How Literature Can Facilitate Discussions about Controversial Topics: An Interdisciplinary Approach

Literature in Foreign Language Instruction

Recognizing its value as a tool for language learning, many authors have emphasized the motivational factor of the literary text (Balboni, *Educazione*, *Insegnare*, *Le sfide*; Collie and Slater; Lazar; Gardner; Ghosn) as a provider of authentic material and a repository of universal concepts such as love, hate, death, nature, violence, heaven, hell, and more, concepts that are common to all languages and cultures (Balboni, *Insegnare*; Ghosn). Motivation is a prerequisite of successful language learning, or, as Giovanni Freddi states, "learning does not exist without an adequate motivation" (qtd. in Caon 15), and is especially achieved when students are exposed to topics that raise their interest and curiosity, to which they can relate on a personal level, or when the subject is enjoyable and deserves further exploration. When students read literature, writes Judith Langer, "horizons of possibility come to mind, moving them to reflect on and interpret ideas at hand; students raise questions, recognize problems, seek causes and solutions, and make connections. They explore multiple perspectives and imagine scenarios" (607). Indeed, learners are more likely to be motivated precisely through, or perhaps because of, these connections which they make with their own lives, finding ways to relate to the story as it arouses previous individual interests, as well as to identify with or to react against the main character of the story. Hence, they assume a more active and organic role throughout their learning process (Belcher and Hirvela 117).

This article supports the arguments for using literature in the language class and embraces the four reasons put forward by Collie and Slater. 1. Literature is valuable authentic material: valuable because it says something about human issues; authentic because works of literature are not fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching languages. 2. Literature facilitates cultural enrichment: literary texts help understand how communication takes place in the country where the target language is spoken, how interactions develop, and how characters respond to varied issues. 3. Literature promotes language enrichment: reading increases learners' vocabulary as well as their understanding of the syntax and

discourse structures. 4. Literature fosters personal involvement: often students find strong connections with the story or with specific characters in the story as they share similar emotions (5-7). Moreover, as exceptional materials for the development of the four learning skills, literary texts provide a fertile territory for the enhancement of interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational abilities along with the development of critical and creative thinking. Therefore, they also contribute to the educational and personal enrichment of the learners.

In line with Paolo E. Balboni's "bisogna far scoprire agli studenti che hanno bisogno di letteratura e che la letteratura può dar loro piaceri straordinari" (*Educazione letteraria* 16), this article will argue that one of the most successful ways to show students the value of literature in their lives can be achieved through a language teaching approach that emphasizes interdisciplinary perspectives. While the changing landscape of our classrooms keeps reminding us that we live in a multicultural society where different languages and cultures interact on a daily basis, educators are challenged to create classrooms that are inclusive and welcoming of the diversity in the student population. To achieve this goal, educators should construct a meaningful curriculum that supports student-centered learning within the context of different cultures and disciplines, "in order to develop an approach [to language teaching] that integrates insights from citizenship education" (Byram and Wagner 140). Therefore, it is paramount to create a curriculum that encourages students to make connections with other disciplines and foreign literatures, a curriculum that is "engaging, accessible, connected, and relevant" (Hines-Gaither n.p.). The curriculum should also consider and include students' diverse cultural traditions in order to create an environment in which learners actively participate, cooperate, collaborate among peers, and are able to become self-confident and proactive individuals. In addressing the different challenges of teaching a diverse population, an interdisciplinary approach is one of the most efficient ways to contribute to the students' educational and personal experience. While helping learners to see the relationships among content areas and consider the many angles from which to explore a subject, the interdisciplinary approach also facilitates the development of communication, collaboration, presentational, and critical thinking skills as well as intercultural awareness. As students recognize other viewpoints and learn better

to understand their own, they acquire "lifelong learning skills that are essential to a student's future learning" (Jones 76).

