

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION: SOME INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Questo articolo parte dalla proposta di Byram (1997) di considerare il parlante/mediatore interculturale come obiettivo della formazione linguistica ed esplora il potenziale dei social media per lo sviluppo delle competenze interculturali degli studenti, attraverso attività didattiche di scoperta e di riflessione. Inoltre, l'articolo discute l'importanza di guidare gli studenti durante le varie fasi di queste attività e propone di partire dall'analisi di piccole unità culturali (Holliday, 1999) per meglio prepararli a comunicare e mediare in situazioni reali di contatto interculturale.

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Introduction

Contemporary language learners live in “dynamic sociological landscapes where plurality and diversity are the norm” (Piccardo, North, & Goodier, 2019: 19). To navigate our linguistically and culturally diverse world, they have to be able to “build bridges” and “reduce the distance” between individuals from different contexts or communities—between different “poles of otherness” (Beacco et al., 2016: 11). When they become familiar with linguistic and cultural otherness, language learners can better understand the social context in which a text or message is produced and act as an intermediary between speakers from different cultural areas (Beacco et al., 2016).

According to the Council of Europe (2001, 2018), the act of mediation combines and integrates three other modes of communication—reception, production, and interaction—in a complex process. Mediation can be exercised by making accessible a text to a person that cannot directly understand it; by facilitating access to knowledge and concepts; and by creating the conditions for successful communi-

cation and cooperation between persons that “may have individual, sociocultural, sociolinguistic or intellectual differences in standpoint” (Council of Europe, 2018: 107). This last group of activities—which includes facilitating pluricultural space, acting as intermediary in informal situations, and facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements—is particularly important in personal encounters and social interactions in which there is an intercultural element involved. In such situations, language users act as social agents: They help to create a shared space where culturally different interlocutors, including themselves, can build on each other’s cultural viewpoints to reach a communicative goal.

Intercultural education is key to the development of mediation skills. The last two decades have seen a growing concern of the role intercultural competence plays in foreign language education. However, despite the rising awareness that “the study of another language is synonymous with the study of another culture” (Cutshall, 2012: 32), language learners often lack the necessary competence to engage

and mediate in cross-cultural communication. In this all-too-common case, it is advisable to give students the possibility to complement their developing cross-linguistic knowledge and skills with an opportunity to develop intercultural competence.

Social media for intercultural explorations and reflections

In his comprehensive model of intercultural communicative competence, Byram (1997) proposes the intercultural speaker, a competent foreign language user who can successfully communicate and mediate across cultures, as an attainable standard for language learners. According to Byram, in order to help language learners become intercultural speakers, learning activities should encourage an iterative and contrastive approach, in which they go through successive phases of acknowledgment and comparison and reflect on what is compatible and what is of contrast between two (or more) different cultural areas. In this process, students should be open to suspend disbelief and judgment and to question the practices and values of their own culture (Byram, 1997). This way, language learners become aware of the cross-cultural relationship between different practices and values and are able to construct “new meaning, in the sense of new understanding, new knowledge, new concepts” (Piccardo, North, & Goodier, 2019: 20), which will serve them well in situations of intercultural mediation.

The global diffusion of the Internet and the rise in affordable digital electronic devices have played an important role in promoting intercultural education (Furstenberg, 2010). During the last 20–25 years, foreign language educators have

used the Internet to move beyond the textbook and to put students in contact with culturally authentic materials and with authentic use of the target language in its situational and socio-cultural variations (Godwin-Jones, 2013; Levy, 2007). Foreign language educators can take advantage of this wealth of resources to design activities that encourage students to explore and engage online with the culture of a foreign community (Bush, 2007).

These activities can be carried on with project partners as, for example, in telecollaborative exchanges. Foreign language instructors can use Web 2.0 tools to promote a “less text-based and more multimodal form of communication” (O’Dowd, 2012: 354) in different settings and with a heterogeneous array of foreign partners. However, despite its pedagogical value (see O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016), telecollaboration presents several organizational and logistic challenges that may render difficult its implementation (O’Dowd, 2012). When telecollaboration projects are not a feasible option, foreign language instructors can still rely on Web 2.0 tools to foster students’ autonomy for intercultural explorations and reflections. Social media seem especially suited for this purpose.

