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The Spaces in Between

Foreign Language Education as Critical and Intercultural Education

Paola Giorgis

Abstract

This contribution will focus on a much needed critical and interdisciplinary reflection on fields which are too often treated separately, Foreign Language Education and Intercultural Education. Giorgis discusses the issue from the double perspective of a foreign language teacher and researcher, briefly presenting some data from a research study to then focus more in detail on a classroom activity designed to favour a critical awareness on both language and interculture. The author's own position of teacher-researcher allows her to address another fundamental issue: the urgency of co-working and integrated cooperation between academic research and factual school practice.

I. Presentation

From the Romantic concept of *Volksgeist*, to early studies in Linguistic Anthropology, to more recent investigations which have highlighted linguistic differences within the same culture, the notion that language and culture are intrinsically connected has often risen divergent interpretations. Given these premises, it is no wonder that Foreign Language Education has undergone several radical shifts, ranging from conveying an essentialist view of the target language/culture to a more nuanced, if not critical, view of the relation between language and culture. By breaking the “natural” link word-world, Foreign Language Education can unveil how

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far it is cultural and situated, thus fostering the deconstruction of taken-for-granted individual and collective cultural identities, and of monocultural and nationalist frameworks. I advance that a critical and intercultural language education should be a priority in education policies at times of global migrations when people and languages meet at unprecedented scale, in order to challenge the prevailing narratives which label individuals and groups according to their linguacultural backgrounds, and capitalize on fear for their reactionary agenda.

2.A Theoretical Overview¹

2.1 Foreign Language Education, Intercultural Education and Critical Pedagogies

Languages and language ideologies should be a core concern for intercultural for several reasons: for their capability of unveiling difference and advancing diversities, for being the place where individual and collective identities are mediated, shape and are shaped by discourses, and for their multifarious intersections with culture. While Western culture has devoted thousand pages of research and reflection on the relation between languages and culture, the connection between languages in general, and foreign languages in particular, and *interculture* has only a relatively recent, though significant, history of its own (Byram & Zarate 1997; Byram & Tost Planet 2000; Abdallah Pretceille 2008; Kramsch 2009; Dervin & Liddicoat 2013; Sharifian & Jamarani 2013; Witte & Harden 2015; Holmes & Dervin 2016), sometimes entwined with Critical Pedagogies (Phipps & Guilherme 2004; Norton & Toohey 2004; Dasli & Diaz 2017) as well as with critical reflections on language and identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004; Heller 2011).

Within the perspective of a much-needed integration between Foreign Language Education, Critical Pedagogies and Intercultural Education, two pronouncements by Kramsch (2009) are particularly relevant: '*Foreign language education is the prime promoter of the foreign perspective*' (p. 192) and '*The experience of the foreign always implies a reconsideration of the familiar*' (p. 5). Foreign languages favour the experience of Otherness at two levels: as an opportunity to encounter the Other (to become familiar with the unfamiliar), and as a way to re-apprehend the Self (to discover the unfamiliar within the familiar). These two levels are by no means opposite, but they rather nurture each other: according to Kristeva (1998), it is only by discovering '*l'étranger qui nous habite*' ['the foreign who lives inside ourselves'] (p. 9) that we can create our '*condition ultime de notre être avec les autres*' ['the ultimate condition to be *with* the others'] (p. 285). Observing, reading, speaking about the world through *other* words overtly discloses the cultural and situated relation between the word and the world, unveiling how far difference is a relative construction, and opening to different conceptualizations and world-views: Abdallah-Pretceille (2008) thus defines a precise task for Foreign Language Education, sustaining that '*L'apprentissage des langues étrangères est le lieu par*

excellence (ou plus exactement, devrait être le lieu) de l'apprentissage de l'altérité [*'Foreign Language Education is the ideal place (or better it should be the ideal place) for an education to diversity*] (p.8).

