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Building Self-Confidence and Motivation through Readers Theater: Integrating Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Altre Parole* in the Italian Class.

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The right to speak coupled with the need for words taps into all parts of our body, heart, mind and spirit. It ignites in our body and is gathered and then released in our breath, bubbles up through our voice until finally, with a sense of relief and release, the words are articulated and then escape us. Words then leave us into space but are still extensions of the speaker. The sound and word are living energy outside us.

Patsy Rodenburg, *The Need for Words*

**Introduction**

The concept of Readers Theater plays a pivotal role in building confidence and self-awareness in K–12 students as they become more fluent and interested readers. Not only. As a strategy, it is also widely used in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes to stimulate motivation and confidence in students learning English in the U.S. school system. However, what exactly is the Readers Theater? A website dedicated to young readers, Reading Rockets, notes that “[r]eader’s theater is a strategy that combines reading practice and performing. Its goal is to enhance students’ reading skills and confidence by having them practice reading with a purpose. Reader’s Theater gives students a real reason to read aloud” (Bafile). However, if it is mostly used in K-12 and ESL classes, can it apply to college students and adult learners in Higher Education language classes?

As a language teacher, I asked myself how I could contribute to my students’ learning, to help them to become more confident about the process of language acquisition, namely with less anxiety and more motivation, and to enjoy the journey without feeling overwhelmed by grammar structures, reading and writing, listening and comprehension, and the speaking One of my solutions is presented in this article spotlighting the introduction of the Readers Theater strategy in my first semester Italian language classes, using authentic materials, such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In altre parole* (2015) and its English translation, that are multi- and cross-cultural and cross-lingual in their essence.

My decision of introducing the strategy of the Readers Theatre to enhance not only self-confidence and motivation in the students, but also creativity and an appreciation and respect for multiculturalism and diversity to become more inclusive global citizens both at home and abroad, has its roots in the crisis of language instruction. Recognizing the declining interest in language

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1 The spelling of Readers Theater varies: while Readers Theater seems to be the most common, other spellings include Readers Theatre, Reader’s Theater, Reader’s Theatre. When quoting directly, I keep the author’s spelling unchanged, while I have opted for Readers Theater.

2 About the development of reading skills and the pedagogy behind it, see Keiko Koda (“Development of Second Language Reading Skills”) and Klaus Brandl (Chapter 9: “Developing Reading Skills” in *Communicative Language Teaching in Action*).

3 Those who read aloud in a classroom are defined by Claire Kramsch as “animators: participants reciting or reading aloud a prepared text or isolated sentences; for example, teacher or students modelling or displaying utterances in the foreign language without any particular addressee” (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching 39*).
teaching and learning by students, parents, administrators, and stakeholders, has spurred me to find methods for creating an engaging classroom where students are taught through Task-Based Instruction (TBI) (Brandl 5-22; Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 115-130, 149-163) and through the promotion of learning by doing (Brandl 12), where students engage directly with their own learning. Moreover, the need for (re-)appreciating values of respect, diversity, equity, and inclusion is especially important in the multicultural and multilingual context of the United States, and the book by Lahiri can generate an environment that steers in that direction.

To show how I have introduced In altre parole in a language class and how I have brought it to life through the Readers Theater, I divide the article into three main parts. The first two parts provide the theoretical framework, with the introduction of the Readers Theater as a strategy for linking interpretative readings of literature with theatrical performance, and then the extension of this strategy to teach language and culture. The third part explains why the book by Jhumpa Lahiri, In altre parole, is ideal for Italian language classes, also providing an example of how teachers can use it.

Readers Theater as a Strategy for Bringing Literature to Life
While agreeing upon the benefits of studying another language, still, as instructors, we encounter misconceptions, resistance, and refusals, by the very same students who enroll in our courses. Although it doesn’t seem that there are many studies on this specific topic, it is known among language teachers that many students attend language classes in a state of anxiety, perhaps thinking that they are not capable of learning a language other than English, while others seek to demonstrate that they have disabilities that prevent them from learning a foreign language. What can we, instructors, do to help those students who feel they are unsuitable candidates for learning French, German, Italian, Russian, or Spanish, to name a few? How can we contribute, as mediators, to build students’ confidence in the classroom and outside? How can we make relevant what we do, fostering excitement, discovery, curiosity, and creativity while also teaching a new language? How can we foster critical thinking in a language class and to allow literature to offer a glance of the world and its incredible diversity? How can we help 21st century students understand that through literature and its multi-faceted interpretations, they can reflect on themselves and better understand their lives and the world and societies in which they live? How can we help our students become more empathic citizens who accept and respect the other? When I thought of options to answer at least some of these questions, the Readers Theater came to mind.

As stated above, nowadays Readers Theater seems to be a strategy that is mostly used in K-12 and in ESL classes to foster competency in English. However, in 1967, Leslie Coger and Melvin White highlighted the importance of this strategy when they published a handbook dedicated to the Readers Theater as “a medium in which two or more oral interpreters through their oral reading cause an audience to experience literature” (8). As the two authors remind us, this strategy is also used in English courses at the college level:

[In Readers Theatre, the director’s goal is to present a literary script with oral readers using their voices and bodies to suggest the intellectual, emotional, and sensory experiences inherent in the literature. [...] Reader Theatre is an effective stimulant for understanding literature, for developing skills in reading aloud, and for adding to the cultural environment of the readers and their audiences. It contributes to a greater mastery of voice and body. It develops creativity and sensitivity. (3)

