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LEARNER-CENTERED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE ITALIAN CURRICULUM

From the earliest issues of *The Modern Language Journal*, authors have noted the importance of recognizing and responding to individual learner differences. The recognition of different learner types is probably, in and of itself, an important indication of common concerns of language teachers through the decades. What has, and will continue to change, is which individual differences are emphasized, and how we, as language teachers, respond to these differences.

In his excellent assessment of technology in the second language classroom, Salaberry examines the factors (the need for increased technological sophistication, technical attributes necessary to exploit new technologies successfully, the possibility of the successful incorporation of new technologies into the curriculum, and whether or not new technologies permit the efficient use of human and material resources) that must be answered to assess the value of new technologies. As Salaberry (51) notes, there is a tendency to translate traditional textbooks into a new technological format with the result that the student simply has an electronic textbook. Such mechanistic translation, however, fails to address individual learner needs. Tognozzi has an excellent overview of the need for professional development in technology for the Italian instructor. Likewise, Christie has an article on the used of web-based multimedia for business Italian. In this same vein, Bancheri, and Bancheri and Lettieri (1991, 1993) are also quite useful.

Chaudron (62-63) notes that the 1970s became the decade of individualized second-language instruction in which the primary task was to examine learners' psychological and linguistic processing. According to Chaudron (63), in the next decade, research focused on the "... learners' psychology (attitudes, anxiety, personality traits, cognitive styles, belief systems) to their learning potential or achievement measures."
Learner-Centered Second-Language Education

The concept of learner-centered second-language education is not new (Papalia 1976; Stern, 506-507, 512-513; Cook, 78-83; Ellis, 2, 17-18, 35-37, 471-527; Richards and Lockhart, 52-77; Omaggio Hadley, 75-77). Nunan (1988a: 2) points out that "... the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught."

Nunan (1988a: 2) also states that a learner-centered language learning curriculum and a traditional one have similar elements, namely,

[A learner-centered] curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation (see for example Hunkins 1980).

However, the key difference between learner-centered and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught.

This change in orientation has major practical implications for the entire curriculum process, since a negotiated curriculum cannot be introduced and managed in the same way as one which is prescribed by the teacher or teaching institutions. In particular, it places the burden for all aspects of curriculum development on the teacher.

Nunan (1988a: 3) further notes that:

One of the major assumptions underlying the learner-centred philosophy is that, given the constraints that exist in most learning contexts, it is impossible to teach learners everything they need to know in class. (While this is true of adult contexts, it is probably also true of other contexts as well.) What little class time there is must therefore be used as effectively as possible to teach those aspects of the language which the learners themselves deem to be most urgently required, thus increasing surrender value and consequent student motivation.

Theoretical Foundations

For Nunan (1988a: 3), a learner-centered language learning curriculum must include the following components for the development of learning skills:
1. to provide learners with efficient learning strategies
2. to assist learners to identify their own preferred ways of learning
3. to develop skills needed to negotiate the curriculum
4. to encourage learners to set their own objectives
5. to encourage learners to adopt realistic goals and time frames
6. to develop learners' skills in self-evaluation

In his discussion of the theoretical foundations of learner-centered curricula, Nunan (1988a: 22-23) summarizes the work of Brundage and MacKerache (21-31) on adult learning strategies when he addresses the basic principles involved:

• Adults who value their own experience as a resource for further learning or whose experience is valued by others are better learners.
• Adults learn best when they are involved in developing learning objectives for themselves which are congruent with their current idealised self concept.
• Adults have already developed organised ways of focusing on, taking in and processing information. These are referred to as cognitive style.
• The learner reacts to all experience as he perceives it, not as the teacher presents it.
• Adults enter into learning activities with an organised set of descriptions and feelings about themselves which influence the learning process.
• Adults are more concerned with whether they are changing in the direction of their own idealised self-concept than whether they are meeting standards and objectives set for them by others.
• Adults do not learn when over-stimulated or when experiencing extreme stress or anxiety.
• Those adults who can process information through multiple channels and have learnt 'how to learn' are the most productive learners.
• Adults learn best when the content is personally relevant to past experience or present concerns and the learning process is relevant to life experiences.
• Adults learn best when novel information is presented through a variety of sensory modes and experiences, with sufficient repetitions and variations on themes to allow distinctions in patterns to emerge.

