EXPLORING THE HOST PLACE:
A CASE STUDY IN INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Mots-clés

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Keywords

Interculturality ; second language teaching and learning; classroom discourse; identity; asylum-seeking student.

Résumé

Cette étude analyse l'utilisation d'une activité interculturelle dans un cours d'italien L2 au Centre linguistique de l'Université de Bologna suivi par des étudiants d'échange, des étudiants étrangers inscrits à titre individuel et des étudiants demandeurs d'asile. L'activité, nommée 'Géographie Interculturelle', a pour but d'aider les élèves à 'développer leur curiosité et à approfondir leurs connaissances sur le nouvel environnement et les personnes qui l'habitent' (IEREST, 2015:74), en les invitant à explorer les endroits de la ville et à rencontrer des gens. Pour les possibles implications dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage linguistique interculturel, nous nous concentrons sur sa réalisation de la part d'un étudiant demandeur d'asile, qui n'a atteint que partiellement l'objectif interculturel prévu mais qui, d'autre part, a pu, grâce à cette activité, réaliser d'importants progrès en tant qu'étudiant universitaire. L'enseignante a

contribué à cette réalisation, en aidant l'élève à développer des capacités selon ses priorités et son rythme différencié.

Abstract

This study investigates the use of an intercultural activity in an Italian L2 course at the Linguistic Centre of Bologna University attended by exchange, international and asylum-seeking students. The activity, called 'Intercultural Geography', was designed to help students 'develop curiosity towards and further knowledge about the new environment and the people who inhabit it' (IEREST, 2015:74), inviting them to explore the city and to meet people. For its possible implications in intercultural language teaching and learning, we focus on its completion on the part of an asylum-seeking student, who only partially reached the intercultural objective of the activity but, on the other hand, thanks to this activity, made significant progress as academic student. The teacher contributed to this attainment, supporting the student to develop abilities according to her priorities and differentiated pace.

Introduction : Intercultural activities in language courses

Intercultural language learning and teaching has been quite often promoted in contemporary foreign and second language classroom contexts (Kramsch, 2006; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). According to this perspective, no longer are language proficiency and targeted culture knowledge the only learning goals, rather a wider set of abilities and attitudes can be applied to understand a variety of cultures, including one's own culture (Baker, 2015).

Interest in the intercultural dimension within language education was raised by a general shift in applied linguistics, a 'cultural turn' which connects language learning and teaching to interculturality, focusing on the process through which students reflect on cultural differences, acquire awareness of these differences and act consequently. Kramsch (2009) suggests that intercultural awareness is not just a skill, that it is rather a set of practices involving knowledge, skills and attitudes. These establish good relationships among people distancing themselves from the common perception of culture as one entire whole, often associated with national stereotypes, and enable people to explore the richness of their cultural multiplicity. The view of culture which rejects stereotyping and essentialism, i.e. the reduction of the other to predefined traits of the culture they are assumed to belong to, underpins the approach towards interculturality we adopt in our teaching practice. We promote a non-essentialist approach, which considers culturality as a process in which meaning is co-constructed in an intercultural dialogue rather than a view of cultures as fixed entities defining people's behaviour (Holliday, 1999; Dervin, 2009). Moreover, non-essentialist perspectives represent a precondition for an identity-related intercultural language education, in which the construct 'identity' could replace that of 'culture', paying limited or no attention to the target culture (Borghetti, 2019).

So, if we assume that interculturality is a reflexive awareness of Self and Other (Holliday, 2018), intercultural language learning implies experiencing cultural diversity, de-centering, critical observation and reflection, and an active experimentation of the new knowledge (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In such a perspective, the role of the language educator is to introduce materials and instruments which combine intercultural and linguistic goals in the language classroom. This combination is facilitated by some traits which the communicative approach, at the basis of our language teaching, has in common with intercultural education: just as students'

underlying communicative competence and creative intelligence are brought out and transferred to a new language, their existing cultural experience and competence in cultural formation can be externalized and used in new cultural contexts (Holliday, 2018). In both language and intercultural learning, students may not be aware that they hold these resources and the educator has the important mission to help them to retrieve this communicative and cultural experiences to employ them in new contexts.