4 About anxiety in the language classroom and how to manage it, see Klaus Brandl, Communicative Language Teaching in Action (21, 143, 219, 222, 283, 304-306, 400-401).
Reading aloud is effective because the reader must understand the author’s piece and its structure first, thereby suggesting the strategy’s usefulness for learners of other languages, who need to understand the material in a language different from their own. Moreover, reading and reciting, a practice that dates back many centuries, is excellent for acquiring self-confidence and self-awareness while also enhancing public speaking, precisely because it focuses on pace, rhythm, intonation, diction, pitch, and tone of voice. Coger and White also mention Readers Theater as a contribution “to the personal development of the participants” (5), also adding that “Readers Theatre stimulates the student to master the techniques of effective oral reading in various situations, making him more confident, flexible, and creative” (6). One should not to forget that “(1) professional Readers Theatre is experimental, (2) it has no one established form of presentation, and (3) it uses all types of literature” (Coger and White 15), which allows teachers to experiment in any direction. What is most important to understand is that in Readers Theatre, scenery and costumes are not used or are only selectively implied; action or physical movement is merely suggested by the interpreter and is visualized in the minds of the audience; a narrator, speaking directly to the audience, usually establishes the basic situation or theme and links the various segments together; a physical script is usually carried by the reader or is at least in evidence somewhere; and, probably most important, there is a continuing effort to develop and maintain a closer, more personalized relationship between performer and audience […]. Specifically, the emphasis in Readers Theatre is upon the aural appeal, and the audience’s attention is concentrated upon the literature. […] Readers Theatre, it must be reiterated, is not a substitute for conventional theatre and it is not intended to be. It is a different form, with a focus on the written word. With few outside trappings, it centers the audience’s interest on the author’s text. (Coger and White 19–20)

Although it is not a substitute for the conventional theater, as Coger and White remind us, Readers Theater does ask its interpreters and performers to use their voices, as actors do. Patsy Rodenburg, a voice teacher, offers astute resources to help instructors to educate their students about themselves and how they can perform. Rodenburg’s texts—from The Right to Speak (1988) to The Need for Words (1993), and from The Actor Speaks (2000) to The Second Circle (2017)—are about actively living with full presence—include useful exercises for teachers and students who plan to explore Theater’s Reading and performing. Specifically, in the manual, The Actor Speaks, although addressing professional actors, the chapter on “The Actor First Speak” is a starting point in understanding the anatomy of the voice and the vocal process; also, the chapter dedicated to “Voice and Speech Meet the Stage” includes very useful information for novices.

The first part of Rodenburg’s The Right to Speak reflects on our life of words and speech as a way of defining ourselves in the world and societies in which we live (12). Rodenburg’s reflections about voice and communication habits and their roots, namely those habits that can limit our speaking expression (chapters 3 through 5), are noteworthy, and can assist language teachers, too, since it helps them to understand what kind of impediments our students might have in the classroom when asked to speak up in a SL (Second Language) or even in a native language. The text explores how class attitudes, environment and geography, physical injuries and illnesses,  

5 “The roots of Readers Theatre can be traced to the dramatic practices of fifth-century Greece. […] Drama and interpretative reading sometimes were united in medieval times too. Church was amplified by the addition of mimetic action, symbolic costume, and the suggestion of dialogue through antiphonal chant” (Coger and White 10-11).

6 Coger and White devote a chapter to “Selecting and Adapting Material for Readers Theatre,” in addition to a couple of chapters about preparation and actual performances.
family, friends, and gender differences (Rodenburg, *The Right to Speak* 63-84) can highly affect our students’ voice production.²

Moreover, the world of words, its production and use, is well investigated in Rodenburg’s *The Need for Words*, where he highlights the necessity to speak and communicate more, but also to read more, reminding us that research has established that “children who are read and spoken to are better communicators” (Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* 17). Rodenburg has seen the world evolve into a wordless one that “is unbelievably barren” (Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* 19), it is the reason why for him “[i]t is critical that we return the power of the word to the centre; it comes first. Oral literature predates written texts. Most oral cultures believe that if you speak, chant or sing powerful, connected words then you bring a potent force into the world” (Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* 19). Rodenburg is certain about this: the importance of oracy demands our immediate attention:

Oracy is the ability to express oneself fluently and effectively – to be able to speak and think simultaneously. Oracy is not something pedantic nineteenth-century notion about proper oratory or dialect or accent but about words used as passionate persuasion. Ideas transmitted by word of mouth. It’s a good and useful word that invokes all of the pleasures of speaking.

We have stopped talking to one another. We have ceased being an oral culture. Our stories come to us in pictures. If we don’t see it, we won’t believe it. The message in words is often rigidly controlled and clipped. We communicate in short bits of text or short videos. All too easily we shift our attention from one programme to another without rhyme or reason We channel hop[e] to distraction. Students in the classroom learn passively, without much genuine verbal interaction or challenge. Literacy skills – reading and writing – are more highly regarded than talents for oracy – the ability to express oneself fluently and passionately in speech. (Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* 20–21)

The necessity of speaking and communication is seen as fundamental by Rodenburg to re-acquire possession of a lost world, where the words themselves seem to float in a vacuum. The act of reading aloud, which is clearly linked to Readers Theater, is one of the best ways to re-possess the mastering of speech:

The decline of literacy in schools is linked to the decline of speaking aloud. When you have learned to read aloud a passage from literature you have learned to master not just speaking, but writing and reading as well. You have started to know words in their context. The simple confluence of all three processes makes a necessity of each individual skill. Education should be the conjunction of all three: reading, writing and speaking. (Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* 34)

Rodenburg rightly refers to three skills that are rather important when one speaks about a strategy such as Readers Theater. His words highlight the importance of speaking and reading aloud, but reading what? Literature and, consequently, its interpretative reading are certainly options. In this regard, in 1942, Sara Lowrey and Gertude Johnson published a manual about interpretative reading for teachers and students who needed to master interpretative reading techniques and required a

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7 Cultural and physical barriers to speech production are also investigated by Patsy Rodenburg in his book, *The Need for Words* (43-75).
8 Claire Kramsch refers to it as “orality” (Kramsch, *Language and Culture* 37). About developing oral communication skills in a language classroom, see Klaus Brandl (Chapter 8: “Developing Oral Communication Skills” in *Communicative Language Teaching in Action*).
9 In Lowrey and Johnson, Chapters II (“Technique of Thinking for Interpretative Reading”), III (“Dramatic Timing in Interpretative Reading”), IV (“Structure in Interpretative Reading”), V (“Illusion in Interpretative Reading”), and VI (“Voice in Interpretative Reading”) are important reading if one wants to master the basic techniques of interpretative
selection of works suitable for use in a student-centered classroom. In the book, literature obviously stands at the center of interpretative reading, and it is worth quoting the American scholar and author, William Lyon Phelps, as cited in Lowrey and Johnson: “Literature is the immortal part of history. Literature is the interpretation of human life” (8).

