian language course's syllabus and the textbook *Allora* were a response to the following question: "How can one design a didactic structure that functions as a bridge between two glottodidactic traditions and that meets the needs of American students who are spending their study abroad in Perugia?" (Grandicelli 2022). The crucial first step was a curriculum development process at the macro level, prior to descending into the particulars of learning objectives and assessments. The point of departure was the analysis of the background and needs of the students, while not ignoring variables such as institutional goals (in this case, intercultural communicative competence), the total time students will have in the classroom, the (cultural/geographical) context, available resources, etc. Then and only then could work begin on the specification and sequencing of the content (Diadori, Palermo and Troncarelli 2009, 180).

As far as the context is concerned, The Umbra Institute organizes Italian language and culture classes for various types of learners, including elementary-level students, called ITAL 101: Living Perugia - Elementary Language, Culture, and Reflection. This is a course of a total of 60 hours, spread over 13 weeks (the period of the U.S. students' stay in Perugia). The second step in designing a response to the question above was the needs analysis. In order to understand learners' needs, we administered a questionnaire with the aim to ascertain what were the major factors in the attractiveness of Italian and Italy to a U.S. learner. The questionnaire was submitted in English and consisted of three main parts: the openness to diversity, the Italian program and the expectations. Students were asked to specify with a score from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) their degree of agreement or disagreement on certain issues. Apart from the high score assigned to the importance of learning Italian (see §1) students expressed a general agreement regarding the item "I am interested in learning about the many cultures that have existed in the world", with a score of 5.42. This says a lot about the profile of the U.S. learner in the study abroad context (or at least the population that chooses to study in Perugia): openness to learning about different cultures prevails and could be seen as a driver for learning a language and culture different from the L1. The responses to "I would like to join an organization that emphasizes getting to know people from different cultures,",

[4] Consider, for example, the syllabi of PennState University <https://sip.la.psu.edu/undergraduate/italian/courses/syllabi/> last access 11/08/2023.

with a score of 5.17, support our thesis: learners who choose to stay a semester abroad are more open to discovering new cultures. In fact, the item "The real value of a college education lies in being introduced to different values" also received wide approval (5.04). So, in conclusion, it can be asserted that one of the greatest motivating factors for the study experience in Perugia is openness to new cultures. Finally, regarding students' expectations about their time in Perugia, 33.8% placed personal growth first, 26.9% of students identified immersion in Italian culture as their primary goal, and 20% considered language a very important goal to achieve during their stay. The discovery of diversity, the chance to grow as individuals, the immersion in Italian culture, the opportunity to have an authentic experience, and the learning of a new language are all factors that certainly help enrich American students' stay in Italy. Regarding the city, half of the informants designated "Live an authentic experience" as their primary purpose; or, as one student wrote, "A more down to earth learning of Italian culture that is not as chaotic and touristy as other major Italian cities".

As the next step in our design process, learning objectives were defined based on the needs students identified in the questionnaire. The main objectives are related to linguistic-communicative competence and intercultural competence. This purpose is also suggested by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which includes intercultural competence among the core elements that a member of a multicultural society should have (Spinelli 2006). Intercultural competence may help people open to diversity, but it is also useful to avoid culture shock. The approach of the syllabus is communicative: communicative functions are placed, in fact, in the first column of the course calendar and in the textbook syllabus (see Fig. 1 below, that reproduces, in English, the indications given for Week 4), to emphasize their prominent role within the teaching action. Through such functions, the student is able to accomplish the communicative tasks that characterize each week.

Figure 1 - *Example from the textbook's syllabus (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 9)*

	Communicative Function	*Structure*	*Lexicon*
WEEK 4	Ask someone to recount something, recount events in the past Recount a trip or a past vacation	Some irregular past participles (*aprire - aperto, bere - bevuto, fare - fatto*...) Other irregular past participles (*rimanere - rimasto, dire - detto, leggere-letto*...) Expressions associated with the past (*yesterday, the day before yesterday, last ..., ... ago this morning*) Adverbs related to time (*before, then, after*) Preposition *in* with means of transportation	Review of the lexicon for travel, means of transportation, places of departure and arrival Pronunciation and spelling: intonations of questions "Where were you on vacation?"