Starting from the two fields of Intercultural Education (Dervin & Liddicoat 2013) and Critical Linguistics (Piller 2007), the authors lament the separation between Language Education and Intercultural Education to reach the same conclusion. Dervin and Liddicoat (2013) affirm that language has long been the 'unnamed dimension of the intercultural' (p. 8). Language education 'can contribute to educating for diversity' (p. 1), moving 'away from an educational approach which consists of building up facts about a "target culture" (...) to one in which the language learner as language user and intercultural mediator are foregrounded' (p. 4). Therefore, as 'Intercultural education is fundamentally an investigation of the intersections of language and culture in that language and culture shape processes of meaning making and interpretation' (p. 9), Intercultural Education should be considered 'as an activity which is fundamentally based in language' (p. 9). From the other side, Piller (2007) sustains that an attention to language dynamics can help Intercultural Education to question critically its own paradigm. According to her, the critique of culture as an essentialized construct has often failed to notice that intercultural can also be essentialized: she sustains that 'some misunderstandings that are considered "cultural" are in fact linguistic misunderstandings' (p. 215), and that cultural interpretations of linguistic mis-communications often serve 'to obscure inequality and injustice' (p. 215). To avoid falling into the trap of 'a range of a priori assumptions about "culture" and "language"' (p. 217) it is necessary to consider linguistic processes and practices in relation to the context and the speakers' access to linguistic resources, addressing the fundamental issue of inequalities in language, and focusing on the situated conditions that can favour, limit or hinder intercultural communication.

2.2 Foreign Language as an Intercultural Experience

As I speak about foreign language as an intercultural experience, I need to clarify what I mean for "intercultural" and "experience". In the last decades, "interculture" has become a hit word which has gone through several definitions and interpretations. A multivoiced analysis which illustrates the discussion among different scholars can be found in Alexander *et al.* (2014), where each participant offers her/his own interpretation of the word; other important references can be found at: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org>. Addressing the educational field, I mainly refer to Gobbo (1992, 2008, 2011) and Abdallah-Preteuille (2005, 2006) as the questioning of one's identity in relation to others, so that the mutual practice of being able to meet and interact with other cultures becomes the exercise of problematizing one's own(s) as well. The mutual encounter with other cultures, then, is able to offer a different perspective on one's culture(s) too, making visible what is usually hidden in the folds of the familiar. Indeed, the word "interculture"

combines the idea of “culture(s)” with that of “inter-” referring to a condition of in-between able to develop a multiperspectival vision of both the self and the others. “Experience” is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>) as ‘a practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity’, that is a knowledge derived ‘by direct observation or participation’. I therefore take “experience” by no means as a generic word, but rather as a fundamental combination of knowledge, appropriation and use. In the context of this discussion which deals with language education, when I refer to the “experience of a foreign language” made by students, I precisely point to the fact that students learn English at school, but they also *appropriate* it from bottom-up, and use it for their communicative purposes. Thus, the foreign language is not only a knowledge imparted as top-down, but becomes an experiential knowledge.

2.3 English Language Education: Global and Local Issues

At the intersection of global phenomena and local appropriations, of norms and variations, of homogenization and subversion, English language has triggered fierce debates on the linguistic, sociocultural, political, ideological and pedagogical implications of its widespread, but also on the potentially creative and critical appropriations that it can elicit. Globalized English has been defined ‘linguistic imperialism’ (*cf.* Phillipson 1992), and, according to Luke (2004), TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) is ‘a pedagogical site and institution for educating the racial and linguistic Other’ (p. 25). Yet, over twenty years ago now, Pennycook (1994) sustained that the worldliness of English ‘can indeed be appropriated and used for diverse ends (...) offering interesting possibilities for the spread of alternative forms of culture and knowledge and for new forms of communal action’ (p. 321), and that English Language Teaching (ELT), if dealt critically, can become the educational site to teach back, and ‘engage in a critical, transformative and listening pedagogy’ (p. 327). The situation is then far more complex than a one-way-flow: the English language does not move any longer following a one-way centre-periphery model, but it rather possesses a polycentric quality, and it is actually what used to be the former periphery to modify and innovate the language. Intersecting this debate, in the last decades the notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), (Seidhofer 2011), has offered new perspectives to what we have been considering the characteristics of a language so far. According to its traditional definition, ELF is a language spoken by non-native speakers coming from different mother tongues. That does not mean that communication automatically occurs on equal grounds, since socio-cultural differences are not magically wiped out: indeed, many studies clearly show how they emerge, raising ethical and political issues which cannot be overlooked, in particular when such differences manifest in asymmetrical relations such as those, for example, between Italian police officers

