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Title: Re-envisioning the Italian Curriculum through Active Learning and *Literacy*

Abstract

This article will discuss current trends in world language education at the university level but that are also applicable to K-12 level. In particular, it will focus on *Literacy* as defined by Kern (2000) and *Active Learning* that is inspired by Bloom's taxonomy. After an explanation of the two trends and a discussion of how *Literacy* in particular relates to other theories and recommendations, specifically to Intercultural Competence, known also as Global Competence or Translingual Competence, concrete examples of practical activities informed by *Literacy* and *Active Learning* for integration in the Italian classroom will be described. In the interest of broadening the knowledge of *Literacy* within research and teaching in Italian Language, definitions and summary images also appear in Italian where appropriate.

Questo articolo discuterà i trend attuali nell'insegnamento e nell'apprendimento delle lingue straniere a livello universitario ma che sono anche applicabili a livello di scuola superiore. In particolare, ci si concentrerà sul concetto di *Literacy* come definito da Kern (2000) e sull'*Active Learning* che si ispira alla tassonomia di Bloom. Dopo una spiegazione dei due *trend* e una discussione di come in particolar modo la *Literacy* si collega ad altre teorie e raccomandazioni, specialmente la Competenza Interculturale, chiamata anche Competenza Globale o Competenza Transculturale, verranno descritti degli esempi concreti di attività informate dalla *Literacy* e dall'Active Learning da utilizzare nei corsi di italiano. Per promuovere e facilitare la conoscenza della *Literacy* nella ricerca e nell'insegnamento in lingua italiana, dove appropriato le definizioni e le immagini riassuntive sono presentate anche in italiano.

Author Biography

Annalisa Mosca is Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of Italian Language courses at Purdue University in Indiana. She holds a Doctorate in Modern Language from in Italian at from the Middlebury College Language Schools in Vermont. In addition to having years of experience in teaching, she has actively been involved in the AP reading for Italian in various roles as well as a member of the SAT Italian Committee. She regularly presents at professional national and international conferences literacy, intercultural competence, technology and pedagogy. She has been an invited speaker giving workshops and webinars. In 2018, she was a Faculty Fellow for the IMPACT program at Purdue for her project of redesigning the beginner level Italian courses by implementing both instructional technologies and literacy in her redesign. Currently she has been accepted and invited into the Purdue CILMAR Growing Intercultural Leaders program.

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Annalisa Mosca è Senior Lecturer e Coordinatrice dei corsi di lingua italiana presso la Purdue University nell'Indiana. Ha un dottorato, Doctorate in Modern Language, in italiano ottenuto presso Middlebury College Language Schools nel Vermont. Ha una maturata esperienza nell'insegnamento delle lingue, ed ha preso parte alla *AP reading* per italiano in diversi ruoli; ha anche fatto parte del comitato *SAT Italian*. Committee. Presenta regolarmente a convegni nazionali e internazionali su *literacy*, competenza interculturale, tecnologia e pedagogia. È stata invita come speaker per workshop e webinar. Nel 2018, era un faculty fellow per il programma IMPACT a Purdue lo scopo di ripensare i corsi di italiano integrando la *literacy* e le tecnologie. Attualmente è stata invitata a partecipare al programma Growing Intercultural Leaders dell'istituto CILMAR di Purdue.

Re-envisioning the Italian Curriculum through Active Learning and *Literacy*

by Annalisa Mosca

By now, all instructors and faculty in the profession of world languages teaching should be familiar with the findings of the 2007 MLA report "New Structures for a Changed World." The report summarized the status of foreign languages in higher education in the USA, concentrating on declining enrollments and on the existing discrepancies that exist between current curricula, needs of students who take foreign languages and students' "exit" competences in the second language at the end of their study in programs in north American colleges and universities. The report also offered recommendations for closing the gap between these discrepancies and making curricula more relevant to the needs of today's students., suggesting inclusion of transcultural competence as well an integrative approach with an updated course offering. Many other documents, theories, recommendations and models followed this report. To name the most important ones, which are also relevant to this article, the ACTFL 21st century skills document, which ties world language study to the soft skills and recommendations suggested by the MLA report; the ACTFL redesigned proficiency guidelines and "Can do statements", which better render explicit specific competences of students in world languages and which now also include Intercultural Communication; the multiliteracies approach advocated by several academics, which is inspired by Kern's *Literacy* theory and offers a framework for its applicability to training the professoriate to teach this approach in the classroom.

