

Transformative Experiences of Beginner L2 Learners in the Italian Classroom for Social Justice

Giulia Negretto
University of Arizona

Borbala Gaspar
University of Arizona

Abstract

Focusing on two beginner Italian courses, this study demonstrates participants' perceptions of and engagement with social justice topics and materials in a semester-long project. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of surveys, triangulated with interviews and artifacts, such as comments by students during lessons and in their video responses, provide us with a better understanding of students' previous expectations, perceptions and experiences with learning Italian; their background knowledge on social justice; and their reactions to the activities implemented throughout the course. Our findings indicate that learners value classroom activities and learning tools that allow them to share, collaborate, and reflect together. As a result of their engagement with multiliteracies approaches and social justice materials, most learners changed their perceptions of Italy and Italian identities. Most of them went through a transformation to altered frames of reference, changing their mind-sets, habits and meaning perspectives. Implications include discussions on offering learners space for critical reflection on social scenarios that can lead to increased engagement, sense of belonging, and unique transformative experiences.

Keywords: *social justice, transformative learning, multiliteracies, Italian, beginner learners*

Background

Foreign language departments, particularly programs of Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), are pressured to increase the relevance of their courses, attract learners, move beyond a view of communication that is merely based on linguistic interaction, and offer more holistic learning to develop transcultural and translingual competences (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). In line with the call for change, scholars suggest a move away from traditional foreign language education to change the approach of only right and wrong proficiency focused approaches and to re-evaluate the standards of foreign language learning.

Recommendations include teaching discourse analysis, critical thinking, self-reflection and overall, a more critically oriented pedagogy (Byram, 2008; Guilherme, 2002; Kern, 2000; Kramsch, 2014; Risager, 2007).

Most published textbooks are not following these recommendations. Chapters in foreign language textbooks for undergraduates, particularly for beginner and elementary levels, tend to fit grammar structure into a broad topic to provide a bit of context. Learners are not engaged in critical analysis of textual genres and they don't have activities designed to reflect on how language functions to convey meaning within them. Texts are often artificially constructed and lack clues that learners may need. The result is that both content and language forms are presented uncritically. Furthermore, textbooks often present "sanitized narratives" (Fabbian et al., 2019, p. 11) that prioritize dominant groups (Grant & Sleeter, 2011), are missing controversial topics (Gray, 2002; 2013) and include culture in a way that it does not require learners to engage in depth with (Canale, 2016, p. 239). These elements all together can lead to misrepresentations (Muirhead, 2009; Kubota 2004).

One way to respond to these discrepancies is to provide learners with opportunities to use relevant authentic texts of different genres, and help them notice, engage and critically reflect on the way information is conveyed. The multiliteracies framework outlined by the New London Group (1996) can assist in achieving these goals, with a particular focus on meaning making. In the meaning making process there are six design elements that represent the "multi" in the multiliteracies framework. These are: linguistic, spatial, gestural, visual, audio meaning, and the multimodal pattern that relate the meanings together to each other. Multiliteracies is divided into four pedagogical stages: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice. Situated practice and overt instruction activate learners' previous knowledge and help them learn new concepts. Critical framing and transformed practice are designed to work on learners' critical and analytical skills to help them become familiar with a particular genre that they can transform or reproduce using multimodal dimensions. In summary, this framework helps us unify language and literary-cultural content teaching.

Multiliteracies approaches provide a space for learners to participate in, reflect on, and, most importantly, create connections to the social world. Teaching with multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) allows us to bring to the surface the socio-cultural elements of language learning, including social justice topics. It expands on language use and cognition-focus of learning to consider language acquisition as a social act. For example, when learners read, they also connect to groups, community, and culture (Kucer & Silva, 2012). In addition to multiliteracies pedagogies, there is a growing call for social-justice-oriented L2 teaching practices that offers the potential to integrate real life concerns of L2 learners (Akbari, 2008; Levine, 2020; Murti, 2008; Osborn, 2006; Randolph & Johnson, 2017). Social justice, perceived as both a process and a goal (Bell, 2016), is at the center of this study. In the process to attain social justice, learners take on the role of social actors who carry out actions in a mutually shaped society where they work toward creating an equitable, safe, and secure environment (Bell, 2016).

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) is a fundamental vehicle for achieving social justice; it can change expectations, world views and assumptions that can lead

to altered frames of reference (mind-sets, habits, meaning perspectives). During this transformation these references can become more inclusive, diverse, reflective, and emotionally open to changes that may foster new beliefs and opinions or reinforce existing ones, which in turn sets the stage for possible actions (Mezirow, 2012). Despite these calls that indicate the benefits of such approaches, language educators may shy away from topics that discuss important social issues, and instead cover less complex real-world topics (Ennsner-Kananen, 2016; Oura, 2001; Willis & Willis, 2007).