and refugees (Guido 2008). However, from an educational point of view, the features foregrounded by ELF can be used for a critical reflection on language varieties and bottom-up appropriations of the language, and on how speakers re-create language by using it in different contexts and with different interlocutors according to their communicative needs. Within this perspective, several connections can be made between a critical approach to ELF and interculture. According to Giorgis (2013a), since ELF transcends the notion of the “nativeness,” it intersects interculture on a common ground: ELF and interculture are both in/formed by different cultures, and therefore they can represent the ideal site to observe how individual and collective representations of culture and identity move through language affiliations and appropriations. By pointing out the dynamic and negotiated quality of language (Holmes & Dervin 2016), ELF also evidences the fact that students are both learners and users of English, interrogating the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class, and often exposing divergences between the language taught top-down by teachers and the language appropriated bottom-up by students (Giorgis 2013b). To comply their educational duties, teachers are inevitably called to mediate between language-model and language-use: Dewey (2012) points out that they are asked to respond both to the ‘professional responsibility to advise students on how to be successful in language tests’ and ‘to their personal responsibility to the communicative needs of (...) students as language users’ (p. 161). The solution would be for teachers to develop a more flexible approach to language pedagogies, working on an *and/and* approach rather than on the mutual exclusion of ELF *versus* EFL. In the Italian context, for example, some studies have begun to reflect in that direction (Giorgis 2013a, 2013b, 2014a; Vettorel 2015; Lopriore 2016); however, the debate hasn’t reached the classroom practice yet for several reasons—e.g., curricula, traditional course books and evaluation tests—but also because the teachers’ formation and in-service professional training programmes tend to offer more and more innovative pedagogic methodologies, though fail to put their hands onto the complex issue of language transformation, varieties and appropriations—all issues which, in particular for English language education, are crucial.

3. The Study: Hypothesis, Participants, and Findings

During my professional practice of teaching English Language, Literature and Visual Arts in Italian high schools, I have had the opportunity to notice several episodes which foregrounded how the experience of a foreign language can impact on, and reframe, individual and collective identities. The episodes elicited some questions which, in the years 2010-2012, constituted the guiding line of my Ph.D. research study in Anthropology of Education and Intercultural Education. The research was focused on the relation between language and identity, and on the impact on language and identity of cross linguistic interactions between adolescents from different linguacultural backgrounds. On the one hand, the episodes I had seen

incited me to analyse the multifaceted relation between the languages we speak and our perceptions and representations of the self and the others. On the other, observing how adolescents spontaneously adopt, mix and cross languages to adapt them to their communicative needs, allowed me to realize how Foreign Language Education could be used to develop a critical awareness on language and language ideologies, favouring the dismantling of pre-given assumptions on individuals and groups, in order to promote intercultural communication between individuals from different linguacultural backgrounds. On such premises I based the hypothesis of my research, being particularly interested in finding out the *intercultural potential* of a language foreign for both Italian and non-Italian students, as is the case of English in the Italian context.

The research was carried out in two different high schools in Turin, a city in the northwest of Italy; the schools were different for curricula (*Liceo Scientifico*, a school which prepares for academic studies, and *Istituto d'Arte*, a vocational school with an art curricula), as well as for the sociocultural and linguacultural background of the participants. The study, which involved sixty-two students (none of whom were one of my students or former students) from five different school classes, was based on field observations, followed by a quanti-qualitative written interview and two back-talk focus groups. All data were analysed, interpreted, discussed with participants, and then re-interpreted; the research was published in a monograph (Giorgis 2013a), in several chapters and articles (Giorgis 2013b; 2013c; 2014a; 2014b; 2016), and presented at international conferences. I will only note here the most significant data. From the analysis of quantitative data, it emerged that the majority of students (45/62 = 72,58%) do not consider the English language as a foreign language (though it is institutionally defined as such in Italian schools) but rather as a contact language which signals affiliation to specific groups of peers connected to transnational youth cultures (music, in particular hip hop; online blogs or games; social networks; etc.), or which is used to establish a special and intimate relation with a specific friend or relative. Data showed no gender difference in these linguistic practices, and both female and male students alike lamented the gap they perceive between the language they are taught top-down at school, and the one they appropriate bottom-up to for their daily interactions, either in face-to-face or in virtual communications.