There is, therefore, a sense that pedagogies, like the Communicative Language Teaching method, no longer satisfy the needs or desires of today's world language students. As initially reported by the MLA 2007 Report and echoed by many academics, a break in the curriculum

between the language sequence –i.e. lower division courses– and the content courses –i.e. upper division courses– persists and it perpetuates a monopoly of traditional courses. This leads to several perceptions about language courses: that the lower division ones not being challenging or relevant enough and that the learning in the target language is not being continued and developed in the upper-division courses, which are usually held in English. Many academics are instead advocating for a model, in which language learning continues throughout the major and upper division courses and where items such as content and pragmatics are also explored more in depth in the lower division courses.

Most importantly, probably, is the sense that currently in world languages a discrepancy between the desired and achieved outcomes pertaining to competence in the target language at the end of either the language sequence or upon completion of the major in a world language. It must be noted that although curriculum design plays a role in such discrepancy, factors such as time on task, opportunities to practice, supportive environment and student motivation are also involved. (Davidson and Shaw). Nevertheless, as shown by a study that aligns ACTFL proficiency scale with CEFR ratings, students who have completed the language sequence –i.e. advanced X language– should thus be at the advanced level of the ACTFL proficiency scale or at the C level of the Common European Framework of Reference. However, oftentimes this is not the case and students find themselves at the lower end of the tiers, such the Novice High/Intermediate[1] low of ACTFL scale and at the A2/B1 of the CEFR ratings.

This situation leads to the need to better reconduct language learning to the multiple competencies required by contemporary society. Language teaching must also emphasize the relationship between language learning and the development of 21st century skills (ACTFL), including intercultural competence, also known as transcultural competence. This poses the issue

[1] ACTFL OPI (*Oral Proficiency Interview*) Workshop, Middlebury, VT, 2010

of re-examining the curriculum with an emphasis on multiple competencies. In essence, there is the need to form students of world languages in a way that they will gain competences or skills not only of a linguistic and cultural nature but also applicable to their future work and useful in contemporary society.

***Literacy*, Intercultural Competence and Active Learning - Possible answers to these challenges**

In the field of world languages, one answer in response to these challenges and needs is the growing interest in multiliteracies approaches. At the base of these current approaches, is the concept of *Literacy* as formulated in 2000 by Richard Kern, who hails from French sociolinguistics and proposed the following more encompassing new definition of *literacy*:

> Literacy is the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic —not static— and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge. (Kern, "Literacy" 16)

As there currently isn't any available official Italian definition for the concept of literacy as defined by Kern, as well as there are no studies in Italian which cited Kern's theory or translated this concept, it is relevant to propose a translation whenever and wherever it is discussed. The below definition is my translation:

> *Literacy*[2] è l'utilizzo di prassi pedagogiche che mirino alla contestualizzazione dei materiali inserendoli nel loro contesto sociale, storico e culturale per creare e interpretare significati attraverso i testi. Coinvolge almeno la consapevolezza implicita delle relazioni tra le convenzioni testuali e il loro uso contestualizzato e, idealmente, l'abilità di riflettere in modo critico su tali relazioni. In quanto sensibile agli scopi da raggiungere, la *literacy* è dinamica—non statica—variabile culturalmente all'interno di comunità dove si forma il discorso. La pratica della *literacy* attinge elementi da una varietà di abilità cognitive, dalla conoscenza di testi scritti e della lingua parlata, dalla conoscenza dei generi e dalla conoscenza della cultura di provenienza. (Annalisa Mosca)

This concept has gained ground within the field of second language acquisition as it is seen by many as the philosophy posited as the basis of the *Pedagogy of Multiliteracies* (Allen & Paesani) which in turn is considered by many as the approach in world language teaching that will replace Communicative Language Teaching (Liskin-Gasparro 2013). In fact, the method of CLT, even in its transformed applications of Contemporary Language Teaching (Van Patten) is no longer seen as fitting the needs of students and approaches based on *Literacy* offer the next development in the field.

Kern's definition is an encompassing one that includes multiple competencies as well as different skills. It must also be noted that Kern's concept seems to be the predecessor for other official guidelines, statements and recommendations that have subsequently been published by several professional associations. A few notable mentions are the ACTFL Global Competence Statement, two VALUE rubrics of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the

[2] In the translation, the term “literacy” is maintained in English as there is no appropriate translation for that term in Italian, also following the recommendations discussed by Banzato in her 2014 study *Analisi critica degli approcci di ricerca della literacy pedagogy*.