Cognitive Styles

Recognition that students bring different learning styles to the classroom is also not new. Richards and Lockhart (60; cf. Papalia 1976, 15-17) cite Knowles who proposes four types of learning styles reproduced here:
Concrete learning style Learners with a concrete learning style use active and direct means of taking and processing information. They are interested in information that has immediate value. They are curious, spontaneous, and willing to take risks. They like variety and a constant change of pace. They dislike routine learning and written work, and prefer verbal or visual experiences. They like to be entertained, and they like to be physically involved in learning.

Analytical learning style Learners with an analytical style are independent, like to solve problems, and enjoy tracking down ideas and developing principles on their own. Such learners prefer a logical, systematic presentation of new learning material with opportunities for learners to follow up on their own. Analytical learners are serious, push themselves hard, and are vulnerable to failure.

Communicative learning style Learners with a communicative learning style prefer a social approach to learning. They need personal feedback and interaction, and learn well from discussion and group activities. They thrive in a democratically run class.

Authority-oriented learning style Learners with an authority-oriented style are said to be responsible and dependable. They like and need structure and sequential progression. They relate well to a traditional classroom. They prefer the teacher as an authority figure. They like to have clear instructions and to know exactly what they are doing; they are not comfortable with consensus-building discussion.

A learner-centered approach to second-language acquisition also involves recognizing those strategies utilized by the good language learner (Mollica and Nuessel, 49-53). Knowledge of these characteristics may also facilitate the curriculum format.

Neuropedagogy
Danesi pioneered the development and application of study in the cognate academic disciplines of semiotics (Danesi 2000b), anthropology (Danesi and Perron), psychology (Titone and Danesi; D’Alfonso, Danesi, and De Lellis), neurolinguistics (Danesi 1988a,d, e, 1998), and applied linguistics (Danesi and Di Pietro) to second-language education. Moreover, his fundamental investigation in neurolinguistics shaped and enlightened a generation of applied linguists and second-language methodologists in the
teaching of Italian as a second-language. This section will review and examine Marcel Danesi's concept of neurological bimodality which is a learner-centered approach to second-language instruction (see also Nunan 1988a).

Neuropedagogy, the neologism created by Danesi (1988a: 7 1988d: 3), has as one of its pivotal premises that second-language acquisition is a bimodal process. Danesi defines neurological bimodality in the following way: “the notion that both hemispheres of the brain are involved in a complementary fashion in global language processing” (1988e: 18).

The neuro-pedagogical model employs techniques and strategies that center on the second-language learner’s second-language acquisition requirement. Specifically, Danesi (1987: 384-389) advocates four specific tactics to engage both hemispheres of the brain. First, contextualization alludes to the creation of an appropriate environment in which to situate the activity. This approach requires the avoidance of rote drills that focus on form rather than communicative functions such as judgment and evaluation, persuasion, argument, rational inquiry, personal emotions, and emotional relations. Next, visualization refers to the inclusion of visual materials (Danesi 1990b) in the classroom repertoire (pictures, slides, film, video discs, interactive C[omputer] A[ssisted] L[anguage] L[earning] materials, and related technology). These visual materials arouse the imagination, i.e., the brain's ability to create and re-create mental images of memorable events. Third, diversification means the introduction of a wide variety of acquisition activities during a classroom period. These activities would include L-mode activities, e.g., repetition drills and structural exercises and R-mode problem-solving activities (Danesi 1985a,b; 1997b;1999). Finally, personalization is the inclusion of the students as full-fledged participants in the activities, e.g., in pair work and group work or in strategic interaction simulations (Di Pietro 1987), i.e., the implementation of scenarios in which students must play roles a common situation with appropriate vocabulary and grammar, e.g., where to find a currency exchange or an inexpensive place to eat.