Though the research was mainly intended to examine the impact of English as a language unfamiliar to both Italian and non-Italian students, analysis of qualitative data also suggested different perspectives. From the discussions in the back-talk focus groups,² the use of English as a language in common among peers (or, in some cases, with adults of choice) emerged as a means to include or exclude from communication. An-*other* language can create conditions for mutual recognition and for a sense of belonging to the *same* in-group community; consequently, a foreign language in common can be used not only as a means to blur borders, but also to set *new* ones, which let someone in, or leave someone out, according to specific choices made by the speakers. The impact on identity surfaced as well: the

experience of a non-mother tongue and of cross-linguistic interactions emerged as practices able to elicit different perceptions and representations of self and the others, to reframe individual and collective identities, and to create the opportunity for new group affiliations. Adopting and mixing languages follows different lines and patterns, where the representation of personal and collective identities, and the creation of in-groups and out-groups, are practices which depend on the context, the aim of the communication, and the people whom the adolescent wishes to include or exclude. The patterns and the lines of the interactions also perform different functions: young people code switch to a different language to create a special affective link with someone, or to protect their intimacy—for example, to share secrets with their boy/girlfriend or best friend—as well as to mimic/appropriate/subvert hierarchies, such as a counter-act to power on adults and teachers.

4. Back to Classroom

After having defended my PhD, I went back to classroom practice. In only three-year's time, the school population had changed: all the students I knew had left—the majority had concluded their studies, a few had dropped out—and the new students possessed different characteristics from the ones who had participated in my study. In a rather short interval, two major changes had happened. The first, was a relevant social and territorial consolidation of the population with immigrant background: students with foreign background belonged no longer to what is known as generation 1.5 (young people who are born in their home countries and, at some stage, join their parent/s in the country of arrival), as they were, for the most part, born in Italy. English had ceased to be, as it had been in the recent past, a bridge-language between their mother tongue and Italian, often favouring a first step for communication and inclusion; yet, it was still a language which was foreign for all students, both of Italian and of non-Italian origins, and therefore it still represented a territory in-between different linguacultural belongings, and was frequently used as a *lingua franca* between peers. The second major change was the so called “Educational Reform” brought along by the Berlusconi's Government, a highly trumpeted optimization of the Italian school system, which, following a neo-capitalistic agenda, actually meant severe cuts to the school curricula and administrations. Moreover, in perfect Newspeak, the whole operation consisted also in renaming the schools: for example, the name of the school where I used to teach, *Istituto d'Arte* (Art Institute), was suddenly upgraded into *Liceo Artistico* (High School of Arts). That impacted on school population too: the word *Liceo*, a high school which prepares for academic studies, generally intimidates students coming from low socio-cultural backgrounds or with a recent history of immigration, as they (and their families) tend to choose more practical studies—e.g., vocational schools or institutes – hoping that such a formation will be less frustrating in terms of school success, and that it will buy them a ticket to the labour market (Sansoé 2012).

4.1 Teaching-Learning as Action Research

In three-years' time I had changed too. Not only had the doctoral study allowed me to acquire theoretical tools in completely different fields from my original academic studies, but it had also offered me a luxury which is too rarely granted to teachers and practitioners: the opportunity to see and reflect on one's practice from without. From within, the study grounded my critical vision of school as a multi-layered and complex environment constituted by many different cultures, where knowledge, languages and pedagogies are never neutral or apolitical (*cf.* Pennycook 1994), and where practices and dynamics are elements which interrogate, inform—and are informed by—broader issues. By representing the connection between the micro and the macro contexts, reflexivity in particular can help locating both the teacher and the students in wider social relations and contexts, promoting educational models able to situate between grand theorizations and empirical flattenings (Anyon & Dumas 2009). At the junction between micro and macro levels, as well as between reflection and action, stands Action Research. Though not solely confined to education, Action Research has greatly impacted pedagogical practices, often converging with Critical Pedagogy (Freire 1970, 1973, 1998; Simon 1992) in addressing issues of power connected with knowledge and advocating a participatory critical approach. Since they both consider knowledge and transformation as connected, they engage students to question pre-given assumptions and develop their potentials with the purpose to empower them to act, in order to produce a transformation in the direction of social action and justice. Being collaborative research-practices, they recognize that teaching and learning are complementary experiences: therefore, they value the students' experiential knowledge as an important element to enhance participation and discussion, and encourage them to appropriate critically their learning—in Freire's words (1998), to become 're-creators of what they learn' (p. 30). It is along these guiding lines that I have tried to develop my professional practice, encountering some difficulties as, on the frontline, it not always easy to integrate action and reflection, but engaging in stimulating a dialogue and, possibly, a transformation. The main track for all the activities has been to combine my professional and institutional duty of teaching English as a Foreign Language with what I learnt during my PhD years to co-construct with the students a critical awareness on languages, cultures and identities.