QCER/CEFR and several definitions of Intercultural Competence, most notably the one by Guilherme. Although it is not known whether these documents were informed or based on Kern's concept, they contain significant portions or wording that echo and resonate with key points that form the definition of *literacy* that he formulated. For the field of world languages these parallels, especially the ones with the widely referred AAC&U Value Rubrics and with the concept of Intercultural Competence, are of significant importance as they posit world language teaching within a larger institutional framework and within current desirable multi-disciplinary skills. It follows that these documents, coupled with Kern's *literacy* and the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies, can be used both to advocate for the importance of world languages as well as to make evident to other departments and to administrators how world languages fit within the new principles and competencies that are being promoted by institutions.

Another concept that universities are dealing with, is related to student motivation and making students more involved in courses. At Purdue University, the department of Teaching and Learning has been promoting the framework of Active Learning, via grants -called IMPACT grants- that are awarded to faculty in order to redesign their courses by changing the delivery format to include a large portion of activities that involve students as well as a more efficient use of technology. This concept of active learning, is informed by self-determination theory (Deci&Ryan)[3] and transformative learning based on Bloom's taxonomy. It advocates for student centered learning based on three principles:

- Autonomy: the feelings of volition and choice, endorsement of behavior, ownership of the learning process
- Competence: the extent to which students believe they have mastered content material or are able to perform academically

[3] Facilitators of the IMPACT program summarized principles from Deci & Ryan's 2017 publication.

- Relatedness: the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others and the material presented in class, also termed relevance

Having gone through the training for the grant, the process of active learning seems to be geared mostly to transforming standard large lecture courses in non-liberal arts disciplines, many of which still follow that frontal lecture format. It also appears to relate more to quantitative rather than qualitative outcomes and results, whereas language standards are rather based on qualitative results. Both the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and the CEFR levels use qualitative descriptors and follow functional outcomes rather than quantitative scores and strict associations of exercises and activities to a single learning outcome. On the other hand, the three active learning components of autonomy, competence and relatedness do seem to fit into the current theories of language teaching and address the recommendations related to student needs. If we combine the three components, we will find parallels to the multiliteracies principles and the 21st century skills. The active learning activities themselves comprise an umbrella of activities based on making students more independent in the choices they make within a given course, thus promoting engagement on the students' part with the ultimate outcomes of becoming competent or proficient in the material. Many active learning activities are based on group work, discussion, presentations, peer work, and co-creation of content, i.e. negotiation of meaning or meaning-making. The program offers many resources that can help faculty promote this type of activity.

As can be seen from the types of formats advocated by active learning, world languages instructors, especially those teaching the language sequence, are half way there; those formats are already part of the curriculum. It becomes a question of modifying some elements of the course rather than the entire course to make learning more engaged, "participatory" or in Italian "partecipato" and "active" or in Italian "attivo" as well as integrating short simple activities, to

make the “why” behind the content and structures more explicit to students and, most of all, to help them make connections. It is preferable that these elements be integrated and repeated in each module or unit so that students, while being challenged, already know what to expect from the newly integrated elements.

Descriptions of examples of activities that are informed by these theories

In the case of Italian, I have incorporated several examples of activities based on these two methods into the curriculum, from the beginning through the intermediate level. The activities are to be performed during classroom instruction and repeated throughout the semester using the different grammatical structures and content presented. Let's discuss some examples of *Literacy* informed activities and *Active Learning* informed activities that can be immediately integrated into the World language classroom at any level. These activities are meant to show how what happens in the classroom can easily be adapted and modified in order to fit into the framework of current learning theories and trends.

I. Literacy informed activities

Before arriving to the actual activities, it is worth noting that the concept of *literacy* can be summarized into seven principles: language use, collaboration, interpretation, problem solving, conventions, reflection, cultural knowledge (Kern 2000). When one studies the definition of *literacy*, it often seems like an idea that is appropriate only to the higher levels of language learning because of all the skills that it involves. Nevertheless, I would argue that these skills have various degrees of performance as appropriate to each level. For some, it might not always be evident how this concept can be promoted from the beginning levels, it bears

emphasizing that Kern himself advocates that *literacy* can be promoted from the beginning levels. Therefore, the activities presented have been purposely created to support this idea and show how it can relate to content and grammatical structures performed at the earliest stages of the beginning level in language learning. Throughout the course, and in subsequent courses, the framework of *literacy* is always in the background. And is developed as appropriate to each level. The activities are neither perfect nor a mandate but wish to represent a practical example of what *literacy* informed activities might look like at the star of the beginner levels.

