Reading Italian "Readers": a review article

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Looking through the titles and the prefaces of most Italian "readers" one has the impression that the main concern of their editors or authors is to disguise "prescribed reading" as "pleasure reading." As a result, in most cases, the "readers" end up by providing neither the particular "prescription" that the students need, nor the motivation that might lead to pleasure, and thus provide the incentive for further reading for pleasure. Were Italian "readers" to deliver what their titles and prefaces seem to promise, "self-motivated pleasure reading," they would provide us with a formidable strategy to solve the problems of literacy, to say nothing of the problems of teaching Italian as a second language.

The process of acquisition of literacy in L1 (the acquisition of an "inner voice"), and the process of acquisition of L2 (the acquisition of an "inner second voice") no doubt have a lot in common. As yet, however, the acquisition of the impulse, or motivation to read, either in L1 or L2 acquirors, has not been studied in such a way as to allow researchers in either field to formulate any well-grounded epistemology.

We know that the more we read, the more we read; and the more we read, the better we write. Until, however, we are able to describe, single out, test the components that determine the compulsion to read for pleasure (which is probably one of the necessary components in the process of acquiring both the "feel for writing" and the "feel for language, or languages"), such knowledge will be considered a mere assumption, or, worse, a trivial commonplace.

Does prescribed reading generate pleasure reading? Or do motivation, pleasure, generate reading?

Researchers investigating the process of reading have extensively described the interactions and transactions between the reader and the text; researchers investigating the process of writing have described the interactions and the transactions between the writer and the text. But it is the latter, the intricate pattern of writing (the motivation, the pleasure of writing) which research is bringing to the surface first, more rapidly and more intuitively.
than the intricate pattern of reading (the motivation, the pleasure of reading). We are still a long way from an understanding of reading, especially in second languages. Moreover, while the process of investigation in strategies for teaching writing is often similar, and parallel to modern research currents in second language teaching, the two lines of research in reading, both in L1 and L2 — though sharing a common ground for speculation — do not often intersect or feed on each other in the same way. It is through reading, though, that S.D. Krashen has provisionally bridged the two fields of research in the acquisition of written discourse, and in second language acquisition. Since Krashen's theory is familiar to every researcher in both fields, I will limit my reference to his work, to his "Reading Hypothesis."

According to Krashen's "Fundamental Principle," people acquire competence in a second language when they get "comprehensible input," and according to his "Reading Hypothesis," people acquire the competence to write in their own language through the "input" which is provided by self-motivated pleasure reading. In Krashen's "Reading Hypothesis" input leads to competence in written discourse, while practice and instruction — more specifically in planning and revision — provide, or might provide, improvement in the performance. Since Krashen's "Reading Hypothesis" stems from, and is parallel to, his second language acquisition hypothesis, he provides not only extensive, supporting evidence in both fields of investigation, but also persuasively joins both hypotheses by means of one solid yet flexible link: comprehensible input.

Krashen's "Reading Hypothesis" — not a provocative invention, but a very sensible re-invention — suggests an endless series of speculations. For the sake of brevity, I will limit myself only to one, one that will allow me to go back to "readers," and — more specifically — to Italian "readers." Leaving aside the investigations of the term "pleasure reading," and its implications, I wish to speculate on the term "comprehensible." If we accept the assumption that acquiring competence in second language is similar to acquiring competence in writing, and the further assumption that one of the main components of both processes of acquisition is comprehensible input, then it follows that reading — a component which is present in both processes of acquisition — must be comprehensible. The extracts which find their way into "readers" and anthologies are too often not comprehensible, and, as H.G. Widdowson has observed, the questions and exercises which are supposed to make them comprehensible too often do not help:
I have tried, on odd occasions, to answer comprehension questions of the kind that are current in language teaching textbooks (and that I have been responsible for producing myself from time to time), and have found the experience a chastening one. I perform very badly indeed. This must be either because I do not know how to read properly, which I am reluctant to admit, or because the questions are just not relevant to proper reading, because they do not involve the learner in the necessary process of interaction, which provides the heuristic means to an epistemological purpose. The second is, I think, the more likely explanation.  

