



FOOD, LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND LAND – THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING THE ITALIAN GASTRONOMIC CULTURE THROUGH THE TEACHING OF THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE IN AUSTRALIA

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The paper considers a cooking class course experience held at the Dante Alighieri Society of Brisbane, Australia, and analyzes the use of a method derived from the communicative approach in foreign language teaching applied to the Italian language as a way to teach the Italian cuisine as well as the Italian gastronomic culture, aiming to investigate its outcomes in terms of cultural and historical knowledge, social interaction and affection, and reflects upon the cultural relationship between the Australian people, their food and their land, and the influence of the Italian culture on them.

Keywords: Food, Language, Interculture, Perception.

This paper is part of a broader research investigating on how food surplus informs and transforms the territory.

This research explores not just architecture – in its planning aspects - and food studies, but also anthropology, sociology, linguistic, in an interdisciplinary discourse.

Upon these premises, I will present a cooking teaching experience at the Dante Alighieri Italian School of Brisbane, Australia, as a medium to explore the connection between food-culture, the experience the notion of food through the senses and the experience of those through language.

Here we stress food as a great medium for teaching and learning a new language, as it involves the use of all the senses and the use of language in a more interactive and communicative way, through an approach derived from various teaching methodologies and approaches like the Action Based Teaching, theorized by Leo van Lier, and the Communicative Language Teaching and the Total Physical Response, created by James Asher.

We aim to discuss the implications of teaching the Italian gastronomic culture through teaching the Italian language and, on the opposite side, the possibility to teach the Italian language through the teaching of the Italian cuisine, setting the basis for further analysis.

The paper will discuss how food and food ingredients can be perceived differently, and can involve different connections and images, in a foreign language, and modify the perception of the food preparation and consumption space.

From the assumption that both food culture and language create and modify space, both in its physical and figurative aspect, the main objective of the research is to investigate on how the students' perception of the space around them, relating the preparation and consumption of the meal, changes from before to after the attendance of the course, and to discuss how the gastronomic culture can modify the perception of the territory, in particular how, by learning the variety of the Italian food culture and its strong connection the variety of a small country like Italy, the Australian participants to the course will perceive their country, their city and their neighborhood, in a different way, identifying the cultural and

spatial differences between the two countries and maybe identifying also the inner variety of the Australian food cultures and territory, exploring also the degree of forbiddances in both cultures and the changes of it though the course.

The social and spatial centrality of the kitchen and dining table for food preparation and consumption will be used as a spatial tool both to teach the Italian gastronomic culture and the Italian language through sharing a communal experience.

Further more, the paper aims to discuss how the Italian language and its structure, and food and the associated rites, can be used reversibly both as an object and as a subject of research, creating a place for an immersion in a foreign language and culture.

The cooking class presented in this paper part of a series of collateral activities running in parallel with normal language classes.

The teaching methodology used draws from various teaching approaches: a communicative language teaching approach, utilizing the target language as a *lingua franca* within the class to enable them to communicate verbal structure through a negotiation between them and between them and the teacher, is enriched by the introduction of emotional-affective components, characteristics of the Communicative language learning approach of Charles Curran, and physical interactions proper of the Total Physical Response method of James Asher.

The principal objective of the teaching activity at the Dante Alighieri Italian School is teaching the Italian Language and culture through the simulation of an immersion, through which the learning activity could be stimulated in a natural and progressive way, like theorized by Krashen: the in-class teaching activity is programmed in a 2 hours teaching plan, structured to stimulate the oral and writing abilities, both in a controlled (through a reflection on lexical and grammar structures) and un-controlled (through the free verbal and written interaction between the students), in a class environment design to break the emotional filter, though the disposition of students and the teacher around a common table.

