

TEACHING CULTURE
EXPLORING, VIEWING, DISCUSSING, AND SIMULATING
AN OPERA PRODUCTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studies show (e.g., Lafayette, 1988) that teachers spend a vast amount of time and effort on teaching grammatical and lexical components of the language, leaving the culture as a marginal element in the curriculum. The purpose of this article is to discuss ways of teaching culture that present effective pedagogical practices and can be included in the second language curriculum in ways that engage learners in the acquisition of language and culture. As a case study, the author will discuss a project developed over a period of four weeks, in an Intermediate-level language class of eighteen students. The project consisted of two phases, the input, in which students explored, discussed, and attended an opera, and the output, in which students simulated a production of an opera and created a 10-minute docu-drama highlighting interviews and performances of a fictional opera company.

2. THE STAGES OF INPUT: A CULTURAL CONTENT APPROACH TO OPERA

Many methods and approaches for teaching culture have been suggested, from preparing and eating ethnic food, singing traditional songs, to reading newspapers or the cultural notes in textbooks. Often, when highlighting the cultural aspect in foreign language classes, teachers do so through what Kramsch called “the four F’s: food, fairs, folklore, and facts” (Kramsch, 217-240), which is of course a superficial characterization of a culture. These more traditional methods to teaching culture can be enhanced as well as the selection of topics through which cultural content is presented to the class. As a matter of fact, how an individual feels about a topic or a learning situation affects the amount of attention dedicated to it. A novel subject taken from the culture of TL or novel settings not only will engage the student and facilitate discussion but will also be retained in memory through the evocation of emotions. In my Italian classes, throughout the years I have consistently devoted time to presenting and explaining aspects of TL culture to improve language retention as well as receptivity and acceptance of a different culture. Cultural themes may be identified based on student interest and curiosity, as well as availability of resource materials. I believe that before proposing a teaching unit on culture (and language), foreign language instructors should ask themselves a simple

question: what could be a representative subject, however novel and less commonly taught, that could stimulate an emotionally positive response and result in acceptance and retention of the proposed material? As for the cultural and linguistic project I presented to my intermediate-level Italian class of eighteen students, I concluded that opera epitomized more than other topics something of the essence of Italian culture. Furthermore, both Belmont University, where I teach, and Nashville, the city where it is located, have a great musical reputation. The first half of the project (input) consisted of exploring an opera, *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi. This phase included two parts, Part 1, in which students described the opera’s main characters, identified its themes, learned, and practiced new vocabulary, and Part 2, in which students attended the opera as a class, discussed their emotional responses to the characters and to the opera as a whole, and answered a questionnaire.

2.1 INPUT: STAGE 1, EXPLORING THE OPERA

The role of input is essential in the process of second language acquisition (SLA) because it represents the primary source on which learners can construct a linguistic system. The reading and listening material that instructors provide in the classroom, as well as data that learners receive in less formal settings, are all part of input that will help learners assimilating language. Elaborating on this process, during the first stage of language input, I introduced the plot (without revealing the end) and the various characters to the class, starting with a clarification of the title “*La Traviata*,” which in Italian means “one who has gone astray.” I used Italian for the introduction and, if necessary, English, encouraging students to stop me (with expressions like “*non ho capito*,” “*può ripetere*,” etc.) and elaborating their questions if something was not clear. To achieve positive results, it is crucial to create an organic and harmonious environment of tolerance toward linguistic errors and to establish a relationship of mutual trust between the learners and the teacher, where “students know that they will not be ridiculed or criticized” (Casciani, Rapalino, 463). So, if errors were present in their formulation, I didn’t explicitly correct it, but incorporated the improved question in my reply. For instance, one student asked, “*Violetta ha una storia vera?*” to which I replied, “*Mi chiedi se la storia di Violetta è vera...probabilmente sì. Forse il suo vero nome era Alphonsine Plessis, una ragazza francese nata nel 1824 (...).*”

I showed the class a short clip of Violetta, the main character, singing the aria, “*Sempre libera*” from the first Act, and asked them to imagine her occupation or title. I provided the lyrics in Italian to facilitate the comprehension, considering that for most of them it was the first time listening to an opera. I also paraphrased some of the words no longer in use (intralingual translation),

adjusting them for a better understanding of the whole passage. However, my goal was not to provide a textual analysis of the aria, but to offer students clues to my question, what is Violetta’s occupation?