To respond to the call for change and the current state of foreign language education, our study demonstrates how social justice pedagogies paired with multiliteracies approaches impacted the experiences of our first-year Italian learners. Data comes from a study conducted in Spring 2021 in two beginner Italian undergraduate courses, taught live online due to Covid-19. In these courses more complex, often marginalized sociocultural scenarios, were integrated into the existing syllabus. Based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data of 23 participants, we discuss the choices, perspectives, and experiences of the participants. The following research questions guided our study:

1. How have participants perceived and engaged with the material presented in the classroom?
2. What benefits and challenges have students reported because of their engagement with social justice topics?
3. How did the participants' perception of, and engagement with, Italian culture and language develop over the course?

In the following section we begin by orienting our work within the current discussion on studies conducted with foreign language learners using social justice pedagogies, transformative learning and multiliteracies approaches.

Theoretical Framework

Our conceptual basis for social justice aligns with Osborn's view of world language education (2006) that perceives foreign language learning as one that is neither driven by marketable skills, nor can be claimed to be apolitical. Within the field of foreign language learning, social justice pedagogies have been demonstrated to be beneficial for learners. Through their engagement with social justice pedagogies, learners critically reflect on power relations (Levine, 2020), address ethical dilemmas (Murti, 2008), and engage in discussion on language, power, social and taboo topics to disrupt what is considered to be "normal" (Coda, Taylor & Jiang, 2021). The multiliteracies model (New London Group, 1996; Paesani et al., 2016) matches well with the recommendations outlined above. Scholars in literacy studies have emphasized the need to integrate a critical pedagogy of multiliteracies in the introductory levels of L2 teaching (Kern, 2000; Paesani et al., 2016; Warner & Dupuy, 2018). This framework has been used in foreign language teaching with collegiate-level learners (Blyth, 2019; Brown et al., 2016; Choi, 2015; Cunningham, 2021; Schmerbeck & Lucht, 2017; Seijas et al., 2021).

Some of the many benefits is that engagement with literacy helps learners recognize elements of communication that they need to pay attention to, such as textual thinking (Byrnes et al., 2006; Paesani et al., 2016), evoking critical thinking

and reflection in the learner. In the center of the pedagogy of multiliteracies is Design, by this we can understand that we are both inheritors of meaning and at the same time we are also creators of the meaning, therefore we are the receivers and producers of Design. In order to understand different types of text, learners engage in Designing (Paesani et al., 2016, p. 24), moving from the available design (what learners already know for instance, how an Instagram post looks like) to the new, undiscovered design elements (help them apply the known to create FL texts and new Designs). The four stages of the pedagogy of multiliteracies (situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practices) also contribute to the important element of reflection. Learners reflect on the learning process, especially in the transformed practice stage when they work on redesigning or transforming a genre. Reflection, as part of the multiliteracies model, is an important link between experience and learning (Correia & Bleicher, 2008), as well as language learning experience, in and beyond the classroom (Crane, 2018). Structured reflection was found to help learners cope with discomfort and recognize it as a vital part of language learning (Rogers, 2011). Structured reflection can promote identity negotiation, self-position, and can help learners recognize the value of language and culture study (Crane & Sosulski, 2020).

The multiliteracies framework, developed by the New London Group (1996), provides a critical lens for learners that allow them to engage in these reflections. Learners can be in the center of their learning journey, while the instructors can take the facilitator role, always there to support learners. For example, in a study by Ryshina-Pankova (2013), German undergraduate learners created and critically interpreted a touristic guide and produced visual media representations. This study shows how moving from “telling the world to showing the world” (Kress, 2003, p. 140) helped learners become critical analysts. In a similar case study, Troyan (2016) demonstrates how Jackie, a fourth-grade Spanish learner, is able, through a genre-based approach, to develop appropriate linguistic representations in a project producing touristic landmark descriptions. These studies support the claim that both beginner and intermediate learners are ready to engage with literacy-based pedagogies. They can make sense of the design and to successfully redesign text in a meaningful, linguistically appropriate representation that increases the willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

While all of these studies and findings are valuable in knowing how we can engage our first-year learners, we still know very little about how first-year foreign language learners engage with multiliteracies approaches paired with social justice pedagogies. Social justice pedagogy provides opportunities for learners to identify real world issues and conflicts (Drewelow, 2020), and offers them the latitude to participate in different discourses, questions, and actions (Bocci, 2016). The pedagogy of social justice fosters learners’ engagement by giving them something to say and do (Beghetto, 2016; Osborn, 2006).

To engage in social justice education, learners need to question their assumed and received points of view and shift their perspective through a reflective process. Hackman (2005) indicates five crucial components of social justice education: a) content mastery and information; b) tools for critical analysis; c) tools for social action and change; d) tools for personal reflection; and e) multicultural group

dynamics. Departing from Hackman's recommendation, to fulfill the components needed for a social justice education, we adopted elements of the pedagogical approaches of multiliteracies with the aim of setting the stage for a transformative learning experience.

Transformational learning happens as a process, triggered by a disorienting experience. For example, in a study by Kiely (2005), study abroad students engaged in service learning in Nicaragua, where they experienced feelings of shock, and were overwhelmed by poverty and the extreme living conditions in which others were living. These emotional reactions of shock and confusion contributed to learners' reevaluation of their beliefs and perceptions. Learners found to be repositioning the ways they see themselves as learners (Johnson, 2015; King, 2000), change their views of language and cultures (Crane, 2018; Johnson & Mullins Nelson, 2010; Johnson, 2015), and they take actions because of their engagement with social justice topics (Porto, 2021).