However, nowadays, this principle and its meaning seem to be lost and not understood precisely because literature is often seen as useless. However, because literature and its interpretation help us to decipher and interpret the world and ourselves, Lowrey and Johnson remind us that “we may find unity in the point of view that the interpretative reader is a creative artist to the degree to which he re-creates the author’s concepts in terms of living speech” (14). Teachers should remind students of this important concept to help them understand that they are part of a creative process leading to a broader understanding of their surroundings. However, the readers’ success in interpreting literary texts “will depend partly upon his ability to understand, to re-create the concept of the author, and partly upon his ability to reveal that concept to an audience” (Lowrey and Johnson 15). It is the concept of an audience that links together the reading, the speaking (aloud), and the writing (because of the need of a script). These three skills form the basis of the Readers Theater strategy to teach language and culture.

The Readers Theater in Language Classes
After having highlighted the importance of literature and its interpretative reading, and the role that literature can play in the Readers Theater, it is critical to see how theater, and in our case, the Readers Theater, is connected to the teaching of another language. Here, an author can come to our help: Stephen Smith demonstrates the connection between theater and language teaching and learning as emphasized in his book, The Theater Arts and the Teaching of Second Language (1984). As Smith writes,

actors and language learners share common goals, the most important being effective “performance,” that is, communicating the intended appropriate message. In order to communicate, actors, like language learners, have to be able to do three things:

1. They have to be able to decide what they want to communicate, i.e., what is appropriate for the given situation?
2. They must then decide how to communicate that message.
3. Finally they must have the flexibility to implement their decisions, or in other words, they must be able to perform with competence. This is perhaps the most difficult task of all.

Actors and language learners also share common obstacles in learning to convey meaning. They must learn to deal with new language and new roles, to understand their own inhibitions and confounding habits, and to develop the ability to control their own instruments, that is, their bodies, their voices, and their minds. (2)

In fact, when we bring the Readers Theater into a language class, we first ask our students to read and interpret a literary work in another language, namely to understand the language structures reading. The chapters and the book itself also include excerpts from literary works that can be used to put the theory into practice.

10 On the interpretation of literary texts, also see Glisan and Donato (67).
11 Smith devotes the second part of Chapter 2 (“Language Teaching in the Drama Rehearsal: A Focus on language Teaching Strategies”) to language practice (29-48). In Smith’s opinion, this can also be extended to language learners, as actors who “are becoming better vocabulary learners and interpreters. They become more aware of what it means to have a ‘range’ of vocabulary that is limited only by past experience, which is expandable, and which varies from person to person” (Smith 33).
and to offer their meaning of an author’s artwork, to possibly re-write it in the form of a script, and to act it out when reading aloud to an audience (a class or a campus community).

As we can imagine, there are many benefits to the introduction of acting in a language class, and Smith lists a series of them, including motivation, reduction of inhibitions, development of communication skills, refining stress, intonation, and articulation, and body training, when the body training is incorporated. Smith insists on warm-ups as the starting point of self-awareness about our own bodies, including our voice and what we can do with it:

\[\text{[t]heater-type vocal warm-ups and articulation and rhythm exercises can be used in language classes to demonstrate the range of the voice, to loosen it up making it ready for work, and to isolate and practice the difficult contortions we all discover in a second language} \] (Smith 18).

Moreover, he sees acting as a stellar method for ear training and listening, key skills to be enhanced and developed in language learners (Smith 19-21).

Finally, another important piece of knowledge that is acquired through the use and adaptation of literary texts for the Readers Theater strategy is the cultural aspect, which is elaborated by the students through the direct experience of a text and is not mediated by a teacher’s lecture in pre-packaged cultural units. One should not forget that one can read and adapt any literary piece since it will carry important cues of a second culture, which are not always easy to teach. Furthermore, the introduction of Readers Theater in a language class with limited time, and during which everybody can participate without memorizing lines as happens in the traditional theater, is highly flexible (Smith 126-127) and adaptable to any need and level.

Regarding the cultural context in a language class, as one knows, is an important aspect of students’ learning, an aspect that we cannot overlook, as Claire Kramsch has discussed in important works such as Context and Culture in Language Teaching (1993) and Language and Culture (1998). Needless to say, in these texts, the reading feature is highlighted rather forcefully when a distinction between reading to learn versus learning to read is made: “In the first case, Smith insists on the importance of observation of the performers as part of the learning experience (50-56).

12 Smith insists on the importance of observation of the performers as part of the learning experience (50-56).


14 For an extensive overview of practices and techniques for voice warm-ups, see the books by Patsy Rodenburg. See also Stephen Smith for a series of techniques and exercises related to voice and body (70-127).

15 About developing listening skills, see Klaus Brandl (Chapter 7: “Developing Listening Skills” in Communicative Language Teaching in Action).

16 About culture and gaining knowledge of it, see Stephen Smith (33-37).

17 A text worth reading that reflects on these challenges is the book by Erin Kearney, Intercultural Learning in Modern Language Education.

18 For an application of Readers Theater in a language class, see Courtney Cazen, “Performing Expository Texts in the Foreign Language Classroom.”
the emphasis is on reading to learn—that is, to decode forms in texts; in the second, the main thing is learning to read—that is, to decode information from texts and to make sense of the text despite a deficient knowledge of forms” (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in language Teaching* 6–7). When Kramsch speaks of texts, she refers to literature as a vehicle to teach language (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in language Teaching* 7); at the same time, she reinforces a basic concept: namely, when “language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed both as enabling language proficiency and as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency” (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in language Teaching* 8). The introduction and integration of a literary work such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In altre parole* (2015) via Readers Theater in an Italian language class (in my case, in a first-semester Italian course) has had the goal of teaching a second language and a second culture while also enhancing cultural awareness and creativity, building self-confidence and motivation, and promoting respect and inclusion in a multilingual and multicultural classroom.

