Salvatore Cavaliere
Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci
Filološki fakultet Banja Luka

LEARNING ITALIAN LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE

Summary: The aim of this paper is to illustrate how learners of Italian as a foreign or a second language can improve their linguistic knowledge and competence through literature, especially the contemporary one. In order to achieve this objective, it will be essential to describe a particular approach to a literary text - based on the "Learning Unit" - that can be adopted to focus on specific morphological, syntactic and lexical items. This theoretical frame encloses the original section of this work, which reports a personal experience made at the University of Banja Luka consisting in the didactization – based on the building of a series of "Learning Units" - of the novel "Una storia semplice" by Leonardo Sciascia.

Key words: Italian language, literature, Learning Unit, communicative competence, Leonardo Sciascia

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how learners of Italian as a foreign or a second language can improve their linguistic knowledge and competence in Italian through literature, especially contemporary literature. The interest in deepening this theme is due mainly to the general approach adopted in the courses of Italian language held at the University of Banja Luka, in which the analysis of contemporary Italian literary texts is a common feature. The main aim of this didactical praxis is not to teach literature but to study Italian through the use of literary texts. Although the courses of Italian consider literature a specific subject, literary texts cannot be omitted from any Italian course. Ignoring this kind of text would render the acquisition of linguistic competence incomplete, and would not lead to that exploration of what Roman Jakobson calls 'the poetic function of language'. Moreover, one of the main features of literary language, especially the contemporary, is to use any style and register in a creative way. Therefore, the result is a text in which any use of language is considered acceptable (cf. Beraldo, Celentin, 2006). In contemporary literary texts, for instance, style does not necessarily need to be 'high' or 'noble', but instead expresses the different trends of contemporary Italian: this may be seen in the allusive language of Vittorini, in the colourful speech of Benni, or in that literary Italo-Sicilian language invented by Camilleri (cf. Balboni, 2006). Therefore, this feature of literary language is not

separate from other forms of language, with the result that its use in Italian classes enhances students' appreciation of that language.

2. The Aims of Reading a Literary Text in a Class of Italian l2/LS

Reading literary texts in a class of Italian as a second or a foreign language entails aiming at the development of some of the main objectives of a class of Italian literature, which can be summarised in the acquisition of the following abilities:
- analysing literary works, that means not only focussing on their meaning and their aims, but also being able to recognize their stylistic and rhetorical devices;
- contextualising the texts analysed;
- giving aesthetic, cultural and critical opinions on the texts read;
- making the literary texts part of the students' personal experience and store of knowledge .

However, as our aim is to show how to teach Italian through the use of literature, it is essential that we add to those objectives previously examined the main aim of linguistic education: that is to say, the development of communicative competence (cf. Balboni, 2008a), which entails working on the students':
- linguistic competence; ie, knowledge of the phonological, graphemic, morphosyntactic and textual rules of a foreign language and of its lexicon;
- linguistic abilities, such as understanding, reading, writing, monologising, summarising, talking, translating.
- socio-pragmatic and cultural competence, regarding how one interacts in everyday, real-life communicative situations;
- extralinguistic grammar, by which we mean the kinetic (gestures and facial expressions), the proxemic (regarding the distance between people while interacting), the vestemic (which studies the social meanings connected to the different kind of clothes people wear) and the objectemic (referring to status symbols, and the use of objects as gifts), and the relationship between these classes of grammar and verbal language.