*Legere*, then, is not just *intelligere* (to identify words by separating them, or to identify the meaning, the proper meaning within the context), but *legere* — and here Krashen *docet* — is *comprehendere* (an all-embracing deeper process than *intelligere*). The "comprehension" of a text, therefore, is provided by interaction at two levels: the interaction between the text and the reading exercises, which, in turn, stimulates the interaction between the students, as readers, and the text to be read.

How should "readers" be designed in order to offer "comprehensible input"? What do their authors need to do to ask "comprehension questions" that are relevant to what Widdowson calls "proper reading"? How can they involve the readers in the necessary process of interaction, or indicate an approach to reading that will make it possible for them to participate in a "reading event"? One could answer that almost any reading passage, if "read" by a "comprehending" teacher, should provide students with "comprehensible input," by means of a comprehensive series of "comprehension" exercises. But it is too easy to throw all the responsibility onto the intuitions of an imaginary ideal teacher. If the editors and authors of "readers" propose their works as heuristic means to an epistemological purpose, they should identify their audience, and the place of reading in the acquisition of language by that audience, before they choose the texts and design the exercises. A "reader" should be designed according to the students' age, their level of linguistic competence, their needs, and their goals; its reading exercises should indicate how "to read" a particular text, according to whichever skill the "reading" is meant to enhance, according to which aim the "reading" purports to achieve.  

Reading may be exploring literary texts (i.e. to improve students' reading competence and writing ability, by exposing them to various kinds of texts, and by suggesting a wide range of literary stances); as well, reading may be exploring documents of everyday life (i.e. to indicate to students how to decode the language of ads, labels, the various sections of a newspaper, or a magazine). Reading may be used as a means to develop
oral skill, as well as a means to acquire written discourse, or to identify the vast range of linguistic registers. Whatever the needs, the goals, the means to achieve them, the business of a "reader" is to guide and stimulate the interaction, the transaction between the texts and the reading audience; in other words, to provide "comprehensible input" by making the reader-text interaction comprehensible, and therefore the text relevant to the reader.

With these criteria in mind, three Italian "readers" that have been and are being adopted as textbooks in Italian courses, both at high school and university level, might be examined.

*Tempi Moderni* purports to fulfil the need for "interesting material, since the study of Italian has increased nationally at all levels." Who is supposed to "read" the short stories by Buzzati, Campanile, Castellaneta, Guareschi, Berto, Moravia, Calvino, Saviane, Sciascia, and the playlets by Ginzburg and Fo? The material — undoubtedly interesting — is intended, according to the preface, for students in "intermediate, advanced, and conversation courses," but also has been tested by the author with her "first year students who thoroughly enjoyed reading unabridged material, and experienced a true sense of accomplishment." Such a "reader" inevitably ends up by proposing a vast gamut of goals (and related exercises) ranging from "class discussion" to "exercises in conversation, oral and written composition, the use of idioms, and new vocabulary," together with grammar exercises "that are provided . . . in order to review specific points, such as conjugation of verbs, the use of verb tenses, the use of prepositions, and so on." The same "reader" provides biographical sketches of the authors whose stories are grouped together in order "to facilitate comprehension both of the language and of the author's work." The stories, predictably, "are arranged according to increasing difficulty of language and syntax." A brief analysis of the first text proposed by *Tempi Moderni* will illustrate how Chelotti Burney expects to serve the needs of such a multifaceted reading audience, and how she aims at fulfilling their varied range of goals. The author, Dino Buzzati, is introduced as a writer whose world is "realistico-stregonesco dominato dall'assurdo, dal quotidianio al fantascientifico." The text, *La Torre*, glossed in the margin (four Italian synonyms, and seventeen English translations), is narrated by a first-person narrator who is disposed of — in the first comprehension question — as the protagonist. After the twelve comprehension questions — indicating a point-by-point précis, and requiring the reader not so much to read into the text as to read at it — there follows a series of topics for either discussion or composition (one of which is: "Discuss the possibility
that ghosts do exist’’); two exercises on the use of words (one on idiomatic expressions, though only two out of five are idiomatic expressions; and one on synonyms and antonyms with a group of twelve words, five of which have already been either translated or explained); and three cloze exercises which imply a mixed array of possible choices which are not clearly defined. The format and the prescription do not vary at all throughout the anthology, apart from the increasing length of the reading passages, and their increasing difficulty — according to the author — of language and syntax. What is lost, in Tempi Moderni, is the reading of the texts; what is forgotten — given the multiplicity of aims, and a potential reading audience that, in the author’s intention, is supposed to be competent at so many disparate levels — is a propaedeutical approach. Chelotti Burney’s ”reading,” as it is illustrated by her exercises, does not suggest any interaction and transaction between the reader and the text, between the reader and the writer; in other words, the texts that she proposes to read, and the way she suggests to read them, do not elicit an appropriate response, if any response at all. Tempi Moderni is an artificial ”reader”; it lacks authenticity, authenticity considered:

... not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver. Authenticity in this view is a function of the interaction between the reader/hearer and the text which incorporates the intention of the writer/speaker. We do not recognize authenticity as something there, waiting to be noticed, we realize it in the act of interpretation.7

It is the business of the ”reader” to elicit the receiver’s response, by indicating the interaction between the reader and the text, the transaction between the reader and the writer through the text. Only then will reading become an authentic reading event, and the text disclose its comprehensible input. If the texts in a ”reader” are to be used for pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading exercises that have little, or nothing to do with the texts, the ”reader” is not a ”reader.” It is for this reason that Tempi Moderni fails as a ”reader.”

A Quattr’Occhi8 is a ”cultural reader designed to develop both reading skills and cross-cultural understanding through meaningful, personal communication.” The authors believe that ”reading selections relating the target language to topics of human and cultural interest will not only foster growth in linguistic proficiency but also broaden students’ experience, encouraging new dimensions of thought.” A Quattr’Occhi, specifically designed for beginning college and intermediate high school students of Italian, is
divided into three parts and "sequenced according to levels of linguistic difficulties." The "most novel feature" is the section of Attività; their objective is "to provide for self-expression through structured opportunities for personal communication . . . [they] are not meant to be prescriptive but rather suggestive." So far, according to the preface, this "reader" assumes a more restricted reading audience, and a more limited — though not less ambitious — range of goals than Tempi Moderni; it also definitely focuses on reading as a means to develop oral competence, and it openly embraces the principles of communicative language teaching, verging on suggestopaedia, and "individual" syllabus designing. It addresses the individual student, in fact, by exhorting enthusiastically "it is possible for you to use your initiative and benefit from the reader on your own," after stating "the text has been designed for you, with your individual needs, interests, and goals in mind." Because it does identify a particular kind of reading audience, and the place of reading in the process of language acquisition, A Quattr'Occhi manages, in part, to deliver what it promises in its preface. It fails, though, to provide the first step for "self-expression through structured opportunities for personal communication," by failing to suggest any interaction between the students and the text. Since it is the "reading selections" that are the basis for the "reader," one wonders why some of the Attività consist in comprehension questions, and true/or false questions, that either require the students just to parrot the information contained in the text, or to point out what is so obviously "true" in contrast with something which is so preposterously "false." Though many of the activities and games will amuse the students while they (perhaps) acquire the ability to communicate, many exercises (such as the one asking them to make meaningful sentences from the elements given, using the correct forms of the verbs and supplying articles when necessary) will bore them, at the same time betraying one of the principles of the "reader": "This is not a set of grammar exercises or drills." If there is an appeal to cognition, it is disguised, it is brought into the "reader" surreptitiously; it is never suggested as a viable strategy. In abiding by the principles advocated by notional-syllabus designers, the authors of A Quattr'Occhi focus their attention on "items," not "strategies," but "notional isolates" as Widdowson would call them:

The notional syllabus is being developed at a time when linguistic interest has shifted to communicative properties of language, when meaning has moved to the centre of the stage with speech acts, presuppositions, case categories, conversational implicatures, and what have you, all dan-
cing attendance. It looks as if linguists have now decided that language is "really" communication. As before, the syllabus designer follows the fashion... The focus of attention in the notional syllabus, then, is on items, not strategies, or components of discourse, nor the process of its creation, and in this respect it does not differ essentially from the structural syllabus, which also deals in items and components. In both cases what is missing is an appeal to cognition, to the language processing ability of the learner... what is important for the learner is not to know what correlations are common between certain forms and functions, but how such correlations and innumerable others can be established and interpreted in the actual business of communicative interaction.9

As Tempi Moderni fails to indicate an approach to reading that will make it possible for the potential reader to interact with the text, so A Quattr’Occhi too often fails to indicate strategies for communicative interaction. Since A Quattr’Occhi purports "to develop cross-cultural understanding... and broaden students' experience, encouraging new dimensions of thought," it also deserves to be assessed as "a cultural reader." A Quattr'Occhi can be forgiven for being plagued with misprints, with unclear, unidio- matic use of the language, and cultural inaccuracies;10 it can even be forgiven for selecting more than fifty per cent of the reading material from Grazia, though one wonders whether a cultural Canadian "reader" would ever represent Canadian culture, were thirteen out of its twenty-three reading passages adaptations from Chatelaine. A Quattr'Occhi might be censored, though, for perpetrating the usual, trite misrepresentation of Italy, Italians, Italian culture. Because it promises its readers assistance in "gaining insights into the ways people and cultures resemble each other and how they differ," this "cultural reader" starts with a chart of some typical Italian gestures (the first being a typical "Wha'd' you' wann' ah'!" Italian gesture), and, towards the end, asks the students to select, from a cliché-ridden list of multiple choices, the attributes of the typical Italian, as he is perceived by foreigners.

The third and last "reader" that I will examine, L'Italia racconta,11 is an anthology designed as "un invito alla lettura," and, as such, aims to stimulate the students "alla lettura di altri scritti e a invogliarlo a conoscere altri scrittori italiani." L'Italia racconta is a "reader," then, whose main goal is to elicit pleasure reading. In order "to ease the reading process and to make reading more pleasant," the authors have "glossed the most difficult words in the margin"; in order to stimulate the students to further their reading they "have given a biographical sketch for each author whose texts are included in the reader." The needs and the goals of an unspecified audience (we know only that the reader is supposedly "young") are not indicated; "it is up to the teachers to de-
termine their students' level of competence before they choose a text." The texts — chosen "according to Italian regions, and not according to increasing difficulty" — are followed by three kinds of exercises that are meant "to verify comprehension," "to stimulate class discussion," and "to introduce the students to the elemento ludico" (Mollica's well known principle of docere dilectando). As in Tempi Moderni, the biographical sketches which supposedly introduce the authors are usually mere collections of facts, dates, titles. Normally they contain no critical or explanatory notes on the writer's work. Moreover, when they do, one wonders how much they will help readers in their approach to the text. That on Buzzati, for instance:

Buzzati crea spesso con giochi di pura fantasia intrecci e drammi, situazioni e vicende che adescano l'immaginazione per la genialità degli svolgimenti e, senza cadere nel giallo, intesse trame che hanno spesso l'intensità allucinante di un racconto di Edgar Allan Poe. Il suo mondo letterario è bilanciato, quindi, tra magia e realtà, fra favola e allegoria in una vasta tematica che abbraccia il tempo, il dolore, la solitudine dell'uomo oppresso da un terrore cosmico.¹²

One might have the impression that, since there are no pre-reading exercises, this sort of critical introduction is meant to prepare the reader to meet with the text. How would the "young reader" — who has just been asked to "trace a map of Veneto" in the same introductory page — interact with the text? Will he not be baffled in sorting out the intricacies of that critical note? How will he sort out the elements of "time, grief, solitude" of the man "who is oppressed by a cosmic sense of terror," when he is asked to answer the first comprehension question, which uncanningly identifies the first-person narrator of La giacca stregata with Buzzati himself?