4.2 The Activities: How Foreign Language Can Work for Interculture—and ViceVersa

All the activities carried out with the students had a double intent: to utilize the foreign language for interculture and interculture for the foreign language with the one major comprehensive aim of developing the students' critical awareness. The first intent was to use the foreignness that foreign languages foreground to reflect on pre-given assumptions on languages and cultures—one's own included. Exercises

were therefore structured to initiate from the students' knowledge to lead them by degrees out of their familiar comfort zone, and to stimulate doubts, questions and discussions able to open up to new perspectives. Such a practice is also advocated by the publication of the Council of Europe, *Developing Intercultural Competence Through Education* (2014), which invites teachers to 'provide opportunities for challenging one's assumptions through comparison and analysis' (p. 29), to help students reflect 'back (...) so that they may question their own practices, values and beliefs' (p. 30) and reminds that 'comparison, analysis and experience need to be accompanied by time and space for reflection and the development of critical awareness and understanding' (p. 30). During these activities I viewed the classroom as an ethnographic field, where students were encouraged to become researchers of languages and cultures, and sometimes invited to produce short auto-ethnographies as an opportunity for reflexivity.

The second intent was to offer meaningful and contextualized activities to elicit students to use the foreign language to communicate and exchange ideas and opinions: diverting the target from the "English Language lesson" allowed students to feel less judged and more relaxed in using the language. The fact that English was foreign to all students presented several advantages. In the first place, it put all students, both native Italian and non-native Italian, in the same condition of disadvantage—or, better, disadvantage in access to language repertoire depended on factors which had nothing to do with national or ethnic descent. Then, as it is often reported in literature (Kramsch 2009; Witte & Harden 2015), by detaching students from their mother tongue, the experience of a foreign language can allow them to develop a meta-linguistic awareness of how far linguistic and cultural features are situated and constructed, 'opening up linguistic and intercultural spaces, that is, the de-familiarization and alienation of the familiar, taken-for-granted ways of talking, thinking, feeling and behaving' (Witte in Witte & Harden 2015, p. 20). Giorgis (2013a) also sustains that, by detaching students from their usual language, the new linguistic and symbolic territory of the foreign language decentres them from their usual self too, allowing them to explore new identities, and that, by separating the students' personal and social self, the foreign language often consents them to recollect and report in a freer and less emotional way ideas, opinions, personal stories and events. A last note from the teacher's perspective: by helping students developing a critical awareness, teachers can also reflect on their educational practice and, paraphrasing Freire (1998), understand that they can be(come) not only cultural workers, but *intercultural workers*.

4.2.1 An Activity: Intercultural Citizenship (5th year; students' age: 18-19)

The project was part of an interdisciplinary work on Plural Citizenship developed jointly with the colleague of Philosophy. The project aimed at developing an intercultural awareness in the students as a process for becoming 'citizens of the

world’—individuals who are conscious of the all diversities which constitute our common world, of the problems and the opportunities that these diversities bring forth, and how we can deal with them. I developed my part of the project from the intercultural perspective of approaching Otherness and Diversity from one’s own otherness and diversity. This section was linked to the subsequent part, a historical analysis of the twenty-century’s genocides presented by the Philosophy teacher, where ethnic mass crimes were introduced as linked to the lack of recognition and the dehumanization of the Other. The project then followed with some encounters with refugees and asylum seekers, and it involved a reflection on how globalization and neo-capitalistic agenda are creating new forms of injustices and discriminations.

As discussion was to be held in English—a non-mother tongue for all the students—I prepared a set of words and expressions which I gave students in advance to facilitate their interventions. These words and expressions were mainly terms describing identity traits (e.g., personality adjectives), or locutions related to giving or asking opinions, expressing agreement or disagreement, etc. (e.g., ‘I think that...’, ‘In my opinion...’, ‘What do you think about...?’). During the lessons, I also proposed a series of questions inviting students to reflect upon them, and/or to bring forth questions of their own. Indeed, the activity was not aimed at offering answers, but rather at eliciting questions and doubts, and problematizing the taken-for-granted.

