Alessia Valfredini

Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Fordham University

Abstract:

The teaching of culture is often at risk of being detached from the teaching of language, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of presenting cultural content free of a critical reflection on both the target culture(s) and one own’s. Byram has debunked arguments that limited linguistic proficiency prevents comprehensive and critical approaches to culture and advocated that the teaching of culture should be intertwined with the teaching of language. At the same time, a critical engagement with cultural content is key to respond to stereotypical views of the target culture and to promote critical skills transferable across disciplines and contexts. This paper, expanding previous scholarship on the pedagogical use of commercials for the teaching of Italian, provides a framework for critical engagement with cultural content via the example of a project-based learning unit in which lower Intermediate students of Italian analyzed commercials in order to reflect on the Italian and American cultures and their representations. The unit: integrates the study of commercials within a curricular progression that prepares the learners with the necessary linguistic tools to complete the task; requires pair of students to conduct a contrastive analysis of two commercials of the same Italian or American product, developed for the Italian and U.S. markets (for they offer portraits of *italianità* or *Americanness* that differ as they cater to a native or to a foreign audience); and, through a collaborative inductive approach, includes recursive whole-class discussions where the instructor poses questions aimed at facing the implications of the observed representations. This process provides
affordances to gain a nuanced, complex, and critical reflection, far from simplistic stereotypical views.

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Developing Cultural Literacy: The Contrastive Study of TV Advertisements.

The case described in this paper aims at furthering students’ cultural literacy by engaging them in a critical study of Italian cultural products. The study is designed to elicit critical inductive analysis of the perspectives embedded in cultural products and to counter the risk of stereotyping and othering via guided collaborative inquiry.

While the teaching of culture, in different forms and to different extents, has been long part of foreign language programs, in recent years its nature and goals have been under increasing scrutiny, as practitioners and scholars reflect on which type of cultural literacy is germane to the students’ full responsible participation in the contemporary world. An indication of the relevance of the issue is the release of the Can-do statements for intercultural communication (NCSSFL-ACTFL) by the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The statements are rooted in the earlier drafted World-Readiness Standards (The National Standards Collaborative Board), that identify cultures as one the five prominent areas of focus (commonly referred to as the five Cs). In the ACTFL paradigm, cultural learning involves the study of products, practices, and perspectives (the three Ps, articulates in World-Readiness Standards 2.1 and 2.2). Cutshall argued that, in the teaching of culture in world languages courses, products and practices should be considered as springboards to access and examine perspectives. Translating the three Ps and the ACTFL paradigm in concrete learning units can be elusive (Blad, Ryan, and Serafin) but there have been scholarly attempts to operationalize the construct of cultural literacy that can guide curricular and lesson design. Barrette and Paesani, following a systematic review of existing literature, suggested that cultural literacy is comprised of ten factors, articulated under the three broad categories of knowledge, context of use, and process.
Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel, in reporting the results of ad-hoc task force for cultural learning in Italian, list four areas for cultural learning: awareness, knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions (54-55). These models share a nuanced and comprehensive view of culture as situated and rooted in ways of thinking.

Yet, the teaching of *textbook culture*, a superficial presentation of unexamined or unquestioned information, mainly related to observable traits of the culture and often limited to the *knowledge* category in Barrette and Paesani’s model (i.e. excluding *context of use* and *process* factors), is common. Such approach presents geographical information, cultural artifacts, and traditions in ways that are not conducive to connect the information presented to worldviews and perspectives. Notwithstanding the obstacles highlighted by the literature (Chang and Yang; Li)\(^2\), studies of courses that focused on cultural comparisons, on intercultural communication, and on culture as an entry point to ways of thinking indicated that engaging students into critical learning of culture did effectively expose students to cultural perspectives, beyond the knowledge aspect of cultural learning. Such approaches translate in changes in motivation and attitudes toward target language speakers (Acheson, Nelson, and Luna), critical appreciation of cultural differences and similarities, and “a more positive attitude towards ‘otherness’”(Li and Liu, 97). These studies encourage instructors to overcome the challenges of training and availability of published materials and effectively pursue a deeper approach to the teaching of culture. The present paper is driven by the question How can language instructors teach culture as a complex perspective, in dialogue with one’s own culture(s), inseparable from the language, and examined critically and from a holistic, interdisciplinary framework?

