



POETRY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: A LESSON PLAN BASED ON POETRY

Kristina Jordanⁱ

Mag. Philol. Ital.,
Department of Italian Language and Literature,
University of Zadar,
Croatia

Abstract:

The present paper deals with teaching Italian as a foreign language through poetry. The poetry chosen for the paper is *Promemoria* by the Italian author Gianni Rodari. The aim of the paper is to suggest an example of a lesson plan based on the poem and is intended for the A2 level (according to CEFR). The suggested lesson plan framework based on poetry attempts to realize further objectives: to make students learn a foreign language based on an authentic material, to generate their interest into poetry, and finally, to promote integration of literature, especially poetry, into the foreign language teaching.

Keywords: poetry, literature, foreign language teaching, Italian

1. Introduction

Integrating literature into the foreign language curriculum has provoked much discussion among scholars. However, different attitudes on using literature in classroom are not the topic of the present paper. By writing this paper in the form of a proposed step-by-step lesson plan, the intention is nonetheless to promote the use of literature, especially poetry, in the foreign language teaching.

The use of literature in classroom has many benefits. First of all, it is an authentic material, that is, the one originally written for the native speakers of a foreign language, which directly exposes students to the authentic “*formation and function of the sentences*” as well as to the “*variety of possible structures and different ways of connecting ideas*” (Collie & Slater, 1987: 5)

Furthermore, as Collie and Slater (1987: 37) state, literature “*speaks to the heart as much as to the mind, provides material with some emotional colour*”. Personal involvement contributes to the motivation as it awakens students' interest and increases their attention. Consequently, this represents counterbalancing “*the more fragmented effect of*

ⁱ Correspondence: email kjordan@unizd.hr

many collections of texts used in the classroom” (Collie & Slater, 1987: 37) and makes students *“the essential part of their own learning process”* (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014: 250).

Furthermore, according to Lazar (1993: 19, as cited in Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014: 249) literature hones students' linguistic and cognitive skills, helps increasing their understanding of the human condition, and, on the other hand, motivates their imagination, develops critical thinking and emotional awareness.

In addition, nothing less than the conventional textbooks, the use of literature opens the possibilities to work on all the four skills of foreign language learning: reading, writing, speaking and listening (Belcher, 2000, Erkaya, 2005, Nasr, 2001, as cited in Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014: 250).

Regarding the poetry in classroom, its pedagogy has been given scarce space in the empirical research (Dymoke et al., 2013, as cited in Sigvardsson, 2020: 954). What is more, many teachers still choose to teach other forms of literature as they are not comfortable enough to teach poetry (Simecek & Rumbold, 2016: 309). Some researchers go even further by being concerned that avoiding teaching poetry could mean its removal from the study of literature in schools (Dymoke [2001](#), [2012](#), [2015](#); Xerri [2014](#), as cited in Simecek & Rumbold, 2016: 309).

Finally, the teacher is the one who should primarily be keen on poetry in order to teach students through poetry, bearing in mind that the teacher's interest in poetry by itself is not enough to be able to teach it (Sigvardsson, 2020: 962). Actually, a teacher who isn't well prepared for the task of teaching poetry could also convey this uncertainty to the students (Sigvardsson, 2020: 964).

2. A lesson plan based on Gianni Rodari's poetry

The proposed lesson plan is based on the Gianni Rodari's poem *Promemoria*ⁱⁱ. It consists of three parts: the warm-up stage, the whilst-reading stage, and the post-reading stage. Each stage is described in detail. The duration of the lesson could be from 2 to 3 hours, depending on the students' age (it might go slower with younger learners).

2.1 Warm-up stage

The objective of the warm-up stage is to set mood and motivate students' interest. The teacher should guide students enthusiastically, especially here at the beginning, so that they generate interest into what follows and do not find daunting the initial encounter with poetry. The teacher should take care to enable a calm learning environment, with no stress, in order to create high affective filters, as this is the point which impacts the development of the following stages (Mezzadri, 2003: 7).

a. Title

The teacher begins with the title of the Italian poem: *Promemoria* ('Memorandum') (the teacher pronounces it and writes down the word to the whiteboard), and asks students if

ⁱⁱ See the Appendix for the Italian version and its translation into English.

they know the word. If it isn't known to them, the teacher can ask if they know at least a part of the word, aiming at the meaning of *memoria* ('memory').

b. Illustration and personal involvement

That part understood, the following step consists of presenting the *illustration* to involve students into the subject (see Dutta, 2001: 525): the teacher explains the word *promemoria* by showing yellow sticky notes (*post-it* notes) and asking students what they serve for (their purpose is to write a quick reminder or to-do list). The teacher then distributes the post-it notes to the students, and asks them to write down their own to-do list for the following week or day. At this stage there is already a personal engagement which should contribute to the interest for the activity.