In defining learning objectives, intercultural competence was an important goal to be achieved for U.S. students at The Umbra Institute. One of the primary purposes of the school's Italian course is immersion in the L2, alive and present outside the classroom, promoting learning that takes advantage of the "linguistic life" outside the classroom. For these reasons, cultural, and pragmatic aspects have a large space in the program and in the textbook. For example, learners are instructed about discussion topics to choose while interacting with Italian people (Fig. 2), and they are stimulated to compare taboos in the two cultures.

Figure 2 – *Discussion topics and taboos (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 200)*

A BIT OF ETIQUETTE

What should you do when Italian friends invite you to dinner? In Italy, when you go to dinner at someone's house, it's a customary to bring something to eat or drink: if you bring a good bottle of wine or a good dessert, you can't go wrong! And if the food isn't very good? Unfortunately, Italians are a bit touchy in the kitchen: it's better not to criticize too much; indeed, compliments are always much appreciated!

CULTURE: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Getting to know new cultures can be very difficult: the customs, the traditions, and even the acceptable topics of discussion can be very different! Imagine you're having dinner with new friends. Would you ask them these questions?

1. How much did you pay for your new car?
2. How much do you make a month?
3. How old are you?
4. Go to the gym? Have you lost weight?
5. Are you married? Are you with somebody right now?
6. Do you want to have children?
7. What do your parents do for work?
8. Who did you vote for?
9. What do you want to do after college?

Unlike the United States, where people talk about money and salaries more freely, in Italy money is usually a sensitive subject: people avoid it because showing they are rich or, conversely, that they don't have a lot of money, often causes shame. Even asking explicit questions about politics can cause slight embarrassment. The acceptability of certain topics also varies according to generations: for example, people 40-50 years of age make observations on others' weight more readily than younger generations. Conversely, a younger person might ask questions about age or partners much more often than an older person.

A curiosity: In Italy, unlike in the United States, questions about your religious beliefs or your zodiac sign are not are considered strange.

Ultimately the macro-level curriculum design we undertook consisted in reviewing the time students would be in the course and harmonizing the course calendar and the textbook's syllabus. As Fig. 3 shows, the 12 weeks of the course are preceded by

four days of full immersion, a distinctive feature of the language courses offered by The Umbra Institute.

Figure 3 – *The course calendar and the textbook's syllabus (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 8)*

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	Communicative Functions	Structure	Lexicon
Immersion Day 1	Introducing oneself, greeting someone, "survival" questions Asking the meaning of a word, *"Come si dice in italiano...?"*, ask who someone is	Alphabet, numbers, to have/to be, subject pronouns and interrogative pronouns	Afternoon: lexicon for the café (Italian *bar*) and *vorrei*
Immersion Day 2	*How much does it cost?*, making requests at the supermarket (review of *vorrei*), asking the price, knowing objects	Singular/plural, nouns, indefinite articles, to have/to be, I like...	Afternoon: lexicon for food/ shopping/weights and measures, review of *vorrei*, review of numbers
Immersion Day 3	Names of shops, asking for objects. Description of apartments (to use there is/are)	Agreement of adjectives and nouns, definite articles, there is/are, verbs ending in *-are* and the irregular verb *fare*	Afternoon: lexicon for and information about the mall, "Where is/are...?", "Do you have...?"
Immersion Day 4	Going to the train station, describing the station, asking for tickets at the counter	*-are, -ere,* and *-ire*: three conjugations, review of numbers for the time, the 24-hour clock	Afternoon: lexicon for travel (tickets, roundtrip journeys)
Week 1	A typical day Asking and telling time Asking and giving information about time Asking and responding to questions about everyday life Talking about one's habits	The present indicative of verbs ending in *-are, -ere,* and *-ire* (*-isc*) The present indicative (1st person singular) of the verbs *fare*, *andare*, *uscire*, and several reflexive verbs (to wake up, to take a shower, to fall asleep...) Some simple prepostions: *in*, *a*, *al*, *alla*, *alle*, *all' Da...a /dalle...alle* (Playing with locations) *Amare*+the infinitive, modal verbs Months and seasons	**Lexical structure** Moments of the day Days of the week Actions that repeat in daily life **Reflection** Some collocations with the verb *fare*