3. The "Learning Unit"

A professor whose aim is to teach Italian through literature may have as an operational model the "Learning Unit" (cf. Balboni, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b); that is to say, the smallest unitary block of the acquisition process. A "Learning Unit" has to be independent, and its duration must be limited (from a few minutes

to a maximum of two hours). Its structure is based on the Gestalt sequence "globalising – analysing – synthesising" which represents the way in which the human brain elaborates any information it receives. This consideration is based on the neurolinguistic concepts of bimodality (referring to «the functional division of the two brain hemispheres[1]» (Balboni, 2007: 41), and directionality (when we receive linguistic input, the first zone of our brain to be activated is the right hemisphere, while the left hemisphere is involved later). Taking this premise as read, a "Learning Unit" will have to be so structured as to follow a specific path, consisting of three distinct phases:

- globalising: globally reading a text is an activity involving essentially the right cerebral hemisphere, and it leads the student to complete the following actions:
  1. analysing the contextual and cotextual pieces of information;
  2. making assumptions about possible subsequent events in the text, considering context, information already known about the text, personal experience and knowledge of events in the world;
  3. overall reading of the text, aimed at verifying the assumptions made and at looking for some general information.

All these tasks need to be quite easy, in order to avoid creating a sense of distrust on the part of the students;

- analysing, which involves a more in-depth comprehension of the text, referring both to contents and form. In this phase it is common to use some specific exercises focusing on a particular aspect of language (phonological, graphemic, morphological, syntactical, lexical, textual);
- synthesising, which aims at verifying whether the students have appreciated the text, encourages a critical opinion and fixes what they have learnt during the previous phases.

4. The Text: "Una Storia Semplice"

"Una storia semplice" by Leonardo Sciascia is a novel which represents an appropriate basis for the development of a number of "Learning Units", aimed at stimulating the students' analysis of the language used, and the themes dealt with by the author. The reasons for considering Sciascia's novel extremely useful for our aims are as follows:

- "Una storia semplice" is a detective story. This genre has specific narrative and stylistic features which stimulate the reader's interest in the evolution of the plot. Furthermore, the story is made up of a number of complex and mysterious events, the narration alternates between a fast

---

[1] According to this theory, the right hemisphere allows global, simultaneous and analogical comprehension, while the left one, which is the core of linguistic elaboration, permits analytical, logical and sequential comprehension.

rhythm, and pauses aimed at investigating the characters' psychology, and the hypothesis on the crimes: these elements help raise the reader's sense of suspense and curiosity. This is also shown by the fact that many students of the classes where this novel was used read the book right through before all the "Learning Units" were introduced.

- "Una storia semplice" is a novel with the central theme of mafia and drugs. Reading this text may help the students to deepen, widen and revise their ideas on the phenomenon of the mafia, which are often banal. Their thoughts on the mafia appear quite stereotyped, greatly influenced as they are by the well known film representations of this subject: these works focus on concepts such as honour, style, respect, and often reduce their portrayal of the mafia simply to shootings on the roads of Sicilian towns, as if this was the norm. On the contrary, in "Una Storia Semplice", Sciascia shows a mafia specialized in the traffic of drugs and art works. In this way the author encourages a more authentic analysis of what the mafia really is, and how it behaves.

- Thanks to the themes Sciascia deals with in his novel, for most of the students in Banja Luka "Una storia semplice" represents an unusual work: they are used to studying texts which express the traditional trends in Italian literature, and to reading comedies, or adventure and fantasy novels purely for pleasure.

- The shortness of the text and the clarity of the language encourage the students to read and maintain motivation and interest in the novel at a high level. These factors have to be taken into account carefully, as a student will be generally discouraged by a task perceived as too difficult.

5. An example of "Learning Unit"

What follows is an example of a "Learning Unit" used in the class to guide the students' comprehension and analysis of the first chapter of "Una storia semplice" which is given below. The "Learning Unit" has been created according to the general structure of the "Learning Unit" previously analysed.