In an intercultural language classroom, students explore cultural experiences and acquire linguistic and discourse structures in order to, for example, i) express similarities and differences among different cultures; ii) explain, interpret and discuss cultural perspectives and practices in texts and intercultural encounters; iii) exchange information about cultural values and attitudes; or iiii) express opinions on facts and events taking different perspectives into consideration.

As part of this process of externalizing existing experience, it is essential for language teachers to know how intercultural learning works and if intercultural development has occurred: examining and reflecting on classroom discourse and interaction is one possible way (Harbon & Moloney, 2013).

1. IEREST intercultural activities

In the present research the teacher investigated the use of an intercultural activity and its outcomes in an Italian L2 elementary course at the Linguistic Centre of Bologna University attended by exchange, international and asylum-seeking students.

The proposed activity, `Intercultural Geography', is part of the open intercultural learning resources produced within the European project IEREST- Intercultural Educational Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers (IEREST, 2015).

The IEREST Project, an Erasmus Multilateral Project (2012-2015) co-funded by the European Commission within the frame of the Lifelong Learning Programme 2009-2012, produced a set of teaching modules to be taught to Erasmus students before, during and after their experience abroad. In IEREST intercultural activities, a collaborative learning environment is created by learner-generated content: students reflect on their own as well as other's contributions and develop critical skills while working through a formal educational social network. They also share information and ideas in a learning community which exposes them to varying social and academic

cultures. Lastly, they build a body of knowledge and gain perspective on guided topics through other students' contributions.

IEREST activities do not prepare students for their intercultural experience in any particular place because the focus is not on the knowledge of a particular cultural environment but on a co-construction of who they are in interaction with other people beyond national identities (Beaven & Borghetti, 2015). As noted above, the adopted view of 'culture' is a non-essentialist one. Following Holliday (1999), we do not speak of 'culture 'but preferably of 'cultures', distinguishing between 'large' and 'small' cultures – where 'large' refers to ethnic, national or international, while 'small' applies to any cohesive group within society, relating to whatever social event or occasion gathers people together. If we put too much emphasis on 'large cultures' we run the risk to be essentialistic, because we focus our attention primarily on ethnicity and so-called national or international traits of people's identities. So, in IEREST activities, students are engaged as individuals who are neither a product nor a representative of a particular culture because they are part of several cultural groups, they identify themselves with a plurality of groups, and they relate for example to a given university, sports, hobbies, gender, religion, etc.

The chosen activity 'Intercultural Geography' was designed to help students reflect on how their host environment – the city, the university, the neighborhoods, etc. – has been shaped by its history and cultures and by the activities of the communities who live in these spaces. The tasks the activity relies on are designed to encourage students to compare their own experience and perception of the host environment with those of other students and resident people. At the beginning, students reflect on their own experience of host environment; then, they explore the similarities and differences between their own experience and that of other members of the group. The aim of this procedure is to see if their experiences are similar but also which parts of the place remain outside their joint experience, and to ask together why that is so. Finally, students are encouraged to obtain a broader and more diversified experience of their host environment by arranging an intercultural encounter of their own and to reflect on their personal expectations and on the actual proceedings and outcome of the encounter. According to the intercultural objective 'Developing curiosity towards and further knowledge about the new environment and the people who inhabit it' (IEREST, 2015:74) and following an ethnographic approach, students choose a place from the host area and interview a local informant. They are asked to select a person who has

lived in the local place for several years and is familiar with one of the places which the student does not know well. The purpose is to find out about the informant's experience of living in the area and how she or he views the neighbourhood and the city. Finally, they prepare a presentation on their findings about the local place[1].