As previously noted, the current study was conducted in a beginner, second semester Italian class. Scholars have argued that the L2 classroom has great potential for the integration of social justice pedagogy, because there is a possibility to introduce transcultural perspectives and do critical work (Tarnawska-Senel, 2020; Pennycook, 2021). This integration is necessary because systems of oppression and identity markers are already embedded in the language that learners are acquiring (Pennycook, 2021). Furthermore, it would contribute to a better preparation for the real-life challenges that learners may face today.

Studying a second language can be a transformative experience for adult learners in the foreign language classroom even without it being prescribed in the syllabus. The study conducted by Johnson & Mullins Nelson (2010) shows how three Spanish learners experienced a transformation of perspectives. These learners increased their awareness of diversity, they connected with Hispanic cultures and became more aware of ethnocentricity.

However, only a few studies focus on learners' perceptions in relation to structured critical reflection tasks of cultural aspects. This study examines elementary Italian L2 learners' experiences and provides a better understanding of the impact of integrating social justice-oriented materials on elementary Italian L2 language learners.

Methods

Context and Participants

Undergraduate learners enrolled in two sections of second semester Italian were asked to participate in an IRB approved study. In total, there were 23 participants who gave consent and enrolled in the study. Authors accessed the consent forms only after final grades for the course had been posted. Among these learners, one was an Italian major, 3 were minoring in Italian, and 2 were still undecided. Most learners were freshmen (36.8%) or sophomores (26.32%), while the rest were juniors (21.05%) and senior learners (15.7%).

The two first-year beginner Italian courses at the center of the study were

taught by Author 1 in Spring 2021. These courses were offered live online, due to the pandemic. During the 16-week course, learners met with the instructor four times a week, for 50 minutes on Zoom. The *Avanti*, first-year Italian textbook (Aski & Musumeci, 2009) was the core body of the course.

As a first step, learners were asked to complete a questionnaire about their previous experiences in language and culture learning of Italian and their level of previous engagement with topics related to social justice in the context of Italian. We started the course with an identity profile activity. First, the instructor in the course introduced herself telling the class the many of her identities and pronoun preferences and then invited everyone to create and share theirs. In this course we covered five chapters of the textbook and for each we matched a social justice topic, including music, a feminist activists' organization, linguistic debates on the gender use in the names of professions and the Slow Food /fair food movement. The following table provides a summary and description of the incorporated social justice topics.

Table 1

Social Justice Topics

Course Plan	Textbook: Cultural topic(s)	Incorporated, relevant resources with social justice
Introduction	Identity profile	Students and instructors created an identity profile that included identities
Capitolo 7	Italian music	Reflection on the power of music. Music video of the song "Cara Italia" by Ghali addressing issues of citizenship and belonging.
Capitolo 8	Italian festivities and the national holidays	Focus on Women's Day as celebrated in Italy. Presenting a feminist activist association on Facebook. Images and infographics addressing issues of domestic violence and femicide. Women as represented in media.
Capitolo 9	Job and Professions	Names of professions and sexism in Italian; examples of inclusivity in the Italian language.
Capitolo 10	Body and well being	The Slow Food movement in Italy and in the US. Exploring the importance of fair food.
Capitolo 11	House and space	Linguistic landscapes, including Italian former colony city of Asmara (Eritrea) with Google maps. Various messages of protests in public spaces (Italian balconies, graffiti); comparisons between the language of protest in the US and the language of protest in Italy.

Each of the developed activities were designed using the stages of the multiliteracies pedagogy. The situated practice and overt instruction activities introduced the topics and helped learners get familiar with the vocabulary needed to talk about it. For example, we started the activity on the *Non una di meno* organization, with a picture in the textbook representing a *mimosa* flower that Italians traditionally give to women for Women's Day. Following, we discussed opinions about why we should or shouldn't celebrate women's day and what is the history behind Women's Day. Then learners engaged in a critical framing activity, during which they analyzed the genre of protest fliers, the logo of the *Non una di meno* organization and short videos discussing statistics and different life situations of (trans) women. As a transformed practice stage of the multiliteracies pedagogy, learners had the opportunity to create their own protest flyers, as they reflected on local issues such as patriarchy and gender.

After each chapter, learners completed a Flipgrid video response to the material covered in the course in which they could use both Italian and English. First, students responded to a prompt in Italian, and then they were invited to reflect on the social justice material in English. Questions such as: "How did you feel about the materials we have covered during our activities? How did you personally connect with these topics? After you completed the tasks and the assignment, what similarities and differences did you notice in the way advertisements depict gender roles in Italy and the US? Did anything happen with you recently, or have you done anything that relates to what we discussed in class?" were part of these reflections.