- Stage 1. Vision of the TED talk *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009) by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>): reflection and discussion on the “danger of a single story”—i.e., how “a single story” not only frames the others, but ourselves too;
- Stage 2. Multiple Me: starting from a track line of words on the different perception and representation of how individual identity profiles change according to the situation, context, interlocutors, age, gender, intention, expectations, etc. several questions and reflections arose: to how many identities and cultures do we belong to/affiliate with? how do we perceive or represent our own identity, as well as others’, according to the language we use?;
- Stage 3. The Stereotypes: a) how “others” see “us” (videos on stereotypes on Italians): reflection and discussion: are “we” like this? do “we” recognize ourselves in these portraits? b) how “we” see “the others” (video on overturning the perspective); the creation and reproduction of stereotypes by the media: reflection and discussion;
- Stage 4. Multiple Others: the Other as the bearer of multiple identities and belongings; diversity as a multidirectional, situated and relational construct;
- Stage 5. Intercultural Communication: how to educate and develop an effective intercultural communication: reflexivity, awareness, decentering, flexibility; using problems, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, etc. as resources; learning from failure.

For brevity, I will report here only some of the Stages afore outlined.

• *Stage 1*

In *The Danger of a Single Story*, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie reminds us of the importance of not framing others into one single story, which, at turn, demands that we ourselves are not to be framed either—both by others and by us too. Stereotypes are precisely “the single story”: it is not that stereotypes are wrong, but they are partial, so they can just tell a part of the whole story of an individual. Adichie’s talk had a great impact on the students: during her talk, I looked at their faces, and they were totally captured by what she was saying. As it always happens when a person tells an unfeigned story, I realized how adolescents have a special radar for authenticity and a profound hunger for truth and dignity—and, with a twinge, I also felt how often we adults fail to nurture that hunger. At the end of the video, students were deeply touched, but they were smiling too. For the next lesson, they were asked to prepare the framework for a discussion on what is “the danger of a single story”, starting from a series of questions I wrote on the blackboard. But they also watched the video again at home, often showing it to their parents and friends.

• *Stage 2 Multiple Me*

During the next lesson, discussion was very vibrant and participated. All students had something to say on “the danger of a single story”, and even the ones who were less proficient in English contributed. All interventions revolved around the consideration that taking things for granted for others also means taking things for granted for ourselves. This debate led us to discuss about the Multiple Me: who I am in different contexts, with different people, or with the same people in different contexts, and we considered differences of gender, interlocutors, expectations, intentions, etc. and how they impact on our interactions with others. For example, a girl who plays rugby in two different teams reflected on her different traits of identity according to the team she plays with, as in one team she is the eldest (a point of reference for the others, she gives suggestions and advices), while in the other she is the youngest, and so she has to listen and obey to her elder teammates. Another girl declared how differently she perceives herself, and is perceived, by her mother, her boyfriend and her friends – and also noted that it depends on *which* friends she is with. Many other examples were brought forth, all highlighting reflections on the situated and multiple quality of the identity traits.

• *Stage 3 Stereotyping—per via negativa*

One of the most important (and dangerous) characteristic of stereotypes is that they are invisible. We take for granted, or assume as an undisputed and undisputable

truth, what, at its best, is a simplified and partial reading of complex stories, and, at its worst, a deliberate construction to perpetuate discrimination, prejudice and injustice. And, of course, the most invisible stereotypes are the ones that regard the “group” we belong to or associate with. For this reason, I decided to work with the students per *via negativa*— that is, instead of starting by presenting stereotypes on other nationalities and ethnic groups, I began offering stereotypes on Italians, as the class was formed by Italian born students, except for a girl born in Egypt (but with Italian citizenship, as her father was an Italian-Tunisian). It is to be noted, though, that the overall adjective “Italian” does not describe well the diversified reality of most Italian school classes, as many students come from different regional and linguistic backgrounds.

The web offers great examples on stereotypes, and some of them are really funny, as they work on exaggeration not only to get a smile, but, sometimes, also to make people reflect on the mechanisms of stereotyping. (Incidentally, that offered us also the opportunity to revise rhetorical figures we had previously studied, noticing how exaggeration can sometimes be so amplified and paradoxical to become a caricature, and therefore convey the opposite meaning). Here are some examples I presented to my students:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhkDEG-2Alk>: in this video a young man enacts all the most stereotypical Italian activities: he eats spaghetti and drinks red wine, handles a woman with a macho attitude, etc., while a typical traditional Italian music, *tarantella*, is playing in the background;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCQ0batArbc>: this is an episode from *Family Guy*, a famous politically incorrect cartoon with often explicit contents. In this episode, the Griffins are in Italy, and this is the occasion to serve some other stereotypes: men kissing each other, scenes of jealousy and connections with Mafia;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VapOQdG9Akc>: this is another episode from the same series which is overtly entitled ‘Italian stereotypes’. Here, there are men constantly shouting and gesturing at each other, others are cutting the queue line, and Peter Griffin, the main character, wants to buy some *salami* but gets involved in an animated discussion with the Italian moustached butcher;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtLNF-ehOn8>: in this video, two young men, one German and one from the US, discuss Italian stereotypes. Starting from their own experiences in Italy, they reinforce some of them (e.g., the food culture, *espresso*, etc.) and call into questions others (they generously acknowledge, for example, that not all Italians are connected with Mafia);