The importance of making engagement with perspectives a primary goal of language teaching is even more compelling in higher education courses.\(^3\) In college settings, the
involvement of higher order cognitive skills via critical examination of cultural content and of multiple, culturally-related perspectives (that provide different points of view) make world language courses instrumental to the overall intellectual growth of the students (Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel) opening a pedagogy of possibilities (Muirhead). To this end, the distinction between Our Way, My Way, and Their Way (Damen) is a valuable analytical lens to counter the danger of stereotyping. While the adjectives Our and Their frame culture as an element common to and shared by a specific social group, thinking about My Way emphasizes that “each individual culture bearer (you) carries around his/her own personal version of that social blueprint or map” (88). This distinction is key to set the basis for critical discussions that are sensitive to “the dangers of stereotyping evidenced in the transmission of generalized statements concerning cultural patterns and mores” (81) and to the role power plays in shaping our views of cultures. Adding this dimension to the three Ps framework counters the risk of validating “existing essentialized ideas of the culture of the Self and the Other” (Kubota 35). Additional tools advocated by Kubota are: “(1) employing a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, approach to analyzing culture, (2) exploring cultural diversity within a culture in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, generation, geographical location, and so on, (3) understanding the dynamic nature of culture in historical contexts, and (4) critically understanding the discursive construction of culture” (35). These four tenets, an emphasis on perspectives, and attention to the Our Way, My Way, Their Way framework (Damen) are the theoretical lenses that inform the view of cultural instruction adopted in this paper.

In pedagogical terms, this paper advocates for a markedly inductive approach to cultural literacy learning. The experience of language teachers interviewed by Cutshall made a case for student-led research projects in which cultural learning derives from an inductive examination of
products and practices. The inductive approach is enhanced by recursive rounds of discussion at the individual, pair, group and whole-class level since whole class dialogic conversation adds value to individual or group work (Kramsch). Among the advantages of an inductive approach is that starting from products and practices makes perspectives accessible even at lower levels of linguistic proficiency, provided that instructors design lesson plans seeking connections between language instruction and cultural content (Barnes-Karol and Broner; Byram).4

The learning unit described in this paper aims at having students conduct an inquiry on cultural perspectives while progressing their linguistic development; it actively seeks to engage factors ranging across all of the three categories that comprise cultural literacy (i.e. not only knowledge, but context of use and process as well) and to promote a complex, dynamic, non essentialist view of culture.

Commercials as a cultural product

This paper presents the work done in several sections of an Intermediate Italian I course within an undergraduate Italian program. The aim of the classroom project was having students explore the different cultural perspectives embedded in a particular type of cultural product, pairs of commercials of the same product that were developed respectively for the Italian and the U.S. market.

Commercials have a remarkable pedagogical potential for (a) they offer a linguistically approachable way to entry a conversation on worldviews and perspectives; (b) they foster student interest, engagement, and motivation5 (Etienne & Vanbaelen; Pavan); (c) they provide cultural insights due to their representation of desirability and values. In the project described here, adopting an inductive approach provided affordances to practice linguistic structures and
consolidate lexicon, thus sustaining the parallel learning of cultural content and language (Byram). 6

Pavan framed studies on commercials as a way to present a cultural view that is current at a certain time, “a cross section of Italy at the time the message is produced and broadcasted” (117). 7 Vegna examined commercials to discuss views from Italy and of Italy, studying representations of Italy and Italians in foreign commercials and comparing international Barilla® pasta commercials to expose embedded views of family and Italianity, while debating cultural views of the moral acceptability of cheating, the value attributed to individualism or ambition, or the various forms patriotism can take, to name a few. Blad, Ryan, and Serafin describe a learning unit where the diachronic study of laundry commercials is an entrypoint to discuss the evolution of gender roles in Italy from the 1970s to the present.