Developing culture awareness while reading literature is what we, as language teachers, should reinforce and enhance in our language classes exactly because, with the construction of new meanings mediated by reading literature to learn, we also contribute to creating a new community of learners, where identities and cultural identities are renegotiated for “alternative contexts of culture” (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in language Teaching* 49). As Kramsch reminds us, “the notion of context is a relational one. In each of its five dimensions: linguistic, situational, interactional, as well as cultural and intertextual, it is shaped by people in dialogue with one another in a variety of roles and statuses” (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in language Teaching* 67). In particular, Kramsch mentions the Readers Theater saying that

this approach is based on the belief that the construction of meaning is a social process that takes place both within and between individuals as they try to make sense of language in discourse. […] The ultimate goal is a group reading of the text that highlights its different voices while maintaining absolute fidelity to its wording. (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in language Teaching* 98)

The beneficial outcomes of introducing Readers Theater in a language class are multiple for Kramsch, too:

*Linguistic.* During the negotiation of roles and parts, students had to weigh each word of the text as to its information and symbolic value in the global context of the story; they had to decide how to segment the text into those units of meaning and choose those prosodic features of speech that are appropriate for their interpretation of the text.

*Situational/interactional.* Besides having to activate the speech functions necessary to take part in group decisions, students had to decide how their different voices were going to interact, for which effect on the audience, and for the representation of which situation.

*Intertextual/cultural.* Students had to base their decisions on their global apprehension of the context: the genre, the real and symbolic setting, the reference to prior texts they might have experienced first hand […] or vicariously […] They had to construct their meaning of that context through verbal and non-verbal paratextual accoutrements. (Kramsch, *Context and Culture in language Teaching* 103–104)

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19 Kramsch devotes Chapter 5 of her *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* to “Teaching the Literary Text” (130-176).
However, when bringing a literary text into the classroom for implementation through Readers Theater, a teacher should also introduce some scaffolding through pre-teaching activities, as suggested by Kramsch: choice of the text; reader reaction; personal experience; textual clues; focus; pedagogic format; presentation of the text (Kramsch, Context and Culture in language Teaching 138-139). Kramsch then moves to pre-reading activities: aesthetic reading; pedagogic expectations; presentation of the theme; reader’s expectations (Kramsch, Context and Culture in language Teaching 140–141). She then continues about the actual reading in the classroom and the various activities that teachers can carry out with students (Kramsch, Context and Culture in language Teaching 141–176) with the goal of acquiring a deeper knowledge of the target culture (C2), which is distinguished by the native culture (C1) of students (Kramsch, Context and Culture in language Teaching 205). Kramsch summarizes four different modes of teaching language and culture that are also important when one integrates a literary text such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s, namely (1) “[e]stablishing a ‘sphere’ of interculturality,” (2) “[t]eaching culture as an interpersonal process,” (3) [t]eaching culture as difference,” and (4) [c]rossing disciplinary boundaries” (Kramsch, Context and Culture in language Teaching 205–206).

While language students learn to establish a relationship between C1 and C2, a teacher should also encourage further explorations of C1 and C2 that are enriched by our multicultural classes. Remembering that C1 is not only exemplified by the U.S. culture (in my particular case as a teacher in the United States), but also by all these cultures represented by students of different, non-American origins, is crucial. As students learn more about their own native languages while learning another language, the same can be said about the students’ own cultures: they can learn more about their own native culture by learning more about a C2, which is, in their case, the Italian one. As teachers, we should see this process as a journey into discovery and self-discovery through interpersonal communication (Glisan and Donato 45) and, also, as a journey for students to (re)discover their own selves and identities. Certainly, one of the most effective ways is for the instructors to also emphasize culture by teaching language in context, through means such as literature as a window to the world.

Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet explain the meaning of teaching language in context using authentic texts that not only contribute to the negotiation of meanings (Kramsch and McConnell-Ginet, “(Con)textual Knowledge” 6–11), but also to the formation of new identities within a community of C2 learners. Linked to this concept is Janet Swaffar’s reminder of how “authentic texts offer readers case studies of fundamental human relationships, needs, and social institutions such as kinship, ritual behavior, social status, governance, or eating arrangements as they are manifested in the unfamiliar culture” (238). In fact, when teachers and students talk about another language and another culture in a classroom, the class itself relates and creates a further culture (a

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20 A formative reading that also works as a summary of teaching literary texts in a language class is June Gold’s chapter on “A Constructivist Perspective on Teaching and Learning in the Language Arts,” where one can also find a paragraph devoted to scaffolding (96-97). Another chapter in the same book that is worth reading is Maxine Greene’s “A Constructivist Perspective on Teaching and Learning in the Arts.”

21 A basic and general introduction to scaffolding is the text by Pauline Gibbons, Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning. Especially, see pp. 91-92 for reference to Reading Aloud and Readers Theater.

22 “The term multicultural is more frequently used in two ways. In a social sense, it indicates the coexistence of people from many different backgrounds and ethnicities, as in ‘multicultural societies’. In an individual sense, it characterizes persons who belong to various discourse communities, and who therefore have the linguistic resources and social strategies to affiliate and identify with many different cultures and ways of using language” (Kramsch, Language and Culture 82).

23 For a theoretical framework about identity and second language acquisition, see Patricia Duff, “Identity, Agency, and Second Language Acquisition.”
sort of renegotiated C2) mediated by the same community of people coming from many different languages and cultures, some of them considered more dominant than others. For instance, in the U.S., although we teach in multilingual and multicultural classes, the predominance of English internationally leads this language and its culture to be perceived by many students as superior to the other languages and cultures, and this might severely impact upon our classes and students’ interactions.