In the second half of the semester learners were introduced to a project activity. In an in-class workshop, learners planned their final presentation topic of their choice, using guidelines and concrete ideas provided by the instructor. The final presentation provided choices for learners to engage in a redesign activity of a multiliteracies framework. After writing and receiving feedback for their final presentation proposal, learners started working on their final presentation, which they presented in a PowerPoint slide show, in the live online class on Zoom. An example of a final project idea that students could choose from is the song *Cara Italia* by Ghali that we analyzed and worked on in class. This song contains examples of racism. Learners were invited to transform elements of the song and recontextualize it to represent examples of racism of their own context. Learners were also invited to create an album cover for their song, using the example they analyzed in class as an inspiration to create their own.

Data Collection and Analysis

The aim of this study is to examine how learners engaged with social justice materials and activities and how the social justice topics and scenarios affected their perceptions of sense of self. For this purpose, we adopted a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative data analysis of the surveys. In addition, we used students' comments provided in semi-structured interviews (with the six students who consented to be interviewed) and reflections on Flipgrid to corroborate our findings.

Data Sources

Learners were asked to complete two surveys on Qualtrics, one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester. Survey 1 included questions about their previous experiences with social justice materials and their interest in the topics. Survey 2 focused on their experience in the course with social justice materials and scenarios. For the preparation of Survey 2 we were inspired by Johnson & Mullins Nelson (2010) and their way of adapting and modifying King’s (2009) transformative learning questionnaire. Following their steps, we used elements of King’s survey that examines if learners have taken on new perspectives. Specifically, out of the sixteen questions we included three questions that resembled Johnson & Mullins Nelson’s (2010) and King’s (2009) questionnaire. These were related to the change that learners may have experienced and activities that they found impactful in their engagement with social justice. We enriched these questions with open-ended questions such as “What are some resources that you enjoyed seeing or using the most in this course?” and “Has your way of imagining or perceiving Italy and Italian identities changed throughout this course?”

The study includes data from the two surveys conducted in the beginning and at the end of the semester with likert scale and open-ended questions; and a follow up semi-structured interview conducted in English at the end of the course. Furthermore, various types of participants’ submitted coursework as well as field notes from Author 1, who was the course instructor, contributed to a rich data set. Table 2 summarizes the data sources including the primary data sets (surveys and semi structured interviews) and secondary data sets (site artifacts, recordings, and observations) that together contributed to our findings.

Table 2

Data Sources

Source type	Sources
Surveys	a. Survey 1 (beginning of the semester) b. Survey 2 (end of semester)
Site artifacts	a. Submitted coursework (Google Doc worksheets, Flipgrid recordings, written compositions, final project proposals, PowerPoint presentations) b. Post in social network platforms c. Textbook used in class and course syllabus d. Field notes e. Class minutes transcriptions
Interviews	a. 6 semi-structured, fully transcribed interviews (Total of 247 transcribed pages / 8 hours of recording)
Recordings	a. Classroom recordings (Approximately 60 hours) b. Flipgrid recordings (Approximately 170 hours)
Observations	a. Participant observer: Field notes of Author 1

Data Analysis

As a first step, Author 1 and Author 2 each did a first-round analysis of the surveys and interviews. The data were analyzed using a first-round coding system during which both Authors created analytic memos that they later compared. Questions of survey 1 focused on learners' beliefs and expectations about learning a foreign language, as well as their previous experiences. Answers to open-ended questions were color-coded and grouped into code categories and subcodes. For the second-round analysis authors consulted positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Besides looking at participants' positionings as an analytical tool, within discourse analysis we focused on stancemark analysis of affective and epistemic stances (Chafe & Nichols, 1986; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989). An epistemic stance expresses knowledge and belief, while affective stance refers to attitude, mood, emotion, and feelings.

Following we examined the codes, specifically elemental coding (structural, descriptive and concept coding) and affective coding (conflicts, judgments, emotions, values). Informed by these approaches we again completed an inductive coding to provide a more in-depth analysis of the perspectives, feelings, meaning making that participants reported on.

Findings

Survey 1

Responses to survey 1 were analyzed with the purpose of providing a better understanding of the classroom context of this study. For clarity and purposes, findings are grouped into subheadings reflecting the main areas of inquiry of survey 1: learning a foreign language; previous experience with social justice issues; exposure to Italian culture in textbooks.

Learning a Foreign Language. When learners were asked about what learning a foreign language meant to them, the majority (82%) associated foreign language learning with expanding their cultural knowledge, communicating with others, and connecting with the world. Fewer learners (26%) associated it also with study abroad, traveling, speaking to family, or job opportunities. Table 3 provides a report of the main themes that emerged, together with examples of learners' answers.

