

## ILTLP CLASSROOM-BASED INVESTIGATION REPORT

TEACHER'S NAME	SCHOOL	LANGUAGE	YEAR LEVEL
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### CONTEXT

Languages are compulsory at Epping from years 7-10. In my year 9 Italian class, there are only a few students who are quite motivated learners of the language. The majority of students in this class unfortunately do not value learning a language and consequently are unmotivated. All but two of the students (there are 24 in the class) are from non-Italian background.

The Italian programs at Epping are based on the Volare series (second edition), by Antoinette Ciavarella and Antonella Caiazzo. Students are required to purchase textbooks for all subjects. At the start of Year 9 students begin using Volare 2. My area of investigation was based on work the students did on Chapter 3 "Una Cena Biologica". The section of this chapter on which my investigation was based was shopping for food in the various shops in Italy.

### AREA OF INVESTIGATION

This was a classroom-based investigation that was carried out in Term 3. My area of focus was that my students would acquire an understanding of the cultural difference between the social interaction that occurs amongst shopkeepers and customers in small shops in Italy and Australia. I chose this area to investigate because I wanted to explore further, in my classroom the concept of how social interaction differs between cultures. The topic of shopping for food was, in my opinion, an ideal setting for this concept to develop. My students would demonstrate the depth of their understanding of how social interaction differs between the two cultures by the quality of their responses to a reflection exercise at the end of the topic.

To achieve this I planned to:

- Show students video examples of people shopping for food in small shops in Italy. They were to observe (and record on a grid) the social interaction that takes place in the Italian context.
- Set the role-play task. Groups would write and perform a role-play set in a small food shop in Italy.
- At the end of each performance, each group would give a commentary to the class on the interaction between the people in the role-play - why they did what they did.

Students would be given criteria for both role-play and commentary. The role-plays would be videotaped.

- The class would view the role-plays and each student would respond to a series of reflective questions on the social interaction they observed in the role-plays. This would be assessed.

As my research developed, I made changes to my original plan. Finding authentic video examples of social interaction occurring in a shopping context in Italy to show my students, proved to be a difficult task. Our school's Italian Assistant, Laura, was an integral part of my planning stage (and throughout the investigation) as her support was invaluable. We both searched for video footage but were unable to find

any. As a result, Laura wrote a dialogue set in a *genere alimentari* (which showed clearly the kind of social interaction that occurs between shopkeepers and customers in Italy). Laura and two other colleagues performed this dialogue, which I videotaped.

As my project developed, changes occurred to my regular teaching practice. In the past, I have focused mainly on language with a small amount of cultural information. This investigation gave me the opportunity to look deeper. I explained to my students that social interaction between shopkeeper and customers is integral to the way of life for the majority of Italians, especially in smaller cities and towns. Looking closely at social interaction influenced the language component of the topic - in addition to the typical vocabulary and phrases needed to buy food, students were now becoming familiar with and using language which was a means for social interaction.

### CLASSROOM PRACTICE

I usually begin a new unit of work by providing students with background information and activities on the topic to be studied. In this way I am able to "set the scene" for the topic. This has usually involved comprehension based activities on areas such as the types of small shops that Italians prefer to do their shopping at, market days, frequency of shopping in small towns and cities. What follows is the language component with a range of different activities and finally a role-play where students demonstrate that they have mastered the language component of the topic.

I started my research for this project in Term 2. By the time I was ready to begin my project in Term 3, I felt that the cultural information I had provided students in the past, whilst important, when compared to what I was going to present my year 9s this year, was rather superficial and did not really show how the culture is expressed through language.

