FL Teaching and Learning as a Gateway for Democracy in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Responding to the conflicting public perspectives about pedagogical approaches to, and purposes for, language teaching and learning, the authors suggest ways to reconceptualize foreign language (FL) teaching and learning as a springboard toward multicultural citizenship and social justice. The authors propose an approach to FL teaching that aims to develop learners' information, media, and technology literacies as well as life and career skills, which are vital to succeed in a 21st-century global environment, and to empower them to become engaged citizens and agents of social change in their communities. By reframing FL and culture instruction within a social justice perspective, we devise new and creative ways to make the teaching of FL relevant to collegiate education and at the core of the university mission.

Introduction

It is widely agreed that an increasingly global economy, rising national security concerns, and changing demographics in the US demand a multicultural education that gives students the information, media, and technology skills (communication; collaboration; critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and innovation; information literacy; media literacy, technology literacy) as well as life and career skills (flexibility and adaptability; initiative and self-direction; social and cross-cultural skills; productivity and accountability; leadership and responsibility) that prepare learners for a complex and interconnected 21st-century world and global economy.[1] It is also widely agreed that the aforementioned skills are crucial in maintaining the US's world leadership and guaranteeing its national security.

In this study, we argue that foreign language (FL) education is best positioned to foster cultural understanding, cooperation, and integration, which are at the core of a multicultural citizenship, and suggest ways to reconceptualize foreign language teaching and learning as a springboard toward social justice education. Viewing FL education as "the practice of freedom" that enables learners to "discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Shaull, p. 34), we promote a multiculturalism linked to social justice and to the advancement of civic engagement in the democratic process. While we believe that FL teaching and learning should aim at developing the academic, career, and life skills learners need in a 21st-century global environment, by reframing FL education within a social justice perspective, we hope to empower learners to become multicultural citizens who are agents of social change in their own communities.

[1] See *ACTFL 21st Century Skills Map* published by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages in 2011.

This study is articulated in three parts. First we place our discussion of FL teaching and learning within the wider context of national-identity constructions and educational reform in the US. Drawing on the work of Pavlenko and Neem among others, we will examine the ideological considerations and sociopolitical underpinnings of FL education and identify ways that FL policies and practices have been influenced by shifting national and minority languages identity narratives. In the second part, we reframe FL and culture instruction within a social justice perspective, grounded on the work of Nieto, Allen, and Freire among others, as a way of making the teaching of FL relevant to collegiate education and the community at large, and at the core of the University of Illinois at Chicago's (UIC) mission. In the third and final section, we offer examples of best practices and instructional strategies aimed at developing students' literacies, multicultural citizenship, pro-social identities, and community engagement.

National Identity and FL Education: An Historical Perspective

Regardless of the role that FL education plays in fostering intercultural understanding, strengthening international relations, and promoting economic growth at a global level, the relevance of FL teaching and learning today has become the subject of intense debates within and outside academic institutions in the United States, with enrollments in foreign language classes declining nationwide, impacting public schools most severely .[2] According to the

[2] In 2007–2008 only 25% of elementary schools taught languages other than English, a six-percentage-point drop from an already meager 31% in 1996/1997. This decline in language programs offered to primary schools' students has disproportionately affected public schools: Whereas more than 50% of private elementary schools had a program for languages other than English in 2007/2008, only 15% of public elementary schools did. The share of middle schools offering world languages has also experienced a significant 17% drop rate from 1996/1997 to 2007/2008. In its 2016 report on the state of languages in the US the Academy of Language and Sciences Commission on Language Learning states that as of 2014, only twelve states had more than 25% of elementary- and secondary-school students studying languages other than English, with enrollments in language classes or programs ranging from 7.9% in New Mexico to 51.2% in New Jersey, with a nationwide percentage of 21.5%. This is in stark contrast with European primary schools, where in 2014 more than 50% of students were learning another language (*The State of Languages in the US,* 2016, pp. 9–10).

Academy of Language and Sciences Commission on Language Learning, an increasing number of American children are not exposed to a non-English language until high school; as a result, only a small minority of high school students attains language proficiency at the intermediate or advanced level. The general downward trend in foreign language enrollments has also negatively impacted post-secondary enrollments, with a dwindling number of FL courses offered and an overall decline in the number of undergraduate degrees awarded to students studying languages other than English.[3]

To interpret such a trend, one needs to consider the United States' long history of ambiguous attitudes toward publicly funded liberal arts education, multiculturalism, and FL education. While many textbooks and approaches to FL teaching and learning maintain a view of foreign languages as neutral transmitters of culture devoid of ideological implications, recent research has been increasingly focused not merely on pedagogical trends but on the ideological, social, and political frameworks in which FL instruction is situated.[4] Following Pavlenko's work (2003, pp. 313–14), the authors argue that FL education's ideologies, policies, and practices have been, and continue to be, affected by shifting ideologies of national identity and the role of public education in maintaining American democracy, and by the tensions between national and minority languages.