The teaching methodology therefore stimulates the active and the passive component of the learning experience, giving the opportunity also for a constructive exchange between the learners and for the understanding of the contemporary linguistic, social and cultural Italian reality through the use of authentic videos and written material; this methodology aims to produce socialization between the students and between students and teachers, self-promotion, cultural enrichments and opportunities for a cultural relativism, overcoming the traditional separation between the *mother language*¹ and the *target language*², and shifting the attention on communication for an intercultural approach to the Italian-as-a-second-language teaching.

Teaching the Italian language and culture in Australia Today means to deal with a whole range of issues and situations: Australia is a country which has been affected by a significant Italian immigration during the post-war period, which has been generated the integration of the successive generations within the Australian society, although with the maintenance of an Italian background, culture and habits.

Students at the Dante Alighieri Society of Brisbane are mainly Australians, with backgrounds other than Italian, some second or third generation Italo- Australians, and a minority of people with neither an Australian nor an Italian background.

Since the 1970s the extensive social and institutional support to Multiculturalism in Australia has brought to an increasing interest on foreign cultures.

Teaching the Italian Gastronomic culture in a foreign country like Australia means also to deal with the complex issue of food authenticity and cultural reinterpretation; assuming the notion of regional cuisine as a modern construction (Montanari, 2010), produced at the beginning of the XX century by cookbooks and then evolved with the contemporary mass media with television shows and movies, we accept the assumption that a gastronomic culture is susceptible of cultural and environmental variations, and therefore any written or recorded documents like cookbooks, recipes, cooking shows, testifies of the particular characteristic of a gastronomic culture at that time.

The investigation of the written document is therefore fundamental, and the choice of which type of material to use is critical³.

We have to stress also the different type of the present Immigration from the one happened in the past and its implication with the transmission of the Italian food culture: while in the post-war period people were emigrating from Italy basically due to economic restrictions and poverty, the more recent immigration phenomenon involves mostly educated young people emigrating for working and experiencing life in a foreign country, characterized by a cultural and social awareness unknown to the first Italian immigrants.

Translated into food culture, this difference means that, while the first generation of Italo-Australians still maintains the food culture, and the language, of the region (and sometimes of the village or town) where they came from, the new generation of Italian immigrants, although being still very attached to its Italian food culture, is more flexible in experimenting and in creating hybrids. As Skrbis, Baldassar and Poynting argue in *Negotiating belonging: Migration and generations* (2007) “the second generation plays a strategic role in linking the migrant generation with the new, host society” (Skrbis, Baldassar, Poynting, 2007) and therefore the analysis of the second and third generation of Italo-Australians would represent a useful tool to understand long-term effects of immigration under a social, linguistic and personal perspective.

As food regional characterization becomes symbolic of a new gastronomic mentality considering the notion of territory as an inclusive spatial identity (Montanari, 2010), teaching the Italian gastronomy from the perspective of a new Italian immigrant to Australian people means to teach basically to deal with the territory and its food culture in a different way, by understanding the relationship of Italian food products with specific cultural and spatial regions, to understand ultimately the relationship between the Australian food products and the different and diverse culture present in the Australian territory⁴.

The notion of a perceived authenticity and the manipulation of it from an outside point of view⁵ are here analyzed through a comparison between the Australian and the Italo-Australian students.

Taking into account Michel De Certeau’s theoretical studies on *les heros obscurs*⁶ and the everyday life activities, by which culinary activities are considered being connected to the living and domestic space as they create a rich language of stratified stories and narratives, we will consider the activity of learning a new language through a new food culture as a cultural creative process, creating, by the use of the voice, gestures and materials, a new cultural and physical space⁷.

If the interest of Australian people in learning the Italian food culture could be inscribed in the wider phenomenon of the increasing interest, also promoted by government initiatives and educational programs, for the Italian culture, the attendance to Italian classes and Italian cooking classes by people having an Italian background reflects the recent social and cultural reaffirmation of Italians immigrants, often in the past discriminated and only in the last decades truly considered as part of a multicultural society.

An educational and sociological interest in the subject focuses instead on the combination of the two disciplines, language and gastronomy, as a winning methodology for teaching a foreign language and its culture.