The tracing of the map — which has just been mentioned — is part of the rather tenuous "geographical theme" of this "reader." Apart from a few exceptions (Marotta, Rea, Sciascia, Deledda), the texts bear no contextual relationship with the regions where the writers were born, nor do they contain any reference to the social, cultural, milieu of that particular geographical ambience that might have influenced their writings. The "geographical connection" is, in most cases, totally irrelevant as far as the grouping, and the reading, of the texts is concerned. The notion that regions might be an excuse to introduce the students to the geographical, cultural variations of Italy is quickly dismissed. The few data (surface in square miles, borders, names of cities) introducing the writers according to the regions where they were born do not add
any interesting or stimulating piece of information. This leaves us with the bare texts, and the reading exercises. Since the aim of *L'Italia racconta* is to "encourage students to read, and to stimulate them to read more works by the same author," it should provide the motivation that might lead to pleasure, and thus provide the incentive for further reading for pleasure. Does *L'Italia racconta* fulfil its ambitious goal? We can start reading this "reader" from the glosses. It is through the glosses of a text, after all, that we detect the intentions of the authors or the editors of a "reader." Misguidedly, in this case, Mollica and Convertini use them instead of while-reading exercises. The fact that they are too many, that they are too often translations, that they are almost never consistent with what might be considered a basic level of linguistic competence, is also due to the authors' inability to refer to an identifiable group of readers. The authors do not cross-reference the glossary, which is generously, yet haphazardly, sprinkled in the margins, in footnotes, and at the end of the "reader." They lean on English translations, even, too often, for cognates; they tend to obfuscate the meaning of words and idioms by paraphrasing them unclearly. Of the three kinds of exercises that follow the texts, the first — based on comprehension — is suppos-
edly closer to what, in the authors' intentions, must be the "reading." The reader, though, is often required, rather than to interact with the text, to interact with, or guess, the authors' cryp-
tic interpretation of the text. This kind of meta-comprehension ex-
ercises might be challenging, yet it is hardly conducive to pleasure reading. In trying them, I found — to say it with Widdowson — that I perform very badly indeed.

The series of exercises designed "to stimulate class conversa-
tion" often seem to be designed to increase, rather than decrease, the students' affective filter, both for the choice of topics, and for the ambiguity of the directions. The authors indicate — and they are not the only ones among designers of "readers" — that questions can be indifferently used for both class discussion and written composition. What is worse, these questions are called "reading" of the text.

Gradually, in *L'Italia racconta*, the exercises drift away from the texts; Mollica's *elemento ludico*, the cross-word puzzles, the crypto-
grams, are fun, yet many of them are too easy (for the students who are supposedly competent to read the texts in the "reader"), and some of them are too difficult (when they imply the kind of general knowledge with which students in general, even at university level, are not equipped). As with many other Italian "read-
ers," the main fault of *L'Italia racconta* is, first, the misconception
of the reading process, and of the "proper reading of the texts." The failure to provide interaction between the reading audience and the texts, in this case, is also compounded by the total lack of a well-defined group of readers, and, as a consequence, of awareness of their needs and their goals. Inevitably, it also fails to achieve its goal, that is to stimulate pleasure in reading and further pleasure for reading. On the other hand, the failure of L'Italia racconta helps us to reach some provisional conclusions.

When "readers" (and, for that matter, Italian "readers"), provide highly sophisticated, "prescribed" reading, they will elicit pleasure in reading from the student audience for which they are intended. Texts that are fitted out with propaedeutic reading exercises must inevitably imply the notion of "prescribed" reading. It is only when the prescription is sensitive, comprehensible, intelligent, that the transaction between the reading audience and the texts can be established, and pleasure can be derived. Through the heuristic means that we gradually test and prescribe, our students will acquire and develop their own sense of "self-motivated pleasure reading," and we can define an epistemological process of reading.

