Developing Competence and Critical Thinking with Activities Based on the *Literacy* Approach

**ABSTRACT**

This contribution will explore how to develop students' communicative, socio-cultural and intercultural competence in Italian by fostering advanced level discourse that spans across disciplines. This can be achieved by engaging students through targeted tasks starting at the beginner level of the language sequence and spanning through the upper-division thematic courses. In particular, the essay will illustrate practical ways in which beginner and intermediate courses and advanced composition courses can be used to promote the development of *literacy*, proficiency, engagement and motivation in a foreign language, particularly in the Italian as a second language (ILS) context. The paper offers examples of activities that strive to develop *literacy* as defined by Kern (2000), that are geared towards fostering students' critical thinking and analytical skills at all levels. Activities were created by the author of this article using multiple texts from varied contexts to promote language learning and competence beyond the surface level. The examples will also show how to easily update a lesson, a unit or a course by choosing departure materials that span across disciplines and themes, thus engaging students to inter-relate those themes in an unconventional unique manner and move towards the more substantial topics that relate to current events or tropes. Although the offered examples come from lower-division language courses, they can also be effectively applied to any upper-division course where there is the need to update and modernize the curriculum also through the integration of materials drawn from multimedia environments and the application of basic user-friendly multimedia technology tools. This contribution was initially presented at the "Italian as Communication and Literacy" conference held at Rutgers in January 2017.
Introduction

In the field of foreign languages there has recently been a rethinking of pedagogical practices due to the current situation in modern languages, characterized by a significant drop in student enrollment, a discrepancy between the foreign language courses completed by students and their proficiency stage in the given language. On an administrative level, there is the need to cater to, recruit and motivate students from other disciplines and to show the relevance of foreign languages in a university environment which fosters practical skills immediately applicable to the specializations and future jobs of students.

Several reports have documented the above-mentioned situation. The first, written by the Modern Language Association, is centered on foreign language pedagogy (MLA "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World") and the second, written by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, is geared towards the skills that foreign language study must foster (ACTFL "21st Century Skills Map"). Both reports emphasize that the focus on communicative competence—the most widely practiced and still popular within foreign language courses—is no longer sufficient and foreign language learning must therefore move beyond this competence as students must also acquire those skills that are necessary for and applicable to the practical situations of contemporary society. For example, according to the first report, the goal of language learning should be to reach translilingual and transcultural competence, meaning to be able to "function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language" (MLA "Foreign Languages": 3-4). This means to not only be proficient in the language but also to understand the background context of situations as well as the relationships and influences between each sector of the society that language is spoken in. The second report, expands on this concept by placing emphasis on developing global awareness and on the importance of understanding "the perspectives on the world that speakers of other languages bring to the table" (ACTFL "21st" 5). The report proceeds with analyzing how this concept affects each of the skills that they identify as twenty-first century skills.

The recommendations contained in the above reports also stem from the realization that at the end of their foreign language studies, students do not possess the competence and proficiency that is proper to the degree of language studies completed. There are two major reference frameworks for measuring foreign language proficiency: the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2001), mostly followed in the United States—but also known on the international level—and, and the QCER (Quadro Comune Europeo di Riferimento, 2001), mostly followed in Europe. The principles that inform current foreign language pedagogy take into account these frameworks when developing curricula, courses, exams and materials. For example, a learner who has completed a path of studies structured around the principles necessary to achieve the classification of "advanced low" in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines should in fact possess the competences appropriate to that benchmark. However, it has become clear—through the concepts of the two mentioned reports, information relayed at workshops and through classroom observations—that students do not in fact achieve the level of competence which corresponds to the degree of language studies completed.

Following the previously mentioned reports, therefore, there emerges the need for language departments to give students the tools to apply skills learned in their language courses to everyday socio-cultural situations as well as to their life and disciplines. The same MLA association report had encouraged to perform a change in the teaching and learning of foreign
languages, whose pedagogical methods no longer seem to satisfy neither the needs nor the requests of learners. The MLA committee emphasized that "As recent world events have demonstrated, deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are equally necessary if one wishes to understand people and their communities." (MLA, "Foreign languages": 2) mirroring a prior observation about academic language teaching in which Kern stated that "Preparing students to communicate in multiple cultural contexts, both at home and abroad, means sensitizing them to discourse practices in other societies and to the ways those discourse practices both reflect and create cultural norms. (Kern, "Literacy": 2). There is the need to change the language curriculum so that the learning that happens in language classes can actually span across disciplines rather than be confined to one single area or topic such as, for example, literature, business or film studies. Therefore, languages need to educate students to acquire a broader set of cross-disciplinary competences.