We will also consider Levi Strauss’ gastronomic language division⁸, composed by the sensorial qualities, the framework of authorized and recognized preparation techniques, and the behavior around the table, as a significant teaching methodology, as the commonality of table rituals made eating a conscious process and the context significant⁹ (Steel, 2009), and language becomes significant when food becomes significant for society producing it, contributing to its formal and semantic articulation (Barthes, 1964); also, since kitchens can be considered environments as political as markets, the teaching experience in the kitchens stimulates in being more communicative and open to share different knowledge.

From the teacher’s point of view, it is interesting to consider Skrbis, Baldassar and Poynting’s thought on Italian immigration in Switzerland¹⁰, where they stress the tendency of tertiary educated second generation Italians to emphasize their integration to the host country by expressing their disaffection to their homeland, in opposition with a less educated second generation Italians emphasizing their Italianness: If this phenomenon is recognizable and visible also in Australia in the present day, we

have to stress that food seems to be the reconciliation medium between these two different migration realities¹¹.

The methodology applied to cooking classes in Italian is based upon the one applied in normal weekly classes at the Brisbane Dante Alighieri Italian School: although we have to stress the specificity of the context, the space and therefore the language used.

If the cooking activity is traditionally designated to a specific part of the human dwelling, the kitchen, and is characterized by specific tasks and rules, its application to the teaching of a foreign language needs the use of a specific language, characterized by its own specific vocabulary, lexicon and syntax.

Upon this premises, we stress the significance of the application of the Action Based Teaching approach (Leo Van Lier) to the course, as it is defined as content based, project based, and task based.

Van Lier stresses the centrality of perception and the significance of a “coherent and non-trivial model of pedagogical scaffolding that integrates structuring and microgenesis” (Van Lier, 2007): food then can be considered a perfect medium at which applying Van Lier’s methodology, as it naturally involves the use of all the senses in its interaction; the way the student is interacting with food can be also described as a building process, a scaffolding starting from the raw material to the final products, integrating necessary knowledge and skills, and culminating with the pleasure of the experience of the final product.

The cooking activity then fits perfectly into a linguistic perspective aiming to the “shift from product to process, or from object to activity” (Van Lier, 2007), putting emphasis to those processes of learning that combine a social-interactive work with a more cognitive-reflective one.

For the purpose of this paper we will analyze a typical class in all its components, its sections and documents used, to illustrate the applied methodology and set the basis for further analytical researches.

A typical cooking process is composed by various phases structured in a logical progressive sequence, starting from wearing the apron and washing hands, meaningful activities respectively for a protective and an hygienic purpose, but also important as rituals within the cooking process, and going through all the preparation phases until the completion of the dish.

If we stressed before the pleasurable aspect of the consumption of the prepared dish, we have to argue that even this pleasurable activity needs to be properly set up and prepared; setting up the table is a fundamental activity adding value and drama to the sharing of the meal.

The same process structure is found in Van Lier’s Action Based Teaching Approach, where three principles define the scaffolding of the experience, its boundaries and its conditions and rights.

Referring to Bernstein’s pedagogic rights, Van Lier defines the phase dedicated to the individual enhancement, the one related to social inclusion, and the final phase setting the right to participate in specific practices.

If we refer those principles to the activity of teaching a foreign language through cooking, we see how the first principle could be applied on the first task of reading the recipe, when the individual reading has the objective of building a confidence in learning the ingredients, both for a cooking and linguistic purpose; the second right, relating inclusion, refers inevitably to the cooking process, where the small community of cooking learners act in a social activity to build something together.

Sharing the meal together represents then the third and last principle, as it involves an active participation, defined as “political” by Van Lier.

Planning a cooking class run in the target language means not only to choose the recipes according to the available kitchen space, the available tools, equipment and ingredients, but also on the number of people, their language abilities and skills, their background and age.