I began by asking my Year 9s to discuss in small groups and document the kind of interaction that occurs between people in shops in Australia, in particular their local shops such as the green grocer, the butcher, the delicatessen, and the frequency of shopping. I wasn't surprised to hear that each group came to the same conclusion - that their parents usually shop once a week (sometimes more often) and that from their experiences social interaction is usually a greeting, asking how each other is, making a comment about the weather and the language involved in the purchase. Laura spoke about shopping for food in an Italian context in particular, Milano. Later I added my experiences having lived in my parents' town for 12 months. As I was living in my parents' house, I shopped for food myself and experienced first hand the kind of social interaction that occurs in the local *genere alimentare* (grocery shop), *panetteria* (bakery), *fruttivendolo* (green grocer) and *macelleria* (butcher shop). A usually rowdy group, the Year 9s listened attentively and later several made comments about the friendliness and openness of Italians in this context. I was pleased to discover that some of my students, even if only a minority, were in fact thinking about the differences between the two cultures in regards to the shopping context.

I modified some activities that I had used in previous years so they included exercises which focused on students thinking carefully about social interaction between people in small shops. In the past, these worksheets had mainly grammar exercises and simple dialogues which were limited to a greeting and the purchases.

In order to implement my investigation, the other student activities were:

- Worksheets which were modified to include examples of dialogues which focused on the relationship between customers and shopkeeper. Students completed tasks which required them to think carefully about the interaction that was occurring in the dialogues and compare it to what would typically occur in an Australian context.
- Internet articles which gave tips for English speaking travellers going on holiday to Italy on what to expect when entering shops. The activities I produced to accompany these articles were aimed at getting my students to understand that the way of life in Italy is different to the one they know at home.
- Viewing a video (mentioned earlier) where they looked closely at social interaction. There were follow up exercises and class discussions which focused on social interaction and language.
- Cultural assessment task. The students read a magazine article written by a retired Australian who, with his wife, now lives in a small town in Tuscany. He describes their life there and gives tips for blending in as a local. The students had to imagine they were the couple's grandchild and had been in the town visiting their grandparents. Their task was to write a letter in English to a

friend or relative back in Melbourne telling them about the way of life in Italy about social interaction, especially in shops.

Students were also required to draw upon knowledge they had gained in previous activities. They were also given additional articles to read before writing their letter.

- Role-play assessment task. In groups of 2-4, students wrote their own role-plays set in the context of a small shop in Italy. The role-plays were to include social interaction (this part I had to translate for them). They were given a rubric for the role-play and rubric for group work.
- Peer feedback task. Each student chose a peer to give feedback when they presented their role-play. Peer feedback was to consider the social interaction that was evident in their performance.
- Personal Learning task: Reflection exercise. Students viewed their role-plays then under test conditions were required to reflect upon their role-play and the knowledge they had gained from the topic on social interaction. The questions focused on describing what their character did, the concept that culture determines language and finally what they personally gained, that is, what they learned about themselves and their own culture. A criterion for this exercise was included on the group work rubric.

### **DATA OR INFORMATION GATHERED**

During the topic, some students made comments like, "Italians seem really friendly", "they like to talk to people about their life", "everyone knows your business" (in small towns), "they do things differently over there, not like here in Australia". One student commented, after having viewed the video, that not only did they purchase their food but also they socialised with the shopkeeper.

The information gathered from the cultural assessment task (the letter to a relative back home), showed that some students had understood the concept of social interaction. They recounted some examples from the video, such as the shopkeeper knows everyone in the town and speaks to customers about family members, health, holidays, and gives advice on how to prepare certain foods.

Most of the scripts for the role-plays went beyond simply asking prices and specific questions about the merchandise. They included discussions about holidays, family members, health issues and events that were taking place in the town. Whilst I needed to help translate the sections that involved social interaction, the students themselves developed the ideas. I was disappointed, however, when my students presented their role-plays. The majority of the groups simply read their lines and used little or no body language appropriate to their character and the context. Only one group tried to "live" their character and link their behaviour with what they were saying.

Not many students thought carefully about the questions in the peer feedback exercise and most of the responses were superficial. However, the feedback given by a few students indicated some understanding of how social interaction differs between the two cultures.