2. The classroom research and the methodology

The research we carried out in the classroom addressed the intended outcome of the activity, namely, if students demonstrated willingness to engage with the local environment, how they interpreted this task and what kind of commitment they put on it. The activity involved two classes for a total of 25 students. Students' final presentations and student-teacher interactions were audio-recorded and examined through classroom discourse analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983; Cots, 2006). In the light of intercultural language education research, these presentations and interactions were considered as examples of small culture formations, that is 'a momentary coming together of a small group of people from diverse cultural background working out rules for engagement' (Holliday & Amadasi, 2017:258). And strictly linked to small culture formations, the construction of identity was also observed in language use through Zimmerman's framework (1998), which distinguishes among 'discourse', 'situational' and 'transportable' identities. Discourse identity refers to the one a person constructs within a given speech situation (e.g. as speaker, listener, etc); situational identity is what people adopt when engaged in a social activity (e.g in class as professor or as student); lastly, transportable identity refers to those aspects of identity which are potentially present in every situation (e.g., being a man or a woman).

In the present research, the teacher is also the researcher and the author of the paper, according to the Mohr and MacLean's model (Mohr & MacLean, 1987).

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[1] An example: Pierre, an Erasmus student, chose to describe a small theatre in a neighbourhood far from the city centre, where most Erasmus students don't go because of its lack of attractiveness. There he interviewed an old member of the association who ran the theatre and reflected on his own expectations about the place, which he had considered uninteresting, and the actual information the informant gave, depicting it lively and important for the local community.

3. General results

Data show different outcomes according to the typology of students, where the differences were found primarily between exchange Erasmus students and asylum-seeking students – different life projects are reflected in the different interpretation of the completion of the task. Erasmus students demonstrated more willingness, put more commitment and successfully reached the intercultural objectives more than asylum-seeking students. As a matter of fact, if the linguistic needs of exchange students are generally clear, based on life context and on the duration of the study, those of migrants, characterized by situations of vulnerability, are less sharp: while Erasmus students come to language classes with a study agreement, Erasmus student office or associations to be referred to, and a home place to go back, asylum- seeking students lack all these certainties. In addition to psychophysical stability, migration dynamics can affect the acquisition of the second language more or less positively: if the student wishes to stay in the host country, the second language will presumably be important for the student, but if she conceives it as an intermediate, temporary destination, its acquisition may be superfluous or hampering (Nitti, 2018). The same phenomenon may happen for the other activities proposed by the teacher in the classroom, namely the intercultural activities.

4. The case study

We want to describe here an example of how an asylum-seeking student, Rosa, completed the 'Intercultural Geography' activity. If her Erasmus classmates were willing to obtain a broader experience of their host environment, arrange an intercultural encounter and reflect on the information they collected from a local informant, she faced the task differently. This different outcome led us to consider her as a case study for its possible implications on intercultural language teaching and learning. Therefore, in the next sessions, we report on the analysis of Rosa's performance during her oral presentation and the student-teacher interaction, answering the following research questions:
-   did Rosa demonstrate willingness to engage with the local environment and the people who inhabit it?
-   How did she interpret this task?

- What kind of commitment did she put on the task?

4.1 Background information about Rosa

Rosa is an asylum-seeking student who, thanks to 'Unibo For Refugees' – a project promoted by Bologna University and the Municipality of Bologna for the integration of refugee people in the university context – was enrolled for the Italian course by the supporting organization. She attended regularly but she always arrived late because she lived outside Bologna. She did not participate in any of the classroom activities. She refused to interact with other students because, as she stated during the first class, she was not really interested to learn Italian and she felt uncomfortable for being the only black person in the classroom. She asked very often to leave the room because of phone calls she received. It was evident that her motivation to follow the course was weak: she was advised to attend it and she thought she was not in the position to refuse it. The teacher had to work on it, negotiating actions, mediating between her and her new context of life, supporting her individually in the learning activities. Thanks to this intervention, in collaboration with the assigned organization, Rosa started to feel more at ease in the classroom, but she asked to sit next to the teacher during classes, avoiding contacts with other students.