Once we had a syllabus that corresponded to all these variables and included communicative functions, pragmatic, and sociocultural aspects we intended to teach each week, we could proceed to the design of the corresponding textbook. As we underwent this backwards design process (Fink 2013), we understood—as Balboni highlights in his work—how important it is to connect the different roles teachers can assume, that is of instructor, facilitator, and designer of the educational process, as well as of the curriculum and author of teaching materials (Balboni 2012, 51).

3. *From students' needs analysis to intercultural education*

While creating course contents, as a baseline, we first considered Lo Duca's Italian L2 Syllabus (Lo Duca 2006). This syllabus is based on the CEFR, and it is designed for Erasmus students, which represent a group similar to the American study abroad students in various respects. According to the CEFR, the primary goal of language teaching is the development of linguistic-communicative competence, which is divided into *pragmatic competence* (the ability to act effectively in different contexts), *sociolinguistic competence* (the ability to master the different social conditions of language use), and *linguistic competence* (the ability to select the most appropriate linguistic elements to realize different communicative intentions) (Council of Europe 2001).

From the other side, we also considered the U.S. standards. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* emphasize that interaction between language and culture in teaching should be accomplished through the development of the five learning objectives: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, Communities. The first goal to be achieved is communicative competence (Communication). The second goal is Culture, that is, in our case, knowledge and understanding of the Italian culture through readings, listening, or consultation of materials that help the U.S. learner understand the Italian worldview and values. Regarding Connections, the main purpose is to be able to connect the Italian language with other disciplines. Reaching the fourth goal (Comparison), the learner will be able to compare the new language to the L1 and to critically analyze linguistic structures and cultural content conveyed by the language. Finally, the fifth objective leads learners to participate in Italian Communities (at home and around the World).

Both documents consider culture as an essential part of teaching a foreign language. However, as we mentioned in §1, very often teaching culture is limited to knowledge-transfer, that is giving information about the target country, both in textbooks and in teaching practice. If our aim is to give students the possibility to understand, to 'live into' and value other cultures' social life, their way of living and thinking, then we should develop students' competence in culture, instead of simply increase their knowledge about culture; in other words, we should develop their intercultural competence. This assumption is shared by the *National Standards in Foreign Language Education* (1996), as well as by the CEFR and a new volume of descriptors including those for 'pluricultural competence' (Byram and Wagner 2018). The aim, according to these reference works,

is not to educate perfectly bicultural learners (as if one were two native speakers in one person), but learners being able to act as mediators (for themselves and for others) in different cultural and linguistic contexts, using their intercultural skills and attitudes. "It entails the crucial skills required for students to decenter from their taken-for-granted and unquestioned world perspectives in order to see how others see the world and «how others see us»" (Byram and Wagner 2018, 6).

In this framework intercultural competence could be defined as a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that allows to understand and respect people with a different cultural background; to interact with them appropriately, effectively, and respectfully; to establish positive and constructive relationships with them; and finally, to better understand one's own cultural affiliations (Huber and Reynolds 2014, 16-17). From a methodological point of view, it is important to stress that intercultural competence is not an automatic by-product of language teaching (see especially Engelking 2018). Rather, it is necessary to plan teaching to help students acquire and use linguistic and intercultural competence. A suitable methodological approach to reach this aim, in our view, should be connected to the concept of experiential learning and to the involvement of learners in social interactions with their immediate community.