Activity 1: This is to be presented and performed when students learn numbers, telling time, have seen the verbs *essere* (to be) and *avere* (to have) in Italian; cultural snapshots or readings in textbooks vary, but likely will have included items such as the 24 hour clock, class schedule, other schedules, Italian habits where the focus is simply on the aspects on the time when they take place. For the activity, the instructor writes on the board the headings "L'orario in Italia" and "L'orario negli Stati Uniti". Students then work in groups to produce a series of sentences related to time for both Italy and the US based on the information they have just learned. The class is reconvened 5-10 minutes after, the exercise is corrected as a class and feedback is provided. Sample sentences that might emerge are as follows, albeit with some acceptable grammatical mistakes that for the purposes of this article have been rendered correctly:

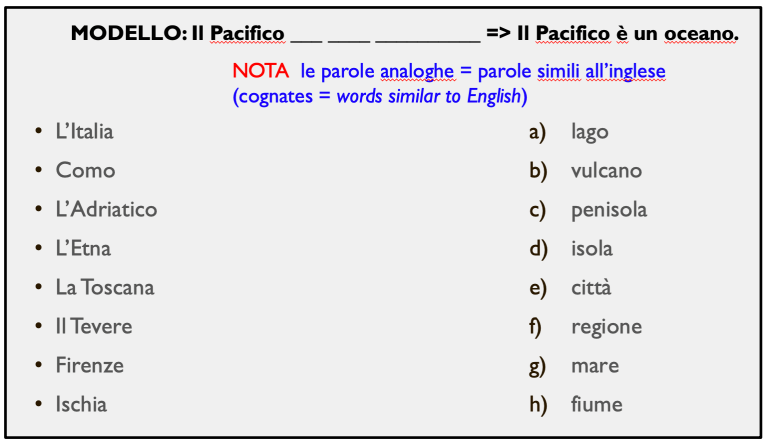
L'orario in Italia	***L'orario negli USA***
L'orario ha 24 ore.	L'orario ha 12 ore.
C'è la colazione alle 8:00	Ci sono AM e PM.
Il pranzo è alle 13:00	C'è la colazione alle 8:00
La merenda è alle 17:00	Il pranzo è alle 11:30
La cena è alle 20:00	La cena è alle 17:00
Etc.	Etc.

(image 1)

This activity is an activity at the basic level that moves beyond widely used exercises that are simply related to time (reading clocks, pronouncing hours and telling time) that are present in textbooks and reinforced by instructional practices. It also integrates some vocabulary that will be covered with more detail later on during the semester – at this stage, if needed, the instructor can provide the unknown Italian words (pranzo, colazione, cena) using images instead of translation – thus challenging students a little. The text produced by students during the activity also gives a platform to address differences in cultural practices. Finally, students will be using or recycling recently learned grammatical structures, vocabulary as well as cultural elements they likely saw in English in their textbooks at this point – most textbooks shift readings to the target language at approximately the third unit. The activity satisfies many, if not all, of the seven principles of *literacy*: in particular, students need to use collaboration and problem solving to use the target language to co-create meaning that reflects cultural knowledge. It also addresses the ACTFL 5Cs and especially that of comparison. It must be noted that, although practicing grammatical structures is part of language use, accuracy should not be the focus of this type of activity, especially at the basic level. As students continue with their language learning, that aspect may be given more attention when they learn to use language that is appropriate to their higher level of competence.

Activity 2: This activity can be performed immediately after having seen the verb *essere* (to be) and having introduced cognates, usually first week of class. It can be performed as a class or in small groups which then reconvene for correcting and providing feedback. For the activity, the instructor provides students with a PowerPoint slide and/or a handout with the exercise below, asks students to figure out "*Cos'è?*" (What is it?) and explains the model. Students determine the

relationships (match) the items of both columns. Instead of simply performing a matching exercise (ex: L'Italia => "c") students will instead follow the provided model to create a complete sentence.



(image 2)