Furthermore, as the poem contains reminders with *cose da fare* ('what to do', or 'things to do') during different parts of the day, the students are encouraged to further divide their reminders for the different parts of the day. The teacher introduces the Italian expressions: *ogni giorno, di giorno, di notte, a mezzogiorno* ('every day, during the day, during the night, at noon').

Afterwards the students are asked about the parts of speech used:

What parts of speech did you use? Are there verbs, nouns? Underline them.

This short, grammar activity serves for later reference, and is an introduction to the poem which contains many verbs.

In the meantime, the teacher draws a table on the whiteboard, containing the words *cose da fare*. The students are now asked to say the parts of their to-do lists, and the teacher writes them down on the whiteboard for all students to see the different activities suggested by their colleagues.

c. Prediction of the subject

Going back to the poem, the teacher asks the students to predict the subject of the poem:

On the basis of the title, what do you think the poem is about?

It could be pair or a small group work, during which the students discuss and then write down their hypotheses, and they are kept for later reference.

Since the poem contains some general not-to-do reminders, introduced by the adverb *mai* ('never') (the teacher writes it to the whiteboard), the students are also asked to discuss and write down if they can think of reminding themselves of something they shouldn't do. The teacher writes this down on the whiteboard as well, with the words: *cose da non fare* ('things not to be done').

The following predicting activity represents a step closer to the poem: it consists of exposing the students to the parts of the actual text. The students can further predict the theme of the poem by being offered an insight into the key words. This activity increases the students' awareness and involvement since they can now compare how far

or close were their previous expectations about the actual content, which simultaneously increases their interest in the whole text of the poem.

The activity for the Rodari's poem at this stage may consist of the following key words extracted from the poem:

...
lavarsi,
studiare,
...
...la *tavola,*
...
...
...gli *occhi,*
sogni...
orecchie ...
...
per esempio, la guerra.

Students shortly discuss the given content in pairs or smaller groups (as formed previously), whilst the teacher prompts and guides the students towards the semantic implications of the words by asking questions, such as:

Looking at the following words: "lavarsi, studiare" ('bathe, study'), what part of the day can these activities be related to?

The above question points back to what has been introduced regarding the parts of the day, at the beginning of the warm-up session.

The following questions point to the activities which have also been introduced during the warm-up stage:

What can we do with
"la tavola" ('the table'),
"gli" occhi" ('eyes'),
"sogni" ('dreams'),
"orecchie" (ears)?

In what sense "guerra" ('war'), can be used among the previously mentioned activities, regarding the "promemoria" ('memorandum') and to-do list?

And further:

Taking into consideration the title and the key words, can you predict more precisely what the poem is about?

Through this stage of pre-reading activities the students' impression of the content of the poem should be more exact and they should have a higher curiosity for the complete content.

At this initial stage the most part of the vocabulary should be worked on, so that in the following, reading stage, students are already familiar with it and thus *“the first reading experience can be easier and more rewarding”* (Collie & Slater, 1987: 16).

2.2 The whilst-reading stage

The students are now presented the whole content of the poem. However, they are not given the written text immediately but the first encounter with the whole poem is realized through listening: the teacher reads it aloud. They should read it in an expressive manner, paying attention to the rhythm, rhyme, intonation and to capturing attention of the students.

Having heard the poem (at least) two times, the students are given the text to take a look at it by themselves, that is, to read it once or twice, quietly. In the meantime, they are encouraged to underline the words they don't know. The teacher then asks what words they have underlined and in plenum explains their meaning. Presumably, the students are going to ask for the meaning of *né ... né* ('neither ... nor') and the teacher could have already prepared some other examples to illustrate the use of the conjunction.

2.3 The post-reading stage

At this stage the intention is to achieve two goals. The first one is that students expand and reassure their comprehension of the text, which can be achieved by putting forward questions about the content of the poem. The second goal is to awaken students' interest in the further creative use of language, through creative activities.

2.4 Comprehension check

Regarding the questions to check comprehension, these may be divided into two groups. The first one is to check comprehension of the meaning of the single words and collocations, such as:

What does it mean when we say we do something
“ogni giorno” ('every day'),
“di notte” ('at night'),
“di giorno” (during the day'),
“né di giorno né di notte” ('not during the day or at night'), or
“né per mare né per terra” ('not at sea or on the shore')
(in the last two verses with the particular stress on the meaning of the words *“né ... né”*)?