To be able to *get all* the students involved in cooking and create a good level of interaction and discussion the number of participants is set between 8 and 12, the same number found in normal language classes run during the week; *mettere le mani in pasta* (literally in Italian: put the hands in the dough, which means getting involved in the situation) both physically and figuratively, helps to break the affective filter and create an informal and cooperative atmosphere.

Unpredictability is enhanced as a key factor of the active participation of the learner into the learning process, as it is the activity within the kitchen, following a set scheme where the quality of the final product is unknown at the beginning¹².

The dramatic tension useful to start an immersion in the Italian language and food culture begun with wearing the apron (*il grembiule*), the tool designated to the specificity of the kitchen space and defining the time of the activity: when the participants wear the apron, they begun the immersion (they are in role), when they put it off they return to their off-role life.

Ritual phrases or situations also help to get the students involved by making them familiarize with the language in a relaxed way, and if during weekly classes we will usually ask at the beginning *come state?* (how are you?) or *avete fatto I compiti?* (did you do your homework?), in the kitchen environment happens that, apart the moment before starting the class, when we will always, with the same words and tone, ask *avete messo il grembiule?* (have you put the apron on?) or *vi siete lavati le mani?* (have you washed your hands?), also during the preparation of the dish standard phrases or ritual questions will come up, like *é cotto?* (is it ready?), or *é buono?* (is it good?).

The next step is reading together the recipe, starting from the ingredients and getting through the preparation instructions.

This phase is particularly important, as it is the beginning of a learning progression culminating with the sharing of the meal around the table. For the purpose of this paper we will analyze the recipe for Tortellini, as an example: if we analyze a typical list of ingredients, each ingredient is composed grammatically by a number, an abbreviation specifying the quality of this number, a noun, and by an adjective or a preposition following another noun: for example, in order of lexical complexity, *1 uovo* (1 egg) is composed by a number and a noun, *800 gr farina* (800 gr flour) is composed by a number, an abbreviation telling it is grams and not kilograms, and a noun specifying the object, while *100 gr prosciutto crudo* (100 gr of raw ham) is composed by a number, an abbreviation, a noun, and an adjective specifying the kind of object.

According to Mary Douglas¹³, food is a code expressing its message through a pattern of social relations and events, which are then expressed through a language having its inner hierarchies divided into social and biological components: Douglas stresses the importance of contrasts, like cold and hot, bland of spiced, solid and liquid, and the existence of different degrees of social habits and patterns connected to those contrasts.

The dissertation of the author on Levi-Strauss categorization of food through language as a critique to his methodology shows how food and food culture can involve different interpretative hierarchies, which can be integrated with each other and used for different scopes in the message expressed by food: for instance, while we could organize the ingredient in an order following the lexical complexity, we will choose different food hierarchies in the writing of a recipe used at cooking classes, as there are different objectives and different disciplines involved.

Ingredients are mainly divided into a logical sequence of preparation, into sub categories, as the understanding of the structure of the dish facilitates the understanding of the single components of it: here we therefore privilege the meal structure towards the linguistic structure of the cooking terms, which becomes consequently a sub-structure through which the student will connect indirectly.

The experience of the ingredients through touch, smell and sight is also fundamental to activate the lexicon and let it sink in indirectly, through spontaneous mental association and physical and emotional stimuli, taking into account Barthes' food language structure principles (rules of exclusion, opposition of meanings, rules of association, codes of use)¹⁴, and making possible the last principle (personal variations), as food language rises from a collective use and an individual use of words (Barthes, 1964).

This methodology takes a critical position towards approaches like the one of Mirko Zardini¹⁵, who argues that in the food study context the research must not be driven by language, semiotics, text, and signs any more, but by the rediscovery of phenomenology, considering the body and the perception of the world through the senses a critical element; here instead language and semiotics, as well as a phenomenological use of the body, are considered as fundamental and complementary tools for experiencing food and food culture in an integrated way, as in our system, language and word, under a

Barthesian definition, are connection reciprocally to each other thanks to the material substance, acting as a meaningful sub-structure.