The concept of literacy as defined by Richard Kern in 2000 seems poised to fill this role. In brief, it consists in the ability to create meaning that is appropriate to given socio-cultural contexts of any given culture in question through critical thinking and advanced level discourse. According to Kern, such ability can be promoted already from the beginning level and throughout the various levels of foreign language study because it can be developed in a way that is appropriate to each stage of learning: "A literacy-based approach, I argue, can help to break down lines of division and assure intellectual stimulation even at the beginning stages of language learning" ("Literacy" 8). This concept is of fundamental importance since it represents the departure point to try to offer a solution to the problem of the discrepancy between level of courses completed and level of proficiency and competence acquired. As illustrated in the figure I have created (Figure 1), literacy can help to make the liaison between the processes that take place during classroom learning, the practical application of the content learned and, via its principle of the juxtaposition of multiple texts, the cross-disciplinarity of language learning.

As far as the Italian context, there is still little research on this embodiment of the concept. In particular, there is no official Italian translation of literacy as defined by Kern and no research on his concept has been published in Italian. This might be due to the fact that in literacy studies research there persists "a definition of literacy that is in constant evolution, seen through multiple perspectives, disciplines and research traditions"¹ (Banzato: 135). In fact, articles relating to Italian and literacy, generally tend to focus on predecessors of the concept —such as multiliteracies²— or to literacy studies, which originated from disciplines other than the field of foreign languages and that are generally centered on the first exposure to learning to read and write in one's mother tongue. In addition, parallel research studies pertaining to Italian —such as

1 original: "una definizione in continua evoluzione di literacy, in base ai dati più recenti che emergono costantemente, attraverso molteplici prospettive, discipline e tradizioni di ricerca." (Banzato 135).
2 term used by the New London Group in their 1994 meeting to discuss a pedagogy centered on multiple modes of meaning-making.
those by Balboni, Pichiassi or Ardizzone—do not appear to be as comprehensive: they tend to focus on single abilities or competences.

Within the English context, there is a long tradition of studies on literacy. However, respectable research articles published in English on literacy studies, such as those by Kinzer or Gee—tend to equate the concept of literacy with that of "alphabetization" (in Italian "alfabetizzazione"), i.e. the opposition between being literate ("istruito/alfabeta") or illiterate ("analfabeta"). Other research studies—such as those by Murray—tend to focus on single competences, such as digital literacy or socio-cultural literacy. Although there are notions that can be drawn upon which are applicable to Kern's literacy, his concept is much more comprehensive and complex: it does not refer to one single ability nor to the sum of single parallel but distinct abilities (competence a + competence b, etc.); rather, in Kern's concept the focus is on the inter-relationships between the various competences, texts, mediums and disciplines.

Therefore, those respectable studies appear to be limitative in scope, for both the discussion of the concept of literacy and its application to the foreign language classroom. Since it is fast becoming the new trend and, according to some American researchers (Allen, Paesani, Liskin-Gasparro), it will become the new method or approach for teaching foreign languages, it is important to analyze the concept and propose some applications to the Italian classroom.

Definition and analysis of literacy

We have hinted to the ambiguity of the term literacy due to its many interpretations and correspondences. In this article, the term refers to the concept proposed by Richard Kern in 2000. While formulating his concept, he also acknowledges the limitations of his definition because it is in constant evolution. The definition he proposes is the following:

"Literacy is the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge. (Kern, "Literacy": 16)"

As mentioned in the introduction, there currently isn't any available official Italian translation for the term literacy as, in current research, it has been used with different meanings (alfabetizzazione, competenza, competenze, abilità, capacità). In addition, there is no Italian definition of the concept of literacy because there are no studies which cited Kern's theory or translated this concept. Since this paper focuses on literacy and applies it to the Italian as a foreign language (ILS) context, it is important to propose a translation of the definition. The below definition is my translation:

"Literacy³ è l'utilizzo di prassi pedagogiche che mirino alla contestualizzazione dei materiali inserendoli nel loro contesto sociale, storico e culturale per creare e interpretare significati attraverso i testi. Coinvolge almeno la consapevolezza implicita delle relazioni tra le convenzioni testuali e il loro uso contestualizzato e,"