As explained above, the activity *'Intercultural Geography'* requires a great deal of student interactions and team work: in groups, students reflect on their own experience of their host environment, discuss the similarities and differences of their experiences, explore the host environment, have to arrange an intercultural encounter in order to finally prepare a presentation to report on the chosen place and the people they have met. This presentation is their final oral exam.

Rosa did not participate in any of the preparatory work. She said she could not work in groups with students because she lived in another city and she also expressed her anxiety to speak in front of a public. Finally, it was decided that she would face the oral presentation but that she would work alone. The teacher did not know anything about the place she chose to work on until the very day of the presentation.

4.2 Rosa's performance

In the task instructions they were given, students had to choose one place which they thought was revealing new aspects of the city. They had to find out information about the reason why the place could be considered significant, about the people who uses it and what for, about its history and identity. They had to obtain some information through observation-taking some pictures or making small videos-but their main source of information had to be a person who knew the place well-for example someone who worked there, or used it regularly.

Unlike the other students who, for example, chose small theatres, libraries or youth centres, that is places with well-defined hystory and identity, the place Rosa chose to work on was a mall, a non-place in the teacher's eyes. Indeed she could not hide her surprise:

T: *who is next? Rosa? Very good Rosa, please come […...] so what do you show us?*

R: *today I am going to present you the Leonardo mall in Imola.*

T: *ok. a mall. She is going to present us a mall, a place where she likes going. a mall, hm?* [surprised*]*

R: *yes […] very modern place yes…. this mall is very important because attract a lot of foreign tourist ehm…... and and and very cheap…...ah….hmmm…... outside mall….this [*shows photo*] outside big parking where all people ah… car…...ah don't matter…yes*[2]

Whereas the mall was regarded by the teacher as a place which is not really culturally and socially representative, in Rosa's description the mall is a socialization place as much as a youth centre can be:

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[2] Original text in Italian:

I: *un altro? tu Rosa? molto bene, Rosa, vieni! […...] allora che cosa ci fai vedere?*

R: *oggi vi presento centro commerciale Leonardo Imola*

I: *ok va bene. centro commerciale. ci presenta un centro commerciale, che è un posto dove lei va volentieri e le piace molto. un centro commerciale, hm?* [sorpresa]

R: *sì […] è luogo molto moderno,eh…. questo centro commerciale Leonardo è molto importante perché attrae tanti turisti stranieri eh…… otre otre oltre molto economica… economico. ah….mhhhh fuori centro commerciale imola…questo… [*mostra foto*] fuori c'è grande parcheggio dove tutti gente ah….macchina…. ah non importa….sì*

R: *outside there is big parking….big parking….where people leave car. Nearby there is a nice park where people, all people go make relationship, yes there is. [….] every people come mall to go for walks for relationship there is children play area* [3]

Rosa then refers only very briefly to the interview she was supposed to carry out. Unlike the other students, she did not bring any photos or videos of the encounter. According to the task objectives, the encounter is the core of the activity. Instructed to do fieldwork, to use observation and interviewing in order to describe what people do and what meanings they assign to what they do, Rosa gives just a short account of it and goes back on the opportunities people have to socialize there, for example via listening to music together:

R: *I made interview…interview with…a shop girl of….shop girl of jewelry…..of imola mall….she told me, during this interview, she told me she likes her job very much. She likes opportunity know many many person. She don't like work sunday, she likes dancing ehm music because in Imola mall there is music, all people listen listen to music. yes ah…* [4]

And the ethnographic work is reduced to a long list of shops present in the mall, with much attention on those related to perfumery, shoes and clothes. She describes them in detail, as she is really attracted by them, by their quantity, their beauty and her purchasing power: the most frequent adjectives she uses are '*many*', '*beautiful*', '*cheap*', '*expensive*'.

