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Using Literary Texts in Language Teaching: Insights from Europe

Donna TATSUKI

Abstract

This paper is the first of a multi-part series that will report on how literary texts are being integrated successfully into English language teaching in Europe and what insights the European experience can offer to language professionals in Japan.

Introduction

According to Kachru and Smith (2008) one quarter of the world's population uses English on a daily basis for living or for making a living and it can be considered the language of "global communication" (de Swann, 2001, p.6). Even countries with no previous "Anglo" connection (through events such as colonization or immigration, for example) are feeling the influence of English's growing position as a global lingua franca. Italy and Japan both share, in the words of Faez (2011), "a dilemma: preserve their own language, culture and history and attempt not to participate in the growing impact of English or become involved in the spread of English as the lingua franca of the economic world" (p.31).

In Japan, for the past 20 years the focus in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been on "practical English" (Kubota, 1998; Matsuda, 2003; Sakai & D'Angelo, 2005; Tanaka & Tanaka, 1995), (usually interpreted as the intensive study of grammar rules, with explanations dispensed exclusively in Japanese) despite the fact that there has been no critical discussion or concrete rationale for the abandonment of literary texts/sources in English language programs—particularly in conjunction with the development of productive skills (speaking and writing) but also with respect to receptive skills (reading and listening). As part of a kaken research team, my colleagues and I have reported elsewhere on theoretical issues involved in the integration of literary texts into ELT curricula (Tatsuki & Zenuk-Nishide, 2012, Minami, 2007) and various rationales for promoting their inclusion (Tatsuki, 2009).

This paper endeavors to describe and discuss the approaches that have been adopted in Italy to use literary texts within the scope of language teaching and will

make connections to show that many aspects of the Italian approaches could be highly relevant to the Japanese foreign language-teaching context. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to first describe the educational context, goals and objectives for ELT in compulsory education in Italy.

Compulsory Education in Italy

Similar to the administrative structure in Japan, Italy's education system is centrally controlled by an administrative body called "Directorates that deals with primary as well as lower and upper level secondary schooling. These directors make decisions regarding curriculum development and implementation, teacher recruitment, funding and other school matters and forward their recommendations to the Minister of Public Instruction" (European Commission, 2010a; cited by Faez, 2011, p.33).

In Italy, school is compulsory from 6 to 17/18 years of age, and is divided into four stages: primary school (scuola primaria), lower secondary school (scuola secondaria di primo grado), upper secondary school (scuola secondaria di secondo grado) and university (università) (UNDP, 2007). There are three types of high schools: 1) the Liceo, similar to the French *lycées* (liceo classico, liceo linguistico, liceo delle scienze umane, liceo scientifico, liceo artistico, liceo musicale e coreutico), 2) the Istituto Tecnico (Technical Institute) and 3) the Istituto Professionale (Professional Institute). The Istituto Tecnico, is divided into ITIS (Istituto Tecnico Industriale Statale, i.e. Technical/Technological Institute) and ITC (Istituto Tecnico Commerciale, i.e. Technical/Commercial Institute), and is more oriented toward practical subjects, such as aeronautics, business administration, computer science and chemistry. The Istituto Professionale offers education oriented towards practical subjects and allows the students to start looking for jobs as soon as they have completed their studies and is even more specific in terms of vocational course offerings than the Istituto Tecnico. Students who study in a Liceo, are exposed to a broad curriculum which is generally considered necessary to enter university. However, students at Istituto Tecnico and Istituto Professionale also have access to university, if they pass the entry tests, which are mandatory in most faculties.

English Language Education in Italy

As one of the member states of the European Union, Italy has agreed that, "in addition to individuals' mother tongue, at least two languages should be taught from a very early age (European Commission, 2008; cited by Faez, 2011, p.34)." There is

an unspoken understanding that English should be the first of the two languages (Erling & Hilgendorf, 2006; Hilgendorf, 2005). Since 2007, the starting age for foreign language study is six (European Commission, 2008). Although "in primary schools, English is often taught by general teachers who do not receive initial training to teach foreign languages but participate in in-service professional development activities, at the secondary level, qualified language teachers teach foreign languages. Initial teacher education programs for foreign language teachers last six years which is one of the longest programs among EU member states" (Faez, 2011, p.36). The total number of hours devoted to foreign language study from primary to lower secondary school is 891 (80 hours per year in primary school and 165 hours per year in lower secondary). In Japan a mere 354-402 hours is allotted to foreign language study during comparable school ages (6-30 hours per year for 2 years in primary school (Carly, 2012), 114 hours per year for 3 years in lower secondary (MEXT, 2011).