³ As can be noticed in this translation, following Banzato's analysis, in this case as well the term literacy remains in its original language.
idealmente, l'abilità di riflettere in modo critico su tali relazioni. In quanto sensibile agli scopi da raggiungere, la literacy è dinamica—non statica—variabile culturalmente all'interno di comunità dove si forma il discorso. La pratica della literacy attinge elementi da una varietà di abilità cognitive, dalla conoscenza di testi scritti e della lingua parlata, dalla conoscenza dei generi e dalla conoscenza della cultura di provenienza. (Annalisa Mosca)

From this description, it is clear that literacy is a concept that entails communication appropriate to different contexts and situations as well as reflection based on critical thinking about the reality that surrounds these varying contexts. For ease of reference, Kern summarizes the qualities at the core of literacy in the following seven principles: interpretation, collaboration, conventions, cultural knowledge, problem solving, reflection and self-reflection, language usage (Kern, "Literacy": 16-17). This summary emphasizes the complexity and the multimodal aspect of literacy. Taking a look at the elements that literacy draws upon, the main items that are immediately applicable to the foreign language classroom are the variety of text types (oral and written) and the many genres contained within those categories. The exposure to these texts will promote the development of those cognitive abilities that allow learners to make connections and gain competence related to cultural and intercultural knowledge.

**Literacy in the Italian classroom**

We have analyzed and discussed the context of literacy and its implications for the field of Italian as a foreign language (ILS). How can instructors apply Kern's concept in their teaching, in the planning of a curriculum and in daily classroom activities? According to the MLA report's recommendations "The idea of translingual and transcultural competence, [...] places value on the ability to operate between languages. (MLA "Foreign Languages": 3-4). This statement attributes importance to that competence which allows individuals to move between languages; it implies cultural knowledge and the ability to be an informed observer and participant. Again, Kern's concept seems to have foreshadowed this recommendation as in his discussion of literacy, he states that "academic language teaching must foster literacy, not only reading and writing skills, but also in terms of a broader discourse competence that involves the ability to interpret and critically evaluate a wide variety of written and spoken texts." (Kern, "Literacy": 2). In other words, during the learner's stages of foreign language studies, competences that are more advanced than traditional reading and writing can be attained. This can be achieved by exposure to different kinds of texts, including electronic and audio-visual texts. In his discussion of what he means by the word text, Kern gives as examples "texts that more inclusively represent the signifying practices of a society (for example, advertisements, political speeches, letters, films, newspaper and magazine articles, music videos, and so on)" (Kern, "Literacy": 6). By having learners approach multimodal texts and learning tools, different skills and competences of variable and progressive nature will be activated, thus promoting literacy.

There are many perceived advantages and disadvantages to the application of literacy in the classroom. Perhaps the most important advantage is the effect that this new pedagogical model offers on student attitude and motivation. A prescription of literacy is, in fact, the use of multiple texts—in different formats—which enables to transform the classroom into a more dynamic multimodal environment. An important piece of information from the ever-important MLA report was, in fact, that "Literature, film and other media are used to challenge students' imaginations and to help them consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things. (MLA "Foreign Languages": 4). Therefore, the use of multiple texts from disparate...
disciplines fits into this way of thinking.

A classroom that promotes literacy will not only integrate and analyze multiple kinds of texts but it will also guide students towards an "awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships" (Kern, "Literacy": 16). If some of these texts are taken from different fields and disciplines, then the classroom also becomes cross-disciplinary and cross-thematic, which in turn allows for development and expansion of the chosen topic and of the students' competences. If students see the topic as directly relating to their life, their major and their interests, they will be more motivated to continue with the language study and become proficient in a manner that is appropriate to today's contemporary society. Finally, with the appropriate preparation, it may permit the abandonment of a structured language textbook; students often request and expect to tackle current topics and texts during their studies; however, due to justifiable editorial constraints, even the highest quality textbooks cannot be — and cannot be expected to be — as updated as texts that an instructor can find on a yearly, semester, weekly or even daily basis.