R i g h e (lines)	"Una storia semplice": capitolo 1 *(chapter 1)*
1	La telefonata arrivò alle 9 e 37 della sera del 18 marzo, sabato, vigilia della rutilante
2	e rombante festa che la città dedicava a san Giuseppe falegname: e al falegname
3	appunto erano offerti i roghi di mobili vecchi che quella sera si accendevano nei
4	quartieri popolari, quasi promessa ai falegnami ancora in esercizio, e ormai pochi, di
5	un lavoro che non sarebbe mancato. Gli uffici erano, più delle altre sere a quell'ora,
6	quasi deserti: anche se illuminati, l'illuminazione serale e notturna degli uffici di
7	polizia tacitamente prescritta per dare impressione ai cittadini che in quegli uffici
	sempre sulla loro sicurezza si vegliava.
8	Il telefonista annotò l'ora e il nome della persona che telefonava: Giorgio Roccella.
9	Aveva una voce educata, calma, suadente. 'Come tutti i folli' pensò il telefonista.
10	Chiedeva infatti, il signor Roccella, del questore: una follia, specialmente a quell'ora
11	e in quella particolare serata.
12	Il telefonista si sforzò allo stesso tono, ma riuscendo a una caricaturale imitazione,
13	resa più scoperta dalla freddura con cui rispose: «Ma il questore non è mai in
14	questura a quest'ora», freddura che in quegli uffici correva sulle frequenti assenze
15	del questore. E aggiunse: «Le passo l'ufficio del commissario», col gusto di far
16	dispetto al commissario, che certo stava in quel momento per lasciare l'ufficio.
17	Il commissario si stava infatti infilando il cappotto. Prese il telefono il brigadiere che
18	aveva tavolo ad angolo con quello del commissario. Ascoltò, cercò sul tavolo una
19	matita e un pezzo di carta; e mentre scriveva rispondeva che sì, sarebbero andati al
20	più presto possibile ma appena possibile, così collocando la possibilità in modo da
	non illudere sulla prestezza.
21	«Chi era?» domandò il commissario.
22	«Un tale che, dice, ha da farci vedere una cosa che si è trovata in casa».
23	«Un cadavere?» scherzò il commissario.
24	«No, ha detto proprio una cosa».
25	«Una cosa... E come si chiama, questo tale?».
26	Il brigadiere prese il pezzo di carta su cui aveva scritto nome e indirizzo, lesse:
27	«Giorgio Roccella, contrada Cotugno, dal bivio di Monterosso, strada a destra,
	quattro chilometri; quindici da qui».
28	Il commissario tornò dalla porta al tavolo del brigadiere, prese quel pezzo di carta,
29	lo lesse quasi credesse di trovarvi qualcosa di più che il brigadiere aveva letto. Disse:
30	«Non è possibile».
31	«Che cosa?» domandò il brigadiere.
32	«Questo Roccella, » disse il commissario «è un diplomatico, console o ambasciatore
33	non so dove. Non viene qui da anni, chiusa la casa di città, abbandonata e quasi in
34	rovina quella di campagna, in contrada Cotugno appunto...Quella che si vede dalla
35	strada: in alto, che sembra un fortino...»
36	«Una vecchia masseria,» disse il brigadiere «ci sono passato sotto tante volte».
37	«Dentro il recinto, per cui pare una masseria, c'è un villino molto grazioso; o almeno
38	c'era... Grande famiglia, quella dei Roccella; ma ora ridotta a questo console o
39	ambasciatore che sia...Non credevo nemmeno che fosse ancora vivo, da tanto che
	non si vede».
40	«Se vuole, » disse il brigadiere «vado a controllare».
41	«Ma no, sono sicuro che si tratta di uno scherzo... Domano, magari, se hai tempo
42	e voglia, vai a dare un'occhiata...Per quanto mi riguarda, qualunque cosa accada,
43	domani non mi cercate: vado a festeggiare il San Giuseppe da un mio amico, in
44	campagna».

The first phase, that is to say, globalising, is made up of two activities: the first (a) aims at raising the students' motivation, at encouraging them to recount some personal experience related to the topic, and at making some predictions

about the content of the novel. The student is not to be considered a 'tabula rasa', but instead possesses a personal wealth of knowledge which should come to the fore in the class. The second activity (b) requires the students to skim the text in order to find some easy information. At this stage, all the tasks need to be quite easy in order to avoid that sense of mistrust mentioned earlier.