Since we want to train our learners to use Italian effectively while interacting with the local community, we need to teach them how to use pragmatic aspects of the language, for example how to express appropriately speech acts such as greeting, apologizing, inviting, requesting, offering and proposing, accepting or declining offers (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4 – *How to express, accept or decline an offer (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 133)*

INFOBOX: SOME USEFUL PHRASES

In the previous chapters we have already seen some useful expressions for ordering and making requests, and for accepting or declining an invitation or a proposal. Let's look at some other important phrases!

OFFERING AND PROPOSING

Do you want a coffee?
Would you like a coffee?
Wanna get a coffee?
Should we get a coffee?
Can I offer you a coffee?
Can I get you a coffee?

Do you want something (to eat/drink)?
Want something (to eat/drink)? I'm buying!

ACCEPTING

Yes, thanks (a lot, a million)!
That'd be great!
Gladly!
It'd be a pleasure!

DECLINING

No, but thanks anyway.
I don't want one right now, thanks.
I'm not hungry, but thanks.
No, I'm fine, thanks.
Maybe another time!

To communicate speech acts in L2, learners have to acquire linguistic expressions (for example, to decline an offer in Italian it is necessary to know expressions like *No, grazie* 'no, thanks' or *Forse un'altra volta* 'Maybe another time') , but they also need to have some knowledge about the rules of proper social behavior, about social

perception and values attributed to certain expressions (for example, if there are any social situations, such as an invitation for dinner, where declining an offer might be considered rude if expressed in a direct way). As Kasper and Rose (2001, 2) note, "Speech communities differ in their assessment of speakers' and hearers' social distance and social power, their rights and obligations, and the degree of imposition involved in particular communicative acts". So, learners of a foreign language must not only know the appropriate linguistic forms to achieve their goals using the language, but they must be aware of the sociocultural norms to speak and to behave "properly" in different communicative situations.

Pragmatic competence is, in fact, one of the core constructs of intercultural competence. Adult learners have a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge: current theory and research suggest a number of universal features in discourse and pragmatics and other aspects may be successfully transferred from the learners' L1. Basic orientation to communicative action, such as politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) might be shared throughout communities, even though what counts as polite and how the principles of politeness are implemented in context varies across cultures. Similarly, specific communicative acts, such as greetings, requests, offers, invitations, refusal, and apologies are available in any community, however their realization varies across cultures. Research shows that speech acts can manifest differently across languages and cultures. For example, if we compare Italian, American and Australian English apology strategies (Lipson 1994, Walker 2017) we see that Italians are more sensitive to differences of status, authority, and social roles of participants, while American and Australian English egalitarian culture is reflected in avoiding displays of power through language. Thereby, in these cultures direct and generic expression of apologies is the preferred strategy independently from the social distance between interlocutors. As various studies demonstrate "many aspects of L2 pragmatics are not acquired without the benefit of instruction, or they are learned more slowly. There is thus a strong indication that instructional intervention may be facilitative to, or even necessary for, the acquisition of L2 pragmatic ability" (Kasper and Rose 2001, 8). The teaching of pragmatics requires specific methodological attention, the question of "rules" in pragmatics being rather complex (Samu 2023). Learners should be provided appropriate input, and awareness-raising and noticing activities should supplement the introduction of pragmatically relevant input in instructed L2 learning. Fig. 5a and 5b show a series of activities concerning compliments, starting with relevant examples in the target language, then stimulating intercultural reflection and concluding with practice.

Figure 5a – *Learning how to give and receive compliments (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 177)*

CULTURE: WORDS TO BE NICE
In Italy compliments are very important: they create a friendly atmosphere and they are very frequent in conversations. Italians love to compliment appearances and particular talents: for example, they make many compliments on clothing and cooking skills. Here are some expressions you can use to be kind in Italian.
– Your dress is beautiful! Where did you get it?
– Your shirt is great!
– I like your shoes!
– This dish is delicious, you're really good at cooking!
– You're a fantastic cook, ma'am!

