Sideways looks, pursed hands and headshakes: Learning to interpret conflict signals in Italian as a second language

Abstract

This contribution reports on the design and implementation of a project which aims to develop a dynamic approach to language and culture teaching, with a focus on sociocultural norms regulating emotion communication during conflict exchanges.

We developed teaching and learning activities for University students of Italian and French, which encourage learners to become ethnographers to some extent, to observe and generate hypotheses on other people’s behaviour, and to develop flexibility in their approach to other cultures. Our aim was to facilitate a process which progresses from (1) an initial ethnocentric perspective, through (2) the development of cultural knowledge and the refinement of learners’ analysis, interpretation and interaction skills, to (3) an open and “decentralized” attitude towards one’s own as well as the target culture.

In this contribution, we present some preliminary results obtained during the piloting phase of our project, which involved using the activities and materials we developed in an Italian conversation class over one academic semester.
Introduction

In this contribution, we illustrate and discuss the design, implementation and pilot-testing of a project developed jointly by the two authors. The project was funded through a Flinders University Teaching Innovation grant, and its aim was to support the development of students’ intercultural communication competence in our language classes. In particular, our project focused on socio-pragmatic norms regulating communication during conflict exchanges, and involved the design and development of multimedia materials to be used in Italian and French conversation classes.

Some considerations regarding design and implementation of the French materials have already been published (Mrowa-Hopkins 2010, 2012). In this contribution, we focus especially on the Italian implementation of our project, which was pilot-tested in a conversation class at first-year, post-matriculation level, at Flinders University, in Adelaide (South Australia). The 50-minute classes ran over 12 weeks, during the second academic semester.

The discussion is organised as follows: In the first section we introduce and discuss the aims and rationale of the project. Subsequently, we consider instructional design principles and provide an example of teaching and learning activity we developed. Finally, we provide some results relative to assessment and evaluation of this project.

Background

The principal reason why we decided to embark on this project is a fundamental dissatisfaction with the existing teaching materials, especially with regard to interactional aspects in an intercultural context. The available textbooks often provide a limited amount of oral input, mostly consisting of non-authentic dialogues (see also Zorzi 1996 for a detailed review), from which the typical features of speech (overlaps, false starts, discourse markers) are absent. Even more rarely are non-verbal aspects of communication (such as face expression, proxemics, etc.) included in language textbooks. What is more concerning, though, is that considerations based on on empirical data obtained in studies of the sociocultural norms regulating communication in the target cultural groups, are seldom included. For example, very little information is available on the strategies typically employed by French or Italian speakers when performing specific speech acts (Searle 1969) and especially on issues related to politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson 1978).

The input presented by language textbooks, therefore, often corresponds to an abstract model of absolute correctness, independent of the context in which it has been produced. One of the risks involved with such an approach is that students may not be able to develop flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity, which are fundamental qualities for effective intercultural communicators (Roberts et al. 2001).
Other risks that students might be facing as a result of this type of exposure concern misunderstandings. It has been well documented that most instances of cultural misunderstanding occur at the level of speech acts, that is in the wrong interpretation of the speaker’s communicative intention (Cohen and Olshtain 1981; Peeters 2003; Kasper 2006). Furthermore, intercultural misunderstandings may result from a lack of awareness of each other’s norms of interaction as well as from a mismatch of the cultural frameworks held by the participants involved in an interaction.

Since sociocultural norms regulating communication operate subconsciously, it is necessary for students to be involved in learning activities that allow them to develop an awareness of their own cultural universe. At the same time, an ability to “read” other people’s behaviour must also be developed, so that the underlying values and motivations guiding such behaviour can be brought to the surface (see also Crozet and Liddicoat 1999).

What we hope to achieve is an awareness in our students that there exist different ways to perform the same act of communication, and that whether the linguistic means that have been chosen to achieve one’s communicative goals are appropriate depends on a number of factors including, for example, social distance between speakers, power relationships, level of imposition (Brown and Levinson 1978), as well as other expectations established by cultural factors (Samovar and Porter 1982).