There are, however, many perceived disadvantages. The same positive effects that such a model can have on student motivation could also have a negative effect on it. The use of multiple texts in the classroom — which is an essential component of literacy — can be hard to implement because it is very difficult to find authentic texts that are level appropriate, especially for the beginner level. Perhaps once a text is found, it does not contain enough items to help develop in students all the properties and inter-relationships prescribed by literacy. Also, students might be demotivated by a text that they perceive to be too difficult, on a topic that does not make those inter-relationships obvious or that requires more advanced language abilities. It bears repeating, however, that according to Kern literacy can be promoted from the very early stages of language learning as appropriate to whichever proficiency level of the learner — beginner, intermediate, advanced — through the use of multiple texts. An example of advanced discourse at the beginning stages of foreign language instruction can be overcoming the structuring of activities based on description, chronological narration, interaction via simple communicative functions which are void of reflection. Linguistically speaking, there are many advanced abilities that can be simplified in order to begin to promote advanced competence at the beginning level; the one obvious example is comparisons: it not necessarily mandatory to have learned the linguistic structure of comparatives (i.e.; more than, less than) in any given language to be able to compare two items. The discussion generated at the beginning levels by comparing two items in a rudimentary way also constitutes the initial stages of advanced discourse as learners begin to reflect, contextualize and think critically about the items presented. It can also be framing of activities in a basic socio-cultural context, so that they are no longer limited exclusively to the vocabulary and themes traditionally presented in the foreign language classroom. If learners become informed observers, their responses will inherently assume more depth without necessarily the need to express themselves in more complex ways in the foreign language that are proper of the higher level language courses.

Another perceived disadvantage is that creating a course, a module or even a single activity based on literacy, requires additional preparation both by the instructor and the students. This often is seen as not feasible by both parties: from the instructor's point of view, they must find texts, adapt them, create activities and perhaps update those activities it they contained dates; from the students' point of view, they will need additional preparation, either before or after the activities are presented in class, they will stray from the textbook perhaps not realizing that the additional texts and activities are complementary to the material covered. Finally, as per
my matured personal experience as an instructor, students still rely on textbooks; despite our efforts to hold them accountable for finding, reading and/or printing materials from the various online platforms at our disposal, the textbook seems to almost be a security blanket for students. It must be noted however that once the desired item or course has been created, it need only be slightly updated or, rather, expanded for future use. There is no need to change everything in a course or every activity that has been created; it only needs to be expanded so that the outcomes will be integrated within the literacy framework.

Models of courses or modules and examples of activities based on literacy

In this section, I offer some practical applications on how to create courses, modules and activities based on literacy. I would like to emphasize that these examples do not constitute a strict mandate; rather, they represent rather guidelines for instructors at both the university and secondary levels. The models are meant to show that a curriculum or activities based on the concept of literacy can, in fact, be easily implemented in the classroom with just a few expedients and the use of instructional technology tools. It is acknowledged that the models have limitations for many reasons: it's been stated that literacy is a concept in constant evolution, in addition, activities are always adapted from semester to semester, even from section to section of a course during the same semester. Nevertheless, while creating these models there was a conscious attempt to follow the literacy framework.

Model 1: Course based on literacy - transforming the advanced language course

a) Context and background

The model of a course based on literacy, comes from an advanced composition and conversation course, offered at the fifth or sixth semester of the language sequence in the university context; therefore it is a lower-division language course, not an upper-division thematic course. It took place in a university known for engineering and technical subjects where the majority of language students come from those disciplines. Though humanities are part of the Core Curriculum — i.e. the range of courses, from several disciplines from which students may choose to fulfill university-wide degree requirements — and many colleges still have a language requirement, humanities and languages are not the focus. Despite enrollment and successful completion of the language sequence, the majority of students does not necessarily choose to pursue a major or minoring in Italian. However, such a model has many other uses and applications in different contexts. For example, as many university Italian departments do not have a six-semester language sequence, the model can be used in the second semester of an accelerated sequence, in a gap or bridge course between the language sequence (lower-division) and the monographic thematic sequence (upper-division) and, of course, in a composition course regardless of which semester it is offered. Needless to say that, since it is based on topics, it can also be used for restructuring any thematic upper or lower-division language course that is offered in the university context, as well as the advanced levels of the secondary context.