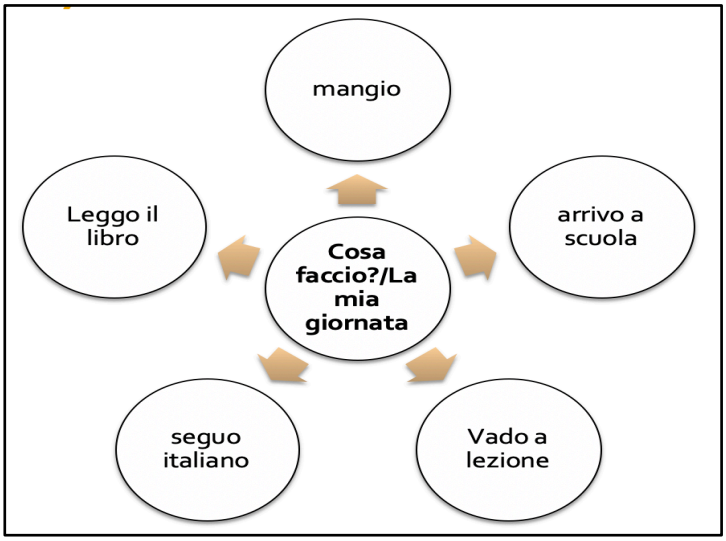
Experienced instructors may remark that, save for a few words, the topic of the city, nature and all its related vocabulary is not usually presented at the beginning of the basic level – there are a few exceptions. This is irrelevant since the activity focuses on students' problem solving skills to recognize and use cognates in order to understand words they have not yet learned. Without a doubt all instructors introduce their students to cognates; however, I would venture, per personal experience observing the instructors I coordinate, that not as many reinforce the *skill* of recognizing cognates throughout the semester or practice this skill regularly with integrated activities. There is instead the opportunity to do just that and also integrate cultural elements from the very beginning with an exercise such as the proposed one. The activity again satisfies many, if not all, of the seven principles of *literacy*: in particular, students need to use collaboration –whether as large or small group– and problem solving skills to recognize vocabulary they likely do not know but they can reflect upon (by practicing "cognate recognition") in order to co-create meaning in the target language that reflects cultural knowledge by forming the correct relationships among the items of the columns.

II. Active Learning informed activities

There are many active learning informed activities that can be applied to the World language classroom. The below are examples that I have found to be most applicable, also because they are easily repeatable. Remember that *active learning* means giving more autonomy to the students so they are more engaged (relatedness) in the process of learning. Once again, the activities presented want to be an example of how active learning –seemingly not very applicable to the humanities– can be easily integrated into the classroom. The two I will be discussing are "concept maps" and "A-Ha wall" or "A-Ha moment". Everyone is familiar with concept maps but it is not always evident how and where they can be useful in the language classroom. Perhaps the immediate association is between concept maps and content, such as literature, culture or history. However, concept maps can easily be used to help students make connections and expand their short answers in the language classroom. The "A-Ha wall" or "A-Ha moment", though variable and perhaps not always as successful as one would hope, is an activity that can lead to the ACTFL "can do statements" since the aim of the "A-Ha Wall" is also to have students realize and summarize what they have learned.

Activity 1: This activity can already be presented after introducing the verbs of the first category ending inn"-are." A very popular active learning activity is one that has been around for a long time, namely concept maps. Either in the form of a handout or on the board, the instructor will present students with a blank concept map, except for the initial center item which will be filled with the chosen topic, for example "*Cosa faccio? La mia giornata*". Students, either in small groups or as a class, will then provide response items to fill the remaining parts of the map with

items related to the initial one and the instructor fills in what students say. Sample items that might emerge are as follows:



(image 3)

This particular concept map activity was introduced after learning verbs in the present tense in Italian. The purpose of integrating the concept map was to help students make connections to the material which is usually presented in textbooks in separate sections, also usually in different units (verbs in *-are*, then *-ere*, then *-ire*, then irregular verbs) and as a list of verbs in the infinitive. Despite textbooks and instructors explain how to conjugate verbs, students, who may not be used to study strategies for world languages, often do not realize what they are expected to do with the material and they might assume that studying the list will suffice. They do not make the connection between the explanation, practice activities and outcomes. The concept map would help them tie it all together into a functional manner and help them realize that they are producing language that is realistic in interpersonal communication. The activity was repeated, maintaining the same central circle item of "*Cosa faccio? La mia giornata*" (What do I do during a day?), and built upon after each section, mixing verbs of different endings learned up to that

point. Finally, it was re-introduced at the end of the present tense, having students use verbs from all three conjugations (*le tre coniugazioni di verbi*) and irregular verbs as well.

A follow up to the concept map would be to have students either write a paragraph or produce and audio or video with additional details, for example for the "*mangio*" (I eat) they could add at what time they eat and where they eat ("mangio alle 12 in mensa"). A technical note should be mentioned: it may be more practical to draw a concept map on a sheet of paper or have a widely available ready-made template that can be written on and projected with a document camera. However, a template in Microsoft's "SmartArt' in word or PowerPoint can also be useful, keeping in mind that the more ramifications are added, the smaller the font will become once the circles are filled.