In Italy, unlike the United States, however, people do not *accept* compliments as easily: they prefer to be modest. To compliments like the ones above you could hear responses like:
– You think so? I got it on sale!
– I think it's a bit tight, but thanks!
– I've had them for years, they're old now!
– It's my mom's recipe!
– Thank you, you're too kind!

You decide how to respond! You can thank the person and freely accept the compliment or show yourself to be more modest.

Figure 5b – *Learning how to give and receive compliments (translated from Calicchio et al. 2022, 177-178)*

21. What are the most common ways of playing a compliment in the USA? And how to respond to them? Do you give a lot of compliments of not? Do you accept them or do you try to appear humble?[5]

22. Now it's your turn! In pairs, try to put together these short dialogues: "give a compliment and respond."
A) This dress fits you very well!
B) Do you think so? says? In my opinion it's too baggy.

A) Ohh, your dog is really cute!!
B) Thank you so much, she's only five months old!

1. At the park: a girl compliments a boy on his cute dog.
2. At the gym: the coach compliments the athlete on her performance.
3. At the mall: the saleswoman compliments the customer on choosing a dress.
4. At home: the father compliments his son on his promotion at work.
5. At work: a woman compliments her colleague on the presentation she just gave.
6. At school: a girl compliments her best friend on her new boyfriend, who is cute and smart.
7. At an art exhibition: a visitor compliments the artist on her work.

[5] Activity 21 (Fig. 5b) is proposed in English in the textbook since a fruitful cross-cultural comparison and discussion between learners would require a language competence higher than elementary level.

4. *Engagement and reflection during the semester abroad*

Participation in community activities and the relationships established between experts and trainees, i.e., legitimized peripheral learners, to use the term introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), produces a much more effective learning than the mere transmission of abstract and decontextualized knowledge. According to the theory developed by Lave and Wenger, learning is a process strongly characterized by the social relationship between the learner and the surrounding world; it is a social process in which knowledge is co-constructed in a specific social and physical context. Situated activity allows learners to be involved in sociocultural practices, to interact and identify with members of the local community. Interaction is a key concept in the definition of the community of practice, and it is interaction and cooperation among members that make such a context suitable for generating learning.

One possible way of realizing social learning is through Community Based Learning (CBL) or Service Learning[6]. This approach has been growing in popularity since the 1990s and throughout the United States many third level institutions have adopted this form as a central element of their curriculum. CBL involves students partaking in activities in their communities which meet identified needs of local groups as part of their credit-bearing university courses. Language learning initially lagged behind other subjects in developing CBL courses, and it is still an innovative approach under development (Rauschert and Byram 2018), even if in the United States there is now a widespread use, particularly in Spanish language tuition (O'Connor 2012). Examples of these courses include students serving as conversation partners, volunteering as interpreters at local hospitals, schools, or social service agencies; tutoring or mentoring Spanish-speaking children and adolescents and organizing after-school programs. Students prepare for the CBL placements in class, take part in activities in the community and reflect on the experience and how it might have enhanced their language, cultural and social skills. These experiences can all contribute to significant learning outcomes as long as they include critical reflection, an essential component of CBL (Clifford and Reisinger 2018, 62ff.).

Studying abroad provides an area rich with possibilities for interaction with and learning from the community. Even if this pedagogical approach can be logistically more time-consuming than a simple 'chalk and talk' class, CBL in a foreign-language curriculum has enormous benefits, as well as some risks to be

In accordance with Eddy (2022, 47), we believe that cultural comparisons, explanations, and reflections should not be postponed until learners can express them properly using the target language. They can be implicitly learned as a result of tasks designed to observe or experience language and culture or, in some cases, they can be explicitly faced using the L1.