In this regard, as Kramsch states, “[c]ulture, as a process that both includes and excludes, always entails the exercise of power and control” (Language and Culture 8), and the perception of superiority versus inferiority of certain languages can certainly play a major role in classroom dynamics. As mentioned previously, even within a classroom’s dynamics, teachers and students can experience the stratified layers of those different cultures brought by the students, for which, in the U.S. context, the American culture may appear to dominate over not only the C2 (the Italian culture, in my case), but also over those cultures owned by members of the community speaking other languages. As teachers, we have the ethical responsibility to promote inclusion and respect for diversity, explaining to students how all these multiple C1s, including the U.S. one, can interconnect with a C2 to create and foster a discourse community that transcends the books and has its own meaning within the class itself.

As Kramsch summarizes, “culture can be defined as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings” (Language and Culture 10). However, all the members of a speech community (Kramsch, Language and Culture 5), such as the one of a class, base their interactions on a “co-operative principle” (Kramsch, Language and Culture 31-32) that helps in creating new meanings within a spoken language and an oral culture (Kramsch, Language and Culture 37–51). Additionally, when members of a community meet a text within a “literacy event” (Kramsch, Language and Culture 60), the students interact with the text also orally during class discussion and through a strategy such as Readers Theater, thanks to which new cultural identities are formed, transformed, and (re)negotiated within these cross-cultural or intercultural meetings in the classroom (Kramsch, Language and Culture 81). As Kramsch reminds us, “[b]y crossing languages, speakers perform cultural acts of identity” (Kramsch, Language and Culture 70), which we should always encourage. Bringing Jhumpa Lahiri’s In altre parole into the Italian class, bringing it alive through the Readers Theater, is a way to collaborate with the students while the students themselves cooperate with their classmates. Through this, as instructors, we create the basis for a literacy event that contributes to allow the members of the learning community to perform cultural acts of identity.

**Jhumpa Lahiri’s In altre parole Comes to Life through the Readers Theater**

Having established the importance of introducing literary texts and the Readers Theater strategy in language classes, why is Jhumpa Lahiri’s book, In altre parole (In Other Words), so important for Italian classes? Why is it ideal for building self-confidence and motivation among students learning Italian? Why this book in particular? First of all, it is a book initially published in Italian (and translated a year later into English by Ann Goldstein) by an American author writing primarily in English, whose mother language is Bengali. In our multilingual and multicultural classroom, we might encounter, on a daily basis, students whose first language is not English, whose first culture is not that of the U.S. Bringing into a language class an author who is multilingual and multicultural in the first place represents diversity and inclusion in their true essence. Several times in her book, which is a collection of chapters that explore a quest to define her own identity (including the linguistic one), the reader encounters her struggling to make sense
of her two linguistic and cultural worlds. While ESL students might identify with her internal conflict, students whose first language and culture are English might come to understand students whose mother tongue is not English. As an example, the chapter entitled “Il muro” (“The Wall”) offers a glimpse of this world. Here, Lahiri describes the difficulties of matching the physical aspect with the spoken idiom:

Ecco il confine che non riuscirò mai a varcare. Il muro che rimarrà per sempre tra me e l’italiano, per quanto bene possa impararlo. Il mio aspetto fisico. [...] Per colpa del mio aspetto fisico, sono percepita come una straniera. È vero, lo sono. Ma essendo una straniera che parla bene l’italiano, ho due esperienze linguistiche, notevolmente diverse, in questo paese. [...] Non mi capiscono perché non vogliono capirmi; non vogliono capirmi perché non vogliono ascoltarmi, non vogliono accettarmi. Il muro funziona così. Quando qualcuno non mi capisce può ignorarmi; non deve tenere conto di me. Queste persone mi guardano ma non mi vedono. Non apprezzano che io fatichi per parlare la loro lingua, anzi, questo li infastidisce. [...] In America, sebbene io parli l’inglese come una madrelingua, pur essendo considerata una scrittrice americana, incontro lo stesso muro, ma per motivi diversi. Ogni tanto, a causa del mio nome, del mio aspetto fisico, qualcuno mi chiede come mai ho scelto di scrivere in inglese piuttosto che nella mia lingua madre. Chi mi incontra per la prima volta – quando mi vede, poi impara il nome, poi sente la maniera in cui parlo inglese – mi chiede da dove vengo. Devo giustificare la lingua in cui parlo, anche se la conosco alla perfezione. Se non parlo, anche tanti americani credono che io sia una straniera. [...] Non posso evitare il muro neanche in India, a Calcutta, nella città della mia cosiddetta lingua madre.24 (Lahiri, In altre parole 102-107)

Why not even in Calcutta? Because as a heritage speaker, Lahiri’s Bengali is not as good as that of a native. The concept of the wall is fundamental in making the students understand a condition that transcends the walls of a classroom, a natural state for many who live in the United States: because of their physical aspects, names, or accent, they are perceived as different, as others, and surely not always with a positive connotation. Reflections such as these by Lahiri can contribute to a deeper understanding, compassion, and empathy towards their fellows.

Second, the author wrote the book directly in Italian, thereby showing the students her journey into a language that it is not her own. This linguistic question is at the fore of the chapter devoted to “Il triangolo” (“The Triangle”), where Lahiri explains her relationship with the three languages she speaks: Bengali (metaphorically her mother), English (learned as a native speaker, and the metaphoric stepmother), and Italian (learned as an adult and identified with the quest for self-redefinition and independence). Lahiri sees the arrival of a third language—Italian—as completing a triangle: linked to the other two points represented by Bengali and English, this third point forms a triangle. Jhumpa Lahiri challenged herself in studying a third language that has eventually become her third space, as I would call it, namely a space where she could redefine herself, to the point that, to explain her thinking, Lahiri quotes from Tabucchi right at the beginning