Literature as a Prompt for Discussion

Literature can also become a powerful tool for cultivating discussions on controversial topics. Keeping in mind the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definition of controversy: "a discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views," controversial topics often lead to situations in which students do not feel prepared or are too intimidated by the subject, or by the strongest viewpoints, to express their own opinions. What follows is an example of how a strong opinion, developed by experience with that subject matter, and corroborated by facts, dominated a class discussion on beauty pageants for young teenagers. While the great majority of students briefly expressed their disapproval for these kinds of competitions, because they promote an unhealthy body image, one student, whose young sister participated in several beauty pageants, took a leading role in the conversation, stressing the advantages of such pageants as they greatly helped to improve her sister's self-esteem, confidence, and discipline as well as her communication skills and ability to better control stress during competition. Ultimately, the young sister won a scholarship to college.

As controversial issues are unavoidable in class, we should not shy away from them, but rather let us seek to make them become a catalyst for building humanistic connections, because "students need opportunities to explore their own values and . . . opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and respectful communication" (Al Badri 74). While instructors have a responsibility to create a safe speaking environment for all students, an environment that promotes dialogue and welcomes an atmosphere of respect and sensibility to the opinions of others, they should also remind students to share their own perspectives on the issues discussed in class in order to foster an honest dialogue among peers. Moreover, instructors should also inform students about the upcoming discussions on controversial topics and assign preparatory work, in order to expose them, for instance, to what Diana Hess calls "multiple and competing ideas before they begin the discussion," aiming to "ensure that everyone is ready to participate because if that's the case, you're more likely to have more participation in the discussion" (n.p.). Krishauna Hines-Gaither goes

one step further and emphasizes not only opinions, but also a sound knowledge base, such as readings and videos (n.p.).

In order to demonstrate how literary texts can be helpful in discussing themes generally considered controversial, the short story "Quarto potere" from the collection *Passeggeri notturni* by Gianrico Carofiglio (a story about bullying, violence, and diversity) will be explored in this intermediate-advanced Italian language unit.[1] Through analysis and reflection on films, music, and visual arts, this unit will show how literature can facilitate the discussion about controversial topics. This approach, while promoting language acquisition, cultural enrichment, and intercultural awareness, develops creative and critical thinking, and ultimately contributes to the educational and personal growth of the students.

In today's foreign language classes, the use of short stories is a helpful input favored by both teachers and students. Some formal characteristics of short stories are pivotal in enhancing language learning and in generating an "aesthetically engaging reading experience" (Pacchioni 84). Short stories, continues Federico Pacchioni, have the ability to minimize the students' anxiety, as they are confronted with a manageable text that can easily fit into "the stressful lives carried on by college students" (84). Furthermore, it is worth noticing another important feature of Carofiglio's short fiction: it presents relevant topics that are common to all languages and cultures, and to which students all over the world can relate.

"Quarto potere" tackles the topic of bullying at school. Students Cannata and Gabriele are the two main characters in the story: the former rough and mean, the latter well behaved and quiet.[2] This simple story brings to the surface issues of diversity, violence, and bullying. As a matter of fact, Gabriele is described as a reserved person with a round face, wearing glasses, a good student, a kind of outcast. He is the perfect target for a bully like Cannata. Cannata attacks Gabriele physically and verbally, but in the end Gabriele finds courage to react to the abuse with the help of another classmate. The following is a detailed explanation of the interdisciplinary lessons and their required preparatory work at home.

In class
"Quarto potere"
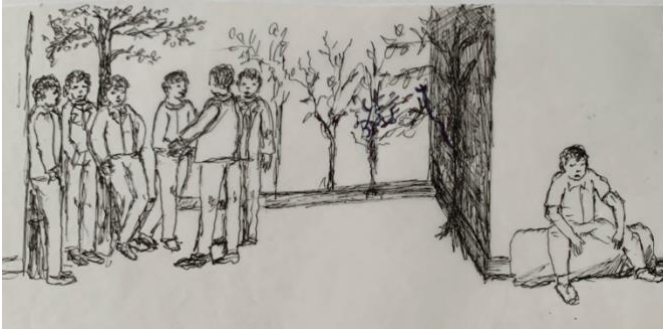
©Helen Costantino Fioratti

In order to introduce the topic(s) of the new story, students will reflect on the title "Quarto potere" and predict the subject matter of the story. Later, they will examine the illustration on the first page of the unit, and express their thoughts and feelings about the image they find before them. Then, they will formulate hypotheses about possible connections between the illustration and the topic of the short story. This five-to-eight-minute discussion allows students to test and exchange their own ideas. Since students often feel reassured in finding out that other classmates share similar opinions, they will be encouraged to participate more freely in the discussion, thus contributing to a better learning environment.