In the initial course redesign4, I had the desire to refresh the course, especially keeping in mind those students who might not necessarily have been interested in reading a literary text, albeit a short and modern one, but still wished to continue with Italian. I wanted to introduce parallel topics and disciplines as well as better tie together the various components —text, video, linguistic structures— of the course that was currently offered. Since originally the components

4 see Chapter 12 of Ramsey-Portolano The Future of Italian Teaching for a step-by-step complete detailed description.
were clearly distinct, unrelated and discussed in separate lessons with few, if any, connections between them, there was a desire to better integrate the three components by finding relationships between all of them. Most of all, the restructuring of the course and the integration of multidisciplinary texts, wanted to also tie the principal text to current events, contemporary times as well as broaden the relevance of the course by teaching skills and competences that would cross over into other disciplines and be applicable to the students' future careers and life.

b) Process and development

The redesign process began with the decision of maintaining the principal text which was *Il Visconti dimezzato* by Italo Calvino, a short novel with a fantastical topic. First of all, two overarching themes which provided the thread and focus of the course were identified: divided or incomplete identities and love relationships between beauties and rejects. I then scoured the internet for current journalistic articles from a variety of disciplines relating to the main theme emerging from each chapter of the principal text; such themes ranged from wars to mutilations, from medical ethics to animal cruelty, from treatment of women to treatment of crimes. While the video component was kept, the actual mini-series video selection was changed in order to relate it to the two overarching themes of the course; of those two the one mostly present in the mini-series was the divided identities in the personality and consciousness of the series' main characters. Finally, as additional supplementary texts, I searched for images or artifacts —of statues, film posters, advertisements, paintings, photographs, comics, concepts— which related to one or both of the overarching themes. The difficulty in this step was finding an image that represented each of those themes in one single shot.

The analysis of the texts during the three weekly lessons was of an integrative nature. Even though, for ease of planning by the instructor and of preparation by the students, each lesson was centered, in part, on one type of text, the majority of the discussion was geared to overlap, anticipate and integrate all text types. It must also be noted that, by following the model of the instructor for the first weekly lesson —main text, analysis, introduction of concepts, quotes and themes relating to the other texts— during the subsequent weekly lessons the students themselves often managed on their own to find relationships (even some that the instructor had not thought about) between the different types of chosen texts as well as between other texts, themes and disciplines. In addition, activities were always of a multimedia nature and incorporated tools and tasks that began on the online learning management system platform of the university. The texts produced by the students were also integrated and analyzed as part of the variety of text types to be discussed; this also permitted to address the development of competences that are encompassed within literacy and that are applicable to all disciplines.

Finally, the culmination of the course redesign was represented by the synthesis weeks. For the final discussions lessons during this period, I created an all-encompassing multimedia presentation that touched the two overarching topics as well as the contemporary topics approached during the semester. As the topics and classroom discussion bridged the two lengthier texts, the synthesis was scheduled to take place in class after completing readings and viewing the mini-series; it was also preceded the students' oral and written final projects, thus offering ideas for students to reflect on those assignments. The projects instructed students to select a real or fictional character that would fit under one or both of the two overarching themes and analyze that character, while at the same time finding appropriate references to the texts approached during the course. It should be noted that, although one of the goals of the synthesis discussion was to provide inspiration to the students for their projects, many of them chose
different and disparaged characters that had not been discussed before and several chose living or historical figures rather than fictional characters.

Therefore, it is my observation that the students were, in fact, able to develop the qualities that literacy strives to promote. Classroom discussions touched on many topics and disciplines; learners gained more depth and their language became more complex and varied; the contextualization of texts and justifications of the students' points of view also emerged. The final projects were highly productive and developed learners' critical thinking as well as advanced discourse. This redesign concurrently promoted the development of the competences enclosed in literacy; competences which became relevant also to the students' majors because they are cross-disciplinary, applicable to different historical and socio-cultural contexts as well as to the communities in which discourse is formed.

**Model 2: Module based on literacy - transforming a single unit**

**a) Context and background**

The model for a module based on literacy comes from a beginning or intermediate course. The idea for this module stemmed from a conference presentation, later turned into workshops for Italian teachers and expanded as an AP workshop during the annual AP reading. The chosen topic, which is society and social problems, usually appears in the second half of any beginning or intermediate language textbook geared to the beginning or intermediate sequence — like *Sentieri* or *Immagina* by Vista Higher Learning, *Parliamo Italiano* by McGraw-Hill, *L'italiano all'università* by Edilingua. In syllabi generally followed in the United States, the timing for the appearance of this topic would roughly correspond to the second or third semester of the language sequence. Nevertheless, since the basis for the model is a beginning language textbook, I would venture that this type of redesign is also applicable to any of the topics that appear in the first semester courses. It is sufficient to replicate the model by concentrating on one such topic — such as family, studies, music, food — and selecting other short current texts and artifacts from a variety of disciplines and specialties relating to those topics.