Our ultimate aim, therefore, is developing our students’ ability to communicate in intercultural contexts. However, this is quite an ambitious aim to be achieved in a University semester. Perhaps such ability cannot even be fully developed in a three-year Major sequence. Therefore, for this project we decided to focus on one aspect of communication, namely conflict signals during interaction, and the communication of negative emotions, especially anger.

Such a decision is motivated by our interest for these themes, which has led us to initiate a ongoing research project on the identification and description of socio-cultural norms regulating conflict talk among French, Italian and Anglo-Australian cultural groups (see Strambi and Mrowa-Hopkins 2007; 2012). Some of the results of our research have been integrated in our teaching innovation project. Furthermore, the communication of emotions is, by definition, a sensitive field, which can create misunderstandings even within the same culture, let alone in intercultural contexts, due to differences in norms of behaviour (Matsumoto, Walbott and Sherer 1994). Consequently, it is an area of great interest for our students.

As observed by Orletti (1998), the emotive function of speech can be realised at all levels, including prosody, phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse. We must then add other non-verbal signals, such as posture, gaze, gestures, face expression, proxemic, and so forth. Identifying conflict signals, therefore, is a highly complex task, which requires not only linguistic, but also socio-cultural knowledge.
and skills. Participating in a conflict exchange involves using specific resources and patterns that are codified by each culture. The art of conflict is learned from a very young age, through a process of socialisation. Children observe, and subsequently take part in conflict exchanges, which provide opportunities to acquire and refine communicative tools that are fundamental to interpret other people’s behaviour, to achieve one’s own communicative goals and, ultimately, to become competent members of a social group (Corsaro and Rizzo 1990).

While it is reasonable to assume that our students have undergone a similar socialisation process in their own culture of origin, it is important that new opportunities are offered to them for developing such knowledge and skills in the target language and culture, preferably in the safe environment of the language classroom.

**Instructional design**

Based on the considerations made in the previous section of this paper, we designed materials that would allow our students to observe semi-authentic interactions and analyse them through a process of scaffolding (Bruner 1986). The framework supporting the structure of the activities is based on an ethnographic model of learning and research findings (Cohen and Ishihara 2005; Moran 2001; O’Dowd 2004) which suggests proceeding through four phases: observation and description phase; experience phase; analysis and interpretation phase; and evaluation phase. Discussion and reflection are carried out throughout these different phases as learners are presented with opportunities to identify and understand socio-pragmatic norms that operate not only in the target culture, but also in their own native culture. The role of the teacher is to guide the students’ discussions through questions designed to draw attention toward linguistic and contextual elements that allow such norms to be brought to the surface (for a similar approach, see Liddicoat 2006).

In the observation and description phase, students observe interactions in everyday life in their own culture as well as in the target culture by watching film extracts that have been specifically selected to illustrate different perspectives and showing critical incidents. In this way they become aware of dysfunctional situations, for example lack of understanding between conversational partners. This phase is expected to develop knowledge discovery and openness, which have been considered by intercultural scholars as subsets of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram 1997).

While it may be argued that films are not representative of authentic interactions, they present important advantages, as we have suggested elsewhere (see Strambi and Mrowa-Hopkins 2012 and Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi 2005). Furthermore, recent studies (e.g. Forchini 2012) have demonstrated that contemporary film discourse is not significantly different from naturalistic conversation, therefore justifying its use for research purposes.
For learners to be able to communicate and interpret conflict signals effectively in the target language and culture, however, they need to participate in authentic interactions in a variety of contexts. This allows them to refine their ability to evaluate contextual factors, and adjust their own communicative means accordingly (see also Scarino 2007). In preparation for this type of experience, it is advisable for learners to (i) acquire some notions relative to norms of behaviour observed by individuals belonging to the target group (Crozet and Liddicoat 1999); (ii) develop the necessary observation and analysis skills, and (iii) participate in interactions that simulate the real situations that they may encounter in authentic contexts, in a safe, protected environment such as the language classroom.