At home

Students watch the film *Solo io* by Guido Milani, 2008 (available on YouTube), and reflect on a list of questions the instructor has prepared for them. The questions focus on the specific and general meanings of the story and include opportunities for open-ended questions. During this receptive activity, students watch, listen to and interpret the meaning of words, music, and images in the film. Moreover, the film provides foreign language students with the opportunity to view and experience the social dynamics of communication as they watch native speakers interact in authentic settings. It also contributes to deepening their understanding of life in the country where the target language is spoken. Offering learners

both verbal and non-verbal messages, films help develop linguistic and sociocultural awareness (Maggini 114; Diadori 334). Indeed, they show a total immersion in the communicative act of native speakers through pronunciation and intonation of words, but also through gestures and behaviors, such as facial expressions, touching and postures, as well as spatial distance between individuals. The following are some model questions for students.

> 1. Riassumi brevemente la storia.
> 2. Descrivi il protagonista Marco.
> 3. Quali emozioni e stati d'animo trasmette il film e in quali momenti?
> 4. Si può definire la scuola un ambiente sicuro?
> 5. È facile fare amicizia in una scuola nuova?
> 6. Che cosa fai per farti conoscere dai tuoi compagni di classe?

In class

The class opens with a brainstorming activity. Students are placed in small groups or in pairs and asked to reflect on the movie *Solo io*, utilizing the questions they have worked on at home. Students can be grouped based on the characteristics they share, such as talkative vs. quiet students (as experience has taught the author that students perform better when they are among similar peers), or the students may be selected randomly. Each group is assigned a question to discuss or asked to work on all the questions, and then they should designate a speaker to present to the class. The instructor can also call on volunteers from the class. In this interpersonal moment of communication, students discuss the film while exchanging their personal ideas, thoughts, and feelings. They also speak about themselves and respond emotionally and intellectually to the events that took place in the movie.

To keep curiosity and interest alive, students are not provided with background information on the story, but as previously mentioned, they can be asked to predict or imagine what the story will entail. Afterwards, they are given exercises that contain difficult vocabulary words, including synonyms, and/or antonyms, derivations, associations and more, generated from the story's lexicon. As Irma K. Ghosn states, literature "presents natural language, language at its finest, and can thus foster vocabulary

development in context" (173). Here it is crucial to stress the importance of vocabulary building through the process of learning a new language, because learners with a paucity of vocabulary are unable to understand others or express their own thoughts. Students work on these exercises at home and check their responses against the answer key. They are also asked to use the new vocabulary during conversation and in their written compositions.

At home

The next step is for students to read the short story, with the guidance of a list of questions prepared by the instructor. Students are advised to read the story more than once, since any new reading will bring them a fresh and closer understanding of the text. As Vladimir Nabokov argues, "[i]n reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting" (3).

The reading of the story is the moment in which literature provides students with the ability to interpret the text: through the process of reading and re-reading the text a second and perhaps a third time, students are able to approach, understand, and ultimately appreciate it. When interpreting a text, the readers make choices, as the attention is concentrated on what they are experiencing during the interaction with the text. As individual readers interpret texts in different ways, "depending on the society they live in and their personal psychology," meaning cannot "be fixed" (Lazar 11). Recalling Claire Kramsch's theory, Bill VanPatten reminds us that "meaning can be layered" and specifically points out a literal meaning, a "hidden" meaning and a "read between the lines" meaning (3). The following are some sample questions about the short story "Quarto potere" to guide the students' reading.