Social media users often share snapshots of their daily life and discuss topics related to their home culture. The visual and textual elements of a social media post (i.e., images, videos, captions, and comments) are rich in cultural information that is current and timely. Although language learners may not always be able to understand the meaning of an image or the meaning of a word or expression, either because they do not know it or because they cannot understand how it

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is being used, the combination of words and visuals helps to enhance students' understanding of both linguistic and cultural input (Plass & Jones, 2005). Social media posts, thus, provide an endless array of authentic, current, and varied information. This abundance provides a mean for students to approach a cultural phenomenon from different angles and to construct a clearer understanding of it (Bush, 2007).

Although most social media have been originally developed for Web browsers, mobile applications are becoming the primary medium to access them. Indeed, some of the platforms that have become popular worldwide in the last few years (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) are native mobile apps. However, despite the popularity of smartphones and other mobile devices, language learning activities only seldom exploit the advanced networking and communication possibilities afforded by mobile social media for the development of students' intercultural competence (see Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo, & Valentine, 2009; Ducate & Lomicka, 2013).

Foreign language instructors can take advantage of social media affordances to design activities that promote students' explorations of the everyday culture of a foreign community. They can do it by directing students' attention to specific resources and by providing precise instructions on how to integrate new cultural information into their intercultural reflections. The declarative knowledge students acquire during these activities aims to integrate their cross-linguistic competence and has potential to become procedural knowledge in situations of intercultural contact. For this reason, this kind of activities are not meant to replace but supplement other educational practices that can prepare students to become intercultural speakers.

A social media-based instructional unit

A couple of years ago, I presented an Instagram-based instructional unit for the development of students' autonomy for cultural and intercultural learning (Fornara, 2018). The unit is a sequence of online activities that helps language learners to learn about the everyday culture of a foreign community and to reflect on cross-cultural similarities and differences between the foreign community and their own. I conducted the activity several times in a third-level, higher education Italian course that did not have a strong cultural component but mainly focused on the study of the language.

Every week, students focus on two-three themes related to daily life that can be explored through online images and videos. For each theme, I identify popular Italian hashtags that aggregate posts shared by Italians and present a varied set of multimedia content related to their life. The hashtags include words and expressions that are rarely used by foreign users. For example, the hashtag #amore (e.g., love) barely shows common displays of affection in Italy—one of the themes that I propose—as it is used worldwide to aggregate romantic posts. Instead, I look for more specific hashtags, such as #semplicementenoi (e.g., just us) or #ilmiosorriso (e.g., my smile). While exploring hashtags, I also identify Italian Instagram users who frequently post about a specific theme (i.e., food, fashion, sport) or consistently post about their daily life; I ask students to follow them. Every day, students browse the hashtags related to the theme covered and explore the posts and Stories of the users they are following—Instagram Stories lets users share photos and videos in a slideshow format that disappear after 24 hours. On at least four different days of the week, every student is required to share in the class group chat—using the

Instagram Direct feature—a post that shows a cultural product or practice that particularly struck their attention, and to add a thoughtful comment to the post. Alternatively, students can post a comment or ask a question about one of the Stories they observed. At the end of every week, every student uploads to the class learning management system an online worksheet with their reflections on cross-cultural similarities and differences and on the cultural values that lie behind the products and practices they observed online.

Students engage in the Instagram chat in a process of knowledge sharing and knowledge building that may help them to develop skills of interpreting and relating and to acquire knowledge of cultural products and practices, especially of the most unfamiliar themes. By completing the individual reflective assignments, students can also develop cross-cultural awareness of products and practices and use their developing skills of discovery to develop cultural awareness of the core values of Italians; the activity may even encourage them to establish cross-cultural relationships between their own values and the values of the foreign culture.