While there was a general consensus among the Founding generation that an educated citizenship was a vital component in the maintenance of freedom in the newly formed American republic, where ordinary people were responsible for choosing their own leaders, Thomas Jefferson believed that it was through the liberal arts that gifted students, no matter how poor,

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[3] See data in *The State of Languages in the US* (p. 17) and the MLA Language Map. Enrollment Database, 1958–2016.

[4] For a sociopolitical approach to FL pedagogy, see at least Kramsch (2005) and Lantolf & Sunderman (2001).

would attain the cultural literacy needed to become effective, civically minded public leaders (Neem, 2017, pp. 6–10). In the mid-nineteenth century, Mann and other education reformers championed the transformative power of a publicly funded liberal arts education and its role in "democratizing access to imagination." In their view, it was precisely an imagination nourished by the study of the liberal arts that would enable Americans to envision new worlds of their own, to become effective citizens, and to lead moral lives (Neem, 2017, pp. 18–21). For William Ellery Channing and his followers, a liberal education allows every human being, regardless of his station in life, to develop oneself to the fullest ("self culture"). Believing that every person deserves an education on account of his humanity, not "because he is to make shoes, nails, or pins," Channing argued that a liberal education is the essence of being American and that no democratic society should allow a social order in which a few are entitled to appreciate beauty and the rest are left to toil.[5] With growing consensus that it was in everybody's interest to educate the young, as educated workers would be more productive and benefit society, new state constitutions pushed for broader access to basic literacy, subsidized by tax dollars (Neem, 2017, p. 7). While Mann and other reformers insisted that economic concerns should not overshadow the civic and cultural goals of education (Mann, 1868, p. 128), many taxpayers who supported publicly funded schools at the lower and middle levels were weary of fostering an "aristocracy of talent" (Welter, 1962, p. 45).

Educational ideologies and debates on the role of the liberal arts in promoting American democracy affected the discourse on FL education in public schools. While American secondary and higher education 19th-century curricula incorporated FL in various degrees, and both Franklin and Jefferson supported FL study for middle- and upper-middle-class American

[5] William Ellery Channing. *Self Culture* (1838), quoted in Neem (2017, pp. 12–15).

children,[6] other constituents, such as Michigan and Illinois citizens, in challenging the constitutionality of public funding for higher learning, argued that the study of the Classics and of modern languages served no practical purpose and was therefore a privilege of the economic and intellectual elites (Herbst, 1996, pp. 62–64, 75–76). In addition, even proponents of FL studies held a double standard with regard to the recipients of FL education. Franklin and Jefferson, for instance, were concerned with native-language maintenance in immigrant children (Pavlenko, 2002) and feared that the transmission of "foreign" beliefs through language would prevent them from assimilating into American society (Crawford, 1992, p. 39).

Nineteenth-century reformers, concerned with an American society that had become increasingly divided by ethnicity, religion, economic status, and political affiliation, envisioned public schools as venues to build civic peace and social solidarity. In an effort to create a shared national culture and a more homogeneous society, public schools were tasked with instilling American customs, manners, and social values in foreign-born children (Neem, 2017, p. 139). The country grappled with the fundamental question of what constituted a shared common ground— a cultural glue—in a diverse society; while some citizens worried that the "separations of people into classes, using even different languages, would materially impede the formation of a national character, and the spread of useful knowledge," others wished to maintain their cultural, linguistic, and religious identities.[7] However, as observed by Pavlenko, until the 1880s, despite concerns about immigrants' assimilation, "Americanization was not yet fully synonymous with Anglicization": English learning and the construction of an American identity

[6] On Franklin and Jefferson and their role in supporting the study of FL see Pavlenko (2003, pp. 168–170). Educational policies and practices of the 18th and 19th centuries were fairly supportive of linguistic diversity and foreign language study with instruction offered, in private schools at least, in Greek and Latin as well as German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Arabic (Crawford, 1992).

[7] *Niles National Register* (1832), quoted in Gjerde, 1997, p. 143.

were not incompatible with immigrant language maintenance, and modern languages continued to be seen as playing an important role in American education (2002, p. 174).

In the wake of the Great Migration wave in the period between 1880 and 1924 and with the rise of anti-immigration and xenophobic fears, the US experienced a drastic ideological shift with the emergence of an hegemonic discourse that established English monolingualism as a constitutive part of American national identity. The importance of English proficiency in the construction of Americanness was further established in 1906 when Congress approved the Nationality Act, signed by Theodore Roosevelt, which required the knowledge of English to obtain American citizenship (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 177).[8] The period from 1917 to 1922, with the United States entering WWI against Germany in April 2017 and the subsequent intense anti-German campaigns, saw the dismantling of German instructional programs throughout the nation. This mounting anti-foreign ideology spread to the teaching and learning of all foreign languages, with the adoption of English-only policies, and with the barring or restriction of FL instruction in elementary schools in the majority of states (Pavlenko, 2003, p. 319).[9] According to Pavlenko (2003, p. 319), such ideologies on languages and their attendant restrictions and

[8] In 1919, viewing language education through the lenses of national identity and patriotism, Theodore Roosevelt predicated equal rights for all immigrants regardless of faith, ethnicity, and birthplace, as long as they were willing to discard their heritage and adopt one language, one flag, one allegiance: "We have room for but one flag, the American flag [. . .] We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language [. . .] and we have room for but one sole loyalty and that is loyalty to the American people." According to the "Truthorfiction" website, Roosevelt's letter, written on January 3, 1919, was read on the evening of January 5t, 1919 at a public meeting of the American Defense Society and published widely. It appeared, for example, in *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, on January 7, 1919 ("Abolish Hyphen Roosevelt's Last Words to Public"). On foreign language education and national identity, see Pavlenko (2002 and 2003). For an analysis of US language policy and ethnolinguistic vitality, see Potowski (2010).