1. Di che cosa parla il racconto? Scegli dalla lista che segue e spiega perché.

a. Violenza
b. Amicizia
c. Bullismo

    d. Rivincita
    e. Solidarietà

    2. In che modo Carofiglio rappresenta il tema che hai scelto? Fai riferimento al testo e scrivi aggettivi, verbi, espressioni di cui l'autore si serve per parlarne.
    3. Secondo te, a che cosa si riferisce il titolo "Quarto potere"?
    4. Perché Cannata è definito cattivo?
    5. Che tipo di personaggio emerge dal racconto?
    6. Pensi che ci possa essere empatia senza conoscenza?
    7. È giusto giudicare una persona senza prima conoscere la sua realtà?
    8. Che cosa si deve fare per comprendere le persone?
    9. Il titolo del film americano *Citizen Kane* è stato tradotto in italiano *Quarto potere* come il titolo del racconto. Conosci questo film? Se sì, di' se ci sono delle affinità con il racconto.

In class

In pairs or small groups, students review the list of questions in order to reflect and comment on the themes of the story. They are also asked to bring examples from personal experience to the discussion. The instructor circulates among the students and generally does not correct the language, instead taking notes on relevant issues that will be presented to the entire class later on during the lesson, in line with Stephen Krashen's argument that linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic reflections are inseparable parts of the process of learning.

    Class discussion gives students more fluency and confidence in speaking the target language, as they interact in a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere. Here students do not feel afraid to make communicative mistakes; rather, they find support from each other, borrow new ideas from their peers, reflect on their own opinions, take notes, and ask questions. Students are also asked to identify vocabulary that could be associated with diversity, bullying, and violence and, ultimately, to add their personal choice of words to describe the topics. In this interpersonal moment of communication, discussion is generated by reflecting on the main themes of the story, analyzing the text in order to "far emergere le

diverse interpretazioni, confrontarle, discuterle, integrarle" (Balboni, *Educazione letteraria* 44), but also through reflections on personal experiences and emotions. This is a moment in which literature has the potential "to transform, to change attitudes, and to help eradicate prejudice while fostering empathy, tolerance, and an awareness of global problems" (Ghosn 176). It is through reading that students broaden their horizons, deepen their understanding of culture in the country where the language is spoken, develop their intercultural communicative competence, and learn to view issues from different perspectives. In promoting cultural and intercultural awareness, literature helps students develop critical thinking and writing skills, as well as emotional awareness (Spera 323-24). As students learn how to develop intercultural communicative competence, they also better connect to other disciplines, and develop insights to make comparisons to their own language and culture, while discovering ways to participate with and relate to different communities. (Cutshall 32).[3]

Literature is a good medium through which students can enhance their critical thinking and reasoning, as they look for main points and causes, support details, and compare and contrast their ideas (Ghosn 176). While engaging with literature, learners acquire specific reading competences and writing skills, such as summarizing or paraphrasing texts; therefore, the students' focus does not only consist in mechanically producing new words and creating grammatically correct sentences, but also in acquiring enhanced communication, i.e., a way of interpreting, expressing or negotiating meaning in different contexts. As students learn how to think critically, they become more proficient in constructing persuasive arguments, a skill that can be applied to other situations in their lives, contributing to the educational process of the whole person (Lazar 19).

In the last five to eight minutes of class, the teacher shows a brief clip from *Entre les murs* (2008), by Laurent Cantet, a French film with English subtitles (available on YouTube), which deals with bullying in schools. Students are asked to reflect on what they are seeing, express their thoughts and describe their emotions. For homework, the class watches the entire film *Entre les murs* and reflects on the similarities between the film and the story "Quarto potere" by Gianrico Carofiglio.

At home

In order to continue the debate about bullying, students are asked to research one of the following Italian novels: *Cuore* by Edmondo De Amicis, and *Volevano uccidere la mia anima* by Marco Cappelletti, which has inspired the film *Solo io.* These novels are, among other things, about bullying, violence, acceptance or lack thereof in the lives of adolescent students. While classroom discussions are conducted entirely in Italian, research can be done in the students' choice of language. Keeping in mind that students' lives can be extremely stressful, between multiple classes, sports teams, and full or part time jobs, the option of doing research in their native language might be more practical and appealing. What follows are some questions to be used by students. This can be a written exercise done at home or a ten-to-fifteen-minute class discussion.