24 “Here is the border that I will never manage to cross. The wall that will remain forever between me and Italian, no matter how well I learn it. My physical appearance. [...] Because of my physical appearance, I’m seen as a foreigner. It’s true, I am. But, being a foreigner who speaks Italian well, I have two linguistic experiences, remarkably different, in this country. [...] They don’t understand me because they don’t want to understand me because they don’t want to listen to mw, accept me. That’s how the wall works. Someone who doesn’t understand me can ignore me, doesn’t have to take account of me. Such people look at me but don’t see me. They don’t appreciate that I am working hard to speak their language; rather, it irritates them. [...] In America, although I speak English like a native, although I’m considered an American writer, I meet the same wall but for different reasons. Every so often, because of my name, and my appearance, someone asks me why I chose to write in English rather than in my native language. Those who meet me for the first time—when they see me, then learn my name, then hear the way I speak English—as I meet where I’m from. I have to justify the language I speak in, even though I know it perfectly. If I don’t speak, even many Americans think I’m a foreigner. [...] I can’t avoid the wall even in India, in Calcutta, in the city of my so-called mother tongue” (Lahiri, In Other Words 128-133).
of the book: “... I needed a different language: a language that was a place of affection and reflection” (Lahiri, In Other Words VII). Again, from a reader’s perspective, this third place is not only influenced by English because of the many common words of Latin origin (Lahiri, In altre parole 114), but also by Bengali because of the more similar phonetic system (Lahiri, In altre parole 115). Furthermore, metaphorically, while English, her matrigna (stepmother), is strong and preponderant and Bengali, her madre (mother), is weaker than English, the study of Italian represents the resolution of her conflicts: “Credo che studiare l’italiano sia una fuga dal lungo scontro, nella mia vita, tra l’inglese e il bengalese. Un rifiuto sia della madre sia della matrigna. Un percorso indipendente” (Lahiri, In altre parole 113-114), which I visualize as a third space:

While this tri-lingual journey might not be experienced by many people, Lahiri’s reflections in the chapter on “Il triangolo” may contribute to a further understanding of the cultural shock and conflict that many immigrants and their children growing up in the U.S. might experience: while on one hand, the parents (or the grandparents) remain attached to their native culture and tongue, on the other hand, the children (and grandchildren) look for an alternative space that might conflict with a space—both cultural and linguistic—their families identify with. One might conceive of this as the creation of a hybrid status that seems unmanageable, and which the author, in fact, labels as a “linguistic exile” (Lahiri, In Other Words 21):

La mia lingua madre, il bengalese, in America è straniera. Quando si vive in un Paese in cui la propria lingua è considerata straniera, si può provare un senso di straniamento continuo. Si parla una lingua segreta, ignota, priva di corrispondenze con l’ambiente. Una mancanza che crea una distanza dentro di sé. (Lahiri, In altre parole 25-26)

However, Lahiri shares her solution to this distance through the creation of this third, independent space, which is only her own. Specifically, the story devoted to “L’esilio” (“Exile”), where she refers to this “linguistic exile,” might help students from different languages and cultures to understand hers and their own existence of being between languages and cultures, while the U.S. natives can understand the multilingual students’ difficulty in dealing with their own world. The mutual understanding is seen here as a way to contribute to a more inclusive community, especially nowadays that we face so many situations of hate and fear toward others.

25 “... avevo bisogno di una lingua differente: una lingua che fosse un luogo di affetto e di riflessione” (Lahiri, In altre parole 11).
26 “I think that studying Italian is a flight from the long clash in my life between English and Bengali. A rejection of both the mother and the stepmother. An independent path” (Lahiri, In Other Words 141).
27 “My mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America. When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you” (Lahiri, In Other Words 21-22).
Thanks to sharing her own personal conflicts experienced in the U.S. as a daughter of immigrant parents, with non-white physical features and a non-Anglo-Saxon name, Lahiri’s book can contribute to a climate of respect toward students who are diverse from what many North American students are familiar with. And as we agree that literature contributes to our understanding of the world and of ourselves, an author such as Jhumpa Lahiri may contribute to self-discovery and a discovery of others, also making us reflect, as a community of learners, on what it means to learn another language and why doing so is important. Lahiri’s quest for a new dimension of identity helps the readers to take a step forward in comprehending what it means to clash against a new culture, a C2, while also trying to master the basics of its language. Although most of the students might not identify with her journey that required studying and learning another language, one would imagine that just reading her book would help students understand why, for some people, learning another language is not only a desire, but a necessity to exercise independence and to construct a new identity.

In chapters such as “Il dizionario” (“The Dictionary”), “Il colpo di fulmine” (“Love at First Sight”), or “L’esilio” (“Exile”), students come to understand how Lahiri’s desire to study Italian began, from her first trips to Italy onward. For her, it has truly been a love at first sight: “Sento una connessione insieme a un distacco. Una vicinanza insieme a una lontananza. Quello che provo è qualcosa di fisico, di inspiegabile. Suscita una smania indiscreta, assurda. Una tensione squisita. Un colpo di fulmine” (Lahiri, In altre parole 23). Later in the book, and as I have explained earlier, she investigates the reason behind this love, which seems incomprehensible at first since, as she recognizes, “Non avrei bisogno di conoscere questa lingua. Non vivo in Italia, non ho amici italiani” (Lahiri, In altre parole 23), although she ended up living in Italy, in Rome, for a year, where she felt as a “pellegrino linguistico” (Lahiri, In altre parole 37), a linguistic pilgrim, and “un’ospite” (Lahiri, In altre parole 38), a guest. She is honest in disclosing her learning curve, including the difficulty of putting into practice with Italian native speakers what she learned in the classroom back in the United States. However, she seems to suggest that it is fundamental for language learners to establish “un dialogo, per quanto infantile, per quanto imperfetto” (Lahiri, In altre parole 29) with the new language they are learning. In fact, her journey into learning Italian as an adult might contribute to students’ understanding of what it means and takes to learn a new language, and this is the third reason why Lahiri’s book is so pertinent.