[9] Until the 1920s, languages other than English were taught in college preparatory schools as auxiliary tools to other disciplines (classical languages or German) or as the language of the country's ally in WWI (French). Curricula started to feature modern language instruction only in the 1920s and 1930s, although almost never as a requirement. See Pavlenko (2002).

policies were grounded on four main discourses that constructed foreign language study as contaminating American values, a vehicle for foreign propaganda, a threat to national unity, and of no practical use for American children.

The situation changed after WWII and with the beginning of the Cold War when political exigencies and national security concerns contributed to a heightened perception of the need of FL education, leading to congressional funding for instructional programs in foreign languages through the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA). Efforts were made to promote and implement foreign language programs K–16 across the country, to increase undergraduate enrollment, and to expand graduate programs (Berman, 2003; Richter, 2003). And yet, the discourses that emerged and solidified during and after WWI (monolingualism as a symbol of American identity and loyalty, immigrant language maintenance as undesirable, and learning of FL as a luxury for the elite) still affect all areas of FL education in the US. Public support for language teaching and learning has been waning as advocates for American political and economic hegemony make the case for English as the global language and for trimming foreign language instruction in American public schools, now largely confined to middle and high school classes (Pavlenko, 2003, p. 321). In a 2012 interview with the *New York Times* on the future of undergraduate education, Lawrence H. Summers, former Harvard president, clearly posits English as a dominant and practical language in the digital age while devaluing the importance of learning foreign languages and doing away with non-anglophone cultural identities. Critics of multicultural identity politics perceive government policies and educational practices that encourage multilingualism and multiculturalism as discouraging immigrants from assimilation and as a threat to social cohesion and national identity.[10] They warn that multilingualism will

[10] See for instance McAlpin (2012); and Thornton (2012).

bring about a balkanized model of society with increased segregation, linguistic and cultural antagonism, and even "economic-technological ineffectualness" at the expense of assimilation into a common American culture and economic integration (Hirsch, 1988, p. 29). Advocating for a return to mainstream American civilization and the attendant need to protect the English language from the threats posed by multilingualism, Newt Gingrich argues that "without English as the common language, there is no (such) civilization" (Gingrich, 1995, p. 162).[11] Foreign language has been recently used to demonize minority groups and to asperge moral condemnation on non-English speakers, as shown during the 2016 presidential campaign, in which then–presidential candidate Donald Trump vilified Mexicans as "bad hombres" (CNN, 2016). Lastly, as many learners fail to reach significant levels of communicative competence despite years of FL study in high school and college language programs—the "legacy of non success" of which Osborne speaks (2006, p. 4)—public support for language teaching and learning has been waning, and its curricular relevance and effectiveness has been put into question (Levine, 2014, p. 61).

Supporters of FL education point to its positive and relevant sociological role in the United States and yet all too often offer lopsided arguments framed solely within a utilitarian discourse that emphasizes global competitiveness and national security—not cultural understanding, cooperation, and integration—as the main rationales for language learning.[12] As public resources are shifting to languages which are deemed critical to American economic interests and defense efforts, the perceived value of teaching and learning certain languages

[11] On linguistic diversity and national identity see Hunt (2007) and Levine (2014, pp. 61–64).
[12] For a comparison between the European and the American framework for foreign language learning (the first aiming at fostering cooperation and European integration and the second on promoting American leadership and competitiveness), see Kramsch (2005), Scollon (2004), Council of Europe (2001), and Levine (2014).

(such as Italian) has declined, with many educational institutions downsizing or eliminating FL programs to the detriment of cultural diversity and educational opportunities for students.

FL Literacy and 21st-Century Skills as a Springboard Toward Social Justice and Democracy

Concerns over the present negative status of FL teaching and learning in the US have given impetus to pedagogical studies that call for adjustments to the structure and social context of language learning, the types of literacies FL educators wish to embrace at the departmental level, and the expected outcomes of these revised curricula.[13] Considering that language and communication are at the heart of the human experience, the teaching community has made language proficiency "around modes of communicative competence reflecting real life communication" one of the main goals of a language program and has established national standards (the five Cs) for the development of effective competence and cultural interaction (ACTFL 21st Century Skills Map, p. 2). The five C goal areas (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities) inextricably link communication and culture, and urge the use of this competence beyond the instructional setting so that learners can become part of local and global communities; they emphasize the understanding of diverse perspectives as well as students' reflection on their own culture and underscore the interdisciplinarity of knowledge by weaving interdisciplinary themes (e.g., global awareness; financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; and environmental literacy) into language education. Following the adoption in many states of the Common Core State Standards that define the role of public education as aimed at "college and career readiness," the FL community has broadened the scope of FL education to include the development of the information, media,

[13] For a discussion about an inclusive concept of literacy see Kern (2000), Swaffar (2014).

and technology skills (communication, collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, information literacy, media literacy, technology literacy) as well as life and career skills (flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility) that a 21st-century global interconnected society demands (ACTFL 21st Century Skills Map, pp. 6–20).