> *Cuore*
> 1. Scegli il personaggio che preferisci, fai una lista di aggettivi e verbi che possano essere collegati con la tua scelta e spiega perché.
> 2. Che cosa avresti fatto tu se ti fossi trovato/a nella sua stessa situazione?
> 3. Conosci qualche altro libro che parla di problemi simili? Se sì, riassumilo brevemente.
>
> *Volevano uccidere la mia anima*
> 1. Ricerca perché Cappelletti decide di parlare della sua esperienza. Scegli tra le possibilità che seguono e spiega il perché della tua scelta.
>
> a. testimonianza
> b. denuncia di un problema che esiste nella società
> c. esperienza in una scuola
> d. il mondo difficile degli adolescenti
> e. difficoltà di inserimento negli ambienti

Since music has often been a powerful source of discussion about controversial issues, the instructor lists songs that make us reflect and call for involvement: *Adesso basta* by Gigi D'Alessio, *Non possiamo chiudere gli occhi* by Eros Ramazzotti, and S*tay with Me* by Sam Smith. Music is one of the most powerful motivational

tools to teach a foreign language. Music evokes emotions, and memories, stimulates imagination, and arguably helps to create a more harmonious environment (Pace 173). For Julie Anne Taylor, "arts integration is important in the overall educational experience. The cultural benefits are one reason that [she favors] the inclusion of the arts. Another reason is the cognitive enhancement that music and arts education offers students of all ages" (qtd. in Jones 78).

In class

As students prepare to watch the video clip *Beautiful* by Christina Aguilera (available on YouTube)*,* they are getting ready to engage in receptive learning as they listen to the lyrics and music, reflect on the images they are watching and interpret their message. The video facilitates the discussion on diversity, violence, acceptance, and tolerance, and can be used to provide "vicarious experiences that foster the development of emotional intelligence . . . which is essential for empathy and tolerance" (Ghosn 177). Afterwards, students work in small groups and share their opinions with the rest of the class.

To continue the conversation on diversity, students read the paragraph below from "Quarto potere" and complete the following exercise.

> [Il ragazzo] decise di prendersela con uno che era arrivato in classe nostra solo quell'anno: si chiamava Gabriele, aveva la faccia rotonda, un po' alla Charlie Brown, portava gli occhiali, andava molto bene in matematica e se ne stava sempre per i fatti suoi (Carofiglio 5).
>
> 1. La diversità: scegli tra gli aggettivi che seguono e decidi quali sono, per te, associabili a diversità e spiega perché.
>
> studioso/a   introverso/a   silenzioso/a   obeso/a
> appartato/a   indifferente

Students are then presented with some images of paintings by Fernando Botero, a Colombian artist famous for his voluminous figurative representations.

Botero, Fernando. *Una familia*.
1989, Museo Botero, Bogotà

Botero, Fernado. *Monalisa*. 1978,
Museo Botero, Bogotà

Botero, Fernando. *Pareja bailando*. 1987, Museo Botero, Bogotà

These paintings will initiate a discussion about Botero's choice in
portraying his subjects, and students are prompted with the
following questions.

> 1. Secondo te, "con i suoi volumi" che cosa vuole esprimere
> l'artista?
> 2. Scegli dalla seguente lista di possibilità, discuti in classe
> la tua scelta e spiega perché.
>
> a. critica sociale
> b. critica politica
> c. umorismo

d. sensibilizzazione al problema della diversità
e. deformazione della realtà
f. altro

Students work in pairs or in small groups and share their findings with the rest of the class. While they are invited to give their own interpretation of diversity, the role of the instructor is to welcome a collaborative dialogue in which students feel comfortable in expressing their various perspectives. As the discussion on controversial issues comes to its conclusion, the instructor provides some food for thought to the class and lists further examples of bullying that can be found in comics. Slide after slide, students look at the images from *Sospeso* by Giorgio Salati and Armin Barducci; *Avengers: No More Bullying* by Jerry Duggan, Sean Ryan and Jody Hauser; *Heartbeat* by Maria Llovet; and *C'est pas toi le monde* by Raphaël Geffray. As the instructor pauses on the images of Peter Parker (Spider-Man), students are reminded that a bully can be defeated!