In common with these studies, the current report is based on the belief that commercials are a valuable tool to elicit the students’ interest and examine cultural views. While the class project is rooted in student-led research and inductive analysis (Cutshall), it includes recursive instructor-moderated discussions (Byram) that brought explicit attention to the cultural perspectives embedded in the commercials.

**Design and settings**

This project was developed for an Intermediate Italian I course (second semester) at the undergraduate level in a North-Eastern University. Several sections of the course were involved over a period of a few semesters.

Students enrolled in the course had either successfully passed one intensive semester-long Introductory course or had placed at this level when starting college. All of them were learners of Italian as a foreign language. The course is part of a mandatory language requirement
for the vast majority of the students, therefore the level of intrinsic motivation varied considerably, with several students enrolling in the course with the main goal to fulfill a requirement. Several sections of the course, taught by multiple instructors over four semesters, have adopted this project.

The project presented in this paper is well integrated in a gradual syllabus and is part of a unit where students are introduced to the topic of mass media and the study of pronouns. At this point, students have the core linguistic tools to make statements that describe TV commercials in concrete terms, but they also possess the tools to make general comments by using impersonal statements. The concrete aspect of describing what the video shows makes this project extremely accessible at lower levels of linguistic proficiency; more abstract conclusions develop from the bottom up, after having seen several sets of commercials, via inferences that typically can be expressed in simple sentences.

The classwork related to this project involves two overlapping but conceptually distinct parts at each class meeting. In the first, a pair of students presents to the class the two commercials they chose in a mini-lesson. In the second, a class discussion with interventions from the instructor serves the purpose to reflect on the cultural representations embedded in the commercials, identify their implications, and recast the comments in light of the whole series of mini-lessons up to that point. The format is repeated until all pairs had the chance to lead a mini-lesson.

a) Students’ mini-lesson presentations

Working in pairs or groups of three, students are instructed to select two commercials for the same product, produced at roughly the same time period, for different international markets:
the Italian market and the US market. The product can originate from any country in the world, but most groups choose Italian or American products. This part of the project centers on the inductive analysis of the cultural products. The presenters’ task is to conduct a mini-lesson of 12-15 minutes in which they show the commercials to their peers, help them understand the commercials at the literal level, and guide them with interpretative remarks and questions. The guidelines for the mini-lesson include a list of four key requirements:

1. Presenters must ensure that the peer audience understand the commercials at the literal level, providing support for vocabulary and contextual information as fit.
2. Presenters must engage the peer audience actively with specific tasks.
3. The activities designed by the presenters must address interpretations.
4. Any accompanying slide presentation is meant to be visual support, not a duplicate of what is said.

Typical questions that the mini-lesson leaders pose include: “Is this product consumed socially or in isolation? How’s the background/environment/setting? Which adjectives describe the product? Which feelings or emotions are associated to the product? What is the slogan in each of the commercials? Why should people buy this product according to each advertisement? Which differences and similarities do you notice in the (youth, family, couple, individual…) represented in the two commercials? Do you think the commercial has a happy ending or not? Which one is most effective for you?”. At the end of each mini-class all students are required to provide a brief feedback to the presenters and invited to take notes for future reference.

b) Discussing the commercials in a whole-class setting to notice patterns, highlight complexities, and question unwarranted generalizations
Following this inductive, student-led analysis, the instructor recursively introduces input and comments aimed at bringing explicit attention to cultural views (Byram). This step is essential in order to make sure that the analysis of cultural products is an entry point to perspectives. Whereas the pair/group work of leading a mini-class allows for a first hand, engaged analysis of the commercials, it is only through the cumulative collective work of discussing the commercials in class that perspectives can be accessed in their complexities and nuances.