While recognizing that these are much-needed skills for students' academic and professional success, some scholars warn that such an ideological and pedagogical approach reinforces a narrow, vocational view of education as a path to economic rewards. A vocational approach to curricula and pedagogy, viewing students not as citizens but as future earners, and seeing education as a commodity and a path to individual self-realization, focuses mostly on the development of technical skills and is devoid of any broader civic mission and objectives. An alternative understanding of the role of public education is offered by scholars such as Danielle Allen. Allen argues for a "participatory readiness" framework rooted on a "humanistic baseline" (2016, p. 47) that seeks to develop learners' verbal empowerment, acquisition of democratic knowledge, and strategic understanding of the mechanics of political action. Recognizing that "fair economic outcomes are aided by a robust democratic process and, therefore, by genuine political equality," Allen supports the kind of education that by socializing learners to the political process, promotes political equality and strengthens democracy (Allen, 2016, p. 32).[14] Similarly, Eggington (2018) warns that education understood as a commodity meant to maximize social distinction rather than seen as an investment in the future of democracy lays the foundation for the balkanization of identities in relation to a larger community. Consequently, he

[14] In an earlier study, economists Edward L. Glaeser, Giacomo Ponzetto, and Andrei Shleifer show a correlation between democracy and education, as "educated nations are more likely both to preserve democracy and to protect it" (2007, p. 94).

calls for a renewed focus on the liberal arts as "dedicated to balancing the rights of individuals against the needs of community cohesion" (Eggington, 2018).

While Allen, Neem, and Eggington do not specifically discuss FL education, their theoretical framework can be adapted to the discourse on FL teaching and learning from the perspective of a critical pedagogy as a tool to empower students and the political dimensions of teaching and learning. The promotion of citizenship education has become the focus of recent debates in the FL learning and teaching field. The objectives of FL education have come to include not only language proficiency and appreciation for other cultures but also the ability of FL learners to communicate and work together with people of diverse backgrounds in their own society and classrooms (Byram, 1989, 2008; Byram et al., 2016; Guilherme, 2002; and Risager, 2007). By examining language as a social and political construct and exploring the relationships between issues of power, language learning, and social change, FL education has the potential to create greater equality among people (Kubota et al., 2008). Such a potential can be achieved only by addressing the issue that, all too often, students of foreign languages are presented with a sanitized, one-size-fits-all narrative of the foreign culture and society where daily life is oversimplified, dialogues are scripted, and cultural content is fragmented and trivialized.[15] Traditional and uncritical approaches to teaching culture carry the risk of othering (adopting a perspective of dichotomies between cultures), trivialization (cultures as seen from a "tourist approach"), and of perpetuating cultural domination (Muirhead, 2009, p. 259; Ennser-Kananen, 2016; Sleeter & Grant, 2011) by unwittingly socializing students into compliance with dominant

[15] See Benesch (2001), Canagarajah (1999), Corson (2001), Kramsch (1993), Norton (2000), Toohey (2000). For a study of sanitized narratives and the need for greater inclusion and diversity with a focus on Italian FL textbooks, see Fabbian, Valfredini, & Zanotti Carney (2019).

norms and prescribed notions of their *imagined communities* and *regimes of truth*.[16] A sanitized, uncritical approach to FL education makes invisible, excludes, or misrepresents groups' socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, religion, ability, age, gender, or sexual orientation; determines a biased view of the foreign culture; and deprives all students of opportunities "to critically understand their native culture and its underlying ideologies" (Kubota et al., 2008, p. 12). Warning against a *liberal multiculturalism* that celebrates difference while failing to acknowledge issues of power and privilege, Kubota promotes the concept of a *critical multicultural education* that "aims for social transformation by seeking social justice and equality among all people" (2004a, p. 37).