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**NOTES**

1 The term pleasure reading seems, by convention, to indicate the reading one does by choice, as opposed to prescribed reading, which is reading that is required or assigned. Pleasure, or delight, therefore, appears never to be derived from readings designated for a particular purpose, as a prescription to the reader-as-patient. Pleasure reading does not necessarily involve the habit of reading, nor the distinction between readers and non-readers. Pleasure reading does not postulate an epistemology of pleasure in reading, since pleasure varies from reader to reader, and readings that generate pleasure cover an infinite gamut of choices. What might be worth some attention is the definition pleasure reading in itself, a term that investigators of the processes of reading and writing often use. If reading is such an important component of the acquisition of literacy, and of the acquisition of a second language, it follows that reading must be required, assigned, prescribed, during the process of acquisition. Prescribed readings and reading strategies are the contents of "readers," yet pleasure in reading is, by implication, generated only by reading beyond, or beside, "readers." The task of any "reader" is to indicate how to read, in order that reading may give pleasure; so that readers can establish an ongoing commitment to reading. The full exploration of the text, the transaction in which readers assume an active role, is what gives pleasure in reading. In this case, then, prescribed reading implies the pursuit of pleasure. Pleasure in reading might be the term we want to use for both pleasure reading, and prescribed reading, to define what — in more rarified, and sensual terms — R. Barthes calls le plaisir du texte ["il y aurait — paraît-il — une mystique du texte. Tout l'effort consiste, au contraire, à matérialiser le plaisir du texte, à faire du texte un objet de plaisir comme les autres." Le plaisir du texte, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), p. 93].
2 S.D. Krashen, "The Role of Input (Reading) and Instruction in Developing Writing Ability," a paper presented at the International Congress of Applied Linguistics (AILA), Lund, Sweden, August 1981.


4 In "Reading in the Foreign Language Teaching Program" [reprinted in Reading in a Second Language, Mackay, Barkman, and Jordan (eds.) (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1979), pp. 97-98], S. Been identifies two lines along which the teaching of reading should be conducted: a) "reading for language, as one of the means of teaching the language," and b) "reading for meaning." The first one should include such activities as reading aloud, teaching new vocabulary before presenting a reading passage, and literal comprehension questions. The "reading for meaning" should include — according to Been — at least two elements: contextual support (i.e. pre-reading exercises), and cues (meant to lead readers into the understanding of the text, even though they do not understand every word in the text). It seems that at least in two of the three "readers" that have been examined here, the "reading for language" is mainly focused on translations in the margin; and that "reading for meaning" is tested — usually by means of "comprehension" questions — rather than taught. Reading in a second language is a process that inevitably involves both reading and general language instruction. A "reader" should foster independence in reading, and that independence can be achieved only through intelligent reading strategies.


6 Rather than introductory biographical sketches, a "reader" of this kind should provide contextual support questions, or pre-reading exercises, in order to stimulate students to search for general, and/or specific information in the text. There should also be while-reading exercises related to topics in a paragraph, and post-reading exercises related to the themes of the short stories. Reading strategies should include the development of both extensive reading — reading in order to get information from the text (skimming and scanning), or efficient reading — and intensive reading. Though it is not the purpose of this article to refer to the several taxonomies of reading skills, nor to postulate a new taxonomy as an alternative to all the strategies suggested in these three "readers," a reference to "reading skills training," as it is approached in the secondary school English syllabus, might be of some use. It is intensive reading that elicits a fuller transaction with, and comprehension of, the text, since it is intensive reading that focuses on the close examination of the text. According to J. Munby ("Teaching Intensive Reading Skills," in Reading in a Second Language, cit., pp. 143-44), most questions used in order to train the skills involved in "reading for exact information, reading for implied meaning, projective reading, reading for gist, reading for required information," belong to one of the following categories: "a) plain sense (i.e. mainly factual, exact, surface meanings); b) implications (i.e. inference, deduced information, emotional suggestions, figurative usage, etc.); c) relationships of thought (i.e. between sentences/paragraphs, summarizing); d) projective (i.e. questions where the answers require integration of data from the text with the pupil's own knowledge and/or experience)." One additional category — which can be described as "grammatical relationships" — involves questions that require "a response to grammatical signals (e.g. structural words, word order for emphasis, subordination, relationship of time and tense)." An English "reader" — F. Dubin, E. Olshtain, Reading by All Means (Reading, Mass., Don Mills, etc.: Addison-Wesley, 1981) — may also be suggested as an illustration of reading strategies that can be adapted for "readers" of other languages. The fact that in this article and in its notes most references to both literature on "reading" and "readers" deal with material concerned with the acquisition of literacy in English, and of English as a second language, reiterates, once more that a) the two parallel fields of investigation on the acquisition of literacy and of a second lan-
guage have much in common, and b) that foreign or second language teaching (other than English) would benefit from a closer examination of the heuristic means proposed by TESL and TOEFL.