The instructor’s remarks throughout the mini-lessons bring explicit attention to three interconnected key points. First, they help framing interpretation within an understanding of the purpose of commercials and the way they leverage on the values that are attributed to the target audience in order to sell a product. This lens introduces the complexity of representations, perspectives, and views layered in the cultural artifact. Whenever the product in the commercial is a representative of one of the two cultures (for example an Italian car maker or American soda producer), students need to read it as a representation of that culture in a way that would appeal to the audience, leveraging on the audience’s values and desires. In this sense commercials are extremely complex in the layers of representations and perspectives included, offering ideas of Americanness and Italianity for American and Italian audiences. Although these concepts are complex and fairly abstract, the experience of implementing this project in the classroom proved that they can be offered at a linguistically-accessible level if the remarks follow the view and discussion of an actual commercial. The questions posed bring explicit attention to certain concrete elements; although the questions and answers focus on concrete aspects of the texts, they activate inferences at a more abstract, critical level. At subsequent mini-classes, students
are encouraged to recall their inferences and try them on new text, ultimately inferring a more general analytical framework from their initial analyses.

A second, connected point that the instructor addresses explicitly is the idea of the multitude of realities and cultures that comprise a more ideal Italian or American culture, some more prominently visible, others invisible. The target of the commercial is not a whole country, but a subset, represented according to the perspective of the people who created the commercial.\textsuperscript{10} Again, rather than presenting this upfront and deductively applying it to the analysis, the instructor poses questions that raise the issue in the context of the mini-lessons led by the students. The fact that one of the commercials is for the US market facilitate this task, since it’s easier to relate issues of representation and stereotypical generalizations of groups when they apply to the context to which the students belong. At this layer of analysis, the exclusion, under representation, or questionable representation of particular groups based on class, gender,\textsuperscript{11} sex, race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical and mental ability, and so on, is brought to surface.

Finally, and connected to the two previous points, explicit attention is brought to the perspective of individuals, the \textit{My Way} version of culture, in Damen’s terms, “to make certain that students understand that the traits of the target of foreign culture [...] may or \textit{may not} be shared by all members of a given cultural group” (82)\textsuperscript{12}. At this point, issues of stereotypization, identifications, and attributed values emerge as part of a critical comment on the implications of the representations embedded in the commercial. Again, the inclusion of commercials developed for the US market is crucial, as students, by seeing their own depictions in commercials, will directly question the way American youth is represented. In agreement with Pavan, emphasis is
put on the practice of observing the manifestations of a consistently evolving culture, reflecting and questioning it.

In the final weeks of the project, when students have had the opportunity to examine several pairs of texts, “by locating certain knowledge about culture and cultural difference in discursive fields and exploring how such knowledge is produced in political and ideological struggles for power, it is possible to extend our knowledge beyond normative and essentialist thinking” (Kubota 35).

c) Final reflective paper

The cycle of inductive, student-led mini-lessons, and instructor-moderated discussions leads the class to engage into a critical examination of the cultural representations observable in the texts, it invites them to a dialectic reflection on the target culture(s) and their own, and encourages them to think about ways groups and individuals relate to aspects of culture represented in the commercials. The culmination of this process is a final, individual reflective piece of writing. The prompt is comprised by a first set of questions in the target language, Italian, and a second set of more challenging questions that students can answer in Italian or English. Some sample questions for the first part, in the target language, are:

1. Consider and refer to all the in-class presentations you saw. Which concepts stayed with you?

2. Whenever you detected a representation of Italianity or Americanness in the commercials, how were those characterized?

3. Which questions and/or personal comments do you have?13

The second part, in the target language or English, can ask questions such as (but not limited to):
1. How and what do commercials teach us about culture?

2. How do commercials represent a “culture”? Can we say that what we see in a commercial is a (direct) depiction of the target culture?