Activity 2: This activity can be performed as little or as much as desired, even during every lesson. The original "A-Ha wall" or "A-Ha moment" activity requires that the instructor mark off part of the blackboard or whiteboard and label it "A-Ha!". As blackboards and whiteboards might often get erased, it is suggested to instead keep a running word document, wiki or discussion forum in the course's Learning Management System and add to it every time the activity is performed. Throughout any lesson, when students learn or understand something or students make a desired connection, the board or documents are slowly populated. This can be achieved either by the instructor writing on the board the connection the student has made or the student getting up from their desk and proceeding to the board to write their "A-Ha moment". In a language classroom an example might be connections made to the introduction questions presented and practiced immediately, as a first impression, in the first day of class (*Come ti chiami? Come stai? Di dove sei? Quanti anni hai?*). The main purpose for these questions is to

start the course in the target language, give students the takeaway that at the end of their very first class they have learned something that can already be put into practice (going out and meeting that Italian student on campus). The "A-Ha" part comes in subsequent class periods, per content progression: once the course has arrived at the point where the irregular verbs contained in those questions are covered and a student makes the connection from the verbs presented to those initial four questions. Students can make this connection by manifesting it on their own, either in broken Italian or English *("stare" ... in "come stai?"*) or by slight prompting on the instructor's part which they complete (*ricordate "la lezione 1"*). Other examples might be students noticing structure similarities *("praticare ... noi ... con "h" like giocare?"*), students finally realizing that subject pronouns are not needed in Italian and making the shift to not using them – instructors will have given constructive feedback on this but students do not always spontaneously replicate that feedback immediately.

It must be noted that this activity is highly variable. Per the experiences in my classes, it seemed at times more successful if done not so much as an activity but rather somewhat stealthily, while the instructor circulated in the classroom when students worked in small groups and asked, often in broken Italian, for confirmation of the connection made. It might even be more productive in the classroom to have the instructor suggest the connection, such as by the prompting mentioned above, and then have students manifest it via an example. Nevertheless, the activity seemed to have an impact in helping students make certain connections to prior material learned in class that were not made as readily prior to integrating the activity. Therefore, it is worthwhile to continue experimenting despite the challenges and its variability.

Conclusion

This article discussed the most current trends in world language learning as well as teaching in general. The focus of the discussion was the multiliteracies approach based on Kern's *Literacy* theory; in addition, the concept of active learning was also discussed. Practical ctivities were presented that showcased some examples of both theories with particular attention to the beginning levels of language learning. The activities wanted to show that, in order to follow the new trends and theories of language acquisition, instructors do not have reinvent the wheel and do not have to completely revolutionize their course. It is sufficient to understand what these new theories are advocating and slightly modify the way instructors currently teach revamping what they are familiar with and seeing the activities they currently offer from another point of view and within a different framework that is more encompassing and functional.