(a) Prima della lettura. *(Before reading)*.

– Cos'è un romanzo giallo?   *(What is a detective story?)*

– Conosci altre maniere per definirlo?   *(Do you know any other ways by which to call it?)*

– Hai mai letto un romanzo giallo? Se sì, quali e perché? Se no, perché?   *(Have you ever read a detective story? If so, which one(s) and why? If not, why not?)*

– Il libro che stai per iniziare a leggere è intitolato "Una storia semplice". Perché credi che l'autore abbia dato questo titolo al suo racconto? Cosa ti aspetti di leggere?   *(The book that you are going to read is entitled "Una storia semplice". Why do you think the author gave his novel this title? What do you expect you will read?)*

(b) Globalità: leggi il passo e rispondi alle seguenti domande. *(Globalising. Read the passage and answer the following questions)*.

– I fatti narrati avvengono: *(The events narrated happen)*:

    a) alla vigilia di un evento mondano;   *(on the eve of a social event)*;
    b) alla vigilia di una partenza;   *(on the eve of a departure)*;
    c) alla vigilia di una prova;   *(on the eve of a trial)*;

– Quanti personaggi compaiono nel passo? Chi sono?   *(How many characters appear in this passage? Who are they?)*

– Cosa pensano il telefonista, il commissario e il brigadiere della telefonata ricevuta? (*What do the receptionist, the police chief, and the brigadier think about the telephone call?)*

– Chi è Giorgio Roccella? *(Who is Giorgio Roccella?)*

The second phase (analysing) allows the students to deepen their contact with the passage: the tasks required are more specific and require them to scan the text accurately. The didactic aim of this phase is to describe the behaviour of the two main characters in the passage, and to make the students identify the essential elements of a detective story. Our principal focus is therefore on developing the students' vocabulary.

Analisi: i personaggi. *(Analysing: the characters).*

– Scegli gli aggettivi appropriati per definire il comportamento: *(Choose the suitable adjectives to define the behaviour of):*

a. del brigadiere; *(the brigadier);* b. del commissario; *(The police chief)*

professionale	superficiale	preciso discutibile
poco professionale	irresponsabile	r e s p o n s a b i l e
attento	indifferente	altro…

– In quale altro modo definiresti il comportamento dei due personaggi? *(How could you also describe the two characters' behaviour?)*

– Conosci qualcuno dei seguenti aggettivi? A quali personaggi pensi che si possano riferire? *(Do you know any of the following adjectives? Which character(s) do you think could they describe?)*

pignolo   diligente   strafottente   irreprensibile solerte

inappuntabile   opinabile   scrupoloso

– Com'è la reazione del telefonista alla telefonata che riceve? *(What is the reaction of the receptionist to the telephone call he receives?)*

Incredula   ironica   sarcastica preoccupata   f r e d d a

divertita   indispettita   sospettosa   arrogante

Analisi: gli elementi principali di un romanzo giallo. *(Analysing: the essential features of a detective story).*

– "Una storia semplice" è un romanzo giallo. Nel corso del primo capitolo, hai incontrato alcuni elementi che sono sempre presenti in un romanzo giallo. Quali? *("Una storia semplice" is a detective story. Reading this first chapter, you have met some essential features of a detective story. Which are they?)*

– Alla riga 23 c'è una parola che compare sempre in un romanzo giallo. Quale? *(In line 23 there is a word which is always present in any detective story. What is it?)*

– Pensa ad altre parole che dovrebbero comparire in un romanzo giallo. *(Think about other words which should be present in this kind of novel).*

In the last phase (synthesising), the students are encouraged to give their critical and emotional opinions both on the text and on the learning unit they have just concluded, and to make some predictions about the way the story may develop, activating their "expectancy grammar".

