



The Role of Community Context in Italian as Second Language Learning in Perugia

Caterina Calicchio

University for Foreigners of Perugia, Italy

Abstract

Second Language Acquisition is a field of learning in which the contextual factor is crucial. According to several studies, circumstances outside the home country can help foreign language learning. Study abroad, in fact, is considered a prime context in language learning because it provides contextualized exposure [1]. Moreover, according to some investigations, during the “dipping” abroad, students achieve socio-cultural, linguistic, actional and strategic competences [2]. These outcomes are possible thanks to the role of the community, especially if it has an active role in language learning.

In the present paper has been carried out research on the possibility of applying a community engagement approach to Italian as a Second Language students [3]. The aim is to show how much the community role is important in language learning and which are the competences that students acquire.

The study case is settled in the city of Perugia and participants attend a language school. Students were asked to fill in a questionnaire with items regarding their competences and behaviors within the community. By doing preliminary study, a sociocultural survey has been made. The model of the questionnaire is the “SCAS-R” [4]. Students were asked to specify their level of agreement to a set of statements in a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree. The data has been analyzed with a quantitative method and has been represented in a pie chart and in a histogram. Finally, mean has been calculated.

The research findings demonstrate that students enhance sociocultural and language competences and cross-cutting skills. Thus, these results could be the prove that Italian as Second Language class could be a breeding ground for community engagement. The goal is to share with the scientific community some insights to trace possible future lines of research.

Keywords: SLA, community engagement, sociocultural survey, Italian L2.

1. Introduction

Language and culture represent a closely intertwined duo rich in connections and meanings that cannot be dissociated. Therefore, when teaching a foreign language, it is imperative to impart not only the language itself but also the associated culture. Culture embodies the people who speak a language and furthermore encapsulates its past, present, and future. From a pragmatic-cultural perspective [5], the learning of a foreign language inherently includes the culturally affiliated models. In fact, in order to be a part of a social system, an individual must possess socio-cultural proficiency in addition to linguistic mastery. The community, therefore, serves as a fundamental resource from which students can draw to acquire a new language or reinforce their existing knowledge [2].

The objective of this study is to comprehend which Italian socio-cultural aspects exert greater influence than others and to assess the competencies of Italian L2 students regarding certain behaviors within Italian society. The study was conducted in the city of Perugia, within a private school offering Italian as a second language. This constitutes a preliminary study that is hoped to pave the way for new research avenues in the field.

2.1 Communicative competence

It is beneficial to frame the context of intercultural competence within the broader framework of communicative competence. Throughout history, communication has been an essential element for human interaction [6]. When applied to foreign languages, communication becomes necessary for the circulation and exchange of various languages and associated cultures. Consequently, communication occurs within communicative events [7], which are characterized by a specific social situation within a particular social context [8].

In Italy, the communicative approach that emerged in the 1970s is built upon these principles. At its core is the belief that effective communication requires linguistic competence, which must be complemented by pragmatic and sociocultural competence to ensure communication is not only



efficient but also appropriate. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish among the three dimensions of sociocultural competence: sociolinguistic, everyday culture (way of life), and reference values, which represent the civilization of a particular people (way of thinking). In agreement with Balboni, "communicative competence is a mental reality that manifests itself as performance in the world" [8]. Now, we aim to adapt this competence to the intercultural context, where the number of languages and cultures to consider is greater.

2.2 Intercultural competence and communication

In the first decade of the 21st century, Caon closely monitored the evolution of the concepts of culture and civilization within the field of language teaching [9]. It is worth noting that since the 1960s, these concepts have been in constant evolution, as culture itself undergoes continuous change. This phenomenon is also driven by the fact that nowadays, thanks to technology and the economy, people from various nationalities can live in the same territory [10]. While culture was initially considered primarily useful for interacting with foreign populations in the late 1960s, in the 2000s, the intercultural domain has become so vast that it is impossible to teach just one form of intercultural communication. It has, therefore, been necessary to devise a model for the analysis and description of intercultural communication that considers the theorization of intercultural communicative competence.