Figure 1 shows Danesi’s (1988e: 19) schema of the differentiated functions of human brain. One vital aspect of Danesi's bimodal model of second-language acquisition is the incorporation of instructional activities and strategies in the language classroom that access and stimulate both hemispheres of the brains, thereby, complementing and reinforcing the acquisition of the target language.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L-Mode Features</th>
<th>R-Mode Features</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of the formal relations (phonological,</td>
<td>Determination of the sentence as declarative,</td>
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<tr>
<td>morphological, etc.) among the parts of a sentence</td>
<td>interrogative, imperative, or conditional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linking of the syntactic and semantic elements in a</td>
<td>Determination of figurative meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>sentence</td>
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<td>Determination of sentence implication and identification of formal errors</td>
<td>Understanding of humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of motor functions of speech</td>
<td>Processing of most prosodic phenomena</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 1. Left Hemispheric and Right Hemispheric Mode Features

Danesi’s Development and Design of Instructional Materials

Because the human brain receives input from the left and right hemispheres, each with differentiated functions, Danesi includes materials in his second-language textbooks that cause the student to draw from both sides of the brain. To accomplish this goal, Danesi utilizes semiotic techniques and strategies in the pedagogical materials in Italian-as-a-second-language textbooks, all of which have applications for other languages (Danesi 2000a,b). He and his associates (Danesi 1992a, 1997a; Danesi, Lettieri, and Bancheri 1996) apply semiotic strategies to print and non-print instructional instruments to enhance their effectiveness by always keeping in mind the learner’s perspective. An overview of Danesi’s pedagogical approaches shows his ability to integrate materials that appeal to both hemispheres of the student’s brain (verbal and non-verbal materials, aural and visual stimuli, computer interactive software, internet exercises, and so forth).

Danesi has also carefully thought about all aspects of the presentation of pedagogical materials to enhance diversification and the bimodal stimulation in the second-language learner (Danesi 1992a, 1997a; Danesi and De Sousa 1998; Danesi, Lettieri, and Bancheri 1996). In several important articles on the presentation of printed materials in second-language curriculum, Danesi (1982, 1983, 1984, 1985d) perfected an exemplary set of innovative pedagogical materials and strategies for second-language educators. The articles noted above deal with the formatting of second-language pedagogical materials for the Anglophone in ways that will facilitate comprehension of second-language materials. Danesi’s proposes effective and comprehensible printed instructional materials with his succinct and lucid recommendations for the format of pedagogical rules, the use of graphics in a systematic way to indicate precise and specific information.
Pedagogical graphics save time, they are highly intelligible, and they enhance the learning of structure (Danesi 1983: 74). Danesi also developed a typology of these instructional aids including dots, boxes, circles, triangles, tree diagrams, braces, parentheses, square brackets, finite state, time-line diagrams, and charts. All of these semiotic techniques appear in his own pedagogical grammars (Danesi 1992a, 1997a, 1999; Danesi, Lettieri, and Bancheri; Danesi and De Sousa). Danesi's textbooks contain a profusion of materials designed to appeal to the visual and auditory senses. Moreover, the activities included in his textbooks feature students in role-playing scenarios (Di Pietro, problem-solving activities (Danesi 1985b, 1999), the use of modern technology (tapes, video, interactive Internet activities, overheads). Danesi's instructional materials embody the theoretical conceptualization of his methodology (neurological bimodality) and the concomitant strategies and techniques (contextualization, visualization, diversification, personalization) required to teach second-language students.

Learner-Centered Teaching Techniques and Strategies

Various pedagogical strategies are useful in a learner-centered second-language classroom. In her discussion of learner-centered second-language education, Waldbaum (7) states that:

The role of the teacher may be likened to that of a scripter, actor, director, or puppeteer. As such, he or she must remain behind the scenes as much as possible, but be ever back there manipulating the action. If the teacher lets loose of the strings or allows them to become intertwined, the entire production may come to an end or will seriously falter, leaving the puzzled participants dangling in mid air. This does not exonerate the learner from his or her responsibilities as an active and participating member of the troupe.

Among the general recommendations that Waldbaum (7-8) makes for the creation of a learner-centered classroom are the following: (1) the unknown, i.e., discovery processes; (2) excitement, i.e., stimulation; (3) variety; (4) activity vs. passivity; (5) elasticity and stretching, i.e., providing students with linguistic input that challenges them; (6) rewards, i.e., praise for students' genuine efforts; (7) confidence; (8) trust; and (9) lowering students' affective filter.