Instructional guidance and support

From a pedagogical point of view, such an activity encompasses the study of all three components of the National Standards' cultural triangle (1996)—cultural products, practices, and perspectives/values—not only of products and practices, as is common in the language classroom (Cutshall, 2012). On the other hand, students may not always be prepared to make appropriate judgments (Godwin-Jones, 2013), especially for what concerns cultural values. Several factors may influence the success of students' intercultural explorations and reflections, including their attitudes and their ability

to extrapolate meaning from the information they find online. However, one condition seems to play a fundamental role for the development of intercultural competence, namely, the appropriate balance between instructional guidance and students' autonomy.

Especially during the first stages of discovery and reflection, it is important to provide students with instructional guidance to encourage them to look beyond what they expect to see and to help them to refine their ability to interpret and relate unfamiliar information (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). O'Dowd (2006) highlights the fundamental role of the teacher in this process. Without guidance, students “are often unable to analyse and interpret the data they receive from the target culture” (O'Dowd, 2006: 144), with negative consequences also on their ability to establish cross-cultural relationships. While detailed instructions can help to scaffold students' observations and analysis, they may not be sufficient to properly sustain the development of knowledge and competence in a process that becomes increasingly sophisticated. Sometimes, students may need further guidance to look beyond familiar products and practices and to properly identify and interpret new information. A continuous instructional support can help students to focus and refine their cross-cultural comparisons of products and practices and to use this knowledge to identify and relate values. The instructor can offer advice that guides students' own reasoning, with insights that help them to integrate their developing knowledge and to improve their skills, until they reach a certain degree of autonomy.

'Small' culture approach

Instructional guidance can also help language learners to break the monolithic image of the target culture and to adopt a 'small' culture paradigm (Holliday, 1999)

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that allows them to approach the cultural reality and variety underlying a foreign cultural area. Often, students do not have instruments and capabilities to identify different cultural groups within a culture and tend to use a 'large' culture paradigm to analyze what they observe online. One of the dangers of exploring social media posts is, precisely, that students may interpret this information as related to "a fixed national culture, aligned to political entities, with widely shared national characteristics" (Godwin-Jones, 2013: 2). On the other side, students' explorations and reflections are based on a set of individual posts and describe products and practices of individuals "who share the same native language" but may "belong to different cultures" within the same community (National Standards, 1996: 41). Guest (2002) suggests that focusing "on the properties of individuals or character types rather than cultures at large" (p. 157) helps to promote a 'small' culture approach. For example, language learners can explore hashtags and posts shared by users from specific regional cultures within a country or examine popular subcultures within a metropolitan area to learn about their unique expressions. More precise information will serve students well in situations of intercultural contact with people from a specific region or city.

When telecollaborative projects are feasible, foreign language instructors can take advantage of these "new technologies" to promote students' direct engagement in "small scale interactive models/methods" (Levy, 2007: 112). While several digital media can serve this scope, mobile social media seem especially suitable for both exploring information from a 'small' culture and interacting with people from that culture. Future practice should apply

a pedagogy of multiliteracies to telecollaborative tasks (Helm & Guth, 2010), developing social media-based instructional units that help to foster the simultaneous development of students' linguistic and intercultural competences—i.e., their intercultural communicative competence. For example, students could use mobile social media to complete a set of tasks modeled on the *Cultura* project (Furstenberg et al., 2001) and to interact with their distant peers through comments and group messages.

Conclusions

The authentic and personal content shared by worldwide social media users and the predominant visual component of these platforms, together with their potential for fostering learners' autonomy for intercultural explorations and reflections, open up new and interesting possibilities for the development of students' intercultural competence and ability to act as mediators in intercultural encounters. This kind of activities, if well-designed and properly guided, can help students to progressively distance from their own cultural view and to assume a detached stance from it. This way, students will be able to interpret new information about a foreign culture from a third place (Kramersch, 1993), a place that lies between one's own 'languaculture' and the 'languaculture' of a foreign community (Agar, 1994). In this position, they will be able "to move beyond a simple juxtaposition of knowledge in the different languages and to arrive at a coherent structured whole" (Beacco et al., 2016: 58) that allows them to interact with linguistically and culturally diverse people and to facilitate understanding and communication in situations of intercultural mediation.

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