To achieve this, it is important to take into consideration certain concepts and consequences. In this regard, the term "acculturation" is used to describe the process by which an individual gradually acquires a culture different from their native one over time. This occurs at the level of the learner, who is influenced by the social distance between their native culture and the new "diversity" [11]. In addition to distance and diversity, there are other intrinsic factors that affect this process, such as the individual's personality and attachment to their home country's culture, as well as extrinsic factors such as how the hosting society receives the individual [10].

The concept of acculturation is closely tied to the concept of culture shock. This is the initial phase during which the student perceives the cultural differences between their native culture and the culture of arrival sharply. Feelings of indecision, sadness due to separation, and estrangement are indicative of this phenomenon. This phase is much more pronounced in an L2 (second language) context, such as studying a language abroad or participating in a university exchange program, like the American "study abroad period," for instance. According to Schuman [12], the greater the social distance between the two cultures, the more difficult it will be for the learner to acquire the second language. This concept is closely connected to the culture and society in which the language is embedded, making these elements just as important as lexical elements.

2.2.1 Cross-cultural difficulties

During the socio-cultural adaptation of an individual, it is easy to encounter obstacles, particularly when knowledge of the culture and society associated with the language is acquired indirectly. An example of this is the association of Italy with pizza and pasta. Stereotypes, often formed through generalizing an element or characteristic, minimalizing meaning, and transforming the unknown into something familiar resembling a typology encountered in everyday life [13], tend to arise in such situations.

For this reason, it is important to understand how interculturality, differences, and stereotypes can be measured among L2 learners. Within the sociocultural elements, there is, as previously mentioned, the category of extralinguistic elements that encompasses all aspects beyond grammatical competence. Failing to comprehend the cultural dimension of language represents a hurdle for learners. It can happen that students become "fluent fools," individuals who speak a foreign language - in this case, Italian - proficiently but do not grasp its social and philosophical dimension. Students may, in fact, overestimate their abilities, giving a negative impression to native speakers of the community and potentially stumbling into diplomatic incidents [14].

2.2.2 Intercultural communication model

At this point, it is essential to attempt to identify a model that incorporates the element of interculturality in communication. As emphasized by Balboni and Caon in 2015 [15], in this case, the communicative event involves two native speakers who have two different cultures and languages, meaning there are multiple elements to consider. We can refer to variables that change depending on the language. Furthermore, within this model, specific relational skills are included, without which intercultural communication is unlikely to occur smoothly. Among these skills are "strangeness" and "decentering," which allow the speaker-actor to emotionally distance themselves from the situation to avoid creating filters. Associated with these skills are also "suspension of judgment" and



"relativization," which imply that one culture is not superior to another, and each can fully represent a people [16]. Finally, in intercultural communication, the ability to negotiate meanings is essential.

2.2.3 How to gauge the sociocultural competence.

After clarifying what is meant by intercultural competence, along with potential challenges, and mentioning a model of intercultural communication, it's important to discuss how to measure and assess this competence.

Several tools are available to assess the intercultural sensitivity and competence of individuals involved in encounters between diverse cultures. Among the most common tools are the "Cross-cultural World-Mindedness Scale" (CCWMS), the "Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory" (ISI), and the "Sociocultural Adaptation Scale" (SCAS) [17]. These assessment scales take into account an individual's attitudes and abilities to adapt and change within a cultural context different from their own.

In this case study, the scale used was inspired by the SCAS-R, which is the revised version of the SCAS in 2013 by Wilson [18]. Originally developed for a study on the intercultural transition of Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand, the SCAS has become a reference tool for assessing and self-assessing individuals' social and cultural adaptation in a different context [19]. Within this scale, there are items related to interpersonal communication, academic and/or work performance, personal interests, involvement in the host community, and language proficiency, to name a few.

3. Case of study: the role of community context in Italian L2 students in Perugia

The study was conducted at an Italian language school located in the city of Perugia. This private institution has been actively engaged in teaching Italian to foreigners since 1986. Within the school, students from various parts of the world attend Italian language courses for varying durations, both short and long, with the aim of learning the Italian language.

In addition to the traditional language courses, which focus on the development of morphosyntactic and communicative skills, the school also organizes cultural activities that allow students to immerse themselves in the social reality of the city of Perugia. For these reasons, a selection of representative students was chosen for the administration of the questionnaire.