Our project stops at this preparatory stage. In other words, given the spatial and temporal limits of our project, we could not involve our students in authentic interactions with native speakers, even though we do recognise the importance of such experiences to achieve the ultimate objective of intercultural competence.

The learning activities we designed aim to emphasise some elements that have been identified as significant in cross-cultural pragmatic studies (e.g. Aston 1995; Corsaro e Rizzo 1990; Frescura 1995; Gavioli 1995; Bettoni and Rubino 2006; Testa 1998; Zamborlin 2004), and provide guidance to the students in the application of techniques developed by conversation analysts (for a discussion of the usefulness of conversation analysis for the teaching of Italian as a second language, see Zorzi 1996). Finally, we offered our students opportunities to use the results of these discussions in guiding their performance in role-play activities, and to receive feedback.

In the Italian implementation, three units of work were designed focussing specifically on the themes and communicative aspects explored in the textbook during the semester. These included the following:

- expressing disagreement, and contrasting other people’s opinions within the theme of the influence of other cultures on one’s own;
- complaining within the theme of racism and discrimination;
- arguing within the theme of globalization.

Audiovisual materials were introduced after some preliminary activities, including:

- small-scale investigations in which the students asked questions related to hypothetical situations that could instigate anger, and to the respondents’ possible reactions to these events;
- image-only viewing of the selected video sequences, and hypothesis generation on the contextual aspects (participants, place, time of the event, etc.);
- vocabulary-building exercises.

Post-viewing activities were also designed. After watching the selected sequences, students could be asked to:
• identify strategies used to perform specific acts (e.g. requests, refusals), both verbal and non-verbal, initially through an impressionistic, holistic process, and gradually progressing toward a detailed analysis of transcripts and images;

• gauge the emotive charge of the verbal and non-verbal means used in the sequence, for example by identifying alternative expressions or behaviours, and generating hypotheses on how the interaction would change if these were selected instead;

• reflect on sociocultural aspects on which the observed behaviours are based, and on any differences in expectations by individuals from a different culture, in a similar situation;

• participate in role-play activities in which students react to events similar to those analysed in the previous stages of the unit of work.

Some role-play activities were included in the experience phase to emphasise the differences in expectations based on one’s sociocultural norms or on stereotypes on the target language, and the actual behaviour observed in the films extracts (for a similar approach, see Zorzi 1996). For example, in the unit of work on complaints, after some preliminary discussion on the process of complaining and on the communicative strategies used to perform this speech act, the students received the following instructions in Italian:

**Situation**

M1 works for a co-operative firm, which employs former drug-addicts. In this sequence, a young man who works under his supervision is mowing the lawn and he accidentally cuts some flowers. The flowers had been planted by F2, the client. F2 had previously warned M1 that they should be careful, given that she cared very much about her flowers, and a similar accident had occurred in the past.

Prepare a dialogue between M1 and F2. What will be F2’s reaction? What do you think she would say to M1? How is M1 likely to respond? How would the scene end?

Please remember to focus not only on the verbal but also on non-verbal aspects (posture, voice, gestures, etc.).

Once students had completed this task, they viewed the relevant film extract from the feature film Trè storie (Gay 1998), which unfolds as follows. An English translation of the transcript is available as an appendix to this contribution.

F1 (1) ma co:sa sta face:ndo (.) ma non vede i fio:ri, si fe:rmì!


M1 (3) [cos’è successo signora.
A number of pragmatic aspects in this extract related to what has been identified as typical of complaint sequences (Bettoni and Rubino 2006). For example, the woman in the Italian excerpt uses a series of “blaming action” strategies. First she focuses on the act itself and not on the person, then she blames the gardeners, and especially M1 using amplification such as “every time they mow the lawn they cut the flowers”, and she comments that the incident is “a disaster”.

