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Olga Vasile - Faculty Fellows Project Final Report

Course development: ITAL 2130, “Reading in Italian: Sustainability”

(for the Department of French and Italian)

During academic year 2024-2025 I designed and taught a new intermediate level language course for the Italian program. The course is taught in Italian and students are expected to speak Italian at the best of their abilities.

The reason behind the creation of this course is that I wanted to give an original contribution to the traditional course offered at this level, which aimed primarily at preparing students for literary analysis. I felt that a content-based language course ([CBI](#)) would revive interest in the Italian program as students unfortunately are less and less interested in traditional literary studies. My Department Chair, Prof. Suzanne Magnanini and Italian program Coordinator, Prof. Priscilla Craven approved the creation of the course.

I proposed course that would fulfill some of the same language learning objectives, while addressing current issues that are at the core of the University of Colorado, Boulder educational mission (<https://www.colorado.edu/academicfutures/common-curriculum>), and that are relevant to students’ interest and concerns. Beyond the university, “sustainability” is one of the most urgent contemporary global issues, so my course hopes to contribute to prepare students to be active participants in a world full of complex challenges. I hope to develop their the ability to relate and understand different cultural perspectives and, possibly, to communicate effectively with local communities.

The topic of “sustainability” granted me the possibility to teach language and culture related to a broad range of semantic fields and cultural issues. It would be highly motivational for students because they could approach the topics by different personal and academic angles. These topics promote and interdisciplinary and intercultural mindset.

One of the major challenges in developing this course was to provide appropriate learning material for students with a relatively broad range of language proficiency. In Spring 2025, my second time offering this course, I had the additional challenge that some students could not take a prerequisite/corequisite course due to low enrollment of that particular course, hence I had to modify and simplify the course.

As the title of the course indicates the course focuses primarily on extensive language exposure via reading and comprehension. Moreover, additional language skills are targeted: oral interaction and presentation (with less emphasis on writing). Students are encouraged to put to work their prior language knowledge, which is somehow contrived by systematic grammar practice, to freely express their own meaning.

For this purpose, I chose a wide range of resources:

- 1) a textbook written for Italian children aged 8-13 which explains in easy terms the 17 sustainable development goals of the ONU 2030 Agenda (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>): Rossella Kohler, *Possiamo cambiare il mondo, L'educazione civica raccontata ai bambini*, Mondadori, 2021. I developed all comprehension questions and glossaries for the readings in this book.

The readings are sometimes linguistically redundant both in terminology and grammatical structures. These recursive patterns help to ensure that students practice essential Italian morphosyntactic structures with growing confidence and accuracy, conceptualize the notion of sustainability in its complexity and reflect on the interrelated nature of its multiple aspects.

- 2) the course includes several more challenging “texts that have the purpose to challenge students, push them beyond their comfort zone so that they actively engage with the texts and develop comprehension strategies. These are mainly current articles and excerpts from a variety of resources, essays, literature, websites etc. I developed all glossaries and comprehension questions for these texts.
- 3) Moreover, the course has an exploratory dimension that allow students to follow their specific personal and academic interests and research Italian “sustainability” initiatives in a variety of fields. Students’ free exploration and contribution to the course is demonstrated through oral presentations of different length and style, and a final project.
- 4) While the literary dimension is no longer at the core of the course, I use contemporary literary texts that deal with sustainability issues such as loss of biodiversity, human impact on the natural world, and climate change.

During class time, I adopted several active learning strategies, that presuppose students’ preparation for the class according to the class program and schedule (sample included).

The standard class pattern is:

- 1) a brief interactive lecture in which I present current data on a particular SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) and I highlight specific relevant vocabulary. All PowerPoints are made available on Canvas for students review (sample attached).
- 2) Students work in pair to share their answers to the comprehension questions of specific assigned texts.
- 3) we review the answers as a whole group and discuss.
Alternatively, we would read the texts out loud, I would ask comprehension questions we would then discuss, express opinions, give examples.

Additional class patterns are workshop style

Students explore specific websites, or documents in class and then give short reports on what they found out (sometimes this is followed by short posts in Canvas discussions). Occasionally class preparation consists in students watching brief videos and posting reactions or presenting what they saw in class.

Assessments consisted in:

- Preparation and participation to discussion and other class activities
- A presentation and a final project
- 3 exams demonstrate knowledge of the content and ability to personally conceptualize the issues discussed. The structure is: vocabulary questions (matching, or multiple choice), short answer questions, summary of an article. In assessing these exams, I pay more attention to the personal expression of meaning and ability to communicate and less to spelling and grammatical accuracy, as this course focuses mainly on oral production.
- A portfolio summarizes some of the activities carried out during the semester: vocabulary learned, presentations, final project, critical reactions to other students work and summaries (from the exams, with corrections).