3.1 Materials and Methods

3.1.1 Participants

A total of 26 students participated in the research. The majority of participants were male (14) compared to female students (12). The student sample was diverse and broad in terms of age, nationality, and native language. Most of the participants fell into the age range of 51 to 70 years (13). The sample included individuals of various nationalities, with a significant portion being American, German, and Dutch nationals. Additionally, some participants had non-European nationalities. There was a wide range of native languages represented among the participants, with English and German being the most common, followed by Arabic and Dutch. The interviewed student sample consisted of Italian learners spanning various proficiency levels, ranging from A1 to C1. Specifically, the most common proficiency levels were B1 and B2. The duration of the Italian course varied from one week to over three months, depending on the length of time students attended classes.

3.1.2 Methods and analysis

Participants were given a paper questionnaire that they could complete either synchronously or asynchronously. The maximum time allowed for completing the questionnaire was ten minutes. Some students filled it out on their last day of Italian language course. It was associated with the school's final feedback questionnaire that students are typically asked to complete at the end of their stay in Perugia.

The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part collects demographic information, and the second part contains items for self-assessing the participants' level of sociocultural competence. The input instruction for the students was as follows: "Thinking about life in Italy, please rate your competency level at each of the following behaviors." For self-assessment of these competencies, as mentioned earlier, the SCAS-R scale was used as a reference point. The fifteen items were based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represents incompetence (= not at all competent), and 5 represents extreme competence (= extremely competent).



With the collected data, the mean and standard deviation were then calculated to examine the consistency of the values provided by the participants. Finally, some data were cross-referenced using Pivot tables.

3.1.3 Results

From the data analysis, it becomes evident that factors such as the participants' Italian language proficiency and their native language are important, even decisive, in determining the values chosen to indicate their sociocultural competencies during their time in Italy. Participants belonging to the "B" level of the CEFR [20], categorized as "independent level," exhibited greater competency in various sociocultural behaviors during their life in Italy. Only the significant results obtained from the analysis of participants' responses are reported here. Among the fifteen items to be evaluated, some were more interesting than others, primarily based on the responses provided by the students. Below is the Pivot table (Table 1) with selected items (5, 10, 13, 14) and the evaluation of these items based on the participants, categorized in this case according to their Italian language proficiency level and native language. The items considered relate to the ability to correctly interpret gestures and facial expressions (5) and changes in pace (10), manners (13), and social behavior (14) depending on the situational context in which the communicative act occurs.

Ita Level & 1st language	Item 5	Item 14	Item 13	Item 10
Arabic	3,5	3,8	4,8	4,3
B1	1,0	1,0	4,0	4,0
B2	4,3	4,7	5,0	4,3
Dutch	3,7	3,5	3,0	2,3
A2	#DIV/0!	3,0	3,0	2,0
B1	3,7	3,7	3,0	2,3
English	3,7	3,6	3,3	2,4
A1	4,0	3,0	2,0	1,0
A2	2,0	2,0	2,0	2,0
B1	4,3	4,7	4,0	3,0
B2	3,5	3,0	3,5	2,5
German	3,3	3,4	3,6	2,7
A1	3,0	4,0	3,0	2,0
A2	3,0	3,0	3,0	2,3
B1	3,0	3,0	3,0	3,0
B2	4,0	4,0	5,0	3,5
Lithuanian	5,0	5,0	5,0	5,0
C1	5,0	5,0	5,0	5,0
Norwegian	4,0	5,0	3,0	2,0
B2	4,0	5,0	3,0	2,0
Spanish	4,5	5,0	4,0	4,0
A2	4,5	5,0	4,0	4,0
Totale complessivo	3,7	3,8	3,7	3,0

Item 5: Accurately interpreting and responding to other people's gestures and facial expressions.
Item 14: Changing my behavior to suit social norms, rules, and attitudes.
Item 13: Expressing my ideas to other students in a culturally appropriate manner.
Item 10: Varying the rate of my speaking in a culturally appropriate manner.

Table 1. Pivot table summarizing survey results.