VIOLETTA canta,

“Follie! follie! Ah sì! Gioir, gioir!
Sempre libera degg'io
folleggiare di gioia in gioia,
vo' che scorra il viver mio
pei sentieri del piacer.
Nasca il giorno, o il giorno muoia,
sempre lieta ne' ritrovi,
a diletta sempre nuovi,
dee volare il mio pensier.”

“Folly! Folly! Ah yes! From joy to joy,
forever free, I must pass
madly from joy to joy.
My life's course shall be
forever in the paths of pleasure.
Whether it be dawn or dusk,
I must always live. Ah!
Gaily in the world's gay places,
ever seeking newer joys”

The answers, both in English and Italian, ranged from, “a young bourgeois woman, maybe unhappily married, because she sounds so desperate for joy”; “*un’attrice famosa*”; “a noblewoman, because she seems to be rich and could do whatever she wants”; “an actress who is partying a lot”; and finally, “a prostitute, because the title seems to imply she lost her way.” I explained that the word *traviata*, as “fallen” woman (as meant in the opera), is not commonly used in Italian anymore. In this context, it refers to the heroine of the story, the tragic, beautiful, vulnerable Violetta who has also become a figure in popular iconography. Although it is known that Violetta is a prostitute, she in no way appears to be morally depraved. The students were surprised, but I pointed out that in Italian culture courtesans or prostitutes have often become central characters of literature and movies. I presented the example of 16th-century Venetian *cortigiana* Veronica Franco (1546-1591) who became a famous poet, and the more contemporary main character in Fellini’s movie

“Cabiria,” whose captivating, kind, and naïve personality make the character more sympathetic and lovable.

After describing the other main characters (Alfredo Germont, the young man in love with Violetta, Giorgio Germont, Alfredo’s father, a bourgeois landowner, and Annina, Violetta’s maid), I made and distributed to the students a list of useful keywords that are still current in Italian. Among the words I selected from Act I are, *cortigiana*, *gioire/divertirsi*, *fare un brindisi*, *calice*, *che diavolo fai?*, *folleggiare/follie*; from Act II, *pentimento*, *giurare*, *sacrificio*, *foglio*; from Act III (or Act II, Scene II), *chiasso*, *giocare d’azzardo*, *confessare*, *ignobile*, *macchia*; from Act IV (or Act III), *un sorso d’acqua*, *malattia/malato*, *guarire*, *pentito*, *ferire*, *colpevole*. We practiced the new vocabulary by creating sentences related or not-so-related to La Traviata. The students enjoyed this activity and naturally transitioned from a more basic linguistic production, using one or two words from the list, to more complex phrases and structures, adding more words and/or creating dialogues. For instance, one student said, “*Violetta è la cortigiana*,” to which another student added, “*Violetta è la cortigiana; si diverte alla festa e fa il brindisi con il calice*.” If learners have a positive attitude toward L2 or a desire to be part of a group that speaks that language, that affectivity can serve as motivation to study L2. The effectiveness of the material is greater the more heartfelt the connection the students have with what they read or hear. If that interest is lacking, if the material is boring, the acquisition and production of TL or L2 may take place more slowly or not at all.