<http://takelessons.com/blog/italian-stereotypes-z09>: the title of this text-and-video is eloquent: ‘Ten Common Italian Stereotypes that Are actually True’. All most common stereotypes on Italians are here listed and confirmed: Italians love *pasta*, *mamma*, football and Opera. And they are always late.

I then wrote a list on the whiteboard of the ten most common stereotypes of

Italians I found on the web—e.g., Italians always wear sunglasses; Italians only wear Prada, Gucci and Armani; Italians are all connected with Mafia; Italians eat pizza and pasta every day; etc. While watching the videos and, later, reading the stereotypes, the students' reactions were quite loud and similar: 'I am not like this!', 'I am never late!', 'I do not shout all the time!', 'I don't like pasta,' 'It's not me!', 'Indeed, it's not me. So, we reflected on these words, taking them one by one: it is-not-me. Who is "me"? how many "me-s" do make "I"? And we discussed on how stereotypes often use words such as "all," "always," "every," terms connected with concepts of wholeness and timelessness presented as given and undisputable statements, which fail to register complex and fluid individual diversities, framing them instead into a general and fixed portrait.

• Stage 4. Multiple Others

After working with stereotypes on how "others" see "us," we were ready to move to how "we" see "the others." I introduced the topic by showing them a silent video of a dark-skinned young man who, on Saint Valentine's Day, walks across Milan with a bunch of red roses in his hands. He passes several couples, and they all refuse his flowers with a brisk gesture of the hand. He enters a restaurant, and both a waiter and a customer do the same. Then, the young man finally reaches a table where a girl is waiting for him, and he offers the bunch of roses to her. The video is very interesting, as it overturns expectations: the young man is not a flower vendor, but a lover who is bringing flowers to his girlfriend (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1437zT62X4&feature=youtu.be>). Students were really impressed by the video, and one girl also suggested a video on a similar topic: a Black man is walking behind a White woman who gets frightened by his presence; so, she starts rushing and is almost run over by a car, but she is eventually saved by the man himself. I asked the students to think about personal experiences when their own expectations on others had been overturned, both in a positive or less positive way, and what they had learnt from this change of perspective. Some students asked me whether these overturns had to do only with "culture," or whether they could involve other situations too. I asked for their opinion, and after a short discussion we agreed that we could think to episodes which could both involve or not involve cultural elements.

During the seminar, we began realizing that Intercultural Communication is not a practice one can learn from a list or from the book, as it involves complex dynamics which can have positive outcomes, or may result in a complete fiasco for many different reasons and causes. The concept of failure has to be taken into account in discourses on Intercultural Communication as an opportunity to reconsider the context or the situation from another perspective, to grasp other meanings and, at the same time, to learn about ourselves too. There is indeed a wide literature on the importance of failure and of cultural *gaffes* as fundamental events in intercultural studies: anthropologist Setti (2015) remarks that '(...) *sperimentare*

la gaffe, l'equivoco o la "figuraccia" ironicamente, è un processo fondamentale per gli etnologi affinché imparino dagli "altri" [‘experimenting ironically gaffe, misinterpretation or poor figure is a fundamental process for ethnographers to be able to learn from the “others”] (p. 100).

With these considerations in mind, at the end of the seminar I presented a quote from the performance artist Marina Abramovic. In her beautifully striking autobiography (2016), she gives a definition of failure which, to me, sounds as the most constructive attitude to approach interculture (and life in general, actually):

Failures are very important (...). If you experiment, you have to fail. By definition, experimenting means going to territories where you have never been, where failure is very possible. How can you know you're going to succeed? Having the courage to face the unknown is important. I love to live *in the spaces in between*, the places where you leave the comfort of your home and your habits behind and make yourself completely open to change (p. 155, italics mine).

