

# LANGUAGE TEACHERS AND TEXTBOOKS AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS AND MEDIATORS

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## ABSTRACT

Teaching a foreign language abroad is a strong promotional tool. For this reason, it has always been recognized as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and soft power. In this strategy, the teacher and the textbook play the crucial role of cultural ambassadors, subject to the influence of many elements. The paper analyzes this role in different historical contexts and moments, with some considerations for the present that may inform further research in the field of Italian language teaching in the US.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Diplomacy, Language Teaching Ideology, Textbook Ideology, Intercultural Competence.

## THE PURPOSES OF TEACHING/LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Knowledge of a foreign language comes with knowledge of its culture and the people who live and speak it normally.<sup>1</sup> Motivation plays a key role in achieving this goal. Although with some differences, all scholars who have dealt with motivation divide it into two major areas: the first is a motivation that refers to the pleasure of learning a language and the desire to appreciate the culture, the curiosity to learn more about the people who speak it and the country where they live to the point of identifying with them and feeling part of that community.<sup>2</sup> The second one refers to the need or obligation to learn it. These two areas are variously defined: integrative motivation, intrinsic motivation, cultural motivation, when it is related to the pleasure of learning and thus to a voluntary and conscious choice to learn one language over another. The second major area, on the other hand, is identified as the need to learn a language for reasons having to do with duty rather than pleasure. In this case the language/culture to be learned is not chosen but is imposed. From school, parents, profession, etc. Scholars refer to this as extrinsic, instrumental, duty-related motivation. (Balboni 2006, Dorney e Ushoda 2009, Gardner 2010). However, motivation is a complex concept. All scholars agree that the two areas can

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<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that language and culture are closely interconnected. To emphasize this connection even more we will sometimes use the term language/culture here. On the close relationship between language and culture see as proposed and defined by Kramsh (1998) who speaks of “languageculture” and Risager (2005) who speaks instead of “languaculture.”

<sup>2</sup> We mention here only the names of Gardner, Dorney, Deci, and Balboni among Italian scholars engaged in this area of research.

coexist. Although pleasure-related motivation is particularly strong and effective in promoting learning, as every teacher has seen in his or her experience.

Even though one may be prevalent over the other, the learner of a language must necessarily come into contact with the people who speak it, with the customs and traditions of the other culture; he or she will want to visit the country where the language is dominant, to know and buy its cultural products, to become part, ultimately, of the community that is identified with the language/culture that the learner is studying. Hardly does this lead to developing a negative or even rejecting attitude toward that community, but rather, those who study a language/culture speak it and “live” it, develop a form of empathy or sympathy toward the culture and the people it represents.

Governments rely on this aspect. For them, language/culture teaching/learning also has political, economic, diplomatic therefore strategic value.

#### PUBLIC DIPLOMACY, CULTURAL DIPLOMACY SOFT POWER AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Public diplomacy is defined as the effort of a country to directly address the public of another nation to make itself known, to be appreciated, and thus to have its policies and products endorsed (Cull 2008). Public diplomacy is not necessarily conducted by diplomats through traditional channels. Rather, the main actors are governmental and nongovernmental agencies, international institutions, cultural institutions, prominent public figures and even ordinary citizens. Culture and its manifestations are the main topic of such communication. Public diplomacy thus becomes cultural diplomacy.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural exchange as a tool to foster mutual understanding, build relationships, and promote national interests between countries. It thus involves all cultural expressions, visual art, music films, tourism, architecture, design, etc.

The two concepts of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy are closely related to that of soft power. The notion of soft power was originally coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, when the fall of the Soviet Union caused a rethinking of the balances and hegemonies that until then had been established on force of arms. The idea of soft power, on the other hand, is based on the force of persuasion. According to Nye, it refers to “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It stems from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political

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<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the two terms are also used with the same meaning.

ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced” (Nye 2009, 1).

From these concise definitions, one can easily understand how language education is a key tool for public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and soft power. Through teaching/learning a foreign language/culture it is possible to read literature, see and listen to movies, understand song lyrics, read newspapers, watch TV, interact with people, eat typical cuisine, buy products, etc. And the more you know the language/culture, the more you want to travel the country and fully enjoy the experience. Therefore, it is possible to have full access to a country’s culture, its manifestations, and cultural products: through which a people’s opinions, customs, behaviors, values, ethics, and attitudes are expressed, ultimately knowing how they think. Governments have always been aware of this potential and have initiated forms of direct or indirect control over the educational offerings of their own language/culture as a tool of cultural diplomacy abroad. But also of the teaching of foreign languages at home.