Table 3

Participant Perspective on Language Learning

Themes	Q: "What does learning a foreign language mean to you?"
Expand cultural knowledge	"Expanding my own knowledge past my own culture;" "Expanding my knowledge of other cultures and becoming a more well-rounded individual;" "learning about a new culture;" "I think learning other languages is really important in expanding your understanding and appreciation for other cultures, and in general, the world around you;" "being able to connect with another culture. Learning a new language will greatly increase my understanding of cultural diversity."
Connect with the world	"I would like to learn more about the world and the many different languages there are in the world;" "It means wanting to experience the world in a different perspective and be able to communicate and identify with more parts of the world;" "a very special connection and opportunity to connect myself with the rest of the world;" "Diversifying myself as a citizen."
Communicate with others	"I am able to connect with people who I wasn't able to before;" "Learning a foreign language means to open the doorway of ability to learn from and communicate with other individuals of different nationalities and walks of life."
Study abroad	"Learning a foreign language means that I will be able to experience global immersion and communicate with people more properly. I plan to study abroad during college and hopefully live in Italy after college for a couple years."
Travel	"I have Italian relatives, so it is a cool cushion, but I don't see myself using it unless I travel;" "I want to be able to travel and speak to family."
Job opportunities	"it opens so many doors in the future in relation to job search;" "I also think learning another language is a great skill to have when traveling, on a job, communicating with others etc."

The examples of students' answers provided in the table above show that there is a variety of subthemes within each broader theme. The theme of expanding cultural knowledge with the purpose of becoming "a more well-rounded individual," for example, suggests that learning a language is already perceived as a holistic, transformative experience that leads to a broader awareness of the world. Words such as "world," "global," and "citizen," found in some of students' answers suggest the awareness, and desire, to perceive themselves as belonging to different, complex realities and communities outside of the one they experience in their everyday lives, and outside of the classroom context. The answer "I don't see myself using it unless I travel" brings to the surface another important aspect to acknowledge, which is that opportunities for undergraduate learners to use the target language outside of the classroom environment are rare. This suggests that learning a language should go

beyond the goal of training learners for proficiency.

Overall, learners' answers do not reflect the traditional arguments for foreign language study in the US, such as its significance for business, to facilitate travel and tourism, or to be able to understand cultural artifacts belonging to a different language and culture (Reagan & Osborn, 2020). Instead, we found a strong desire of learners to connect with other realities, experience cultural diversity in the rest of the world, and their wish to expand their cultural understandings through the lens of another perspective.

Previous Experience with Social Justice Issues. When we inquired whether students recalled previous experiences engaging with social justice topics in previous language courses, most declared not having any experience. Only four learners out of 23 said they occasionally had some, such as, for example, a teacher sharing stories about post-war Germany in the German language classroom: "I took German in high school, and since my teacher was raised there at the tail end of the Nazi regime he would often share stories of what it was like in post-war Germany and how the healing process began." Ten learners reported that social justice topics were addressed in previous courses taken other than a foreign language (e.g. art courses, political science, sociology, history, and linguistics): "they were mostly art course as I feel those have an easier time conveying messages and topics like that." Another student wrote: "I took a linguistics class that had many ties with social justice/injustice within many different cultures! It was very interesting to read/discuss how language can be a very prominent part in discrimination in social/economic/political classes." Even though students may be aware that language, power, and politics are tied to one another, they are used to experiencing content-based courses as spaces that are more fit to discuss social justice topics.

Among those who reported not having any experience engaging with social justice in previous courses other than language, one answered: "No. Everything was pretty straight forward and avoided this topic." The use of the verb "avoided" indicates students' awareness of the teachers' intentionality of not engaging with social justice topics. When students were asked whether they had any awareness of social justice issues in Italy, most learners at the beginning of this class were not aware of any (61%); some learners were somewhat aware or had a vague idea of what issues the population may be facing (21%): "I'm sure Italy deals with many of the social issues that the US does;" and a few named specific topics such as immigration, the mafia, the economy, unemployment, political turmoil, the Covid-19 pandemic, low birth rates, and women's inequality. As expected, most learners (95%) stated being aware of a variety of social issues in their local communities.

Exposure to Italian Culture in Textbooks. Food (23), family (18), sport (16), linguistic diversity (12), and fashion (12) were the most highly ranked cultural aspects learners were exposed to in previous L2 Italian classes. It also emerged that the textbook is the primary source for them to learn about cultural topics in Italy. The images and materials to which learners were exposed in Italian textbooks communicated a view of Italian people as family and community oriented: "I see Italians as kind people and very much focused on family and community;" proud of their culture, "as individuals who take pride in their culture, family, and values;" relaxed: "I always felt that life was more 'relaxed' based on the people and places in

the textbook I was learning from;” “The people look like they truly enjoy life and value relaxation and their surroundings;” and surrounded by beauty and fascinating places: “I always find the places and people depicted to be fascinating;” “the places portrayed in my Italian textbook look gorgeous.” More than half of our participants gave answers expressing some sort of fascination and attraction to people and places in Italy, based on generalizations rather than representations of complex and nuanced identities.

Some learners, however, expressed the awareness that the textbook does not provide an authentic representation of Italians, perceiving them “just as a part of the textbook,” and that a diverse representation is completely lacking as it “looks like any other textbook for any class.” Significantly, one learner wrote: “I doubt that every Italian is named Giovanni and works at a bar or pizza ristorante.” Asides from locations, most if not all depictions in the textbooks are simplifications of Italian culture to make them easier to teach. These answers suggest that learners already have an awareness that textbooks only provide a limited and superficial portrayal of the target culture, and that this is expected. Even more significantly, none of the learners could recall any of the images in textbooks introducing topics of social justice: “the textbook didn’t seem much involved in politics. I got the impression that the textbook was old, or written by old people, just from how they talked about computers and phones and other technology.”