In fact, the construction of the book itself helps the students to comprehend the gradual quest and journey of the author: from the importance of a dictionary, to her falling in love with the language (as we have already seen), to her actual study of the language (see the chapters on “Le conversazioni,” “La rinuncia,” “Leggere con il dizionario,” “Il raccolto delle parole,” “Il diario,” or “Il racconto”), to her mastering it, despite acknowledging and accepting that she would never know Italian as well as a native speaker. For instance, despite receiving tutoring in Italian, the language seems to exist only when she is with her teacher, only to disappear afterwards: “Nonostante le conversazioni, la lingua resta un elemento sfuggente, evanescente. Compare solo grazie all’insegnante. Lei la rende presente a casa mia per un’ora, poi la porta via. Sembra concreta,

28 “I feel a connection and at the same time a detachment. A closeness and at the same time a distance. What I feel is something physical, inexplicable. It stirs an indiscreet, absurd longing. An exquisite tension. Love at first sight” (Lahiri, In Other Words 17).
29 “I don’t have a real need to know this language. I don’t live in Italy, I don’t have Italian friends” (Lahiri, In Other Words 17).
30 “[A] dialogue, however childlike, however imperfect” (Lahiri, In Other Words 25).
palpabile, solo quando sono insieme a lei”32 (Lahiri, *In altre parole* 33). Students can certainly identify with this situation when their comfort with a language in the classroom proves fleeting once class time is over.

Lahiri also mentions the necessity of completing exercises that are not so stimulating, yet necessary, together with the inevitability and the acceptance of corrections and feedback: “Facciamo una valanga di esercizi, aridi ma necessari. L’insegnante mi corregge continuamente”33 (Lahiri, *In altre parole* 55). Despite her recognition that learning a new language requires time (Lahiri, *In altre parole* 41), this learning should be seen as something valuable because it helps the students to understand the world, especially when she says that “Le parole sconosciute mi ricordano che c’è tanto che non conosco in questo mondo”34 (Lahiri, *In altre parole* 42) and “Leggere in un’altra lingua implica uno stato perpetuo di crescita, di possibilità”35 (Lahiri, *In altre parole* 43). At the same time, as mentioned, we should accept that as much as we would like to know a second language, we can’t reach a native speakers’ knowledge: this means the acceptance of our limits. As an example of her struggles in Italian, the chapter on “L’imperfetto” (“The Imperfect”) touches upon prepositions, articles, and past tenses such as the use of *imperfetto* and *passato prossimo* in Italian. In the chapter on “Il secondo esilio” (“The Second Exile”), the author explains how “Una lingua straniera è un muscolo gracile, schizzinoso. Se non lo si usa, s’indebolisce”36 (Lahiri, *In altre parole* 96), which is why it is fundamental for students to practice it on a daily basis.

Through reading *In altre parole*, students not only understand some features of the Italian language (when it is read in Italian) and culture (such as the Italian habits during Ferragosto or the directions given by Italians in the chapter on “Il diario,” entitled “The Diary” in English) through the eyes of a non-Italian, but they also understand the struggles, the surprises, the love, the disorientation, and the fears that one might have in encountering a L2 while traveling abroad or staying at home. This is why it would be important for students of Italian to read the entire book. Certainly, based on the level of knowledge of the students, the instructor can introduce solely the version in Italian or both versions, namely also the English translation. In my case, because I teach to beginner students (namely, students who are in first semester of Italian), they are required to read the book first in English within a two-week period after a first week of pre-reading activities. In this first week, students are required to do some basic research about the author, read the article by Jhumpa Lahiri, “Teach Yourself Italian,” and also listen (possibly with the help of the instructor, for first-semester students) to the two interviews on YouTube (the links are available in the bibliography): “Interview to Jhumpa Lahiri” (Center for American studies, Rome)37 and “Falling in Love with the Italian Language. Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri.” After this initial preparation, the findings are shared and discussed in the classroom or virtually over a discussion board. Following the week devoted to the pre-reading activities, students have the afore-mentioned two weeks to read the book in English independently. However, within this two-week period, I ask my first-semester

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32 “In spite of the conversations, the language remains elusive, evanescent. It appears only with the teacher. She brings it into my house for an hour, then takes it away. It seems concrete, palpable, only when I am with her” (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 31).
33 “We do an avalanche of exercises, arid but necessary. The teacher corrects me constantly” (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 33).
34 “The unknown words remind me that there’s a lot I don’t know in this world” (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 44).
35 “Reading in another language implies a perpetual state of growth, of possibility” (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 45).
36 “A foreign language is a delicate, finicky muscle. If you don’t use it, it gets weak” (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 25).
37 “Intervista a Jhumpa Lahiri” (Centro Studi Americani, Roma).
students to complete a short activity (such as the one included in the Appendix) on an excerpt in Italian from a chapter. For this activity, the goal is reading a short excerpt in Italian, looking for unknown words in the dictionary (which is why I have chosen the chapter on “Il dizionario,” entitled “The Dictionary” in English), and working on verbs in -are, inductively building conjugations and recognizing regular versus irregular verbs, and also finally identifying verbs from other conjugations, such as those in -ere. As a writing activity, students are required to compose short sentences in Italian using the verbs in -are from the excerpt. Certainly, if this activity is well-suited for first-semester students in the first weeks of classes, more complex activities should obviously be structured for more advanced students.

Once the students have completed the reading of the book, as post-reading activities, we discuss it in the fourth week with the goal of comprehending and interpreting the literary text in preparation for the Readers Theater’s activity to be completed in Italian. The post-reading discussion aims at enhancing intercultural communication aspects precisely because of its multicultural and multilingual nature. As we have seen, any literary text can be used for performance in the classroom through a strategy that does not require—as in the case of an actual professional theater—a stage, costumes, and memorization, among other such elements. Even in the case of Readers Theater based on literary texts, students should produce and manage the script. Specifically, students should decide in which order to read the book. Students should be encouraged not to follow the order of the chapters, but to find their own voices, their own way to interpret and express the author’s words. For instance, they are allowed to skip some chapters in order to construct a new story based on their interpretative reading.