Sintesi. *(Synthesising).*

– Cosa credi di avere imparato in questa unità? Pensi che il lavoro fatto sia stato utile? *(What do you think you have learnt in this unit? Do you think it has been useful?)*

– Il romanzo ti sembra interessante? Perché? *(Does the novel seem interesting to you? Why?)*

– Il secondo capitolo inizia così:"L'indomani, in pattuglia, il brigadiere andò in contrada Cotugno". Come pensi che continuerà la storia? Scrivi un breve testo. *(The following chapter begins thus: "L'indomani, in pattuglia, il brigadiere andò in contrada Cotugno". How do you think the story will continue? Write a short text).*

Conclusion

To conclude, a literary text can be considered a useful way to improve the student's knowledge and competence in Italian, especially the communicative competence, that is to say, the main aim of linguistic education. "Una storia semplice" proves that the style of a literary text does not have to be necessarily noble but can express the trends of contemporary Italian. The operational model adopted to guide the students into the reading and the analysis of Sciascia's novel is the "Learning Unit". This model is preferred, in particular, because it is based both on the neurolinguistic principles of bimodality and directionality and on the Gestalt sequence "globalising – analysing – synthesising". This follows the way in which the human brain elaborates any information it receives according to the neurolinguistic principles of bimodality and directionality and, therefore, it seems to be the most natural way of submitting a student a text, driving him into its exploration and, thus, making him clearly perceive his own learning.

References

Balboni, Paolo. 2006. *Insegnare la letteratura italiana a stranieri.* Perugia. Guerra.

Balboni, Paolo. 2007. *Operational Models for Language Education.* Perugia. Guerra.

Balboni, Paolo. 2008a. *Le sfide di Babele. Insegnare le lingue nelle società complesse.* Torino. Uтет Università.

Balboni, Paolo. 2008b. *Fare educazione linguistica. Attività didattiche per italiano L1 e L2. lingue straniere e lingue classiche.* Torino, Uтет Università.

Beraldo, R., Celentin, P., 2006, *Letteratura e didattica dell'italiano LS,* Fılım – Formazione degli Insegnanti di Lingua Italiana nel Mondo, Laboratorio Itals, Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia , available at http://venus.unive.it/filim/materiali/accesso_gratuito/Filim_letteratura_didattica_italiano_ls.pdf

Daloiso, Michele. 2007. *Early Foreign Language Teaching.* Perugia. Guerra.

Luise, Maria Cecilia. 2006. *Italiano come lingua seconda. Elementi di didattica,* Torino. Uтет Università.

Sciascia, Leonardo. 1989. *Una storia semplice.* Adelphi.

Serragiotto, G., Luise, M.C., 2007, *Insegnare italiano come lingua straniera a bambini, insegnare italiano come lingua straniera ad adulti*, Fılım – Formazione degli Insegnanti di Lingua Italiana nel Mondo, Laboratorio Itals, Dipartimento di Scienze del Linguaggio, Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia , available at http://venus.unive.it/filim/materiali/accesso_gratuito/Filim_adulti_bambini_luise_serragiotto_teoria.pdf

Salvatore Cavaliere

USVAJANJE ITALIJANSKOG JEZIKA PUTEM KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Sažetak: Sadržaj ovog teksta ima za cilj da ilustruje kako učenici italijanskog kao stranog ili drugog jezika mogu poboljšati sopstveno znanje istog putem književnosti, pogotovo ukoliko se radi o savremenoj književnosti. U svrhu postizanja ovog cilja suštinski značaj će imati opisivanje specifičnog pristupa književnom tekstu – baziranog na „jedinstvu učenja" – koje se može sastojati u posebnim morfološkim, sintaksičkim i leksičkim stavkama. Ovaj teorijski okvir podrazumeva i originalni odeljak o radu koji je nastao na osnovu ličnog iskustva stečenog na banjalučkom univerzitetu, sastoji se u didaktizaciji teksta romana „Jedna jednostavna priča" pisca Leonarda Šaše, a sačinjena je od serija „jedinstva učenja".