The table clearly demonstrates how the proximity of the native language to Italian is an important factor. It is noticeable that in the case of Spanish, this similarity led to the choice of high values, despite the participant's lower Italian proficiency level (A2). Conversely, those who have Arabic as their native language do not feel very competent in these communicative acts, despite having a threshold level of Italian (B1).

It is evident that the participants' choices are influenced not only by their linguistic abilities but also by personal factors. Intrinsic elements like personality, such as being introverted or extroverted, and extrinsic factors like customs and practices are some examples. Furthermore, the duration of the stay in Italy is another influential factor: from the analysis of the collected data, it becomes clear that the longer the period spent in Perugia, the greater the competencies of the participants.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, after mentioning some of the numerous reference theories, ranging from communicative competence to sociocultural adaptation, and after analyzing the results of a preliminary study, it can be affirmed that the community plays a significant role in education. In the context of teaching Italian as a second language, it is important for the development of sociocultural competencies in students.

This paper presented a preliminary study based on a limited sample of students. It is hoped that in the future, this line of research can be further pursued to support the thesis.

References



- [1] Isabelli, C. A. "Development of the Spanish subjunctive by advanced learners: Study abroad followed by at-home instruction", *Foreign Language Annals*, 40(2), 2007, 330–41.
- [2] Kinginger, C. "Language learning in study abroad: Case studies of Americans in France.", *Modern Language Journal*, 92, Monograph, 2008.
- [3] Chambers D. "An Interdisciplinary Approach to Language Learning through Community Engagement", *Innovation in language learning International Conference*, 2020.
- [4] Wilson, J. "Exploring the past, present and future of cultural competency research: The revision and expansion of the sociocultural adaptation construct.", Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Victoria University of Wellington, 2013.
- [5] Bruner, J. "The Culture of Education", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol.45 (1), England, 1997, pp.106-107.
- [6] Kelly, L.G. "Twenty-five Centuries of Language Teaching." Rowley, Newbury House, 1971.
- [7] Hymes, D. "Models of Interaction of Language and Social Life" In Gumpers, J.J.; Hymes D. (eds.), *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972.
- [8] Balboni, P. "La comunicazione interculturale e l'approccio comunicativo: dall'idea allo strumento", *EL.LE*, vol.4, Num.1 2015.
- [9] Caon, F. "Cultura e civiltà nella didattica delle lingue: Una tradizione omogenea, una prospettiva tripartita", *Scuola e Lingue Moderne*, 1a parte, 6-9, 2013; 2a parte, 4-5, 2014.
- [10] Celentin P.; Serragiotto G. "Didattica dell'italiano in prospettiva interculturale", *ITALS*, Venezia, Università Ca' Foscari, 2000.
- [11] Acton W.R.; Walker de Felix J. "*Acculturation and mind*", in Valdes J.M., *Culture Bound*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1986.
- [12] Schumann J. "Social distance as a factor in second language acquisition", *A journal of Research in Language Studies*, vol.26 issue 1, 1976.
- [13] Giacalone Ramat, A. "Il ruolo della tipologia linguistica nell'acquisizione di lingue seconde" in Giacalone Ramat – Vedovelli, 1994, pp. 27- 43.
- [14] Bennet, M. J. "How Not to Be a Fluent Fool: Understanding the Cultural Dimension of Language", *The Language Teacher*, vol. 27, 1993, pp.16-21.
- [15] Balboni, P.E.; Caon, F. "La comunicazione interculturale", Venezia, Marsilio, 2015.
- [16] Freddi, G. (a cura di) "La civiltà nell'insegnamento delle lingue" Bergamo, Minerva Italica, 1968.
- [17] Lombardi, M. R. "Assessing Intercultural Competence: A Review", *NCSSMST Journal*, 16, 2010, pp.15-17.
- [18] Wilson, J. "Exploring the past, present and future of cultural competency research: The revision and expansion of the sociocultural adaptation construct. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.", Victoria, University of Wellington, 2013.
- [19] Ward, C.; Kennedy, A. "Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS)", 1999.
- [20] Council of Europe, "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume", Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, available at www.coe.int/lang-cefr., 2020.