A small number of students thought carefully about the questions in the Personal Reflection exercise. Some comments indicated that they now understood that cultures are different. They noted that social interaction in shops is an important part of Italian way of life compared to Australia.

### **FINDINGS**

I discovered that most of my students were unaware that there exists a world outside of Epping that is very different to the one they know. Even though the majority of students in this class were difficult to engage in the topic (as is usually the case, unfortunately) they did come to the realisation that the world is made up of many different cultures and people on the other side of the world do things differently!

Viewing a video (even though it was not authentic) gave them the opportunity to see social interaction taking place. The activities that required them to make comparisons between the kind of dialogue that takes place in Italy and Australia enabled them to see that culture is expressed through language. The cultural assessment task was a worthwhile learning activity as I discovered that students, even if only a minority, had understood the information gained from previous tasks.

In the planning stage and for a major part of the topic I thought that the role-play would have been the main activity where I would have been able to see if my students had truly understood the concept that I had presented. Just before the peer feedback exercise, I realised that the most important exercise was

going to be the personal reflection activity. It was here that I discovered the extent of understanding that my students had obtained.

### **INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION**

From the findings, I learnt that even the least motivated students (those that did not really engage in many of the learning opportunities provided) gained a basic understanding that for Italians, daily shopping for food is also a means for social interaction (especially in small cities and towns). They understood that Italians interacted differently in the context of everyday shopping than did Australians.

When my students completed the letter to a relative, I hoped they would draw upon knowledge that they had obtained from previous activities in this topic. This was the case from my more motivated students.

I was disappointed, however, by the performance of the role-plays (except for one) and the peer feedback responses. Since most of the groups had made a good effort to include social interaction in their scripts, I was expecting them to have made the same effort in their performance in relation to gestures, eye contact, posture and tone. On the peer feedback forms, question 4 asked for advice on what the performer could have done to improve their interaction with the other role-play members. The response peers gave to question 4 was "to learn lines off by heart". I was expecting them to have made comments in relation to what the character could have said and done to enhance their interaction.

A small number of students invested a fair amount of thought when they completed their reflection exercise. Their responses were basically the ones I was hoping for. These students were able to explain what they had learnt about the relationship between people in different cultures.

I found this investigation very valuable for me as it has shown me that my teaching style needs to change and therefore my topics need to change so they are intercultural.

### **MATERIALS AND EXEMPLARS**

The samples I have attached are:

1. Cultural Assessment task - this was a very valuable exercise as students were able to think about what they had learned and express it in a language they were fluent in.
2. A role-play written by two of my students - the role-play script is an example of the social interaction that took place. This activity worked quite well as all but one of the groups that completed their role-play included social interaction.
3. Peer Feedback form - a peer was required to analyse the performance of a student in relation to the social interaction. This exercise did not work as well as I hoped. Question 4 was responded to superficially. The typical response to "How could I have improved my interaction with the other members of the role-play? e.g. What should I have asked/said/done?" was "learn your lines off by heart".
4. Reflection exercise on Social Interaction - the most important task where students demonstrated if they had made the connection between language and culture. The questions addressed three areas: a summary of the content of the role-play, the importance of how culture determines the dialogue and what the student had gained from the topic. This exercise worked well (even though a small number of students gave thoughtful responses.)

### **EVALUATION**

From time to time during my investigation, I would become disheartened, as the majority of my students weren't showing the same enthusiasm as I felt. I believed that my investigation was not going well at all. However, as I write this report I feel differently. Even if only a few students seemed to have understood that the culture of a country influences the language, and that people elsewhere interact differently to what they find "normal", I believe my investigation was valuable.

This type of investigation was very valuable for me, as it has made me look closely at what and how I teach Italian. Looking back at my units of work, I can see how they do not connect with intercultural

teaching and learning. In fact, the culture is a small part instead of being at the heart of the topics.

A small number of my Year 9 students also gained from the investigation. This was evident by the responses they gave in the reflection exercise. They reached the understanding that cultures are different and that this determines language and behaviour.