Their answers to Survey 1 revealed that if learners hear or learn about social justice topics in a language classroom, it is not from the textbook adopted in their L2 courses, nor from a consistent exposure to cultural topics integrated in the syllabus. Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between learners’ awareness of social issues in their local communities; what they have heard about Italy from resources outside of textbooks; the romanticized and stereotypical images of Italy and Italians provided in textbooks; and what, instead, they would be interested to learn about in the Italian classroom. In fact, most learners (70%) mentioned being interested in, or open to, learning more about immigration and citizenship issues, racial diversity, racism, sexism, feminism, gender inequalities, non-binary language options, religion, politics, social classes, or other social justice related topics in general.

This is a brief summary of some of the main quantitative findings from survey 1, that provide an overview of our participants’ thoughts at the beginning of the semester: most of our learners associated foreign language learning with more abstract ideas (82%); most are aware of social issues in their local communities in the US (95%); most were not aware of any social justice issues taking place in Italy (61%); but most were interested in learning more about them (70%).

Survey 2

For the end of the course survey, we asked learners to talk about their experiences with the social justice materials. Nineteen learners completed the survey. The Likert scale questions indicate that most learners (94.74%) reported to be aware of the social issues in their local communities, and most (90%) affirmed that the way they imagined or perceived Italy and Italian identities changed throughout the course.

Learners were asked to read eleven statements and select those that they felt resonated with their experiences. A significant number of learners (52%) had an experience that made them question ideas about social justice, and many of them (42%) questioned the way they acted, yet a similarly high number of learners (47%) relied on their previous experiences and beliefs. Many learners (47%) used their imagination and placed themselves in the shoes of others by imagining living and acting in a different way. Noteworthy to mention that a significant number of learners (47%) went beyond sympathizing with the represented groups and issues, and they engaged in a deeper empathizing process. Furthermore, only one learner indicated that they felt uncomfortable because of their engagement with social justice pedagogies in the class.

The changes in perceptions that most of them reported were the result of part of a class assignment (68.42%). When we asked our learners to point to the assignments that contributed to the change of their perceptions, they noted a large variety of activities. Of these activities the most significant were the Flipgrid reflections (63%), class activities (47%), class group activities (42%), final project (42%) and article summaries (36%).

The Flipgrid oral reflection received surprisingly higher selection than the personal reflection (16%) and writing about concerns (16%). What learners perceived as the most impactful activities were those where learners had the opportunity to share their personal reflections and opinions in their first language, interact, and collaborate with each other.

Survey 2 also had a qualitative segment with nine questions. Among the nineteen students who completed this survey, six students consented for a follow up interview that was conducted by Author 2. With the aim to further corroborate findings of the likert scale survey results, for a well-rounded, triangulated study, we draw from data from the qualitative segment of the survey as well as the six semi-structured interviews with those who completed the survey. We grouped our findings into three main categories: a. Imagining and Perceiving Italy; b. Sharing, Interacting and Collaborating; c. Changing Views and Perspectives. We analyzed the answers paying particular attention to the epistemic (looking at knowledge and belief) and affective (examining attitude, mood, emotions, and feelings) stances. As follows, we elaborate on each of the three categories identified in the survey.

Imagining and Perceiving Italy. Most learners (89%) gave a written answer that was dominated by epistemic stances that show their perception of viewing themselves confident in possessing more knowledge about culture and social justice issues. Learners also used a significant number of metaphors to express their confidence and experience as a whole-body experience. Expressions such as “it was eye-opening,” “my view of Italy have gotten more nuanced,” “it has shown me social issues that I had not previously seen,” “which I hadn’t ever really heard of,” “has given me a new outlook about places I haven’t been in Italy yet,” “I got to experience culture,” all point to a learning engagement that can be defined as a whole body experience that activated learners’ imagination through different channels (visual, auditory, physical experience). These findings show that learners had a deep and impactful engagement with the materials.

Sharing, Interacting, and Collaborating. In the survey's section of the open-ended questions, one student, among just a few, discussed their changing perspectives as a result of a complex process influenced by various social engagements in and beyond the classroom walls. To the question "If you experienced a change in perspectives, was it a person who influenced this change or else?" the student replied: "I think the people and discussions in several of my classes (including this one) combined with new videos and podcasts I was watching? Not like a specific person."

Similarly, another student expressed the positive aspects of classroom conversations, as she stated in the follow-up interview: "...about the women versus men in this advertisement and like guys would speak up and actually like say the right answer so it's like I gotta give me a little bit of hope, because I feel like a lot of the time men can be sort of ignorant ...they just don't recognize it...so it's really nice to hear the guys like speak up and recognize them."