I showed the students a clip from Act I, the famous “brindisi” (drinking song), “*Libiamo ne’ lieti calici*” sung by Alfredo, an irresistible aria, familiar from movies, radio, and TV commercials, like the Doritos commercial during the Super Bowl XLIII, in 2009, ALFREDO canta,

“Libiamo, libiamo ne' lieti calici
che la bellezza infiora,
e la fuggevol ora
s'inebria a voluttà.
Libiam ne' dolci fremiti
che suscita l'amore,
poiché quell'occhio al core
(*indicando Violetta*)
onnipotente va.
Libiamo amore, amor fra i calici
più caldi baci avrà.”

“Drink from the joyful glass,
resplendent with beauty,
drink to the spirit of pleasure
which enchants the fleeting moment.
Drink to the thrilling sweetness
brought to us by love,
for these fair eyes, irresistibly,
(*indicating Violetta*)
pierce us to the heart.
Drink - for wine
will warm the kisses of love.”

After watching the clip, I asked the students what kind of emotions the aria evoked and some of their replies in English were, “I think all those people on stage are having a good time”; “they are a bunch of fashionable young party animals, I like them! Italians love wine!”; “it makes me smile”; “the oom-pah-pah accompaniment is cool.” I provided a translation of the song and substitutes for words no longer used in Italian. And since one of the main goals of teaching culture is “to increase students’ awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, to make comparisons among cultures” (Tavares and Cavalcanti 19), we watched the Doritos commercial. I asked the students why the creator of the commercial decided to use that specific Verdi aria to promote chips. Some of the replies emphasized the “power of that music which gets stuck in your head”; or “the crescendo of the music is as explosive as the flavor of the chips”; or “no reason, it’s just a catchy aria”; and “it has to do with pleasures in life, like drinking and love in the song and money, a beautiful (naked) woman, and freedom (disappearing of the policeman) in the commercial.”

2.2 INPUT: STAGE 2, ATTENDING THE OPERA

The second stage of input involved recognizing and processing the information acquired during stage one and applying it to a real situation, such as attending the opera. The evening of the performance, students were visibly excited. The anticipation, the unique atmosphere of the theatre, the crowd, and being all together as a class contributed to make the event special and unforgettable. The exhilaration was palpable! Sitting with the students while watching the opera gave me the opportunity to see their reactions as the opera progressed and to listen to their comments during the intermissions. As they all asserted, the in-class preparation helped them to understand and appreciate the plot. They were able to hear and recognize Italian words I presented in class, but

admitted, as I expected, that they had to read the English supertitles to follow the dialogues. They remembered and understood the two arias we listened to in class and could utter some of the words together with the singers. Since I never revealed the end, the students were emotionally taken when Violetta, very ill, eventually died. Dead divas are nothing extraordinary on the operatic stage, yet there is much about Violetta’s death that affects the audience uniquely. I asked the students what struck them the most and some of them answered “she (Violetta) has been dying all night, but I was still hoping she could end up happily ever after,” or “Verdi makes love and death so absolutely real!” Overall, it was great entertainment. Students didn’t expect to like it so much and to understand it, not just the words but the plot, so deeply. After the opera ended, a few students were able to repeat phrases they recalled, simple phrases like “*Amami, Alfredo!*”; “*O, mio rimorso!*”; “*Perché piangi?*”; or “*La tua salute rifiorirà!*”

To conclude Part 2 of the activity, I submitted an anonymous questionnaire to collect qualitative evidence I could use to improve future in-class activities. The questionnaire consisted of three questions:

Question 1 – What do you think you have learned from this activity?

Students reported that they “enlarged their vocabulary and ability to communicate” in a more “natural, effortless, and interesting way.” They added that they would have never thought they “could indeed like opera.”

Question 2 – Do you express a language preference when learning about opera or Italian culture in general?

Students (at the intermediate level) expressed that they preferred to learn about Italian culture when their teacher uses “more Italian than English” or a “good balance” between the two languages. All respondents described the use of “some” English as an “appropriate” tool to make sure that they “understand correctly what they have been taught” when they learn about Italian culture and opera in this specific activity. They also described learning about Italian culture in the target language as challenging and therefore beneficial to their learning progress.