Where to next? To achieve Intercultural teaching and learning we can't just teach "the culture" of the country, we need to teach how culture is expressed through language. This is a challenging task, and one that I will continue to face as I rewrite my units of work.

### **REFLECTION**

I found this learning experience of immense importance to me, both professionally and personally, as not only did it force me to look critically at what and how I teach Italian but also it has made me think about how I see other cultures. My investigation, and indeed the ILTLP course as a whole taught me that a person's values, beliefs and behaviours are shaped by their language and culture.

## Attachment 1

Cultural Assessment: Write a letter in your own words, in English

- read the articles Tuscany, Italy; Local Customs; In The Shops
- draw on the understanding you gained from the video on social interaction and the questions you answered on the Kids' Europe newsletter

Imagine you are Rick Everingham's grandchild. You have been in Italy with your family visiting your grandparents now that they live in Soiana, a tiny town about 70 km west of Florence. You have been there a month already. Whilst in Soiana you have been living the life of a "local" and have seen first hand how Italians **interact**, especially when you have accompanied your grandparents/parent(s) to the local food shops.

**Using the information you have gained, write a letter to your cousin or friend back home in Melbourne telling them about the way of life in Italy with regards to social interaction, especially in shops. You could pretend that you were in Olga's shop when signora Carla and signora Manuela were doing their daily shopping. Your letter should be about 250 words in length.**

Attachment 2

**Student A - customer    Student B - shopkeeper**

**B:** Buongiorno signora Alessia, come sta?

**A:** Buongiorno signora Giulia, bene grazie e Lei?

**B:** Bene. Quanto tempo che non la vedo!

**A:** Sì sono stata molto impegnata.

**B:** Davvero, desidera?

**A:** Vorrei un chilo di mele, due chili di arance, due pere ed un ananas.

**B:** Allora, come sta la famiglia?

**A:** La famiglia sta molto bene, siamo appena tornati da una gita.

**B:** Davvero! Dove sono stati?

**A:** Siamo andati in Hawaii. Era bellissimo.

**B:** Mi piacerebbe andarci un giorno. Ecco a Lei.

**A:** Quanto costa?

**B:** Le mele sono un euro e cinquanta, le arance due e cinquanta, tre pere otto euro e l'ananas dieci euro. Ventidue euro in totale.

**A:** Ecco a Lei.

**B:** Grazie, Mi saluti tutti a casa.

**A:** Va bene, arrivederci signora Giulia.

**B:** A presto signora.

**Peer Feedback Form**

Please carefully observe my performance in the role-play and answer the following:

1. In your opinion, was my character involved in social interaction?

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2. To what degree did I engage in social interaction with the other characters of the role-play?

1	2	3	4	5
not much		moderate amount		lots of social
social interaction		of social interaction		interaction

3. What activities/conversation was I involved in that you would not expect to see in a similar situation in Australia?

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4. How could I have improved my interaction with the other members of the role-play? (e.g. what should I have asked/said/done?)

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Reflection on Role-play

**Please think carefully about the responses you give to the following reflective questions.**

1. What are the things you wouldn't normally do when in a shop in Australia that you did in the role-play?

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2. Describe your character in the role-play. In your opinion, was your character involved in social interaction?

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3. Comment on the interaction between people in your role-play - why did they do what they did?

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4. What does "hi, how are you?" mean for an Australian when entering a shop?

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5. What does "buongiorno, come sta?" mean for an Italian when entering a shop?

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6. What advice would you give a friend who is planning a 4 or 5 month trip to Italy and will be staying with a host family in a small town near Florence.?

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7. What did you learn about the relationship between people in different cultures?

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8. Having looked closely at social interaction in Italian shops and participated in the role-play, what does it tell you about yourself and your own culture?

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9. What have you gained through completing this task?

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10. Did you enjoy this task? What did you like? Why? What didn't you like? Why?

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