R: *there are many shops in the mall. There is shop….hm shop perfumery Douglas….yes there is shop grocery…..yes there is shop where sho…shoes there is shop clothes. there is shop Zara where sold many many beautiful dress.*

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[3] Original text in Italian:

R: *di fuori c'è parcheggio grande….grande parcheggio…dove tutti gente lasciano macchina. Vicino c'è un bel parco dove persone, tutte persone fare relazione, si c'è [….] tutti persone viene centro commerciale imola per fare un passeggiata per relazione c'è area di giochi bambini*

[4] Original text in Italian :

R: *io ho fatto un'intervista…un'intervista con…..ad un commessa del….commessa di giueria…di lo centro commerciale imola… lei mi ha detto, durante questa intervista, lei mi ha detto che lei che le piace molto il suo lavoro. Le piace opportunità con conoscere tanti tanti persone. Lei non piace lavoro domenica, le piace ballare eh musica perché in centro commerciale Imola c'è musica, tutti persone ascolta ascolta musica. si ah….*

> *yes. there is shop Pittarello where sold beautiful shoes….all cheap shoes but I am sorry there is not big brand like Gucci and….hm expensive…..[5]*

The reflection on how the host environment has been shaped by its history and cultures, by the activities of the people who live there – the main objective of the task – is not here. But, as she goes on in her presentation, something happens regarding herself: Rosa feels more and more confident, her voice is higher and firmer, traits of her transportable (she is a black girl) and situational identity (she is a student) are constructed in discourse:

> R: *there is jewelry where sold….je je yes jewelry where sold earrings ah…expensive and…and cheap. Mh…but i like cheap because **i don't have much money NOW.** […..] hm….there is a shop called Kiko where sold beauty product…**i like Kiko because there is product for…ehm black skin.** because there is no there is no many shops where products for black people are sold*
>
> T: *ah*
>
> R: *just Kiko… cheap too [lowers voice] **for me because I am a student***
>
> T: *laughs*
>
> SS: *laugh[6]*

The teacher reacts sympathetically and, at the end of the presentation, with enthusiasm:

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[5] Original text in Italian :

R: *ci sono tanti negozi centro commerciale Imola. c'è negozio eh….negozio perfumeria Douglas, c'è negozio ehm….elimet…alimentari……si c'è negozio…..hm…..dove casa….calza…calzatura, c'è negozio….abbigliamento. c'è negozio Zara dove venduto tanti tanti belle….vestiti. si. c'è negozio…Pittarello dove venduto…bella anche bella scarpe… tutti scarpe economico ma mi dispiace non c'è marca grande come Gucci e eh….costoso xxxx ah… ehm….*

[6] Original text in Italian :

R: *c'è c'è giueria dove venduto giu giu sì giueria dove venduto orecchiani eh… costoso e… e economico. mh…. ma mi piaci economico perché **non ho tanti soldi ADESSO**. […..] hm….c'è un negozio chiama Kiko dove venduto prodotti bellezza…**mi piace Kiko perché c'è prodotto per…ehm pelle nera.** perché no no non c'è tanti tanti negozi dove vendono prodotti per persone nera*

I: *ah*

R: *solo Kiko anche economica. [a bassa voce] **per me perché sono una studentessa***

I: *ride*

SS: *ridono*

T: ***that's fine*** [cheers] ***oh…… you made it…….!!!!! You made your presentation hurray!***[7]

As she considers Rosa's presentation weak in terms of intercultural outcome but, at the same time, wants to encourage her to go on, the teacher expands on Rosa's choice for the other students, stressing on the socializing dimension of her description of the mall:

T: *for Rosa, this mall is the best place where to go. This is important, isn't it?* [to class] *It is important. Because Rosa found her own place in a mall and that's fine. That's fine because if this is a place important for the city* […] *She sees people who are fine, aren't they?* [to Rosa][8]