In language textbooks, whether published in the United States or Italy, the topic of society and social problems is presented in an impartial and simplistic manner. There may be many motivating factors for this editorial choice: avoiding taking sides, minimizing the possibilities for controversies, not offending students' sensibilities, presenting basic information on a difficult topic and, keeping up to pace with fast-changing issues. Usually, the minimum necessary content is offered, together with a list of useful vocabulary accompanied by very brief broad readings pertaining to general issues of society and government of the target culture and often including graphs. Open-ended activities that follow this presentation focus on personal or streamlined questions that lack any depth (ex: "is this an important issue in your country?" or "what is the most important [X] for you?" or "what do you know about [X] in Italy or your country?", etc.). The result is often comprised of very dry and demotivating discussions built around narrow-scope questions with factual, one word or yes/no responses related to general knowledge — which is, per experience, quite limited in the majority of students. The ultimate result is that the discussion topic is seen as boring or difficult by both instructors and students.

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therefore important and useful topics in today's global culture end up being glossed over or altogether skipped.

**b) Process and development**

The redesign process for this module began by choosing a very light-hearted Italian contemporary musical of extraordinary success as the principal text. The primary text was the DVD of the musical *Notre Dame de Paris* performed by the Italian cast, composed — even in its debut French version — by the Italian pop singer Riccardo Cocciante. In particular, its songs which talked about the homeless and immigrants living in the city were chosen as primary written texts. The secondary texts were constituted by a newspaper article which traces parallels between the events represented in the musical and modern and contemporary European History; other headlines, short articles and video-reportages in Italian about immigration, poverty and homelessness in big cities were also integrated. Supplementary texts were graphs and other visuals relating to the homelessness and immigration.

The type of redesign brought a positive development to the formerly dry discussions of a seemingly uninteresting and, at times, difficult or sensitive topic. The fact that the principal text was of an audio-visual nature, a recent contemporary theatrical text, allowed for connections to the conventions pertaining to that discipline, such as for example, to see whether the directorial choices supported the representation of that topic. Most importantly, the path that used a light-hearted medium to then approach onerous topics like immigration and social issues, made the textbook's unit on those same topics more lively, interesting and motivating for the students. The responses to the simple questions presented in the textbook gained more depth and moved from being "descriptive-narrative" answers towards stimulating critical thinking in students. They also departed towards related but unplanned topics that the instructor was also able to recycle within the same classrooms. With geared in-class activities relating to the texts used in this module, students were able to sustain more complex discussions in basic Italian, thus slowly moving towards the higher level competence. They were also able to gain intercultural competence, which is an inherent part of *literacy*.

**Model 3: Activities based on literacy - expanding one single item**

This model also applies to the beginning and intermediate language sequence. The following two activities were mainly used during in-class discussion for reinforcement of grammatical structures, culture snapshots and vocabulary. The idea was to relate topics that seemingly were not inherently interesting to students and make them current. Once again, the principles can be followed for any of the topics addressed in the textbooks used for such courses.

**a) Fairy tale tropes**

This activity is based on the topic of fairy tales. It fits in very well with any unit that address narration in the past tenses of Italian, especially the *passato prossimo* versus *imperfetto* and the introduction to the *passato remoto*. In fact, a version of the principal text, *La chitarra magica* (The Magic Guitar) by Stefano Benni, appears precisely at this point in one such textbook by Vista Higher Learning. The secondary texts instead were collected by me, in a PowerPoint that introduces students to fairy tale tropes relating mostly to situations, character description and visual representations. The students were also encouraged to analyze fairy tales' influences on current entertainment, references in items ranging from TV shows to items of attire described originating in fairy tales and applied to current characters.