Another student positioned interaction with others on Flipgrid to critically reflect: "I think having to, like, form an opinion, like an opinion I can communicate to others, it makes me think critically about the topics we see in class. For as far as personal connections, I can't say I really made a lot of personal connections with other students, but I do make kind of like more, by forming an opinion on a topic I feel like it's...the topic feels slightly more personal to me, I guess, and they do help me reflect on stuff that I've learned in class." Similarly, one student highlighted Flipgrid reflections as beneficial to feel more included in the classroom discourse: "...like our Flipboard assignments, you know she would, of course, make sure that we were paying attention and learning it, but then would want to hear what we thought and it made at least me feel like she was genuinely interested in what we were thinking and so it felt more like a conversation rather than like a lecture and I think that was really great."

Another student highlighted the connections and the importance of his interactions he had in class and his long lasting connections he established with his classmates: "My experience was great, it was awesome you know I still talk to about ten kids from my 102 class and a lot of us are actually going to be trying to take the same time classes together in the future, so it was really nice, I had a great time." All these reflections indicate the importance of social collaboration to connect with the material through social interaction.

The final presentation that students had to prepare was a topic of their choice, based on a social justice issue, connected to what they explored in their class. One student, mentioned that a successful presentation depends on the reaction of his classmates, as he stated: "I was just more or less nervous about I guess how people would look at it like it's, you know, is this going to teach somebody something you know, am I going to be able to be that person that someone thinks about later like oh yeah that was a cool subject that was a cool topic, that's how you know it was a good presentation and I felt really good that people were into it." Similarly to the previous example, another student considered their classroom community as an important element in their preparation of their final project. They decided to give a lesson on how to prepare homemade yogurt as their final presentation. In their reflection they emphasized the importance of interaction, sharing and their collaboration with

classmates. In this presentation the student talked about how, inspired by the Slow Food movement discussions and activities in class, they wanted to have a direct impact on their classmates by helping them eat healthier: “I feel like it had a more direct impact and I feel like yogurt is one of those things that’s like oh no it’s an expensive food, but it’s really healthy for you and it’s really easy to make, and so, if people could make good food that is healthy for them without like, even if they can’t afford lots of yogurt because yogurt is expensive, and that was annoying to me, so I wanted to spread the yogurt recipes so that I felt like it had more of a direct impact on the people who would be attending.” The students’ reflection above further substantiates that the engaging activities using multiliteracies framework paired with social justice materials result in helping learners critically reflect, emotionally engage, practice empathy and feel more connected to each other. Based on the likert scaled results and the qualitative data, it is apparent that students perceive the reflections and their social connections and interactions with each other as impactful tools for their learning.

Change in Views and Perspectives. Learners noticeably connected the social justice topics covered in class to their personal interest. Thus, the impact they perceived social justice had on them was connected to their previous experiences and their current activities. However, we also note a significant number of learners (36%) who report on changes in their perceptions, changing their mindset as one of the important steps of transformative learning.

One learner noted: “challenged me to view the world differently and the way I behave in certain situations;” another student stated: “my family tends to be more conservative and against regulation. But personally, I feel I’m like kind of shifting to the opinion that, like, these things are important and government regulation is like it’s necessary to set a standard in food quality and also labor and workplace standards.” Similarly, another student stated: “The Women’s Day unit had impacted my beliefs and attitudes because I realize the importance now of celebrating Women’s Day I pay more attention” and “I support slow food’s efforts for overall healthy food because food is a major passion of mine.”

These reflections show how learners not only acknowledge the need to be more inclusive or empathetic but their realization that they themselves can be responsible to contribute to these changes, indicated by the action verbs such as “I pay attention” and “I support.” We also note that some student changed in awareness and empathy. For example, one learner became “aware of processes in different areas of the world;” another mentioned “it allowed me to empathize with people going through such a tedious process;” and another said “I come from a kind of conservative household, and before the class I was I guess mostly indifferent to a lot of issues like immigration...I would say my indifference grew into more progressive feelings.”

Finally, a student has pointed out how their engagement in this course helped them change their views about Italy: “I can think about Italy as a real place but you know when you have no idea about the country and, like the actual social dilemmas that goes through... tend to romanticize just the idea and the concept. You know, someone thinks Italy is oh wine and nice sunsets and oceans’ or whatever else but no it’s a real city with air it’s a real place with real problems, just as much as where I live.”

Learners who indicated a complete transformation in a sense of their concrete

actions are in most cases changes connected to their lifestyles and way of living a healthier life. For example “I’ve changed my original way of living,” “now I want to eat healthier,” another mentioned: “This is an abstract way of saying it, but you know after the class and presentations and talking about that I thought about giving back to, is very abstract, I thought about giving back to like my community more because I work at a job, where we waste a lot of food at the end of the nights I work at a retirement home. And we cook and we make a lot of food and at the end of the night so I’m like I could probably be giving this to people.” Finally, a student stated: “I started looking for more like, organic restaurants in Tucson after we were talking about it in class... I was looking at some restaurants and they look so good, and so I’ve been looking for those and am excited to try them once I feel more like safe going out.” Most of these statements only hint at concrete actions, however, they show us examples of how learners are taking the social justice topics beyond their classroom walls and how they are engaged in thinking of potential actions and solutions.