Appendix

Figure 1: Summary visual of the definition of Literacy (Kern 2000) in English

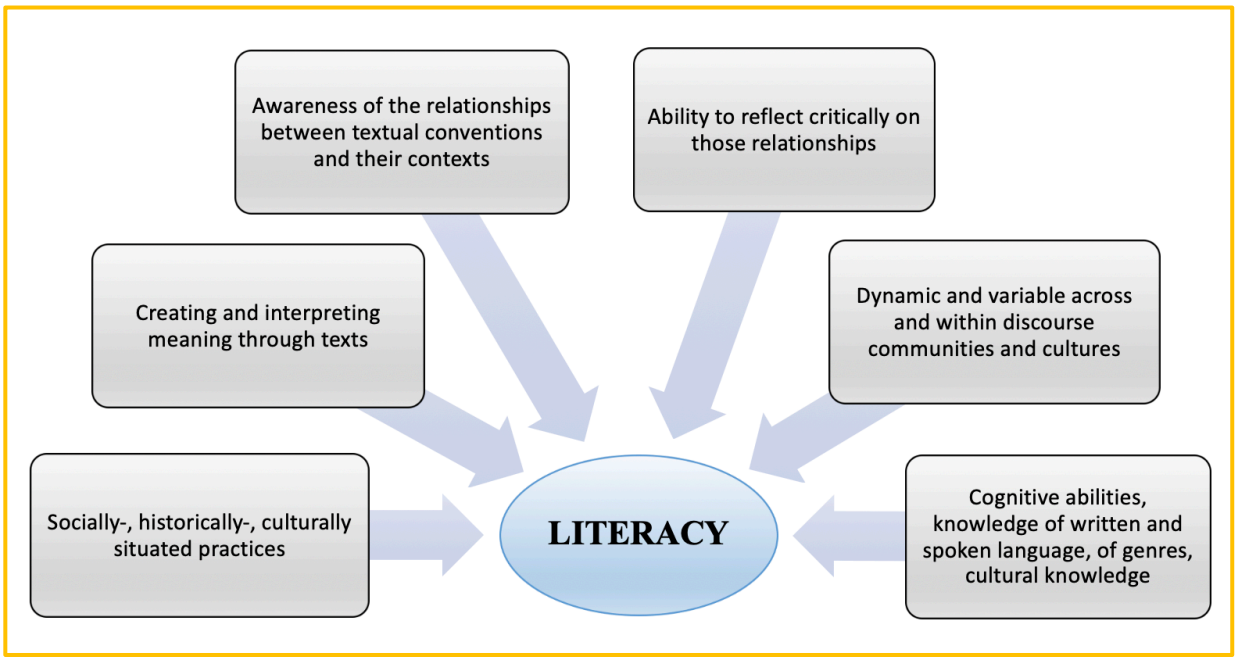


Figure 2: Summary visual of the definition of Literacy (Kern 2000) on Italian – translation by Annalisa Mosca