The sheer lack of instructional contact hours (never mind issues of pedagogy) put Japanese students clearly at a disadvantage in comparison with Italian students by the time they reach high school. This disadvantage begins in primary school where a late start (5th grade) and a lack of clarity in policy has resulted in "considerable confusion, particularly at regional or school level. Until 2011, the Japanese government's policy, for example, aimed to introduce language activities with the purpose of fostering 'an introduction to foreign language and culture as part of international understanding, rather than teaching language learning per se' (Butler and Iino, 2005, p. 40). This has resulted in schools and teachers having difficulties interpreting the policy" (Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011).

All upper secondary schools in Italy require two complementary streams of English language related study: the study of English language ("practical", linguistic, communicative) and English literature/culture. Language study is organized into two biennial programs and then the fifth year. Table 1 provides descriptions for each part of the program.

Table 1. Upper Secondary English Language Program Descriptions in Italy by Year

Biennial Program One (Years 1-2)

Nell'ambito della competenza linguistico-comunicativa, lo studente comprende in modo globale e selettivo testi orali e scritti su argomenti noti inerenti alla sfera personale e sociale; produce testi orali e scritti, lineari e coesi per riferire fatti e descrivere situazioni inerenti ad ambienti vicini e a esperienze personali; partecipa a conversazioni e interagisce nella discussione, anche con parlanti nativi, in maniera adeguata al contesto; riflette

sul sistema (fonologia, morfologia, sintassi, lessico, ecc.) e sugli usi linguistici (funzioni, varietà di registri e testi, ecc.), anche in un'ottica comparativa, al fine di acquisire una consapevolezza delle analogie e differenze con la lingua italiana; riflette sulle strategie di apprendimento della lingua straniera al fine di sviluppare autonomia nello studio. [In the context of linguistic and communicative competence, the student has a comprehensive and selective oral and written texts on familiar topics related to personal and social sphere; produce oral and written texts, linear and cohesive to report the facts and describe situations related to sources close and personal experiences, participating in conversations and interact in discussion with native speakers in a manner appropriate to the context, reflects on the system (phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, etc..) and uses language (functions, a variety of records and texts, etc..), in a comparative perspective, in order to gain an understanding of the similarities and differences with the Italian language, reflects on the strategies of foreign language learning in order to develop autonomy in the study.] (Interministerial Decree 211, 2010, pp.12-13).

Biennial Program Two (Years 3-4)

Nell'ambito della competenza linguistico-comunicativa, lo studente comprende in modo globale, selettivo e dettagliato testi orali/scritti attinenti ad aree di interesse di ciascun liceo; produce testi orali e scritti strutturati e coesi per riferire fatti, descrivere fenomeni e situazioni, sostenere opinioni con le opportune argomentazioni; partecipa a conversazioni e interagisce nella discussione, anche con parlanti nativi, in maniera adeguata sia agli interlocutori sia al contesto; riflette sul sistema (fonologia, morfologia, sintassi, lessico, ecc.) e sugli usi linguistici (funzioni, varietà di registri e testi, aspetti pragmatici, ecc.), anche in un'ottica comparativa, al fine di acquisire una consapevolezza delle analogie e differenze tra la lingua straniera e la lingua italiana; riflette su conoscenze, abilità e strategie acquisite nella lingua straniera in funzione della trasferibilità ad altre lingue. [In the context of linguistic and communicative competence, the student includes a comprehensive, detailed and selective oral texts / writings related to areas of interest of each high school; produce oral and written texts structured and cohesive to report facts, describe phenomena and situations, support views with the appropriate arguments, participating in conversations and interact in discussion with native speakers, in an appropriate manner to both parties and to the environment, reflected in the system (phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, etc.) and on language use (functions variety of records and texts, pragmatic, etc..), also in a comparative perspective, in order to gain an understanding of the similarities and differences between the foreign language and the Italian language reflects on knowledge, skills and strategies acquired in the language foreign function of portability to other languages.] (Interministerial Decree 211, 2010, p.13).