In the reading of the preparation instruction we stress instead the extended use of the infinitive tense, used often in cooking recipe for giving instruction: in the specific case of cooking classes in the L2, the infinite tense (in cooking recipe it could be used also an other tense, like the present simple, or other persons, like first plural) finds its natural application, as it is used as the easiest form of communication, through which the student could focus not on which tense or person it is, but on its meaning and significance.

During the class, in a natural progression - physical, emotional, didactical - the student will be encouraged to conjugate those infinitive forms by explaining what he or the other members are doing practically.

During the reading of the ingredients, the teacher will always make the students experience the single material through the senses, repeating its name and its possible associated adjective, objective and subjective, broadening then the lexicon.

Communication within the kitchen environment is based upon a collective lexical bargaining (Barthes, 1964), as well as a collective social bargaining, making use of a specific themed linguistic system to impose a meaning on the objects.

Korsmeyer¹⁶ stresses the dialectic and evolving nature of the activity of eating, explaining that the temporal dimension of eating, happening sequentially, allow the satisfaction of appetite to develop a narrative text giving meaning to the action of consumption.

Because of its temporality and its consequent narrative aspect, Korsmeyer¹⁷ argues the action of eating is a cultural practice composed by experiences characterized by positive or negative values: the link between reality and fiction is then a way to give significance to traditions proper of a community.

If both learning a language and preparing a dish follow a structured sequence through a progression, the reading of the recipe is useful to activate the lexicon, and the preparation of the dish is the working of the lexicon and the syntax (both gastronomic and linguistic).

The recipe is the support for learning to use actively the language to create something concrete.

During the preparation the teacher divides the recipe in tasks and asks the students to accomplish the initial ones, like chopping onions, washing veggies or peeling potatoes, always speaking in the L2.

If the teacher has to carry a particular task itself, he explains the single operations in the L2, always caring to make the students experiencing the process through touch, smell, sight or taste.

The L1 is here only used to lowering the affective filter in personal conversations, supporting the students in creating an informal and pleasant environment.

As the building of a meaning (linguistic as well as social) is a progressive process (Barthes, 1964) and the meaning of the food system is articulated in the double oppositions of *work* and *leisure*, and *activity* and *rest* (Barthes, 1964), the sharing of the meal around the table is the climax of the experience, when the food prepared previously is consumed and the experiences of the students are shared.

It is the most creative moment of the experience, since the students, after having activated the lexicon and created a relaxed and informal environment by cooperating together, are able to try to communicate in the target language without any didactical support, always being able to use the natural language.

If food during the preparation of the recipe was supported by language in the creation of an immersion experience, here food becomes the supporter for the spoken communication.

We will consider here Marte's notion of 'seasoning'¹⁸, used in contexts speaking of "how people season foods, places, social relations and their sense of self" (Marte, 2011), and associated to the action of consumption, both physical and metaphorical.

According to Marte the communal aspect of eating together is not a notion to be considered a-priori: in the translation from subjectivity into intimacy food has the role of forming a community through the progressive build up of a trust between its members¹⁹.

According to Korsmeyer the action of eating together involves the creation of a bond of kinship and obligation that might transcend the effective pleasure of the experience or the happiness of the community²⁰, due to its ritual property.

In the analysis of the experience and its documented outcomes, we take in consideration Ian Cook's article (*Geographies of food: mixing*, 2008) on multiculturalism and culinary culture, and we try to answer to some significant questions, dealing with possibility of changing the relationship between two ethnic groups by sharing a meal or cooking recipes, and the question on how ethnic food can be a successful model of reconciliation, also in spatial terms.

Upon the assumption that food relates to the specific culture, the habits, and the environmental factors proper of a specific place and a specific population living within, and Van Lier's arguing that "learning an L2 involves a struggle to forge a new identity that is true to the self" (Van Lier, 2007), we aim to investigate how the experience of a different food culture together with the learning of a new language through the notion of perception-in-action, can modify the self and the experience of the surrounding space through this new self. Here we're dealing with the discourse around exoticism and authenticity²¹.