Evidence of this are the institutes that, since the late nineteenth century, have been founded by governments for the purpose of promoting the teaching of language/culture and culture abroad with the aim of increasing not only the cultural, but also, and more importantly, the economic and political influence of the country system abroad.

The first were the Alliance Française in 1883 and the Dante Alighieri Society (1886), followed then by the Italian Cultural Institutes in 1926, the British Council in 1934 to the Goethe Institute born in 1951, the Instituto Cervantes, in 1991. Last are the Confucius Institutes, established in 2004.<sup>4</sup>

#### LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION IDEOLOGY

The government’s strategy implies an ideological will, that is, a specific vision of what it means to speak a language/culture. Academic literature defines language ideology as:

“Language ideologies,” “linguistic ideologies,” and “ideologies of language” are alternative labels for the same field of inquiry and are generally used interchangeably. Their focus is on ideologies that are in some crucial way about language itself, rather than all ideologies encoded in or through language. As most commonly understood now, ideologies of language are morally and politically loaded representa-

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<sup>4</sup> These are just a few. There are actually many others. For example, Denmark, Portugal, Poland, Japan, have all founded institutions aimed at promoting their language and culture abroad.

tions of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world.  
(Woolard 2021, 1)

These definitions are part of the research field of both anthropology and applied linguistics and also have implications for the field of language education.

Teachers, students and authors beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, dispositions, judgments, or pre-judgments -in addition to institutional language education policies are all variables that interact in defining the relationship with the foreign language/culture, returning an “image” of it.<sup>5</sup> They thus contribute to forming the complex system that we can call language education ideology.

Although all are important the strength of these variables in defining a language education ideology is not the same for all. Moreover, it can change over time and under certain circumstances.

We will see in the following paragraphs how governments and educational or diplomatic institutions can define language policy and can condition language education ideology.

With regard to domestic policy, it is a common and shared view that the main purpose of public education is to train citizens and educate them to respect the laws and the nation’s founding values.<sup>6</sup>

In democratic nations this ensures individual freedom and respect for the opinions of others, but in non-democratic nations education is and has always been one of the key tools in indoctrinating citizens and ensuring the survival of the dictatorship or regime.

Within the educational system, some subjects are particularly susceptible to control by the political system. Policies regarding language education are also aimed at forming citizens who respect institutions and the state. But precisely because knowledge of a foreign language/culture represents the opening of a window to the outside world, and thus provides access to uncontrollable information, to ideas that may be in opposition to those of the regime or the state, it has always been subject to special scrutiny.<sup>7</sup>

In foreign policy it can be used as an ideological and political weapon to propagandize a regime’s ideas outside. Or to defend against attempts to import values opposed to those of the state. Language/culture promotion

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<sup>5</sup> To which we must add the beliefs, perceptions, dispositions, etc. of families and society as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> The debate on these aspects of philosophy of education is very broad and is not relevant here.

<sup>7</sup> Clearly, in democratic systems, foreign language education has quite different goals, such as respect for diversity, development of intercultural competence, intercultural dialogue, what we can call “peace education.”

is no longer an instrument of cultural diplomacy, but of propaganda. In such cases, the teaching of a foreign Language/culture and promotional interventions can become a battleground between countries: the one promoting the Language/culture and the one in which it is taught.

Such a tension could certainly be unloaded on the two key figures: teachers and textbook authors. If nations are in some sort of ideological or economic competition or even conflict, the pressure and control on them could be very strong.

#### TEACHERS AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

All the most recent methodological approaches, from communicative to socio-cultural and constructivist, emphasize that language competence is only one of many skills needed to act effectively in a foreign language/culture. All the major Standards, from the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* to *ACTFL's World Readiness Standards for Language Learning*, emphasize how the learner must become a social actor who knows how to act appropriately both linguistically and culturally in the different situations he or she will face when interacting with native speakers. In formal learning, students can and will be confronted with different situations, texts, and tasks that will enable them to develop the skills necessary to achieve the intended objectives.