Understanding FL teaching and learning as a public investment in democracy, the Italian program at UIC has adopted a participatory, rather than vocational, approach to education as it seeks to prepare learners not only to successfully participate in a 21st-century global economy but also to be active promoters of a 21st-century democracy in a diverse society. Embracing UIC's mission to provide wide-ranging opportunities to its students and be a channel of social mobility, we strive to give all students the same opportunities to receive an education, which enables them to function in a multicultural world by developing the academic, life, and career skills that are vital to succeeding in a 21st-century global environment. However, embracing Freire's critique of a "banking," neutral concept of education (2005, p. 73) that simply integrates youth into a system that remains unchallenged, we also promote a multiculturalism linked to social justice and diversity, and a view of FL education as "the practice of freedom" that enables

[16] Foucault (1980) asserts that as images, beliefs, and practices are inscribed upon individual consciousness, they become normalized and uncontested *regimes of truths* that shape our identity and encourage compliance with socially constructed values. For *imagined communities* (inaccessible groups to which an individual desires to belong, where such a desire shapes a person's agency and construction of identity), see Norton (2000, 2001), Wenger (1998), and Anderson (1991).

learners to "discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Shaull, 2005, p. 34). We adopted a FL pedagogy steeped in a critical approach that goes beyond a narrow definition of education as academic achievement and tests, and steers away from instructional materials that are steeped in shallow ideas and inadvertently complicit in perpetuating stereotypes, racism, structural inequality, and discrimination (Nieto, 2014, g; 2010, p. 46).[17] We have reformulated issues of linguistic and literary practices in ways that take into account the lived experiences of students, challenge their own systems of beliefs,[18] and empower them to imagine the many possibilities for change (Bell, 2016, p. 18). The goals, structure, perspectives, and assumptions of the curriculum have been adapted and broadened so as to enable students to view "concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view" (Banks, 2007a, p. 255), foster students' skills to be "effective, moral, caring, and active citizens in a troubled world" (Banks, 2007b, p. 3), and ultimately support an "educated democracy' (Osborne, 2006, p. 8).

Social Citizenship, Community Engagement, and 21st-Century Skills in the Italian Curriculum at the University of Illinois at Chicago

In this section, we discuss a transformative FL pedagogy that, through a variety of instructional activities and extracurricular projects, integrates into the Italian curriculum at the University of Illinois at Chicago the 21st-century skills promoted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) with key elements of social justice education and a participatory view of education. In teaching topics commonly found in Italian textbooks and courses, we adopt a transformative and holistic pedagogical approach at all levels of instruction.

[17] For a social justice approach in the FL classroom, see Glynn, Wesely, & Wassell (2014).
[18] See Bissex & Bullock (1987); Eisner (1991). On teachers as participants see Carspecken (1996). For a definition of a social justice approach to FL teaching and learning see Nieto (2010).

Due to space constraints, we will focus exclusively on examples related to the topic of Italian food and eating habits, one of the many cultural topics that students explore throughout the Italian curriculum. Moving beyond shallow and stereotypical representations of typical Italian dishes and cuisine that conjure up idyllic and picturesque environments, mouthwatering dishes, and happy multigenerational gatherings of Italian families, our curriculum fosters students' critical and intercultural reflections on the cultural, social, political, economic, and ethical contexts of eating and on metaphorical functions of food in Italian history and contemporary society. Students develop their foreign language skills through exposure to a variety of discourses and genres (films, literature, historical sources, cookbooks, advertising, songs, and so on) while also learning to critically question common misconceptions and stereotypical views of Italian culture and society by analyzing concepts and issues from several perspectives. In the process, they gain a more in-depth understanding of the complexity of Italian culinary history and an appreciation of diversity as "inextricably bound" with social justice.[19]

One of our sixth-semester advanced topic courses (Literary and Cinematic Kitchens. Decoding Food in Italian Culture) is aimed at developing Italian language skills and knowledge of Italian history and culture through the exploration of food and eating habits as multifaceted and ambiguous symbols of Italian cultural constructions. Students explore the historical evolution of Italian cuisine; the concept of taste as a product of history; the relationship between class, tastes, and lifestyles; and discourses on gender, class, ethnicity, and identity as embodied in representations of food preparations and consumptions through a variety of authentic visual and printed media. While it is not within the scope of this study to describe the full reach and breadth of this specific course, we'll briefly touch upon two of its units as an example of a

[19] For the concepts of diversity and social justice as "inextricably bound together" see Bell (2016, p. 4).

transformative approach to the topic of food. The first unit focuses on the analysis and discussion of a nineteenth century text (*Il ventre di Napoli*, 1884) written by female author Matilde Serao in the aftermath of Italy's unification and within the literary context of the Italian verismo movement. Students begin by reading and discussing an article that reconstructs the cultural history of the tomato, pizza's main ingredient, as a product that was brought to Europe from the New World in the sixteenth century. This initial assignment is aimed at raising students' appreciation of the complexity of Italian 'national' cuisine not only in its regional varieties, but also in the context of a long history of global and often violent exchanges. Students then read excerpts from Matilde Serao's 1884investigative report, *Il ventre di Napoli/The Bowels of Naples,* written in the aftermath of yet another outbreak of cholera that had taken a huge toll on the inhabitants of the poorest and packed quarters of Naples. While science had not yet identified the cause of the disease, it was generally believed that it originated within the dark, putrid slums of the city, an idea that magnified popular fears and widened social-class divides while encouraging disparaging, rather than compassionate, views of Naples and its most indigent inhabitants among tourists and the middle class. In her writing, conceived as a response to the government plan to "disembowel" Naples (an unsympathetic word which was used to refer to the government's plans to demolish the fatiscent quarters of the city and build new ones) and to disparaging comments made by contemporary commentators on the character of the Neapolitan people, Serao exposes the desperate poverty and filth of the 19th-century Neapolitan slums. She also highlights the resilience, generosity, and appreciation for beauty of Naples' poorest dwellers while making the case that poverty was not due to laziness and lack of character, as it was often assumed at the time; rather, it was the result of a problematic divide between the newly unified Italian state and its people, a divide that had left the city of Naples to its own devices. Among