3. How do you feel regarding the differences you noted in the ways advertisers targeted the US and the Italian market?

4. Share your thoughts on what “culture” is, reflecting on the project.

Assessment

The assessment of students’ work is aligned with the principles that informed the design of this specific project: students’ direct engagement with inductive inquiry that combines language learning and cultural content, and activation of a framework for critical analysis of culture as a perspective. These three broad aspects are addressed in different assessment exercises: peer feedback on individual presentations; instructor’s evaluation of individual presentations in terms of structure and delivery of the presentation; and instructor’s assessment of the individual final reflective paper for critical content and cultural learning. Only the latter exercise is used to evaluate cultural literacy.

At the end of each mini-lesson, each member of the peer audience compiles telegraphic feedback to which the class refers as a compliment, a suggestion, a thank-you-for (a note on positive aspects of the presentation, a note on what could be improved, and a grazie, a thank you, or the personal take-away for the viewer) and, after sharing it with the instructor (who can thus gain a sense of the class reception), hands it to the presenting group. The purpose of this task is two-fold. If, on the one hand, via this activity peers offer feedback and acknowledge and celebrate the work done, on the other hand, they also engage in a reflection on the mini-lesson,
which encourages deeper engagement with the content and gives them an opportunity to think about their own mini-lesson, in the attempt to promote thoughtfully planned mini-lessons.

Additionally, at the end of each mini-lesson, the instructor grades the student leaders’ performance according to a rubric that takes into account research, active engagement of the class, communicative effectiveness, fluency, use of grammar for meaning making, and lexical choices. In other words, the emphasis is on two aspects, language and preparation, with the assumption that preparation (articulated in research, class engagement, and, in part, reflected in communicative effectiveness) will set the ground for the dialogic in-class reflection that will lead to the cultural content. Students are not expected to deliver fully developed critical content independently at this point. Cultural learning is the desired outcome of the whole project, a series of several mini-lessons, intended as collective conversation, rather than of individual presentations.

The attainment of cultural learning is evaluated via the final reflective writing that all students complete individually. In order to evaluate the responses, I developed a descriptive scale. The initial draft underwent several rounds of revision, each tested on the students’ responses until all responses could be reasonably described by one of the statements. The final scale includes four descriptions.\textsuperscript{14}

1. Student demonstrates a superficial/stereotypical/essentialist view of culture(s), not rooted into the commercials examined. Student does not raise issues of perspective or representation.

2. Student depicts an anecdotal view of culture(s), might make specific referrals to some elements of the commercials analyzed, but fails to draw general reflections. Student considers the commercials as a literal representation of a culture (face-value).
3. Student draws some general conclusions on culture based on the examined commercials. Student demonstrates understanding that commercials reflect a culture but fails to examine the layers of representation in their complexity and deeply question the literal representation.

4. Student draws critical conclusions on culture based on the examined commercials. Student demonstrates understanding that commercials reflect a culture in indirect, not literal ways and draws larger reflections on cultural representations or perspectives, questioning stereotypical representations of cultures and avoiding binary interpretations.

**Challenges**

Provided that the project presented here has limitations in terms of its applicability to other contexts of learning and is offered as an exemplification of the guiding principle, not as a directly transferable model, it is helpful to examine some challenges that emerged and strategies that can be implemented to respond to them, which are likely to emerge also in other contexts.

Most of the challenges repeatedly encountered during the cycles of student-led analysis of the commercials and class-wide discussions were of three orders: some related to cultural stereotypes, others to ungranted overgeneralizations of the findings of each mini-lesson, others yet to the sensitivity of critical topics emerged in the discussion. These challenges can be addressed with specific pedagogical strategies.

a) *Dealing with stereotypes*

A risk that became apparent from the first stages of the project was the danger to reinforce stereotypes or essentialist views of culture. Across the various semesters, it was common for the first groups leading the mini-class to attempt to explain differences in the specific pair of commercials with generic and simplistic commonplaces, for example statements
that Italians have large families, or Italians love to feast on food, or Americans eat fast food.