But Rosa reaffirms her priorities and the reasons for choosing the place, expresses self-confidence and the teacher acknowledges it:

R: *yes, but also because I like fashion*

T: *and finally because she likes fashion* [laughs]

SS: [laughs]

T: *she likes perfumes, she likes make up, don't you?* […] *ok, it's done!*

R: *yes*[9]

Conclusions and implications for intercultural language teaching and learning

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[7] Original text in Italian :

I: **va bene** [incolla] ***oh…… ce l'abbiamo fatta…….!!!!! ce l'abbiamo fatta a fare la presentazione, evviva!***

[8] Original text in Italian:

I: *per Rosa un centro commerciale è il meglio che c'è. È importante questo, no?* [alla classe] *È importante. Perché Rosa ha trovato una sua dimensione in un centro commerciale e va benissimo. E va benissimo perché se un luogo è importante per la città* […] *Lei vede gente che sta bene giusto?* [a Rosa]

[9] Original text in Italian :

R: *sì, anche perché mi piace moda.*

I: *e poi perché le piace la moda* [ride]

Ss [ridono]

I: *le piacciono i profumi, le piacciono i trucchi, giusto?* […] *a posto!*

R: *sì*

Our study noted that, while her fellow students put committment to complete the intercultural activity and demonstrated willingness to engage with the local environment and people, Rosa has been reluctant to do so since the beginning of the course: she interpreted the task as one of the several duties to comply in the long path to the refugee status. As a result, she was not really interested to develop curiosity and further knowledge of the host environment and she chose to present a mall, a place she usually went to and that was easy for her to describe. But that does not mean that she did not learn anything: if, on the one hand, the planned intercultural objective was reached only partially, on the other hand, she attained an outcome as academic student by successfully giving a presentation to an audience, which was inconceivable for her during the first classes and which made her pass the final oral test. Moreover, thanks to the opportunity she had to make a presentation, she could live her own personal intercultural experience, choosing which identity showing to her audience. As a matter of fact, we observed how, following Zimmerman's framework (1998), through her discourse identity – being the speaker in front of a public-Rosa expressed her transportable identity – being a black woman – and her situational identity – being a student.

Assuming an 'identity' perspective in intercultural language teaching and learning implies, on the part of the teacher, encouraging unexpected outcomes, as these can have identity-loaded expressive functions linked to the intercultural experience the learner is going through (Borghetti, 2019). In this case, the teacher's intervention, expressed either through encouragement or flexibility to reconsider a different task completion, contributed to Rosa's final achievement, offering the student to choose from different identities with which participating in the activities of the classroom (Norton & Toohey, 2011). With heterogeneous student groups, this is much needed, as it may lead students to develop abilities according to their priorities and differentiated pace.

The 'identity' perspective can replace the 'culture' perspective in language learning and teaching, given a non-essentialist perspective on culture – that is if we consider culture as an everyday constructive process for negotiating the identities necessary to interact with people (Holliday & Amadasi, 2017). According to this view, individuals do not represent a given culture but co-construct their identities in interaction with a variety of groups. Presenting the learners with transnational 'small cultures' (Holliday, 1999) is a preliminary condition. In this respect, in the intercultural and language class,

objectives are reached when learners are able to use language to convey images of themselves that better express their desired identities (Cook, 2012). Rosa did so: she presented herself to the class as a black woman and succeeded in completing an academic task, actions which were unthinkable at the beginning of the course. She participated in the cultural group of international students by giving her oral presentation and going through her intercultural experience by identifying herself with this group. Thus, we can define her experience as 'intercultural' on the basis of her subjective experience of belonging that emerged during the discourse construction: a discursively intercultural experience through the narration of stories, thoughts and personal trajectories (Holliday & Amadasi, 2017). And this is possible in a class where not only students learn about the target language and culture, but also where they develop the language skills they need to better express their subjectivities, practice and explore new meanings in interaction with other learners and with the teacher.

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