Serao's vivid representations of the countless difficulties experienced by Neapolitans, especially women, in their struggle to survive, we find a section in which the author describes the ghastly dwellings that housed the indigent as well the foods and the ways of consumption typical of the 19th-century Neapolitan slums. Even rudimentary cooking was impossible in those tiny and crowded domestic spaces, and thus the poor were forced to live and consume their food in the streets, at considerable risk for their health. The cheapest dish that they could afford, at the price of one *soldo*, was a slice of pizza, a disgusting, flies-covered piece of uncooked dough which Serao associates with the worst of Neapolitans ills. After reading excerpts of Serao's text, students compare and contrast her compassionate depictions of the Neapolitans slums and call for social justice and change with excerpts from some of her contemporaries' vehement and heartless attacks against Naples and its inhabitants, identifying different perspectives and ethical takes on the social issue of poverty and its negative impact on people's health in 19th-century Naples.[20] As students critically reflect on the difficult road that brought pizza to its current global popularity, they learn to interpret and analyze a cultural product and refine their overall language proficiency by discussing literary and social issues in Italian; to interpret and analyze a literary text in its social, cultural, and historical context; and to confront ideas and issues from a variety of different perspectives. They also acquire interdisciplinary awareness through comparison with other disciplines, such as history, urban planning, science, and medicine. To conclude the unit and connect the plight of 19th-century society to contemporary urban settings and learners' lived experiences, students work in groups to identify, discuss, and write a report on how poverty,

[20] For additional bibliography and a discussion of the text in the context of late-19th-century *letteratura putrida*, see Fabbian (2012, pp. 56–58).

food insecurity, and poor nutrition negatively impact health and well-being in their own communities.

Our reflections on, and discussion of, food and lifestyles as symbols of power (and lack thereof) and social class extends to the following unit, in which students analyze and discuss *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* by Pellegrino Artusi, a 19th-century didactic text on gastronomy written for middle-class housewives and their cooks. The text is a landmark work in Italian culture and a template for a bourgeois national cuisine and identity respectful of local culinary traditions and mindful of the relationship between food intake and health. While much of Italy's population subsisted on a meager diet, Artusi showed a narrowly classist view of society and exhibited a remarkable indifference to the plight of rural poor.[21] *La scienza in cucina* offers learners the opportunity to analyze and deconstruct a complex, multilayered cultural text in its social and historical context; it also provides a counternarrative to Serao's concerns over poverty and malnutrition as learners identify, and critically reflect on, the differences between the diet of the bourgeoisie and that of Serao's Neapolitans and of the millions of Italians who, in the years that followed the unification of Italy, fled the country in search of a better future. Through their work in the foreign language, students learn the transferable skill of organizing and expressing their thoughts, using quotes and data to support ideas and interpretations, and drawing coherent conclusions; develop cultural and global awareness by encountering and interpreting the otherness of a different culture, geographical space, and time; explore the

[21] Even after Stefano Iacini's report had fully documented, and brought to national attention, the dire conditions and dismaying malnutrition of the poor, in his introductory health guidelines Artusi is rather dismissive of the predicaments of the masses: "It goes without saying that I am speaking here of the privileged classes, since those not favored by fortune are forced, in spite of themselves, to make a virtue of necessity and to seek consolation in the belief that an active, frugal life leads to a sound body and lasting health" (transl. Baca and Sartarelli, p. 14).

historical evolution and complexity of Italian cuisine; and reflect on social and economic disparities in food consumption, identifying and interpreting relations of power between social classes. By raising learners' awareness on issues of social justice and injustice both diachronically and synchronically, we encourage their engagement with the ideological and concrete realities of their own world.

For a fifth-semester Italian language and culture course aimed at developing foreign language skills and knowledge of Italian history and culture through the exploration of regional identities, we designed a unit on food traditions and the agricultural industry in the Southern region of Puglia aimed at fostering students' inquiry and critical reflections on the topic of food. Through a multimedia, multidisciplinary approach and the analysis of a variety of authentic texts and intellectually and socially relevant cultural content, students reflect on the politics and economic impact of food production, preparation, and consumption; they learn to identify systems of labor exploitation in the Italian food industry; they discuss environmental concerns, cultural perspectives, and local practices that affect sustainability, economic growth, and public health. Intercultural comparisons were drawn with the issue of migrant agricultural workers in the United States in an effort to deal critically with students' own realities and to foster reflections on the logic of the present economic system and labor and environmental policies. Students, for example, read a brief article and watch a documentary that raise awareness of the grueling working and dire housing conditions of immigrant farm workers, most of whom come from sub-Saharan Africa illegally. Afterward, in small groups they discuss this rampant and unchecked immigrant exploitation system (*caporalato*, or gang system) that exploits farm workers across Italy and allows Italy to be one of the biggest fruit and vegetable exporters in Europe. On the other hand, students also analyze and discuss local initiatives that promote sustainable and