A few examples will illustrate the authors’ more than awkward use of both Italian and English: “Molti considerano i gesti un linguaggio a sé. Possono variare da persona a persona e da una cultura all’altra. Non soltanto gli italiani parlano con le mani! Però è gente molto espressiva” (p. 3); and “Compare l’apposito gettone o verificati di avere moneta,” as part of an exercise for which the directions are as follows: “To know how to make a telephone call, number the following steps in the correct sequence. Check your order with the key” (p. 14). As for cultural inaccuracies: from “le capitali delle regioni” (p. 37); to an exercise about springtime: “It is springtime and animals are looking for their mates. Help them by matching up the male and female of each species,” in which the walrus cannot help but mate with a seal (p. 24), to the way Dante is handled in a nota culturale: “Because of a controversy with the Pope, Dante was eventually condemned to eternal exile from his beloved city” (p. 34).

12 A. Mollica, and A. Convertini, cit., p. 27.

13 It seems to be obvious to most investigators of the process of reading, and to designers of reading strategies, that comprehension questions should be focused on helping readers to understand, rather than on finding out whether readers have understood the text or not. To that purpose cloze exercises, free-response, and multiple choice questions should be used instead of series of literal or “meta-comprehension” questions at the end of the reading passages. In setting up cloze exercises, words should not be eliminated arbitrarily (and the purpose of the exercise should not be made that of locating the missing word in the reading passage, and copying it verbatim). Cloze procedure should be used to help with the reading and therefore should suggest a re-wording of it by means of paraphrasing, synonyms, antonyms, and careful deletions [for an illustration, see R.A. Hunt, “Toward a Process Intervention Model in Literature Teaching,” in College English, vol. 44, N. 4 (April 1982)]. Free-response questions — that appeal to the conceptual ability and to the sensitivity of readers — should leave room for interpretation, rather than ask for the “correct answer.” Multiple choice questions should be devised according to the main areas of comprehension errors, which should then be exemplified by subtle distractors, (see J. Munby, “Teaching Intensive Reading Skills,” cit., p. 146). Background knowledge and conceptual ability play an important part in the process of reading. Awareness of these factors stresses, once more, the necessity of identifying age, background, level of linguistic competence, needs, and goals of the reading audience before designing a “reader.” (For the relationship between background knowledge and reading strategies, see: J. Coady, “A Psycholinguistic Model of the TESL Reader,” in Reading in a Second Language, cit., pp. 5-12). See also C. Harrison, T. Dolan, “Reading Comprehension, a Psychological Viewpoint,” ibid., pp. 13-23; and R. MacKay, “Teaching the Information-Gathering Skills,” ibid., pp. 79-90.

14 A few examples of topics suggested by Mollica and Convertini might give an idea of the questions that usually follow a text: “Credi nell’occultismo? Rendi la ragione della tua risposta” (p. 34); “Di chi sei geloso-a? Perché” (p. 12); “Esprimi un tuo giudizio circa il significato storico-culturale espresso nelle citazioni seguenti tratte dal testo” (Pavese’s “Si Parva Licet,” a playlet about Adam and Eve): 1) “E dimentichi troppo sovente che sei stata fatta per tenermi compagnia” (Adam to Eve); 2) “Non dimenticare, Adamo, che ti è stata conferita, all’atto della creazione, una certa autorità sulla tua compagnia” (God
to Adam); 3) "Mi allontano solamente perché, se tu mi vedessi continuamente, ti stancheresti di me" (Eve to Adam) (p. 12).

15 As for the ambiguity of the directions, this example will suffice: "Parliamone insieme . . . Svolgi oralmente e in breve uno dei seguenti temi" (p. 25).