The Italian marker ‘ma’ (but) at the beginning of a turn is also typical of competitive interruptions and, in general, tends to emphasize a contrast of opinion (Testa 1988). Together with non-verbal traits, the repetition of ‘ma’ can be considered a conflict marker (see also Coveri, Benucci and Diadori 1998: 202). Another marker of conflict is the woman’s repetition of the same word used by M1 in his question “what happened” to which the woman adds “you have a look at what happened, look”. Repetitions are another device often employed in conflict discourse (Orletti 1998).

Finally, a clear signal of conflict can be observed in the content of the last remark uttered by the woman. She concludes by calling the two men “handicapped”, which, although not necessarily offensive in other contexts, here is a clear insult. M1, who has appeared accommodating so far, reacts strongly by questioning the term used by the woman. Rejecting lexical choices made by one conversational partner is another mechanism that is commonly observed in conflict (Orletti 1998). Interestingly, M1, the male character, repeatedly invites the woman to calm down, which indicates an evaluation of her behaviour as excessive and unjustified.

Obviously factors that pertain to the type of relationship between the characters, and especially their power relation, come into play here. The gardener, who is a subordinate, tries to minimize the damage done, and at the same time to maintain the relationship on a positive ground. He offers repair and a possible solution to the problem. However, the woman responds to this offer with an insult, therefore maintaining her negative positioning.
Another important element of analysis concerns non-verbal behaviour. For example we can observe the woman’s open arms when she becomes aware of the damage caused, then her hands on the hips, tight lips and frowning when she listens to the gardener’s defence, her head shaking and raised voice, and finally her raised chin when she challenges the gardener with the insult. On the other hand, the gardener tries to calm her down by using a soothing voice, raising his hands palms up. His attitude changes at the end, when he responds to the insult with a gesture that typically signals the necessity to slow down (waving hands palms down), and using a more stern tone of voice.

By engaging in this type of analysis, under the teacher’s guidance, students have the opportunity to focus on elements of discourse that normally would escape their awareness, especially if only the referential content of an interaction is considered, as is often the case in language courses. Moreover, it is important to clarify that these samples are not to be taken as a model to imitate, but should rather be considered as a point of departure, as a basis on which students can practise and develop their skills to interpret other people’s behaviours in the safety of the classroom (see also Zorzi 1996).

**Assessment and evaluation**

As mentioned previously, our aim was to contribute to the development of our students’ intercultural communication competence. Therefore, an evaluation of our project must include some measure of such competence. Assessing intercultural competence reliably, however, has proven difficult, as testified by the vast body of conflicting literature on the subject.

However, there seems to be at least some agreement among researchers (e.g. Byram 2000; Liddicoat 2006; Scarino 2007) on the process of development of intercultural competence. This would progress through several stages, from an ethnocentric attitude to an open and “decentered’ one, which recognizes positive and negative features of the target culture as well as of one’s own. Advancements along this line are obtained through the acquisition of knowledge on both one’s own and the target culture, and the development of analysis, interpretation and interaction skills.

One of the best-known constructs of intercultural competence is that proposed by Byram (2000), who identified the following components:

- attitudes (openness toward other cultures, a desire to explore new ways of responding to events)
- knowledge of social processes, cultural products and practices of one’s own as well as other cultures;
- ability to interpret and relate (interpret events in the target culture and
relate them to one’s own culture)

• ability to discover and interact (building knowledge of the target culture and using this knowledge, together with attitudes and skills, during interaction in real time)

• critical cultural awareness (ability to evaluate critically values and process of one’s own as well as of the target culture).

As observed by Byram, “Assessing knowledge is thus only a small part of what is involved and what needs to be assessed is learners’ ability to step outside, to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, and to act on that change of perspective” (2000 n.p.). Therefore, assessment must start from a record of individual and deep changes that are not accessible to an external observer, such as changes in attitudes and awareness of cultural differences. Moreover, assessment must take a longitudinal perspective, by focusing on the process of development rather than on products. For these reasons, Byram (2000) views self-assessment portfolios as the most effective tools to evaluate the development of intercultural communication competence (see also Scarino 2007). Such a portfolio should include the following areas:

• interest for other people’s lifestyle
• ability to change perspective
• ability to live life in a different culture
• knowledge of another country and culture
• knowledge of intercultural communication.