Cutshall shared two recommendations from the teachers she interviewed to counter this risk: contextualize and let students do ethnographic research. Providing extra source of information to give more context is a feasible strategy for many cultural topics. For this project, it was a fruitful effort curbing the urge, as instructor, to rectify what felt like misled interpretations, and instead posing more questions to let the students suggest alternative interpretations. The questions, formulated in concrete terms, nevertheless stimulated the application of lenses such as targeted audience, leveraged values, represented perspectives, imagined communities, aspirational belonging, and encouraged to avoid simplistic direct explanations. At the end of the discussion, initial observations that replicated unquestioned stereotypes could then be recast in different terms.

*Example 1.* Initial statement: Italians have large, traditional families.

Exemplary questions/sources that can be raised in response: How do you know? Let’s check the current statistical data.15 Who is the target of the advertisement? If the commercial does not reflect the actual reality of many families in Italy, why is it so?

*Example 2.* Initial statement: Italians love to feast on food, Americans eat fast food.

Possible exemplary questions/sources that can be raised in response: How do you know? For how many in the class fast food is the primary source of nutrition? Are there fast food chains in Italy? Which ones? Whom are they popular with? What is a traditional menu structure in Italy? Are all courses served at each meal nowadays? Are there options for Italians who eat out for lunch? Whom is this commercial directed to?

b) *Dealing with incomplete/partial observations and overgeneralizations*
A second challenge that emerged was, for certain groups, a tendency to draw conclusive generalizations from a single pair of commercials, as if the sample exhausted what one could learn about Italian culture on the topic (for example, as if a commercial on a family’s breakfast could exhaustively exemplify the cultural notion of family or breakfast). Cutshall states that the goal while teaching cultural content is that students realize that they are learning a little bit about a specific area. It is a good practice that instructors make this explicit throughout the project. In addition, it is helpful to mimic that strategy that Barnes-Karol and Broner used to prevent superficial overgeneralizations. In their study on the acquisition of cultural-specific concepts associated to words, for example what countryside or farm mean in English and in Spanish, they searched for images that offered a cultural-specific representation of the word and situated the images in context first. Then, they connected each image to sequences of other images or verbal texts (other cultural products) to test the hypotheses generated on the first image because “as students encounter images linked to other images or texts, the tendency to turn one image into a monolithic statement about the target culture is immediately challenged as any image is just a springboard to a more extensive consideration of the cultural phenomena it depicts or illuminates” (Barnes-Karol & Broner 429). Similarly, in this project any individual groups’ contribution helps recasting the previous groups’ comments into a larger picture. In addition, it is helpful to keep asking the students to identify the target of the commercials. Finally, explicit remarks of the instructor bring to the students’ attention to other sources of information and other examples that may challenge or complete emerging partial views.

c) Dealing with sensitive issues

Finally, instructors need to be ready to facilitate classroom dynamics when students touch on cultural comparisons of politically loaded themes (Byram; Byram & Wagner). Although
difficult (Britzman; Ennser-Kananen), dark, or painful topics (Becker; Zipin) pose challenges in the classroom, not only they are crucial to a true, deep understanding of culture; their avoidance would also perpetuate the exclusion of groups too often invisible in the curriculum. In order to mitigate possible tensions, Byram argues for exposing the students to different multiple perspectives and worldviews, without advocating for one or the other, while referring to human rights’ standards to escape from the risk of moral relativism. In this project, approaching all themes from the frameworks of targeted audience and with the critical understanding of the layered perspectives embedded safeguarded from potential tensions and encouraged to favor analysis and understanding over judgement of value.

Conclusions

The repeated experience of teaching this learning unit over several semesters has been rewarding. Far from considering it a comprehensive way to achieve cultural literacy, this project is a single point in a curriculum where cultures are approached with an inquisitive eye and valued as complex, multifaceted perspectives. For its appeal to the student body and its rich potential it has become one of the most relevant points in the curriculum along the path toward cultural literacy.