[6] Apart from Community Based Learning (CBL), other terms like Service Learning, Education-Based Community Service, Community Based Service, Community Service Learning are also used with the first being widely diffused, especially in the literature.

faced by educators[7]. There is much evidence of how the approach improves not just students' language skills, but also their cultural acquisition (Hellebrandt, Arries and Varona 2003). Thanks to the practical experience, students can learn how to act efficiently in real life contexts, and they can identify their own linguistic and intercultural potentials and limits.

The aim of the textbook *Allora* is to immerse students not only in the study of the Italian language but also in the new host city and its culture. Several activities create spaces for intercultural learning not only through traditional classroom activities, but also in off-campus sites through tasks that engage students in a process of cultural exploration and self-reflection. As Byram states (2021, 109-110), some attitudes can only develop in fieldwork or independent learning locations and some skills depend on the opportunity for real-time interaction with native speakers. In the textbook the full immersion week is characterized by the alternation of in class and out-of-class activities. The activities of the immersion week (see Fig. 3) directly involve students, who receive (in addition to the first useful linguistic tools) practical information about the city, grocery stores, shops, leisure activities, and the public transportation system. After the morning and early afternoon lessons the students, accompanied by their teachers, gain direct experience of what was previously studied in class. Therefore, they are able, from the very first days, to place orders at the bar, to shop at the grocery stores, and to buy a ticket at the train station. To further bring students closer to the city, the dialogues in the book, the mock shopping lists, and exercises involving maps and directions (to give just a few examples) all are set in Perugia. The photographs used in the textbook are overwhelmingly drawn from the city and cultural references (e.g., to the gastronomic tradition) are linked to the municipality and the surrounding region. So, students feel more at ease outside the classroom finding daily references of their study abroad experience in the book.

CBL approach includes several kinds of activities, going from simple out-of-class activities to volunteer work. Apart from the full immersion week, the Italian language program of The Umbra Institute offers various co-curricular activities within the course syllabus, for example language tandem meet-ups with local students or "ViviPerugia activities", which are weekly assignments that encourage students to explore the city using Italian. These assignments are complementary to the book and nudge students to continue to discover the city and to practice the language. These activities aim at grounding the textbook in the local territory and encouraging students to interact with the physical spaces of the city as well as with its inhabitants. Throughout the years several socially engaging initiatives have been tested, such as collaboration in a community garden managed by The Umbra Institute, with an introductory Italian class focusing on special vocabulary preparing students to interact with local people.

[7] Students who participate in CBL abroad often wrestle with culture shock, reverse culture shock, and identity construction.

Working in the community garden together with local L2 speakers is a good example of what Lave and Wenger (1991) call 'situated learning', applicable also to the acquisition of the L2 used to interact. Other similar projects could be realized in connection with the topics of the weekly program to ensure hands-on education in which learners take part in activities targeted toward community needs while using Italian language.

5. *Evaluating the coursebook and the study abroad experience*

One of the main strengths of The Umbra Institute is the possibility the study Italian language and culture during the period of study abroad according to the principles of community engagement. The Institute's goal is to offer American students not only an academic experience, but also an immersive stay in the reality and community that hosts them. If language educators collaborate to develop their students' skills and attitudes—the 'knowing how' or 'can do' approach—related to intercultural competence, rather than promoting 'knowledge about' the Italian culture, they facilitate their students' development of skills which are relevant to every aspect of their lives.

The final step of curriculum design is the evaluation process to determine whether instruction achieves the desired learning outcomes. The American syllabus is usually characterized by a rigid and schematic presentation of the evaluation criteria, learning outcomes and grading policy. The textbook *Allora* fulfills the requirements of the American institutions as far as summative assessments are concerned. For example, comprehensive reviews before midterm and final exams are included in the coursebook's syllabus. However, as suggested in the CEFR, language programs should empower learners to take charge of their own learning and self-evaluation might be a key issue in this process. Self-evaluation grids are an effective way to help learners to recognize some aspects of their learning process, to engage in reflective practice and, at the same time, they give useful information about the effectiveness of the instruction. Furthermore, they may enhance awareness about learning outcomes and gaps to be filled in. As a possible improvement of the textbook, self-evaluation questionnaires could be added at the end of each week, listing relevant learning objectives and other educational goals established by the Institution. Questions could be proposed directly in English to allow full comprehension for elementary level learners. Table 1 shows an example of self-evaluation grid for Week 2 with 'leisure' as its central topic.