ethical agricultural models of economic growth while also fighting the *caporalato* system, protecting farm workers' rights, and creating opportunities to integrate immigrants into the fabric of local communities. Students work in groups to envision solutions to similar issues of labor, discrimination, and migrant exploitation that affect their own communities, developing the awareness and knowledge necessary to critically analyze structural features of justice and injustice in their personal lives and their own socialization within institutional organizations, local entities, and society at large. By fostering in students a deeper appreciation of the concept of food production and consumption in Italy and what it entails, we hope to help learners develop a sense of civic engagement, connect their intellectual work to action, and commit to changing normalized patterns and behaviors which perpetuate systems of inequality (Bell, 2016, p. 4).

While not all instructors have the flexibility to design their own instructional material for an entire course, we encourage the Italian faculty to create task-based activities that complement textbook content, provide multiple perspectives, and sensitize students to issues of social justice. For example, in a third-semester Italian language course, students watch *Italy: Love It or Leave It*, a 2011 documentary by Luca Ragazzi and Gustav Hofer, featuring a gay couple that take a road trip throughout the Italian peninsula in the iconic Fiat 500 car to explore Italy's glorious past and future potential as they struggle to decide whether to migrate to Berlin for better work opportunities or to remain in Italy despite its many economic, social, and political challenges. En route, they first stop at the Fiat factory, a symbol of Italy's economic boom in the 1960s and interview an assembly line worker who struggles to make ends meet on her monthly wage. Another stop is at the Bialetti factory, maker of the iconic stovetop espresso pot. Luca and Gustav find the place closed up and empty, as all work has been outsourced to Romania. As students learn about iconic Italian design (Fiat, Bialetti) and products that are traditionally

associated with Italy, in the eyes of many foreigners, with Italian “dolce vita” lifestyle, they work collaboratively on a variety of online and in-class activities designed to promote linguistic skills and cultural awareness. However, learners move beyond stereotypical images of iconic products and practices of the foreign culture (Fiat 500, coffee drinking, and coffee pots) by being exposed to, and reflecting on, their full cultural complexity and socioeconomic underpinnings. As a concluding activity, learners, working in groups, plan a similar road trip to visit sites and interview people that loom large in their respective nation’s collective consciousness.

In an effort to expand learning outside of the classroom, promote appreciation for diversity, and connect global awareness to social engagement in local communities, we organize extracurricular activities that are open to students of Italian as well as to the general public and aimed at promoting students’ physical well-being and lifelong awareness of the importance of healthy eating habits. For instance, we offer cooking demonstrations to show students how to prepare inexpensive, easy, and healthy Italian dishes; in collaboration with local experts, professional chefs, and nutritionists, we organize workshops on the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet to help learners make informed decisions when it comes to choosing what foods to consume. We also strive to create opportunities for students to engage in active citizenship and the pursuit of social justice in the local community. For example, we invited to campus the Italian owner of a local restaurant who is also the founder of Recipe for Change, a not-for-profit organization that helps Cook County inmates reenter the job market after their release from prison by providing culinary and life-skills training.

Our diachronic and synchronic treatment of the discourse on food across the curriculum is only one example of the ways we strive to embed foreign language teaching and 21st-century skills acquisition, as described by ACTFL, into multidisciplinary themes that enhance students'

awareness of, and critical reflection on, diversity, democracy as a process, and issues of social justice within a participatory view of education. Other strategies and outreach initiatives include:[22]

- designing an inclusive curriculum that incorporates the voices of the marginalized and underrepresented. By including diversity and representation into all courses, we strive to nurture students' social and cross-cultural sensitivity and to offer learners a more realistic portrayal of a multiracial, multicultural, and multiethnic Italian contemporary society;
- maintaining a critical approach to instructional material adopted for basic language courses by problematizing their content; identifying stereotypes and omissions; and questioning textual materials that perpetuate dominant assumptions about race, gender, social status, and sexuality.[23] For example, in an effort to offer linguistic solutions to issues of binarism and hierarchy both in English and in a grammatically gendered language such as Italian, we introduced nonbinary pronouns, starting in the beginning language classroom, and continue to explore appropriate references to gender identities;
- creating our own personalized and free instructional materials. These efforts serve the purpose of containing students' textbook expenses as well as using materials

[22] For an in-depth analysis of a multipronged social justice approach to foreign language teaching and learning at UIC see Fabbian & Zanotti Carney (2018a, 2018b).