Year Five

Lo studente acquisisce competenze linguistico-comunicative corrispondenti almeno al Livello B2 del Quadro Comune Europeo di Riferimento per le lingue. [The student acquires linguistic-communicative corresponding to at least level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.]
Produce testi orali e scritti (per riferire, descrivere, argomentare) e riflette sulle caratteristiche formali dei testi prodotti al fine di pervenire ad un accettabile livello di padronanza linguistica. [Produce oral and written texts (to report, describe, argue) and reflects on the formal features of texts produced in order to reach an acceptable level of

fluency.]

In particolare, il quinto anno del percorso liceale serve a consolidare il metodo di studio della lingua straniera per l'apprendimento di contenuti non linguistici, coerentemente con l'asse culturale caratterizzante ciascun liceo e in funzione dello sviluppo di interessi personali o professionali. [In particular, the fifth year of high school course serves to consolidate the method of foreign language study for learning non-linguistic content, consistent with the cultural axis characterizing each high school and with the development of personal or professional interests.] (Interministerial Decree 211, 2010, p.13).

The focus of the first two years is the consolidation of language skills. The second biennial program (years 3 and 4) focus on communication, language in use and learning strategies to encourage more learner autonomy. The fifth year culminates with an expectation of the attainment of at least "Vantage or upper intermediate" (B2) proficiency as articulated in the Common European Framework which characterizes the learner as an "independent user" of English (Wikipedia, 2013).

The study of foreign culture and literature is also organized into two biennial programs and then the fifth year (see Table 2 for detailed descriptions). The second biennial program (years 3 and 4) include comparative analyses of literary texts along with a range of other approaches to the study of culture and language. In the fifth year an effort to integrate a range of disciplines is the goal.

Table 2. Upper Secondary Culture and Literature Program Descriptions in Italy by Year

Biennial Program One (Years 1-2)
Nell'ambito dello sviluppo di conoscenze sull'universo culturale relativo alla lingua straniera, lo studente comprende aspetti relativi alla cultura dei paesi in cui si parla la lingua, con particolare riferimento all'ambito sociale; analizza semplici testi orali, scritti, iconico-grafici, quali documenti di attualità, testi letterari di facile comprensione, film, video, ecc. per coglierne le principali specificità formali e culturali; riconosce similarità e diversità tra fenomeni culturali di paesi in cui si parlano lingue diverse (es. cultura lingua straniera vs cultura lingua italiana). [In the development of knowledge about the culture on the foreign language, the student includes aspects of the culture of countries where the language is spoken, with particular reference to social analyzes simple oral texts, writings, iconic graphics-, which documents current, easy to understand literary texts, films, videos, etc.. to grasp the main formal and cultural specificity; recognize similarities and differences between cultural phenomena of countries where different languages are spoken (eg foreign language culture vs. culture Italian language).]
Biennial Program Two (Years 3-4)
Nell'ambito dello sviluppo di conoscenze relative all'universo culturale della lingua straniera, lo studente comprende aspetti relativi alla cultura dei paesi in cui si parla la lingua con particolare riferimento agli ambiti di più immediato interesse di ciascun liceo

(letterario, artistico, musicale, scientifico, sociale, economico); comprende e contestualizza testi letterari di epoche diverse, con priorità per quei generi o per quelle tematiche che risultano motivanti per lo studente; analizza e confronta testi letterari, ma anche produzioni artistiche provenienti da lingue/culture diverse (italiane e straniere); utilizza la lingua straniera nello studio di argomenti provenienti da discipline non linguistiche; utilizza le nuove tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione per approfondire argomenti di studio. [In the development of knowledge related to the cultural foreign language, the student includes aspects of the culture of countries where the language is spoken with particular reference to areas of most immediate interest of each high school (literary, artistic, musical, scientific, social, economic), includes and contextualizes literary texts from various periods, with priority given to those genres or those issues that are motivating to the student; analyzes and compares literary texts, but also artistic productions from languages / cultures (Italian and foreign) use the foreign language in the study of topics from disciplines other than languages, using the new technologies of information and communication to explore topics of study.] (Interministerial Decree 211, 2010, p.13).

Year Five

Lo studente approfondisce aspetti della cultura relativi alla lingua di studio e alla caratterizzazione liceale (letteraria, artistica, musicale, scientifica, sociale, economica), con particolare riferimento alle problematiche e ai linguaggi propri dell'epoca moderna e contemporanea. [The student explores aspects of culture in the language of study and characteristics of the high school (literary, artistic, musical, scientific, social, economic), with particular reference to the problems and the language specific to modern and contemporary art.]