Discussion and Implications

In this study we analyzed how learners perceived and engaged with the material presented in the Italian classroom, how their perceptions of Italian culture developed over the course of one semester, and what benefits and challenges did learners highlight in their engagement with social justice materials. Most of the class expressed their openness and interest to learn more about social justice topics and only one learner felt uncomfortable. Learners reported no difficulties working with authentic and relevant text and different genres in Italian. Findings shows us that learners are ready to engage with materials developed using pedagogies of multiliteracies even at the beginner level of language learning. Despite their different interests, personalities, backgrounds and previous experiences with Italian language and culture, most learners valued their interactions with others and felt a sense of belonging to (classroom) communities in meaningful ways.

The multiliteracies approaches paired with social justice resulted as an effective way to engage learners in a process of transformation of their previous assumptions. Most learners perceived activities that allowed sharing, collaboration, and conversations as impactful in their learning and engagement with social justice topics. Thus, this study reaffirms Hackman’s (2005) recommendation to include tools for personal reflections as a crucial component of social justice education. It also complements this recommendation by showing that learners value personal reflection if it’s done socially, in collaboration with their peers. Each of the four steps of multiliteracies approaches (situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transferred practice) that we used to introduce the social justice materials, allowed more time for learners to observe and experience relevant authentic texts from a variety of genres, and to emotionally connect with topics through reflections.

Most learners initiated their process of transformation by critically reflecting on the social justice materials. While many of them went through a transformation of their mind set by shifting their perspectives and beliefs, only few learners went through a concrete, more easily detectable transformation, by taking concrete actions and integrating new habits. These last steps of transformation, however, are a result of a longer process that is hard to show in a one semester long study (Johnson

& Mullins Nelson, 2010).

Many of these learners went beyond sympathizing with the represented groups and issues, but they also engaged in a deeper empathizing process of imagining living in Italy or participating in different social groups. For most learners the way of them perceiving Italy and Italian identities changed throughout the course, and many reported they used their imagination to empathize with others and imagined living and acting in different ways.

Our brain processes imagined actions the same way as actual ones (Decety & Grèzes, 2006). The use of imagination is an important motivational element to negotiate the self, create a sense of belonging and display emotions co-constructively (Gaspar, 2022). More studies on social justice looking at learners' processes of imagination, could reveal more details of how their agency and negotiation of self are impacted by imagination, and the effects imagination has on learners' motivation.

Furthermore, learners' comments regarding their textbooks as falsely depicting reality, suggest that institutional discourses (including textbooks, departmental home pages, curricula) should consider the lived experiences of learners and their ways of representing them. Institutional discourses often depict prospective learners as tourists in study abroad contexts (Michelson & Álvarez Valencia, 2016) and there is a clear lack of diversity in foreign language textbooks (Anya, 2021). Our findings provide additional information on how foreign language learners perceive different discourses and contribute to the call to revisit these discrepancies.

This paper argues that implementing a social justice curriculum paired with (multi)literacies approaches in first year foreign language courses is beneficial and successful. It has the potential to provide a symbolic space for learners to shape their sense of self; by doing so, it is more likely that students keep learning the second language, as they shape a special bond with it and use it as a symbolic tool to build their personal trajectories.

Most participants felt comfortable and were open to engage with social justice topics. By the end of the course half of the participants changed their world views and more than a third of them reported a transformation in their habits and activities. These findings also demonstrate that it is neither too early, nor too difficult or challenging to incorporate social justice topics paired with multiliteracies pedagogies that introduce relevant materials and different genres.

As language educators, we want to make sure that our learners feel a sense of belonging in the foreign language classroom. A growing number of research demonstrates the benefits of socially focused pedagogies (Gaspar & Warner, 2021; Kramsch, 2009; Warner et al., 2021). To avoid shaping our learners into tourists, or into any other accidental prescribed identities, and to create a more inclusive education, we recommend integrating social justice materials into the existing curriculum paired with (multi)literacy pedagogies. Formato (2020) calls instructors to integrate queer-pedagogy in the Italian classroom, creating materials that move beyond heteronormativity. The gender-just education project developed by Kris Aric Knisely (2022) provides innovative and practical ways to create a gender inclusive and non-binary foreign language teaching environment. The ACTFL's special publication in *The Language Educator*, titled *Diversifying Language Educators and Learners* (Anya & Randolph, 2019) is another great resource on how to foster diversity with a

special focus on power, agency, and equity representations.

We had the opportunity to follow one of the survey participants' journey for two semesters after the study, observing their decision to minor in Italian, and change their preferred name and pronouns. This suggests the importance of case studies, and of longitudinal studies in particular, that could reveal more transformative practices and agency development. One semester might not be enough to note whether these transformations took place. Furthermore, we, the authors, are white, female, heterosexual instructors. Our positionalities might be perceived as privileged and in power. We acknowledge our awareness that this might have influenced our participants' engagement.

The current state of the field, and the possibilities for forthcoming studies help us brightly envision the future of language education and research. Today, as we write our final words of this paper, the Supreme Court ended the constitutional right for women to make decisions about their bodies, and by doing so, they strengthened the power of patriarchy in American society. It is imperative that we continue our work centering on our learners' social shaping, providing them space for their lived experiences. This will contribute to a more inclusive and diverse language education from which we all can benefit.

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