Finally, especially thinking about what can be identified as the fascination with "royalty
and princess culture popular among the current generation, students were also introduced to a supplementary text, constituted of a controversial advertisement campaign created by an Italian who represented Disney princesses and other characters into battered women. Once again, discussion departed from a light-hearted topic and assumed more depth. Texts originating from different mediums and disciplines were used to expand students’ point of view and make responses more complete. After approaching the textbook topics of these models in this way students were able to gain cultural knowledge pertaining to the target culture.

b) Shock advertising

This activity considers advertising images that first originated in the fashion industry. Therefore, it fits perfectly with any unit that addresses clothes, fashion, art or advertising. The principal text was a description of the Benetton company presented in several Italian textbooks. This is a well-known brand of affordable Italian designs whose directors commissioned advertisement campaigns by another Italian artist, Oliviero Toscani. The secondary texts for discussion are constituted by the images of these ad campaigns, which often addressed issues that were current in society at the time of those campaigns. The supplementary texts, were constituted by other the images of the same artist's campaigns as well as other “shock” commercials and advertising and by images with indirect references to renowned artworks that inspired those images.

This activity allows for an unusual way to approach the topic of fashion and modeling as well as that of significant people for the target culture. The principal text, a descriptive text of a biographical nature, is expanded by the integration of other texts which are of a visual nature. By relating the texts through similar but disparaged topics pertaining to other disciplines, including images pertaining to the canon of art, the discussion once again assumes more depth. Students are not only able to practice language skills but also think critically about the relationships between fashion, photography and other forms or art as well as to issues that are relevant and current in contemporary society.

Conclusions

The main goal of this article was to show that it is feasible to integrate the literacy approach in the classroom, and specifically into the Italian classroom. As we have established concept of literacy as defined by Kern is becoming the trend to follow in the teaching of foreign languages. Traces and influences of this concept can be seen within the guidelines and statements formulated by many associations that promote the study of foreign languages, such as the MLA and ACTFL. Although literacy is not yet a full-fledged method — such as, for example, is Communicative Language Teaching — many researchers in the field of second language acquisition (Liskin-Gasparro, Paesani, Allen) in the United States see it as the foundation for a future method of teaching foreign languages.

Kern, in defining his concept, places emphasis the multimodal aspect, which seems to also have inspired other university general education guidelines. Of note are those compiled by the AAC&U, in which we can find several common points between Kern's literacy and some competences deemed to be necessary in the university core curricula. In particular, there are clear common points and perhaps awareness of Kern's literacy in the AAC&U Value rubrics pertaining to Intercultural Knowledge and to Integrative Knowledge. The latter — the most aligned with the definition of literacy — currently appears to be seen as more widely pertaining to the scientific disciplines rather than to the humanities.

The concept of literacy enclosed into Kern's definition seems to be extraneous to Italian
pedagogy due to the fact that not much research that explores it has been performed in Italian or by Italian researchers; as a consequence an official definition of literacy in Italian does not currently exist. Therefore, the author of this article has thought it appropriate to propose her translation of the definition in Italian, in order to promote discussion and application of its principles in the Italian context and classroom. Literacy, which bears reminding, is not simply the grouping together of a set of competences—such as linguistic, discourse, digital, etc.—is an encompassing concept which interconnects all these competences and skills. Activities geared toward the development of literacy must take into account this interconnection as well as the importance of integrating activities geared to develop multiple skills at the same time.

This article had the practical goal to offer some examples of models that are centered on the concept of literacy. All models were created by the author of this article and continue to be integrated and modified in the classes taught and coordinated by her. It is the observation of the author that the use of these models has improved the classroom experience. The reason for this conclusion is that the kinds of competences encouraged by literacy have noticeably emerged in the classroom. This improvement has been observed not only in the works produced by students but especially during the in class discussions, which have gained more depth. The result is that they have made the lessons and courses more motivating for the students.
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**Author Biography**
Annalisa Mosca teaches and is Coordinator of Italian Language courses at Purdue University in Indiana. In addition to having years of experience in teaching, she has participated in the AP reading for Italian in various roles. She has presented on the use of technology at several national and international language conferences, including ACTFL Conference and she has been an invited speaker giving workshops on her activities based on literacy, at the AP Italian Professional Night in 2015 as well as at other workshops for Italian teachers. She has currently received the DML, Doctorate of Modern Languages, in Italian at from the Middlebury College Language Schools in Vermont. She has recently received the IMPACT Grant at Purdue for her project of redesigning the beginner level Italian courses by implementing both instructional technologies and literacy in her redesign.