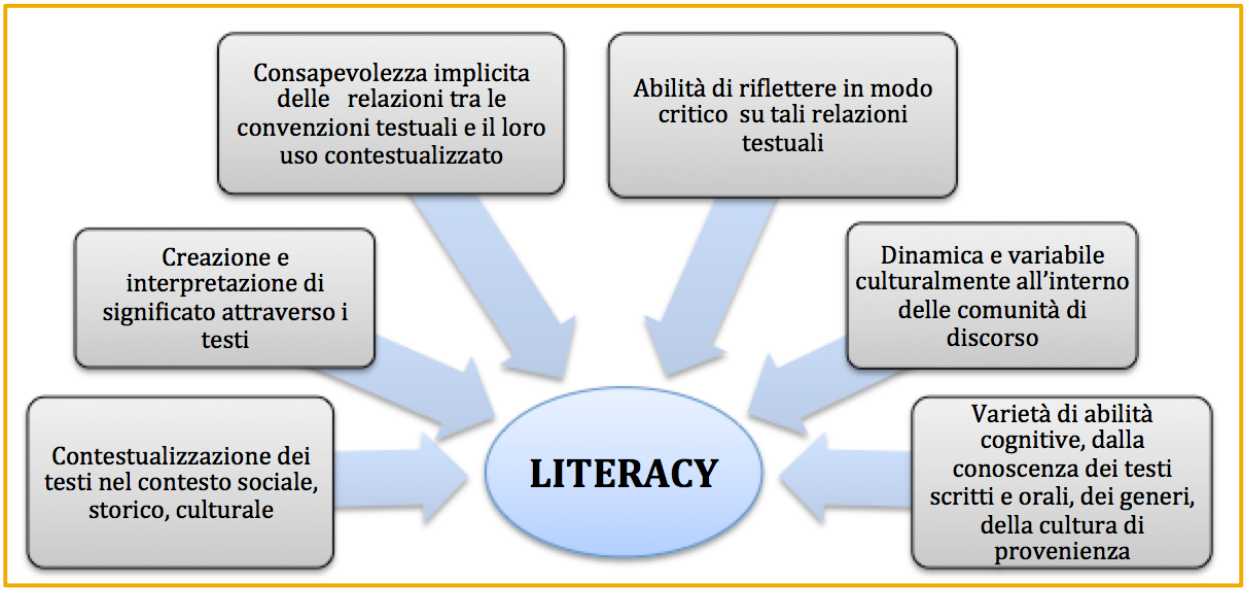


Figure 3: Visualization of the Active Learning philosophy in English

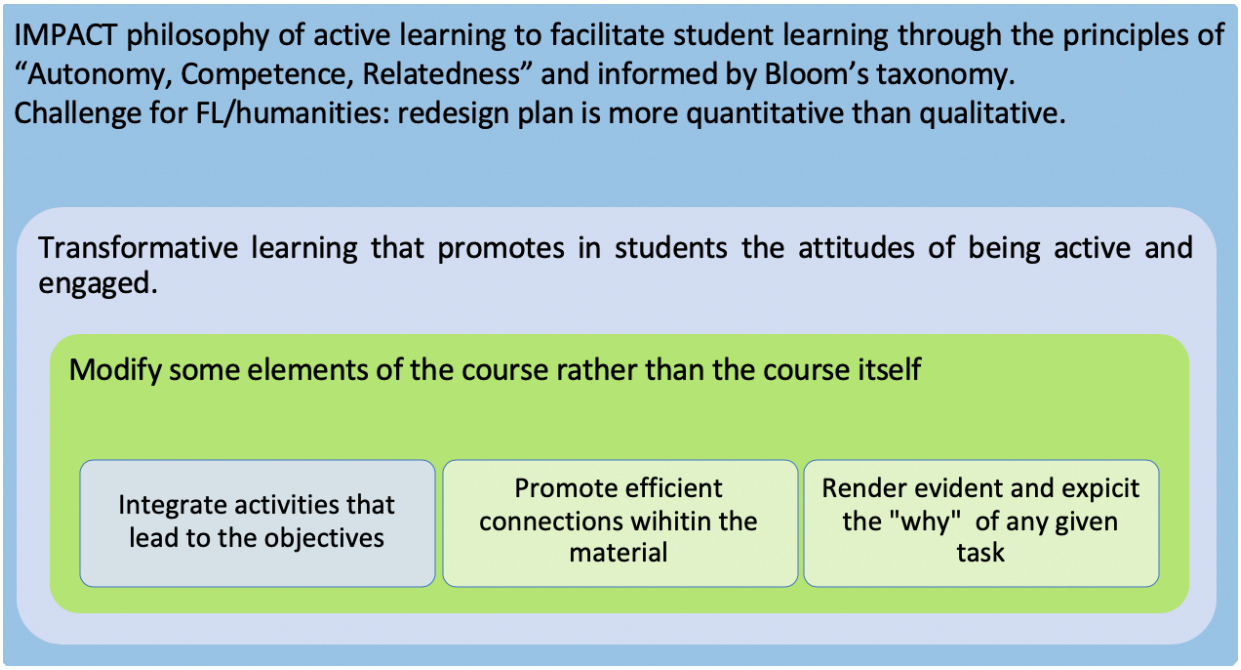
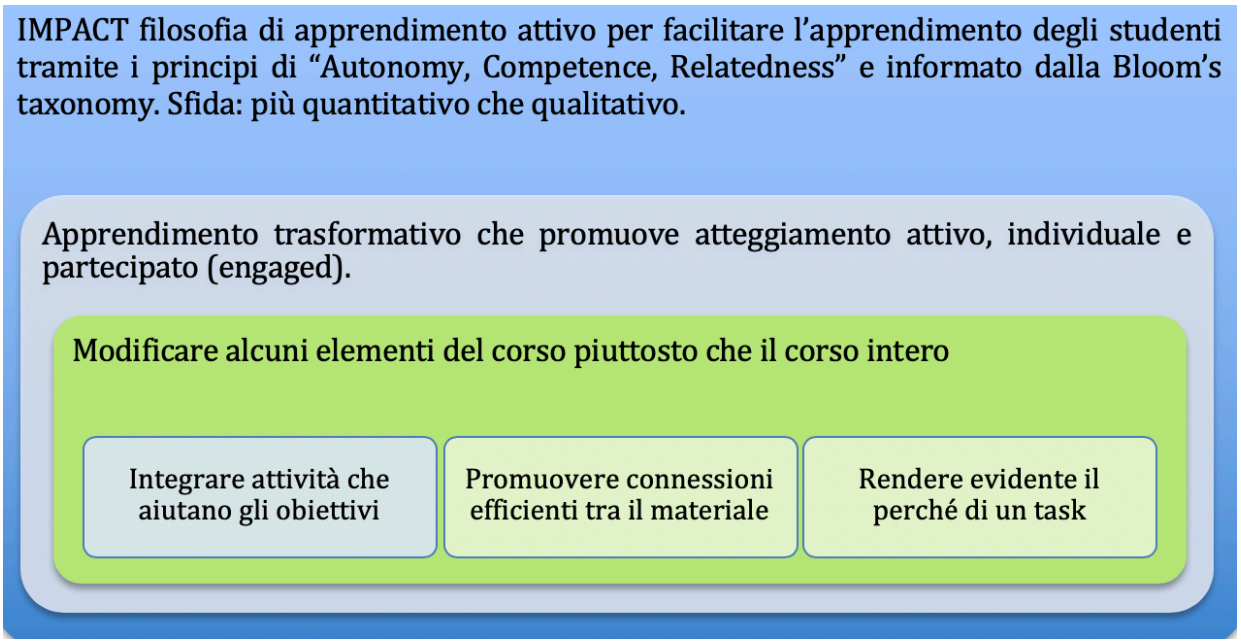


Figure 4: Visualization of the Active Learning philosophy in Italian



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