Towards Plurilingual Pedagogical Practices within a Web 2.0 environment: building an Hybrid Italian Language Course for Romance Language Speakers in USA

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In the last few decades, language departments of colleges and universities of North America (as well as other departments) have been facing challenges posed by both the conditions created by the world's increased globalization, and the climate of accountability and austerity in academia. Many deem that to effectively respond to these challenges, language departments need to thoroughly revise their mission and educational goals. This thinking was recently endorsed by a report published by the Modern Language Association (MLA)[1] Foreign Languages (FL) *ad hoc* committee (2007). The committee was charged with examining the current language crisis that has occurred as a result of 9/11 and with considering the effects of this crisis on the teaching of foreign languages in colleges and universities. The members claimed that the current structure of foreign language programs is inadequate. The 2007 MLA's report (http://www.mla.org/pdf/forlang_news_pdf.pdf) called for a complete overhaul of the FL curricula. According to the committee one of the main goals of these language curricula should be the development of the student's translingual and transcultural competence which "places value on the ability to *operate* between languages". In the last decade, many scholars, invoked *literacy* as a way to address the issues highlighted in the MLA report. The proposals these scholars put forward, while not identical, share many notions, and generally align with Cope and Kalantzis (1993) and the New London Group's (1996) notion of a pedagogy of *multiliteracies*. Cope and Kalantzis and the New London Group advocate an understanding of language as a socioculturally situated semiotic system (Halliday, 1978), and meaning-making as a form of design or active and dynamic transformation (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009). They emphasize the *multiplicity of languages*, of genres, and of modalities present in any given social context, and advocate a pedagogy that puts this *multiplicity* at the center of the curriculum.

In the language departments of North America colleges and universities, teachers work increasingly in multilingual classrooms where students' language practices include multiple languages (García & Flores, 2013). Thus, teaching literacy in multilingual classrooms necessarily has to move towards a *flexible model of multiliteracies* which includes the use of all the students' linguistic repertoire and the use of multimodalities – visual, aural, textual, multiplicity of semiotic resources- which allow constructing different dimensions of meaning (New London Group, 2000; Kress, 2000, 2003; Saravanan, 2012). Within this context, language plurality is seen as a source of positive learner attributes, such as higher cognitive flexibility; linguistic, cultural and conceptual transfer; and enhanced capacity for abstract, divergent, and creative thinking (Piccardo, 2013; Boekmann, Aaalto, Atanasoska & Lamb, 2011).

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[1] Founded in 1883 by teachers and scholars, the Modern Language Association (MLA) promotes the study and teaching of language and literature in the United States.

Many Romance languages departments of universities and colleges of North America offer intensive courses for students who know at least another romance language besides the target language they want to study.

This paper describes a classroom project aim at developing multiliteracies and plurilingual competence within a 60-contact hour Intensive Elementary Italian language course[2] for Romance language speakers offered in both semesters (Fall and Spring) at Columbia University, New York. The Intensive Elementary Italian course is a Hybrid course, which includes the use of the "Wiki" to build a multilingual space. "Wiki" is a social network tool which can facilitate interaction outside the classroom, the exchange of ideas, documents, and links in different online settings, and requires collective knowledge construction. In this sense, this tool can be useful to extend language learners' opportunities for meaningful creative language processing and practice multiple representational modes. The paper describes the challenges encountered to integrate such multimedia space into a more "traditional" classroom. In this context, "traditional" classroom is intended as a language classroom which aims at developing speaking, listening, reading, writing skills, and grammar and vocabulary competence. Therefore, the primary focus of the class is still the target language, which is also used for the oral interaction in the classroom, but all forms of code-switching, code-mixing and transfer has seen as a part of the construction of Italian proficiency. The Wiki environment is used collaboratively by students, who, linking to their existing knowledge and linguistic repertoire, build multilingual and multimedia materials (in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and English) and develop metacognitive and metalinguistic skills on vocabulary, grammatical structures and language functions following the units of the course. Students are asked to fill out multilingual tables by making inter-linguistic comparison, finding "bridges" (Escudé & Janin, 2010; Jamet & Caddéo, 2013), and using transfers among languages. Students also become aware of the specific feature of English- the common language in the classroom, as L1 or L2, besides the target language- which has structured itself from the very beginning of its history around a syncretism of diverse elements from completely different languages and cultures, and which is included in the pluralistic repertoire. This reflection on plurilingualism in English dominant contexts moves "from a vision of recognizing language diversity, preserving heritage languages and cultures (e.g. Italian and Spanish) or making English speakers aware of the value of studying other languages to a more dynamic vision, open to linguistic plurality" (Piccardo 2013), which also represents one of the main needs the MLA report wishes to fulfill.

In the light of what mentioned above, this paper also discusses the outcomes of the data collected during the course by means of a qualitative approach with the use of questionnaires, teacher's diary and classroom interactions tape recordings.

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[2] In order to design the syllabus of this course, the topics and learning objectives have been identified using the descriptors of the *Common European Framework* (CEFR, 2001), and the CARAP/FREPA *Framework for Pluralistic Approaches to languages and cultures* (http://carap.ecml.at/CARAP/tabid/2332/language/en-GB/Default.aspx) while the linguistic material has been selected according to the inventories of the *Profilo della lingua italiana* (Spinelli & Parizzi 2010).