In general, the course has been well received by students and most of them have been very successful, however some of them had some issues with the more open-ended nature of a content-based course (CBI), the lack of a specific textbook designed for language learning, and sometimes difficulties with following a program and accessing documents clearly listed and posted on Canvas. Students are more familiar with traditional grammar-based courses, with a textbook which has all the questions in one place and with little space to elaborate with the language in original ways. Other students on the other hand appreciated the ability to express opinions in a more free and generative way and were more apt at finding the resources.

While I loved teaching the course, I am cautiously positive about its outcomes. It inevitably generated in some students a sense of insecurity and fear. I think these challenges are part of learning process, but they also require continuous reassessment and adjustment on my part. It is sometimes hard to adopt the right differentiation strategies with students of different abilities and

needs. Some students are up to challenges and capable of working through “raw” learning material, others cannot and/or will never be pleased.

Producing and orchestrating this course required a tangible amount of work for me: with no preset manual to work with, I had to research, adapt and produce course material. From a financial standpoint, I am grateful to ASSETT. In the Summer 2024, I was able to use some of the funds received for my prior faculty fellow project (2019-2020) to do preliminary research. I kept updating material in both semesters as this course presents up-to-date information about Italian culture and current facts.

As mentioned, the course has been approved by my department and, due to a reconfiguration of the whole Italian program, it should become one of the “special topics” courses offered in the higher division. It will be taken concurrently with other higher division courses. I was asked by my chair to submit a “course recoding” from a 2000-level course to a 3000-level course, which should take effect when the new Italian curriculum is launched, I believe possibly in Fall 2026.

However, students will have probably the same language proficiency than the students who took the course this year, thus the course will have approximately the same structure. It will make sense for students who are no longer interested in “literary studies”, but who are interested in improving their language skills while exploring authentic aspects of Italian culture, nurturing their intercultural competence, developing basic critical and creative skills. The learning outcomes of this course will certainly be transferable to other Italian courses of the same level or higher.

I am very thankful to have developed this project while being an ASSETT faculty fellow. I was extremely pleased to be exposed to a wide range of teaching strategies. I found inspirational for instance the strategies presented by Dr. Beth Osnes on “Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching”, which are consonant with my teaching approach and that I applied straight away in class. I also appreciated ASSETT’s technological support to implement some of the course assessment strategies, in particular a BuffsCreate portfolio that students submitted at the end of the semester (link to sample students portfolios included to support this report); developing a mid-semester survey to check on students satisfaction, and confidence in the course; ASSETT-VIP observations to monitor teaching and learning techniques to make sure students were actively involved during class time.

I mentioned BuffsCreate portfolio to my Italian colleagues and some of them are considering it as an alternative to the more traditional “senior essay” that Italian Majors must produce to graduate. I believe portfolios are a very powerful assessment tool in language learning and this is supported by language teaching organization worldwide (Council of Europe, European Language portfolio: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portfolio> and by ACTFL, LinguaFolio)

Above all, I was happy to present my project to the 2024-25 Faculty fellow cohort and receive their feedback, as well as to learn about other projects and be inspired by them.

I thank Amanda McAndrew (ASSETT) and her team for teaching my students to create portfolios with BuffsCreate; Sarah Andrews (ASSETT) for fine tuning my mid-semester survey and for observing class dynamics in the Fall, and Faculty fellow Prof. Azza Kamal with whom I could share the same interest in sustainability issues. With the latter during 2024-25 I was also in a different working group (CSJE: [Climate, Sustainability, Justice, and Education Working Group](#)) sponsored by BFA and CTL, where we discussed the possibility of creating pathways for students to demonstrate their competence on sustainability and climate change. It was great to see the high investment on sustainability issues from broad range of academic angles. I enjoyed the complementarity of ASSETT and CSJE and this has contributed to my enthusiasm in developing and teaching my ITAL 2130 course. I can see the clear benefits of this type of course for its interdisciplinary nature, for the creation of an intercultural education, and, of course, for enhancing students' foreign language competence and in general, communicative skills.

In addition, I want to thank the contribution of Romance Language Librarian, Kathia Ibacache, who was instrumental in getting students started on their independent research projects (presentation and final project). She also assisted me in purchasing several resources, which were extremely important to develop my expertise on the subject.

To sum it up, I hope that my course will have a positive impact on my department which is struggling with retention issues, on students in the Italian program by empowering them to talk about sustainability issues in Italian and to learn about current Italian culture. CBI courses on sustainability are, as we speak becoming more popular in World language education in K-12 and higher education. I hope to be able to share the work done at CU with other colleagues nationwide.

I am including with this report:

- Sample students' portfolios links. They demonstrate students' work throughout the semester, however obviously the work was done in class during class time. I was very proud to see most of the students present and discuss fabulous projects demonstrating their personal and academic involvement with these complex issues.
- Syllabus
- Detailed program (sample)
- PowerPoint accompanying a course lecture (sample)