In conclusion, assuming Cook's point of view in our perspective, we have forged a methodological ground not only to be able to investigate on the connection between food culture, language and the physical and cultural space, but also a theoretical ground to investigate on the exotic appetite of the Australians students within the multicultural Australian contemporary society, considering also whether they have an Italian background or not.

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Notes

¹ Mother language (L1 or natural language) refers to the language naturally spoken by the learner of a second language

² Target Language (L2 or language of arrival) refers to the language the learner of a second language is approaching

³ “If one wish to reconstruct the contemporary gastronomic French system, one has to decide in advance which kind of document to analyze” (Barthes, 1964)

⁴ “Basic as it may be, the need to shop for food – or to socialize over a nice cup of latte – becomes a means to manipulate authenticity. Consumption spaces promote different kinds of authenticity, for different communities of experience, while even consumers of alternative spaces participate in working out the details of this fabrications” (Zukin, 2008, p.734)

⁵ “We can only see spaces as authentic from outside them” (Zukin, 2008, p.728)

⁶ in De Certeau, M. Giard L. and Mayol, P. (1994) *L'invention du quotidien: habiter, cuisiner*. Gallimard: saint-Amand (Cher)

⁷ “Modern discourses of consumption are based on inclusion” (Zukin, 2008, p.735)

⁸ “Levi-Strauss establishes another opposition, culture/nature and associates boiling with culture and roasting with nature because a pot must be used for boiling but is not necessary for roasting. His own data on this association are ambiguous, as he admits, since in many cultures roasted meat is associated with feasts and boiling with everyday food preparation. Boiling and roasting form two points of the culinary triangle. The third is smoking.” (Lehrer, 1972, p.167)

⁹ in Steel, C. (2008) *Hungry food: how food shapes our lives*. Vintage books: London

¹⁰ “Wessendorf shows how some tertiary educated second-generation Italians who are well integrated into the Swiss middle class responded to racist slurs about the disaffection of the second generation by organising a political campaign to emphasise their integration into and belonging to Swiss society. In contrast, other (less formally educated) second-generation Italians publicly emphasise their Italianness to assert their migrant identities and difference.” (Skrbiš, Baldassar, Poynting, 2007, p.267)

¹¹ “The focus in second language studies has gradually shifted from linguistic inputs and mental information processing to the things that learners do and say while engaged in meaningful activity” (Van Lier, 2007, p.46)

¹² “not only do the curricular structures enable derided processes, but the processes themselves also modify the structures, as learners gain in autonomy and set goals and parameters for their work that go beyond the confines of the original curriculum guidelines” (Van Lier, 2007, p.52)

¹³ “If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events” (Douglas, 1972, p.61)

¹⁴ in Barthes, R. (1964) *Eléments de semiology*. Denoël/Gonthier: Paris

¹⁵ “Critical thinking in this context is no longer driven by language, semiotics, text, and signs, but by the rediscovery of phenomenology, experience, the body, the perception, and the senses” (Zardini, 2005, in Ray, *Dreams of Pakistani Grill and Vada Pao in Manhattan: re-inscribing the immigrant body in metropolitan discussions of taste*, p.247)

¹⁶ in Korsmeyer, C. (1999) *Making sense of taste: food and philosophy*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ “seasoning could be used theoretically as a frame but also as a metaphor for the process of transculturation that we all experience when we move from place to place” (Marte, 2011, p.196).

¹⁹ “functioning communities are precious because they are hard to come by” (Korsmeyer, 1999, p.193)

²⁰ “those who choose to eat together tacitly recognize their fellow as saliently equal” (Korsmeyer, 1999, p.200)

²¹ “there is no automatic, powerful, taken for granted, Other-eating white personality that needs to be dismantle and deconstructed. It’s already fragile and bitty because people’s heterogeneous biographies and everyday lives are often both food colonialist and anti-colonialist. They are, in a way, self-disruptive” (Cook, 2008, p.829)