Table 1 – *Self-evaluation grid for Week 2 (based on Grandicelli 2022, 94-95)*

What did I improve in my Italian this week? Think about what you studied this week during the Italian classes (what you can do with Italian, topics covered, new words learned, grammar...) and reflect on your improvements and topics you still need to work on. Specify your level of agreement about these few sentences: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Disagree a little bit; (4) Agree a little bit; (5) Agree; (6) Strongly agree.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. I am able to talk about my interests in my free time.						
2. I can correctly use the verb *sapere* 'to know' to explain what I can do and what I can't do.						
3. I can correctly use the verb *volere* 'to want' to express what I want and what I don't want.						
4. I am able to order something at the bar in Italian.						
5. I am able to ask for the bill in Italian.						
6. I know the names of the months and seasons in Italian.						
7. I know the names of leisure activities in Italian.						
8. I am able to talk about sports in Italian.						
9. I know music genres and musical instruments in Italian.						
10. I know the most common leisure places in Italian.						
11. I am able to pronounce, spell and write these kinds of words: *cappuccino, caffè, prosciutto, sciare, cornetto.*						
12. I am able to recognize and reproduce the intonation of a request in Italian.						
13. I am able to recognize and reproduce the intonation of a question in Italian.						
14. During this week, I felt more curious about discovering Italian culture.						
15. During this week, I felt more involved in sharing my culture with the Italian one.						
16. During this week, I felt more involved in the city life.						

The first 13 questions are concerned with general communicative competence, including pragmatic (Q1, 4-5), grammatical (Q2-3), lexical (Q6-10), and phonological (Q11-13) competences. Questions reflect the main approach of the textbook emphasizing the importance of communicative functions over formal aspects of language (for ex. "I can correctly use the verb *sapere* to explain what I can do and what I can't do"). Question 15 ("During this week, I felt more involved in sharing

my culture with the Italian one") is referred to learners' intercultural competence, while the last question ("During this week, I felt more involved in the city life") reflects the aim of making learners live an immersive experience in the local community of Perugia. Learning Italian is a means to discover the city's traditions and culture and CBL activities are planned to facilitate this process. Integrating the evaluation process with this kind of reflection could emphasize the Institution's engagement to answer learners' needs issued from the analysis described above (§2): learning Italian language and using it to discover a new culture and a new system of values, to live an authentic experience, becoming culturally more open and growing as an individual. Thanks to self-reflection students may become more aware about the "transformative" effect of their study abroad experience (Davidson et al. 2021) and realize fully the aims of the course they attend, named, not accidentally, "Living Perugia - Elementary Language, Culture, and Reflection".

Summing up, the elementary Italian language program and the correspondent textbook *Allora* attempt to bridge two glottodidactic traditions, offering a course calendar similar to a classic U.S. syllabus but at the same time responding to the glottodidactic goals appropriate to the European tradition. Learning objectives are based on the needs and interests of U.S. learners in Perugia: to immerse themselves as much as possible in the local context and community, to better understand local culture and worldview while learning Italian language. As Abbott and Lear have commented, CSL in second-language programs challenges students to improve language skills and, at the same time, increase their cultural competence (2009, 322). To reach this goal, the classroom becomes less the principal location of learning and more an auxiliary location to prepare learners to real-life experiences. Such experiences should always be supported by guided reflection (for ex. in the form of self-evaluation grids as illustrated above). Through reflection students can interpret their lived experiences and make a deeper sense of them. Students then come to value language education as education for developing their identities rather than as the learning of a code which can only be used in some restricted environments.

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