In this section, we will examine five pedagogical techniques and strategies for a learner-centered environment.
1. Classroom Arrangement

Papalia (1976: 34-36; 1998: 154-155) advocates a variety of non-traditional chair arrangements to facilitate different types of activities, e.g., a semi-circle for instructor mobility, enhanced communication, eye contact and personal interaction of instructor and student. Other seating patterns include a quadrangle for large-group discussion, participation of teacher as an equal, and more informal atmosphere for oral presentations. Placement of two chairs together for pair work or four or more chairs facilitates group work. The latter two cases enhance peer-tutoring, collaborative assignments, self-instructional materials, development of scenarios, self-pacing and other activities that focus on the learner.

2. Internet

The Internet permits students to plan a trip to Italy. Students may consult www.travelocity.com to book a flight. The may also look for the cheapest fare by consulting www.orbitz.com, www.cheaptickets.com, or www.lowestfare.com. Likewise, students may access www.regioni.it to locate specific places they want to visit and determine other information about the locales that they choose. After carrying out their Internet research, students may then report on their choice to the rest of the class.

3. Scenarios

Robert J. Di Pietro (1987) developed the scenario for use in the second-language classroom. Di Pietro (41) defines it as “... a strategic interplay of roles functioning to fulfill personal agendas within a shared context.” These situational interactions constitute a sort of role-playing or simulated game playing in which the participants may imagine how they would react and express themselves in typical situations in Italy, e.g., ordering a meal (what, where, when together with appropriate linguistic forms for the situation). Other contexts may involve asking directions, making arrangements to meet someone over the telephone, and so forth.

4. Problem-Solving Activities

Anthony Mollica and Marcel Danesi have developed numerous paper-and-pencil activities to stimulate student interest in a second-language. Crossword puzzles are a favorite (Danesi 1985, 1999; Mollica 1991, 1992, 2001). Individuals, pairs or even groups of students may carry out these activities.

The selected activities suggested above comply with many of the basic tenets of learner-centered second-language instruction proposed in
Papalia (1976) Nunan (1988a, 1992), and Brundage and MacKeracher, Richards and Lockhart, Knowles to conform to the cognitive styles of adult learners. Professors of Italian are responsible for many of the creative activities suggested above.

5. Peer Editing

The notion of peer editing is certainly not a new technique. In her 1981 volume on composition, Gaudiani advocated this process. In this approach, students reproduce triple-spaced copies of their compositions for review by classmates. The extra space allows students to comment on five separate aspects of writing: (1) Comprehension of meaning, (2) correction of grammar, (3) analysis of prose style, (4) analysis of organization, and (5) overview/synthesis. The submission of anonymous compositions for peer editing also facilitates this process (Omaggio Hadley, 331-332).

Concluding Remarks

Learner-centered language instruction is not a simple procedure in which the instructor places the burden of second-language acquisition on the student. Rather it involves planning on the part of the second-language instructor to determine the learning styles of the individual members of a given class (Ehrman and Dörnyei, xv, 1-21, 36-38; Gardner: Nunan 1988a: 91; Papalia 1976: 15-27; Stern, 373-374). Such a determination may involve careful observation of students over a period of time or actual testing to assess this information (see Haley 2001 for a discussion test of Gardner’s notion of multiple intelligences; see Haley, 362-363 for a multiple intelligences survey instrument; see also Papalia 1976: 16-17).

More specifically, learner-centered language instruction is a collaborative, ongoing process between student and teacher. This means that instructors must know not only their students’ learning styles but also know their own (see Cooper 2001 for a discussion of tests intended to determine one’s teaching style). This approach to second-language pedagogy also entails “reflective teaching,” i.e., an approach to teaching in which “… students and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and uses the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching (Richards and Lockhart, 1-5).

Learner-centered second-language instruction further means that instructors must be able to adapt traditional textbook materials to different learners’ cognitive styles. Moreover, instructors must incorporate
diverse teaching strategies and techniques into the classroom to ensure that the activities will facilitate multiple learning styles.

Adapting a learner-centered strategy in the second-language classroom entails a profound reevaluation of teaching methodology, a serious assessment of student learning styles, and a revamping of the classroom architecture and teaching strategies and techniques.

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