As a class, in week five, students are asked to create a script in Italian with single roles that will be later assigned to each student in the class to read aloud. Before starting the practice, the sixth week of the project would be the ideal point to introduce the students to the principles and techniques behind the voice practice and warm-ups, such as those elements presented by Patsy Rodenburg or Stephen Smith. Once these concepts are learned, if not mastered, students can start practicing to read aloud in Italian the assigned parts (one or two paragraphs per student, depending on the script), using gestures, facial expressions, correct diction, and appropriate intonation for the message to convey to the audience, which is the class itself. Practice can occur in the classroom (for instance, devoting fifteen minutes every week to it) or outside of class. Practice should not take more than a couple of weeks before passing to the rehearsal as an entire class for another two or three weeks, depending on the timeline. The culminating, final activity is the performance in front of the teacher and the class, who are at the same time audience and performers, unless one wants to move the performance out of the walls of the classroom to be shared, for instance, with the campus community.

The Readers Theater as a culminating activity has its benefits because of the reading of interpretative literary texts, the communicative aspects with the post-reading discussion, the writing, in the form of short sentences for first-semester students (in this regard, Lahiri’s writing might be even more accessible to students learning Italian because she too had to learn the language), and the organization of a script in view of the Readers Theater’s performance, which contribute to students practicing the language first-hand, namely making Italian by doing theater.

The book is also amenable to being reshuffled and reconstructed because it deals with a journey that does not follow an exact chronology, also being intermingled with short stories written by the author in Italian. A class can decide its own focus, reordering Lahiri’s intentions and creating a new script or book that is meaningful for the class, to be read aloud in Italian. Again,
because Lahiri’s writing does not originate from a native speaker’s experience, the reading is a pleasant exercise for students, recognizing that the words she uses are within L2 students’ reach.

Conclusion
Readers Theater is a strategy that is seen as a way to help students reduce anxiety through teamwork, while also building self-confidence and motivation to study another language and another culture through reading Lahiri’s book that highlights both the enthusiasm and challenges it entails. As a strategy involving interpretative reading of literary texts, Readers Theater also fosters writing and communicative skills with a culminating reading-aloud performance where diction, intonation, and interpretation through engagement of students’ voices are encouraged, if not required. In particular, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In altre parole* contains elements of discussion not only about an L2 such as Italian, but also it offers an overview of the internal conflicts that one might experience in dealing with multiple languages identified as madre and matrigna by Jhumpa Lahiri. The interpretation of these multiple identities, both linguistically and culturally, can certainly contribute to students’ understanding of a multicultural society such as that of the United States, possibly helping them empathize with those people who are perceived as others. The words by Jhumpa Lahiri in the chapter entitled “L’imperfetto” (“The Imperfect”) are keys to understanding the experience of many, in particular their linguistic and cultural conflicts:

Da ragazzina, in America, provavo a parlare il bengalese alla perfezione, senza alcun accento straniero, per accontentare i miei genitori, soprattutto per sentirmi completamente figlia loro. Ma non era possibile. D’altro canto volevo essere considerata un’americana, ma nonostante parlassi quella lingua perfettamente, non era possibile neanche quello. Ero sospesa anziché radicata. Avevo due lati, entrambi imprecisi. L’ansia che provavo, e che talvolta provo ancora, proviene da un senso di inadeguatezza, di essere una delusione.38 (Lahiri, *In altre parole* 86)

The suspension and the anxiety felt by Lahiri, together with her “sense of inadequacy,” is what we want to spare our students when they enter our language classes: bringing to life *In altre parole* through Readers Theater also has this goal, beyond fostering enthusiasm and curiosity in language learning. It also contributes to forging responsible, empathic, and global-minded citizens who respect diversity while enhancing equity and inclusion in any multicultural and multilingual society.

38 “As a girl in America, I tried to speak Bengali perfectly, without a foreign accent, to satisfy my parents, and above all to feel that I was completely their daughter. But it was impossible. On the other hand, I wanted to be considered an American, yet, despite the fact that I speak English perfectly, that was impossible, too. I was suspended rather than rooted. I had two sides, neither well defined. The anxiety I felt, and still feel, comes from a sense of inadequacy, of being a disappointment” (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 107).
Il dizionario
Jhumpa Lahiri

Il primo libro italiano che compro è un dizionario tascabile (pocket), con definizioni in inglese. Sto per (I’m about to) andare a Firenze per la prima volta, nel 1994. Vado in una libreria (bookshop) a Boston, con un nome italiano: Rizzoli. Una bella libreria, raffinata (refined), che non c’è più.

Non compro una guida turistica (guidebook), anche se (even though) è la mia prima visita in Italia, anche se non conosco per niente Firenze. Grazie a un mio amico, ho già (already) l’indirizzo (address) di un albergo. Sono una studentessa, ho pochi soldi. Credo che un dizionario sia (is) più importante. […]

Da allora (since then), per molti anni, ogni volta (every time) che vado in Italia,porto questo dizionario con me. Lo metto sempre in borsa. Cerco le parole quando sono per strada (in the street), quando torno in albergo dopo un giro (after an outing), quando provo a leggere un articolo sul giornale. Mi guida, mi protegge, mi spiega tutto. […]

Sulla prima pagina, a un certo punto (at a certain point), scrivo: «provare a = cercare di» («to try to = to seek to»).


Attività di lettura, comprensione e scrittura
1. Leggi il testo tratto (excerpted) dal capitolo Il dizionario di Jhumpa Lahiri. Cerca le parole sconosciute (unknown) sul dizionario.
2. Sottolinea (underline) tutti i verbi ed elenca (list) qui sotto (below) i verbi in –are. Usa ancora (again) il dizionario!
3. Quali verbi in –are non sono regolari? Prova (try) a coniugare i verbi in base ai soggetti (io, tu, lui/lei/Lei, noi, voi, loro).
4. Scegli (choose) quattro verbi in –are tra (from among) quelli del punto #2. Scrivi quattro frasi complete (complete sentences) in italiano sul testo.
5. Quali verbi non sono in –are? Scrivi qui sotto gli infiniti (infinitives).

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