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One of the advantages of working with literature is that reading becomes the subject matter not only for analysis and discussion but for compositions as well. Ghosn maintains that literature provides learners "with language experiences that will not only motivate and foster oral language, but also deepen their awareness of the target language in its written form" (175). As students prepare to write the final essay, they are given the option 1. to reflect on the story "Quarto potere," its themes, and Carofiglio's choice of words and expressions to represent those themes, or 2. to choose the interdisciplinary example (film, music, art) that best represents the topic(s) of the story and explain why. In preparation for the final composition, students write a short paragraph outlining the main topic of their essays and the reasons for their choices. The instructor reviews the paragraphs and gives suggestions, then students write the first draft. Instructors might choose to have students read their own works in class, or they may read some of their students' works to stimulate discussion and make students realize that there are many diverse perspectives on the same matter. No grade is assigned at this point. Students then write the final version of the essay, which will be graded.

Finally, the students prepare a poster that represents diversity and/or bullying, and/or violence. In this presentational mode of communication, they demonstrate their research and creativity. This is the moment in which the students progress from learners to real authors and creators. It is an emotional moment, a time of great pride and reward, as students' individual talents are at center-stage. If, as Balboni states, we want our students to grow up thinking critically, and push them to "divenire attori e registi … è l'unico modo per portarli 'fino in fondo' nel processo di riflessione critica su un testo, visto che ogni scelta è un'interpretazione, frutto di un'analisi" (*Educazione letteraria* 47). As technology offers an engaging learning environment that favors individual creativity (Diadori 57), students are able to choose and build their own learning paths depending on their interests and needs, resulting in tremendously successful oral presentations.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this article has focused on the important role of literature in the language class. Furthermore, it has presented the use of literature as a powerful tool to discuss controversial issues in a

foreign language learning environment. In promoting critical thinking, develop knowledge and attitudes, contentious topics increase interest and class discussion among students. Following Freddi's view of the instructor as "letterato-educatore che guida gli studenti all'accostamento, al godimento e alla valutazione della letteratura nelle sue valenze primarie, in quanto portatrice di valori di bellezza, cultura e umanità" (qtd. in Balboni, *Educazione letteraria* 37), the author's work, often done together with colleagues, has maintained its priority to consider approaches to language instruction that actively and emotionally capture students' interest in literacy through literature. Teaching and learning language through literature calls for an active involvement from both the instructor and the learners in a collaborative effort to bring the text to life. The short story "Quarto potere" by Gianrico Carofiglio has offered students an opportunity to reflect on its content within a larger spectrum, as part of a process of educational and personal growth. While students have found support, guidance, stimulation, and motivation within a literary text, the choice of this short story has provided engaging, creative and meaningful ways to use literature in the language class. With bountiful insights and classroom applications, this story has proven to be a successful input in teaching language through literature. Moreover, this article endeavors to push instructors behind the boundaries of their comfort zone in order to explore other possibilities that stimulate students' curiosity while offering new approaches to a single topic. As a reward, students and instructors alike will be inspired by other cultures and experiences. It has been argued that an interdisciplinary approach to the use of literature in the language class works effectively as a teaching and learning activity to engage and challenge students' varied interests. In examining the connections of the short story "Quarto potere" with different disciplines, specifically the visual arts, films and music, and then comparing concepts across subject areas**,** learners have developed communicative, collaborative, presentational, critical, and creative oral and writing skills.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This article revisits and expands on some exercises presented in *Spazi Riflessivi in Passeggeri Notturni* by Bisello Antonucci and Nastri.

[2] Carofiglio introduces Gabriele as a "ragazzino che … andava molto bene in matematica e se ne stava sempre per i fatti suoi" (5), and Cannata as someone who "picchiava come un adulto - pugni, calci, testate" and one day, out of the blue, he took Gabriele by the shoulders "lo buttò a faccia a terra e lo immobilizzò. Adesso ti inculo ricchioncello, - disse montandogli addosso e mimando un rapporto sessuale, con tanto di respiro affannoso e grugniti" (5).

[3] Following the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*, Sandy Cutshall recalls the 5Cs of language learning (cultures, communication, connections, comparisons, communities).

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