[23] Examples of guiding criteria for textbook analysis and classroom discussion in Fabbian & Zanotti Carney (2018a). For a study of the representation of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, socio-economic class, age, and disability in Italian language textbooks see Fabbian, Valfredini & Zanotti Carney (2019).

specifically suited to our academic institutional context, curricular needs, and students' interests;[24]

- promoting student-centered, collaborative pedagogical practices that are respectful of diversity and empower students' voices in the classroom (e.g., surveys, blogs, group work, research projects, and oral presentations);[25]
- mentoring and advocating so as to connect formal education with experiential, community-based learning (e.g., facilitating internships and volunteering opportunities locally and internationally; soliciting donations and applying for grants; and encouraging students' involvement in high-impact practices such as study abroad, leadership positions in students' organizations, or research projects);[26]
- including students' voices and lived experiences as children of immigrants and/or citizens of a multiethnic society by incorporating into the curriculum courses and/or materials focused on the Italian American experience of immigration and on immigration in general;

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[24] By supplementing commercial instructional material with our own, we were able to require students to purchase a single textbook for the first three semesters of Italian at a discounted price. For students enrolled in the more advanced levels of Italian, we eliminated commercial textbooks altogether. For a discussion on the advantages of open educational resources, see Blyth (2012).

[25] On the benefits of collaborative learning and its role within a social justice approach to teaching see Bruffee (1989) and Adams (2016).

[26] The UIC Office of Student Affairs has identified six areas of engagement (Leadership and Involvement; Research; Environmental Awareness and Sustainability; Civic Engagement and Social Justice; Career Development; Global Perspective and Diversity) with the goal that every student will engage in at least two high-impact activities while at the university. For further information, see: http://vcsa.uic.edu/impactmain/. One of the authors served as a member of the UIC Student Success – Extend Student Engagement via Programming project team. For a discussion on how higher education can enhance the opportunities for students by connecting liberal education and professional training see Sullivan and Rosin (2008). For a study on the positive outcomes of study abroad experiences, especially on underprivileged students, see Redden (2010) and Kuh (2008). Data collected from the UIC Study Abroad Office support Kuh's findings on the positive outcome of study abroad on students' academic success and show that UIC continues to outperform national averages in the percentages of underrepresented students who enroll in study abroad programs (49% of underserved students participating in 2014/15, up from 39% in 2007/2008). For the full report see Deegan.

- facilitating students' success within and outside the academic environment by designing an explicit and unified pedagogy (e.g., in our genre-based writing curriculum we provide access to the sources of understanding which learners need to engage critically with the texts, comprehend and challenge the foreign culture and their own, and produce socially appropriate texts);[27]
- disclosing "insider knowledge" (Collins, 1997, p. 82) and re-socializing students in the academic setting: We use syllabi as powerful tools to make explicit faculty's expectations, pedagogical practices, and rules of professional interaction (Worthen, 2017); we provide tutorials on study management, information on Italian-related events in the Chicago area, and campus resources for students' advancement and well-being (Sulik & Keys, 2014);
- increasing accessibility to, and flexibility in, students' learning experiences and fostering digital literacy by adopting a blended format in all basic language courses.[28]
- intentionally promoting cognitive and civic awareness through in-class discussion of the role played by FL and the liberal arts in fostering learners' analytical skills, expressive abilities, and civic participation; and

[27] Scaffolding metacognition about genre writing assignments include: explicit modeling and inductive introduction to specific aspects of the genre through multimodal, collaborative activities; scaffolded analysis of specific textual models to draw students' attention to rhetorical action; and a checklist to support students' output and guide the self-editing and revision processes. Commented samples of students' finished products provide a model and additional writing input for students. For a full discussion of the Italian writing curriculum at UIC including sample writing assignments, see Fabbian & Zanotti Carney (2016).

[28] Blended basic foreign language courses at UIC meet three days per week in a classroom, on the MWF grid, for 50 minutes each time, and incorporate one hour in which students complete online activities on their own outside of the classroom. For a full discussion of the Italian blended program at UIC, see Fabbian, Zanotti Carney & Grgurovic (2017).

- connecting academics and praxis as members or leaders of professional associations and not-for-profit organizations and promoting awareness of FL education as a powerful force to affect social change.

Conclusion

As support for the privatization of education grows stronger and the very existence of public institutions is highly contested, we cannot take public education, its role and purposes, for granted. Within the present crumbling support for public education, FL departments need to reconceptualize their scope and mission within academic institutions by embracing the type of literacy that makes FL education relevant to students' diverse communities and experiences. As foreign language educators at a public institution, we ground our teaching in practices and scholarship that intentionally promote public schools' civic and humanistic purposes and their vital role, in Thomas Jefferson's words, in "rendering the people [. . .] the ultimate guardians of their own liberty" (1955, p. 148). In providing a multicultural education that values the humanities and social sciences and is relevant to our student body, we affirm and promote diversity, and we contribute in weaving together an engaged community of educated citizens with shared values, perspectives, and identities—a powerful and effective antidote to the tribalization or balkanization of our society (Eggington, 2019). Our curriculum is designed to help UIC students develop the information, media, and technology literacies as well as life and career skills, which are vital to succeed in a 21st-century global environment. Our ultimate goals are to facilitate learners' participation in the democratic process and to empower them to become agents of social change. By framing FL and culture instruction within a social justice perspective, we reposition the teaching of FL as fundamentally relevant to collegiate education and as an "apprenticeship in democracy" (Nieto, 2010, p. 46).

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