Analizza e confronta testi letterari provenienti da lingue e culture diverse (italiane e straniere); comprende e interpreta prodotti culturali di diverse tipologie e generi, su temi di attualità, cinema, musica, arte; utilizza le nuove tecnologie per fare ricerche, approfondire argomenti di natura non linguistica, esprimersi creativamente e comunicare con interlocutori stranieri. [Analyzes and compares literary texts from different cultures and languages (Italian and foreign); understands and interprets cultural products of various types and genres, on topics of interest, cinema, music, art, uses new technology to research, investigate topics non-linguistic, express themselves creatively and communicate with foreign interlocutors.] (Interministerial Decree 211, 2010, p.13).

In many ways the literature and culture program is CLIL (Content and language integrated learning) wherein subject content is learned through a foreign or second language, thus teaching both the subject and the language. CLIL is considered to be important because it "can provide effective opportunities for pupils to use their new language skills now, rather than learn them now for use later. It opens doors on languages for a broader range of learners, nurturing self-confidence in young learners and those who have not responded well to formal language instruction in general education. It provides exposure to the language without requiring extra time in the curriculum, which can be of particular interest in vocational settings." (European Un-

ion Council, 2008).

In the many classes that I have observed (both in large cities and smaller communities), the teachers and students valiantly used English as the medium of instruction and I was impressed by the willingness of all parties to communicate in English (those observations will be the subject of another paper). The various textbooks that structured their classes and interactions merit descriptions. One example is *New Literary Landscapes* (Thompson & Maglioni, 2006), which provides a survey of literature in English from 700BC to 2004. Every unit (organized in chronological eras) first sets the historical background, including the big innovations in science and the links in the world of art of that time. The unit then describes the literary context in which the target literary work is situation. This is followed up with a section called "From Brit Lit to It Lit" in which a comparable Italian work is introduced for analysis and reference.

The textbook *Only Connect: New Directions* (Spiazzi & Tavella, 2009) does a similar survey of English literature from its origins up to contemporary times and likewise provides historical, social and literary contexts for each target literary work. It also offers a glimpse of the larger world of the time and closes with a direct connection to our modern perspective. The same publisher (Zanichelli) has another series in two volumes called *Performer Culture and Literature* (Spiazzi, Tavella & Layton, 2012), which integrates language/linguistic study within the literary topics and offers multiple connections with films and other media.

When I observed teachers using these materials in their classes both in urban and rural settings, I was impressed that the medium of instruction for the entire class time was English and I was assured that this was the usual case (not just for show during my observations). During interviews the teachers confided that the materials are a big challenge in terms of vocabulary range and grammatical complexity and that they wished they could have more class contact hours to deal with the language/ linguistic problems encountered by their students.

Discussion

Despite the impressive curricula/learning objectives and generous contact hours promoted by the Ministry of Education in Italy, a survey by Faez (2011) indicates that teachers are "not satisfied with English instruction in the country. Teachers commented that in Italy, 'bureaucracy' consumes a lot of their valuable time. Teachers have to spend a lot of time filling out unnecessary forms…There was a lot of focus

on grammar and accuracy and that a lot of teaching to the test takes places in the classrooms as students need to prepare for end of year national exams." (p.40). In this regard, Italian and Japanese teachers of English seem to share common views on their teaching contexts.

Furthermore, despite "receiving up to thirteen years of language instruction by the time they graduate from secondary school…, Italy is one of the countries that has the lowest levels of English proficiency in Europe" (Faez, 2011, p. 41). Pulcini (1997) attributes this to two factors—high levels of illiteracy until the mid 20th century and the need to focus on the learning of the national language because of the many dialects used throughout the country.

Faez (2011) also reports that while Italians generally perceive a need to learn English "to participate in the global economy" and "for youth and their participation in youth culture (e.g., media, music, movies, travel)…Italian citizens are generally not motivated at a "fundamental deeper" level because of two things: (a) they can be quite successful without knowing English, and (b) there is a strong healthy Italian culture that Italians appreciate and enjoy" (pp.38-39). This is eerily similar to what has been reported in Japan regarding motivation to learn English, or the lack thereof (Irie, 2003; Ryan, 2009). Young Italians and young Japanese alike see little need to look beyond their own rich cultures and strong, insular senses of national identity—to the detriment of their ultimate proficiency in English.

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