Intercultural Communication is indeed the experiment of a mutual relation in *the spaces in between*: there are some practices and even some procedures which can be followed, but at the end of the day what really makes it work is our availability to explore new territories, to leave certainties behind (and maybe most of all those which regard ourselves), to explore new territories, to be open to change, to encounter new questions, doubts and, in the good days, even solutions. Yet, this experiment has no guarantee of a happy end: so, we should also permit ourselves to be ready to deal with our impotence and frustration, and, in case, to be ready to encompass failure, not seeing it as an end but rather as a different starting point.

4.2.3 A Comment on the Activity

In the last years, I have been carrying out several activities as such above, presenting them to students either in an indirect way or per *via negativa*, that is from the opposite end. In my experience, this is an effective educational approach as it allows students to follow their own path of research and it makes them the protagonists of their learning. Through analysis and comparison, students can realize by themselves the relations, the similarities and the differences between things and dynamics: knowledge comes from a personal—though guided—critical reflection, and then becomes part of the person's experience. Such an unconventional approach can sometimes confuse students, as school assignments are usually characterized by a specific one-way quality. Therefore, I had to plan carefully all passages of the activity to help students move out of their comfort zone by degrees; yet, I also had to be flexible, considering and developing suggestions or objections which the students might advance during the lesson. Thus, these activities also evidenced the very clear and simple notion that any lesson is always and primarily a dialogue and a co-constructed activity.

The main concern of all the activities was the development of critical aware-

ness also in the perspective of a pro-active transformation, as advocated by Critical Pedagogies and Action Research. Yet, critical awareness is a process which demands much time, and results might not be seen or expected in the short run. Besides being an individual lifelong process, critical awareness is a very personal one: not only do some people need more time to reflect, compare, and critically evaluate facts, elements and dynamics, but a critical approach begins with problematizing one's own ideas and opinions, an activity which can be uncomfortable for many. In our activities, some students immediately engaged in seeing things from a different perspective, while others were more reluctant, or simply needed more time, to exit from their comfort zone. My task was that of mediating several different standpoints, accompanying students along new paths of reflection and of a discussion respectful of different points of view. In all of this process, foreign language was not only a means: as critical awareness implies reconsidering what we take for granted from a different perspective, saying things in a different language did help students see things differently—and themselves too: some students observed that they felt more open and confident in expressing their opinions in a non-mother tongue. Linguistic achievements were also a part of the goal, as while making connections and distinctions, and expressing their point of view, the students exercised and improved the foreign language. A final note: this kind of activity requires much of school time, it often competes with institutional programmes waiting to be accomplished, or is suddenly interrupted by the school bell announcing the next lesson. Such a basic consideration lead us to bear in mind that in the perspective of a critical and intercultural approach to foreign language education, several steps should be made—for example, curricula should be reconsidered, school time should become more flexible, and teachers' formation as well as in-service teacher training programmes should not only focus on new entertaining teaching methods, but be braver, and also address critical and theoretical issues.

Conclusion

These activities tell us that foreign language and interculture can fruitfully and mutually work together in a critical perspective. They also tell us that theoretical reflections and practices go together, and literally nurture each other. Ethnographic studies have bravely built bridges between the two; yet, theory and practice continue to be divided: on the one hand, academics produce brilliant educational theories which too often fail to grasp the complexity of the actual educational environment, a multilayered net of relations and cultures and a constant work-in-progress; on the other, teachers and practitioners feel they are left alone on the frontline, literally compressed between too many tasks and roles (educational, professional, ethical, social, relational, institutional, bureaucratic) to have time to reflect on their practice to see the theory which breathes within it. As a teacher and independent researcher, I have the privilege to know the best (and the worst) of both worlds: from my own

position *in between spaces* I cannot but advocate for the fundamental and necessary co-working between academics, researchers, educators, teachers and practitioners, as it is only by this collaboration that we can build up more just and equitable conditions and opportunities for our students, our communities, and ourselves too.

Note

¹ Some parts of 2.1, 2.3.3, 2.4, and the Activity presented in this article are a shortened version of those items from Giorgis (2018), *Meeting Foreignness*, Lexington, Rowman, & Littlefield. The author wishes to thank the publishing house for allowing this reproduction.

² The back-talk focus group is a follow-up tool which “consists in drawing together research participants to discuss research findings” (Frisina 2006). It is meant to stimulate the reflexivity of the researcher, to empower participants, and to disseminate results in a responsible and cooperative way.

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