Question 3 - Are there items you would have liked to learn more about the opera?

Students responded they enjoyed studying about the opera (specifically the plot, the characters, new words, the arias), and that it was interesting to study the language without actually “focusing so much on grammar.” They also noted that attending the opera was “the best possible way to conclude the activity,” and that it would have been “a missed opportunity,” had we not gone.

As we can see through the students’ comments, the first phase of the project appears to have reached its goal of helping students develop an understanding and appreciation of opera overall as well as ensuring a deeper acquisition of language (linguistic ability).

3.

4. OUTPUT: THE ROLE-PLAY VIDEO

As input is not sufficient to achieve language acquisition, it must be supplemented with output in productive tasks, let’s call it the *practicum* aspect of the process. This practical application enables learners to contextualize and internalize meaningful language use they have learned and experienced in previous stages (input). The final step in the project aimed to creatively integrate what students learned in the various stages of input with an innovative activity (output) that focused on communicative functions, acquisition of vocabulary, and mastering another culture. Below are the module-summary and discussion of the activity.

Description: This is an example of in class activity based on culture. It is a simulation, a role-play in which participants act out specified roles. The module aims at refining and acquiring speaking and writing skills while learning about opera and its components, including plot, characters, music, costumes, stage, themes (love, jealousy, betrayal, etc.).

Type of module: simulation (discussion, conversation, interviews, and creation of a video).

Level: Intermediate or Advanced

Age-group: University

How to use the activity:

- Students will discuss and create a story line for the video.
- Prior to filming, students will be divided in small groups. Each group will select the student(s) who will act in the video. For the project, the characters included: the narrator (Group 1, three students), the prima donna (Group 2, three students), the conductor (Group 3, three students), three costume designers (Group 4, three students), the artistic director (Group 5, three students) and two music critics with divergent opinions (Group 6, three students).
- Each group will write two sequences of the script. Students will work together in class to write the script, then compare writings. This way students are able to share information and ask each other grammatical questions while the teacher supervises and clarifies structural or syntactic issues.

- Students will rehearse in class and offer one another suggestions about their performances.
- Students will perform their parts and shoot a video.
- Students will edit the video and add subtitles (in English).

Keywords: Opera, interview, intermediate, advanced, conversation, language.

The final activity (output) did not require students to stage or replicate parts from an opera, which would have entailed translating and memorizing sections of the libretto. Rather, we created a video with students playing fictitious characters, including a conductor, singer, costume designer, and journalist, in a simulated production of Mozart’s opera. I chose Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* because some students were studying arias from Mozart’s opera for their end-of-year recital. They were therefore already familiar with the characters, the plot, and previous representations, and could help the rest of the class understand the overall story. We produced a 10-minute docu-drama highlighting interviews and performances of a fictional opera company. Considering our limited technological resources and skills, I reached out to the College of Entertainment for collaboration. Two Motion Pictures majors helped my class film and edit the video, which, by adding a more “professional touch,” increased the students’ enthusiasm and excitement for the project. Also, seeing themselves on video heightened their awareness that language is not just words but intonation, pronunciation, behavior, interaction, and gestures, as they saw and heard at La Traviata during the input activity.

As images of the streets of Nashville and the Troutt theatre appear, the narrator talks about the much-anticipated opening of *Le nozze di Figaro*. The theatre welcomes a world-famous soprano who plays the Countess of Almaviva. She has played that role previously, but this time she will be conducted by a famous narcissist and directed by a charismatic and innovative stage director who aims to make opera more accessible to a younger audience. The prima donna is delighted to work with the ingenious stage director, but troubled by the conductor’s reputation. The eco-friendly costume designers have created attires with organic fabric and proudly explain their responsible choice.

Occasionally, the students’ work showed the interference of the mother tongue (transfer) and other languages, especially Spanish, producing errors in both vocabulary and syntax. For example, one student playing the costume designer says:

“Il tema [la scelta dei costumi] è moderno, si *ispira* al ventesimo secolo” (instead of *ispira*); “Personalmente, *preferito* l’interprete della Contessa” (instead of *ho preferito*).