The second group of questions is to check comprehension of the content of the poem:

*What are the activities the author suggests we can do “ogni giorno” ('every day')?
What are the activities the author suggests we can do
“di giorno” ('during the day'),
“di notte” (at night),
“a mezzogiorno” (at noon),
“mai” (never)?*

The above, final question regards the message of the whole poem, and the students get an additional question in order to focus more on the interpretation of the message. For example:

Why “guerra” ('war') is the “cosa da non fare mai” ('thing never to be done')?

The questions are not following the order of the information in the poem; what is more, they are ordered in such a way so that the students can notice better the difference between *ogni giorno* ('every day') and *di giorno* ('during the day'), followed by *di notte* ('at night') with the same preposition, and then by *a mezzogiorno* ('at noon') that has a different preposition. The teacher can add the explanation that the hours in Italian are preceded by the preposition “a”.

The students answer the questions orally in pairs or in groups. They are allowed to have the text of the poem in front of them for the entire time at this stage.

2.5 Creative tasks

The first creative task could be the one that concentrates on the ending as it may have represented for the readers the highest curiosity. The students can thus think of their own interesting ending of the poem by suggesting a new thing or activity *da non fare mai* ('never to be done'). After some time they are asked to share and discuss with the colleagues what they have written.

The second creative assignment involves replacing the activities in the poem by their own activities (or to-do things), those that can be done in particular parts of the day, as presented in the poem: *ogni giorno / a mezzogiorno / di notte / di giorno* ('every day' / 'at midday' / 'at night' / 'during the day').

The above activities give students the opportunity for personal involvement: to express their own ideas, personal experiences, emotions, or their imagination.

The following, final activity could be reading aloud, that is, reciting their own, 'new' poems in front of the class or in groups. This activity is also guided and motivated by the teacher who tries to encourage students to read expressively (as they have previously), to pay attention to the rhythm, rhyme (if there is any), the exact pronunciation, and to capture the attention of the colleagues.

Time permitting, an extended version of this activity could be reciting their poem or Rodari's original in a variety of ways. For example, reading the poem in a rather cheerful or in a more serious way.

Finally, students are assigned a creative homework in order to maintain their individual interest in poetry outside the classroom as well. Such assignments could be: to give another title to the poem; to write down what they visualize when they read the poem; to draw a comic book sequence or do illustrations according to the text of the poem. The teacher can select one of the listed tasks or offer them the opportunity to select an assignment they prefer. This offer may increase even more their interest as they can again personally choose a task and thus be more enthusiastic about it.

In addition, students can get a homework (with a prolonged deadline) to learn to recite the Rodari's poem by heart. Some researchers suggest that memorisation of poetry helps the individuals to relate themselves to the poem on a more personal level and can generally help the person's well-being (see Simecek & Rumbold, 2016: 311).

3. Conclusion

During the suggested lesson plan students have come into contact with an authentic material - poetry. The lesson plan showed that the class based on poetry can successfully comprise all the four skills essential in foreign language learning: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Students have been guided by the teacher through the carefully chosen sequence of different activities, from the pre-reading, warm-up ones, towards the final, creative ones. Apart from learning the language, its structures and new vocabulary, the activities aimed at fostering enjoyment and appreciation for poetry.

Teaching poetry is surely a challenge and not the easiest task for a teacher as they are greatly responsible for the engagement of students into the process. Nevertheless, it shouldn't be avoided since poetry, as well as literature in general, offers multiple benefits in foreign language teaching.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author

Kristina Jordan is a language instructor at the Department of Italian Language and Literature at the University of Zadar. She teaches Italian language practice at the undergraduate level. Her research interests regard Italian language teaching, Italian language and culture, Croatian-Italian contrastive phraseology. She regularly participates in seminars for Italian language teachers.

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Appendix

Promemoria

Ci sono cose da fare ogni giorno:
lavarsi, studiare, giocare
preparare la tavola,
a mezzogiorno.

Ci sono cose da fare di notte:
chiudere gli occhi, dormire,
avere sogni da sognare,
orecchie per sentire.

Ci sono cose da non fare mai,
né di giorno né di notte
né per mare né per terra:
per esempio, LA GUERRA.

Memorandum

There are things to be done every day:
bathe, study, and even play
help lay the table
at midday.

There are things to be done at night:
close your eyes and sleep
have dreams to dream
sounds to reap.

There are things never to be done:
not during the day or at night
not at sea or on the shore
one, for example, is WAR.

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