



Teaching Italian through films: The first Beautiful Thing

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In the last two decades, the field of language pedagogy has shown an indisputable success in adopting new multimedia technologies and in utilizing audiovisual material. Films are a vehicle for creativity that encourages students to discuss issues and themes presented in the movie enhancing their language skills and widening their vocabulary, making the learning process not only effective, but also entertaining



We meet Elisa Dossena, an Italian Language Lecturer at Princeton University. Elisa taught and directed Italian language programs in several language schools in the USA and Japan.

Her research interest lies in the area of new multimedia technologies applied to teaching, and specifically in the use of audiovisual materials in teaching foreign languages. She is the coauthor of a book in the series “Quaderni del cinema italiano” on *La prima cosa bella* (The first Beautiful thing) by Paolo Virzì.

How did you get the idea of using cinema as a tool to teach Italian?

This book is the thesis of my Master in Teaching Italian as Foreign Language. It has been written in collaboration with Alberto Borghi, lecturer of Italian at the University Karl IV in Prague. My interest towards teaching Italian through cinema and new technologies has increased over the years and this is how the idea of this thesis, later published by Guerra Edizioni in the series “Quaderni del cinema Italiano” (Booklets of Italian Cinema), came up.

In 2010, when I was writing my thesis, this movie looked very promising. It was screened at some international film festivals including the Open Roads, New York, won various prizes, was nominated for 18 ‘David di Donatello’ Awards (presented by the Academy of Italian Cinema), and ended up winning Best Screenplay, Best Actress and Best Actor.

What’s innovative about this book compared with the more traditional language teaching methods?

In the last two decades, the field of language pedagogy has shown an indisputable success in adopting new multimedia technologies and in utilizing audiovisual material. The language patterns and linguistic structures presented in a movie are authentic, allow the students to familiarize with up-to-date intonation and accents, vocabulary, nonverbal interjections.

Indeed, in a movie reality is filtered by the camera-lens of the director, but I am using the word “authentic” here in its technical sense, because the movie, its language and its cultural contents are produced for the audience of the target culture.

Watching and listening to dialogues in contexts help students to learn and appreciate the major sociolinguistic and cultural differences that so strongly distinguish and characterize Italian language and culture. With the advantage that dialogues can be more easily understood when represented in a visual dimension.

The end result is that the learning process is not only effective, but also entertaining.

How does it actually work in the classroom?

We have chosen key scenes to be watched by the class. The students learn about the story, the characters, they work on the grammar structures, vocabulary, idioms and phonetics.

In building our lesson, we need to take into consideration the cognitive order of perception. Our brain, in fact, perceives first the visual and then the linguistic-textual elements, activating first the right and then the left hemisphere of the brain.

Here are few activities that we can do when we first introduce the clip:

- o Sound only (inferring meanings without the images)
- o Silent viewing (inferring dialogues without hearing the sound)
- o Still picture description
- o Description of characters, environment, landscape, background, clothes, etc.
- o Color matching

Then, when we show a sequence with both audio and visual together, we can perform:

- o True/false questions
- o Dialogue reconstruction
- o General comprehension questions

After these activities we then begin with detailed analysis of sentence structures and grammatical patterns according to logical and rational principles.

After working on a few clips the class can watch and enjoy the whole movie inferring meaning based



on what previously studied.

Here is a link to an extract of the book [>>>](#) [2]

What are the challenges of teaching Italian as Foreign Language, and given your teaching experience in Japan, what the main differences, if a generalization is at all possible, between the Japanese and the American students?

When teaching Italian abroad it is crucial to keep in mind the mother tongue and the cultural context of our students in order to understand their difficulties. Cultural distance, in fact, can be the source of countless misunderstandings.

For example, in a class of Japanese students, is important to understand the social dynamics amongst them. Not always the student who participates the most is the best one...maybe he is just the one with the highest social status whose presence inhibits the others as it would be considered impolite to answer before him or to contradict him.

From a cultural point of view, it should be made clear to the student of Italian how we are used to strenuously defend our opinions and individuality, even by maybe raising our voice...

In America we face different sets of problems. The students are more individualistic and competitive; therefore we need to encourage group work and collaboration. Their grammatical competencies are often not strong enough so a lot of time goes into the in-depth study of the grammatical aspects of the language as well as into practicing the pronunciation.

As far as cultural differences the Americans (as well as students of Italian from many other cultures) will necessitate an explanation of gestures as integral part of our communication, a clarification on a number of stereotypes about our culture in order to avoid embarrassing misunderstandings, or, just to cite an example, an explanation as to why food is an important part of our everyday habits and conversations...

The use of audiovisual materials: movies, TV programs, news, interviews, etc, becomes the best tool of linguistic learning coupled with cultural awareness, supporting the bond between a language and its culture.

What did you learn from this project?

When you are writing a language-teaching book it is crucial to test it with your students. We had to change a few things to ensure that all the activities were properly organized and level appropriate. The class is the best feedback you have.

This book is a great example of how films can be used to enhance the language learning process by developing linguistic, sociolinguistic cultural and intercultural skills, stimulating curiosity and facilitating and informal exchange of opinions amongst the students about the contents of the movie.

Experiencing culture in its living context - which means learning Italian in Italy - is indeed the easiest way. But when this is not possible (as, for example, when students learn Italian outside Italy), multimedia and audiovisual materials become the best tool at our disposal. Videos are a window on Italian language and culture.

Studying a language along with its cultural context is undoubtedly the key to successful communication: "knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom" (American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages).



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