These criteria have been used by other researchers as categories for the analysis of texts produced by learners (e.g. Liaw 2006). Even though some of these criteria are more appropriate to situations of direct contact with the target culture, such as study-abroad programmes, than to a University course context, nevertheless they represent a valuable starting point.

Another example of a framework for the assessment of intercultural language learning is that proposed by Liddicoat (2006) in a study focusing on the acquisition of address forms in French. According to this scholar, the process of acquisition would progress from a completely ethnocentric view of address forms, through the identification and comprehension of linguistic and cultural differences and of the complexities of the French system, to arrive at a completely decentered attitude (in Byram’s terms, a “critical cultural awareness”).

Even though Liddicoat’s framework presents some limitations, as recognised by the author (2006: 76), it is interesting for its application to a limited aspect of intercultural language learning. In Liddicoat’s study (2006) the main source of data was represented by texts produced by the students themselves for inclusion in a diary, in which reflections on the analysis of authentic texts were recorded.

What is common to several of the approaches just reviewed, is the conviction that the development of intercultural communication can only be reliably documented
through forms of self-evaluation, in which the learners identify and provide evidence of such development. On the other hand, given that our project was implemented in the context of a formal University course, assessment criteria, in our case, had to be at least partially performance-based.

For example, student learning in the Italian course was formally assessed through a participation mark, which included preparation and performance in role-plays during the semester, as well as a final oral examination, which also involved analyzing video extracts and participating in role-plays. Throughout the implementation of our pilot project, however, we also collected data in the form of audio-recordings (and some video-recordings) of class discussions and role-plays, questionnaires, observation sheets, and interviews conducted by the students. Based on these data, some observations relative to the French implementation of our project have already been published (Mrowa-Hopkins 2010, 2012).

As for the Italian implementation, six of the eight students participating in the pilot phase completed a questionnaire at the end of the semester, in which they were asked to evaluate the project in terms of whether and how their participation had contributed to the development of their intercultural communication competence. The questionnaire was generated based on suggestions provided by Byram (2000) for inclusion in an intercultural communication section of the European Language Portfolio. Table 1 shows the students’ responses.
Table 1: Questionnaire results: Likert scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Combined with the language (grammar) component of this course, the activities carried out during the tutorial (conversation class) provided me with opportunities to sustain and/or develop:”</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral/Unsure</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My interest in other people’s way of life, and especially elements of Italian daily life which are not usually presented to outsiders through the media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My ability to change perspective (understanding Italian culture by seeing things from a different point of view, and by looking at my culture from their perspective)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My knowledge about Italy and its culture, and especially how to engage in conversation with Italians in a way that maximises mutual understanding and promotes positive interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My knowledge about Intercultural communication. In particular, knowledge about:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a) How to avoid and/or resolve misunderstandings which arise from people’s lack of awareness of the viewpoint of another culture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b) How to discover new information and new aspects of Italian culture for myself</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, then, the participants in the Italian pilot project seemed satisfied with the opportunities offered by the activities and materials provided, although there was some uncertainty regarding the acquisition of knowledge about Italian culture and Intercultural communication. This is to be expected, however, given the limited time spent working with these materials (one hour per week, for 12 weeks) compared with, for example, an in-country experience. Still, it is very encouraging to see that all students evaluated the activities as able to sustain and/or develop their interest in Italian culture, and that three students thought this project had provided them with knowledge about how to discover new information and new aspects of Italian culture independently.
In addition to selecting their responses using the 5-point scales provided, students were also asked to include examples of how their experiences in the project contributed to the development of their intercultural competence. Here are some of the students’ comments in relation to each of the questionnaire statements:

Table 2: Questionnaire results: Examples of evidence provided by the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Combined with the language (grammar) component of this course, the activities carried out during the tutorial (conversation class) provided me with opportunities to sustain and/or develop:”</th>
<th>(Students’ responses: Examples of how the project contributed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My interest in other people’s way of life, and especially elements of Italian daily life which are not usually presented to outsiders through the media</td>
<td>Through the study of interaction I was able to discover the blunt nature at which the Italians argue, however rarely rude. How Italians may seem angry when they argue but they in fact stay very formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My ability to change perspective (understanding Italian culture by seeing things from a different point of view, and by looking at my culture from their perspective)</td>
<td>Role playing: Looking at video’s (sic) and worksheets; other students’ opinions I was able to notice the “stiff” cold nature of Australian culture, and particularly enjoyed learning about the Italian way of life. I saw the way/ understood the way true Italians (people living in Italy) saw Australians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My knowledge about Italy and its culture, and especially how to engage in conversation with Italians in a way that maximises mutual understanding and promotes positive interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>Learnt how to approach conversation in Italy or with Italians that is respectful and respects their style. Before I would not have been so hasty to disagree, now I would as it is only natural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My knowledge about Intercultural communication. In particular, knowledge about: 4a) How to avoid and/or resolve misunderstandings which arise from people’s lack of awareness of the view point of another culture 4b) How to discover new information and new aspects of Italian culture for myself</td>
<td>How to disagree and/but explain our point of view Be polite Through the use of camera I can now deconstruct arguments and conversations Watching videos, radio, TV, meeting new people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ comments do point to changes in the students’ beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and skills, which in turn suggest that a development had taken place in all areas of intercultural communication competence. However, these results are limited in scope and await confirmation from future studies involving a greater number of students and more detailed analyses of the texts produced by the learners.
Conclusion

The observations we have made here suggest that the integration of affective aspects of socio-pragmatic competence into the teaching of a second language may enhance students’ learning, and especially their development of intercultural awareness and communication competence. The results we have obtained so far are indeed encouraging.

However, this type of learning requires a re-evaluation of traditional forms of language and culture assessment in the context of interculturality. When students experience the meetings of cultures they embark on a personal journey of discovery and self-reflection, which implies losses as much as gains: losing one’s old self while gaining multiple perspectives. Integrating self-assessment techniques with the requirements of a formal academic course remains a challenge, as well as a necessity. Our aim is to expand our project to involve greater numbers of participants, and to refine our assessment and evaluation techniques to obtain reliable results on the effectiveness of the materials and tasks we have developed.

Notes

Notation symbols used for transcription of speech:

( . ) Barely noticeable pause
( . 2 ) Timed pause (in seconds)
[ ] Start of overlapping speech.
- Interruption
: Elongation of the preceding sound.
((xxx)) Transcriber’s comment.
Underlined Higher volume

Appendix

F1 (1) but what are you doing ( . ) can’t you see the flowers, stop!
F1 (2) every time you mow the lawn you cut my flowers. It is not the first time this happens ( . ) look. A disaster really!
M1 (3) [what happened madam.
F1 (4) ((to M1)) eh ( . ) you have a look what happened ( . ) have a look.
M1 (5) alright ( . ) calm down ( . ) I mean I can see you-
F1 (6) I did ask you to [watch the flowers
M1 (7) [yes ( . ) don’t get cross madam. I mean ( . ) don’t get angry at the boy. The boy didn’t know anything about it. If someone is responsible then it’s me [(2 s y l l)
F1 (8) I know ( . ) exactly it is you: I asked before ( . ) to watch the flowers ( . ) you could have told him to be careful.
M1 (9) alright. now we'll look at which seedlings are ruined. we'll replace them
F1 (10) you employ the handicapped. there you go. this is the result.
M1 (11) no, hang on madam. there is no handicapped around here as far as i can see.

References
Frescura, M. 1995. Face Orientations in Reacting to Accusatory Complaints: Italian L1, English L1, and Italian as a Community Language. Pragmatics and Language Learning, 6, 85-110.