Another example of this sort occurs during the narrator’s introduction:

“Ecco Nashville, una città con una cultura musicale unica, piena di belle persone artistiche. Ogni *anni* (instead of *anno*) migliaia di turisti visitano *la* (instead of *la visitano*) Nashville è nota per la musica folcloristica, ma non dimenticate che questa città è ricca di molte attrazioni *come* (instead of *come*) i musei, i parchi e le università.”

I addressed the errors both in the script and the rehearsal performances. Noting how and why students go wrong can help the teacher understand and implement possible pedagogical changes and improvements (Marchegiani-Jones, 457).

Although many language teachers do not consider written composition to be one of the main goals in learning TL, it is important to remember that writing is one of the essential tools for testing grammatical knowledge and the ability to accurately communicate one’s thoughts, opinions, interpretations, and observations. Raquel Oxford reminds us that, “Knowing how to write is among the most important advanced abilities that L2 learners need to develop” (Oxford, 360). Obviously, for the project in question there was the need for a script, but at the same time the need to “wean oneself off the script” (Banchieri, 101), which can become an impediment to spontaneous communication. The text had to be mostly spoken word. We paid attention to the structure of the spoken text, since, as Marilena Da Rold says, “Italian speech is always studded with distinctions, clarifications, digressions and parentheses”; and we also attended to facial expressiveness and gestures, since “Italian ... expresses its impressions and feelings with its face, through a very articulate facial expressiveness” (Da Rold, Celentin, Serragiotto, 18). The classroom became a place where students were allowed to make grammatical mistakes as a natural part of the language development process and encouraged to correct each other.

After the activity, I submitted an anonymous questionnaire (See interview questions in Appendix A) to the participants to gather qualitative data for future projects. Students were queried to characterize and assess the project in terms of group collaboration, learning progress and how they believed the project furthered their language understanding and cultural competence. The comments were all positive and encouraging. The students felt they learned a remarkable amount of vocabulary in an almost nonconscious or effortless

way. They also felt they were in control of the language structure and production. Although two of the students were already familiar with opera because of their major, the general comments emphasize how surprisingly modern and fascinating opera is.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I would like to encourage L2 instructors to consider engaging in this particularly creative experience. Both activities (input and output) discussed earlier suggest several opportunities relevant to traditional approaches to L2 teaching and learning. They both create a positive environment which fosters an attitude of cooperation among students. The input (pre-project activity) and output (the opera project) activities demonstrate that thoughtful cultural instruction can provide (1) comprehensible data in a meaningful context, (2) motivational value, as students enjoy the intellectual satisfaction of learning about Italian culture, (3) engagement, intellectual interest, and willingness to exert effort on assignments and activities. Overall, the opera project has fulfilled its objectives, for it has won the interest and praise of the students. In practical and pedagogical terms, the students were able (1) to increase their understanding of aspects of Italian culture through learning about opera and attending one; and (2) to acquire more advanced oral and written language skills. Also, this project confirms that cultural instruction has a generally positive effect on students' intellectual engagement, their willingness to continue studying Italian, and their awareness of connections between Italian and their other academic pursuits. The activity also suggests important directions for future studies. As a matter of fact, it not only affects students' foreign language education, but their liberal education more generally. The opera project was not perfect from either a linguistic or an interpretive standpoint, but what was most important to me, in addition to deepening and practicing grammatical competence, was the experience, attending the opera together, the group work, and lastly the opportunity to convert the classroom into a stage where students, even the timidiest, could participate, transform into characters, and play with their own identities.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions:

1. How did you like to work in a group? Elaborate.
2. What did you like about the opera project? Elaborate.
3. Do you feel your language competence has improved? How?
4. Do you think your cultural competence has improved? How?
5. What was difficult or easy for you?

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