The project could be adapted to other learning contexts or serve as an example for individual instructors, curriculum designers, pedagogical coordinators, and departmental administrators, who seek approaches to the teaching of culture in higher education that view cultures as perspectives, conceptualize cultural literacy as comprising knowledge, context of use, and process, and commit to engage in foreign language teaching with a critical lens.
Works Cited


Notes

1 See Lange and Paige; Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel

2 The challenges that world language educators face in teaching culture are exemplified by the findings of Cheng and Yang in their six case studies of college educators from different language programs in the US. The instructors, whose individual understanding of culture varied significantly, struggled with the lack of standards for teaching culture in the classroom and between the choice to teach "textbook culture or reality culture" (171). Li described a similar challenge in English culture instruction in Chinese colleges, with lack of clarity on the specificities of what English culture means and which aspects of it are suitable as teaching content, paired with inexperience with the pedagogy of teaching intercultural awareness.

3 In fact, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages in 2007 recommended that postsecondary second language programs cultivate students’ “translingual and transcultural competence”.

4 Byram argues for teaching culture in a way that’s intertwined with linguistic instruction, “as a strategy for helping students to develop the interrelated linguistic and cultural competencies” (525) for translingual and transcultural competence. The explicit analysis of certain aspects of language and grammar - those that are imbued with perspective, such as the subjunctive mood or use of subjects - can be seen in itself a powerful “entry point for higher-level critical thinking” (Byram 530). Similarly, in Barnes-Karol and Broner’s work on images to learn about culture-specific nuances in meaning, the conceptual analysis of the pictures went in parallel with the conscious development of language in which perspective is embedded, language for “paraphrasing, relating another’s point of view, analyzing texts, supporting a position with
textual evidence, refuting an argument with textual evidence, pointing out contradictions among sources, citing sources appropriately, and so forth” (428).

5 Li and Liu found that the critical discussion of cultural topics in general had a positive effect on motivation.

6 Byram (2001) recommends that “linguistic forms and practice should be explicitly linked to cultural information to help students develop sensitivity to the meanings forms carry within their natural context” (Byram 527).

7 “Uno spaccato dell’Italia nel momento in cui il messaggio viene prodotto e trasmesso” (Pavan 117). Pavan’s intent was to engage the students with a four-folded purpose: interrupt monotony, achieve results, increase students’ engagement, make the task more engaging (described in Italian with the acronym ROAR, Rompere la monotonia, ottenere risultati, aumentare il coinvolgimento degli studenti, rendere il compito più interessante).

8 A variant of this project, not described in this paper, gave the additional option to contrast two commercials of the same product for the Italian market created in different decades.

9 Barnes-Karol and Broner described similar concerns when working with images with their students, noting that all images “are taken by a person with a specific purpose for a specific audience, and it is wise for instructors to bring this to the forefront in using these images in the classroom.” (427)

10 Similarly, Pavan alluded to regional differences represented in commercials. Here, differences are not just regional, but pertain also to various groups that comprise a nation, that share similar demographic characteristics.

11 See Blad, Ryan, and Serafin on gender roles and commercials.
Damen, discussing the emergence of the intercultural communication field, exposed the limits of textbooks adopting “the anthropologists’ approach to culture as a group phenomenon” (75) with the danger of validating stereotypical views of cultures and countries.

Original questions in Italian: Che cosa ti è rimasto delle presentazioni che hai visto in classe? Fai riferimento a tutte le lezioni. Quando hai notato una rappresentazione di italianità or americanità come erano caratterizzate? Hai domande o commenti personali da fare?

The initial scale included five levels, but upon testing the descriptions on the students’ work it became apparent that levels four and five did not provide much differentiation and were condensed in a single group.

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NOTE: I co-authored a paper on this topic, currently under peer review, and I will reference it in a footnote if accepted.