The choice of texts, activities, tasks and situations depends on the course syllabus and textbook. It is the teacher's responsibility to manage its timing, modes and content. Although not always with the same freedom. This depends on many factors. If the school or educational institution provides a curriculum, syllabus or even mandates the choice of a textbook, the teacher will have relative freedom, conditioned by higher specifications. In any case, the teacher does not merely give information about social and cultural aspects, but inevitably suggests an interpretation that may influence the student.

Similarly, the choice of cultural products, practices and perspectives made by the authors of a textbook to represent the society and culture of the country where the language/culture is spoken influences the student's interpretation.

Therefore, we can say that authors and teachers have to handle two representations:

- ✓ The objective one. That is, attempting to describe without prejudice a certain country.

- ✓ The subjective one. In which the description of reality is filtered through a personal interpretation of that reality.

Both positions are idealized and extreme, and the reality is certainly much more complex and relativized. We know that authors, but especially teachers in their daily practice, move with a constant tension between these two positions. They are aware that the second representation implies an ethical question. Indeed, there is a risk of embellishing the image of a country, emphasizing its positive aspects and minimizing its negative ones. Or of simply removing some aspects to focus on others with the more or less conscious result of distorting reality. This risk is both present in an L2 context i.e. where language and culture outside the classroom are the dominant ones, and in an LS context, where instead language can only be practiced within the formal educational context and culture and social relations can only be simulated.

But abroad the risk is certainly higher. In that context, the teacher is the major or sometimes the only mediator between the two or more cultures. He is the representative of the target culture. The one who knows the social rules and knows how relational dynamics work. Even today although the net allows students immediate access to information, events and cultural representations, the teacher continues to serve as a filter that can influence the interpretation of the target culture.

The ways in which a teacher decides to present and interpret the practices, cultural products, and social dynamics, that govern the life of the country in which the language he or she is teaching is spoken are influenced by a variety of factors.

Among such conditioning factors, an important role is played by the emotional one, the emotional relationship a teacher has with the language/culture and culture he or she teaches. This relationship may be influenced, for example, by his or her personal experiences. In fact, the L2 teachers most likely maintains strong ties to the country where the language/culture they teach is spoken.

If they are not native speakers, they certainly have spent some time in the target country where they have had a chance to learn the cultural rules that govern social life and know how to use them correctly. And they probably go back there from time to time. They have managed in this way to build strong and solid social relationships with the local community. It is very likely that this path of their discovery and learning has gone through various trials and has not always been easy. They may have experienced situations of cultural conflict, caused by culture shock in the confrontation

between their own beliefs and the cultural norms of the host country. Cultural adaptation may then have proved problematic and reinforced some stereotypes or pre-judgments instead of resolving them. This may continue to affect them in presenting the culture of the language they are teaching to their students.

Teachers might instead have been born in the country and left it when they were very young with their parents. They might therefore have a “heritage” relationship with the country of origin, filtered by the culture in which they grew up and of which they feel part, by their parents, and by the community of people with whom they share that origin and with whom they have social relations.

Instead, they may have recently left their home country specifically to go and teach abroad, and they see this as a success in their work, or they may have been “forced” for various reasons to leave their country, toward which they have some resentment for this very reason.

Motivations, then, can be many, these in turn elicit reactions, including emotional ones, that can affect the kind of relationship with the language, culture, and country that can then influence the way they present them to their students.

Personal experience, background, education, even character, help define not only the identity of the teacher, but also that of each student who makes up the class. To which is added the identity, values, and opinions of the textbook authors. And other more external but still important factors such as the educational language policies of the school and government.

#### TEXTBOOKS AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

If one were to ask a teacher what a textbook is and what it is used for we would probably have answers that emphasize how books are a key resource of information, provide teaching activities for the class to work with, also represent a syllabus to follow, etc.

It is clear to anyone, experienced teacher or not, student, families, how textbooks are one of the most important educational tools. They are the source of information that is given the most credibility, but at the same time they have also often been the source of much controversy precisely over the choice of content and its reliability and neutrality. There has always been a lively debate among specialists about the “impartiality” and truthfulness of textbooks, whether they correctly report events or correctly represent a culture. Many experts say that textbooks legitimize and convey only those dominant cultural values and beliefs that serve the purpose of creating national unity, deliberately omitting others (Apple 1999).

Others point out that “A textbook can be a teacher, a map, a trainer, a resource, an authority and an ideology” (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999), highlighting precisely the possible bias of their interpretation.

Guides have often been produced to assess the transparency and trustworthiness of textbooks. The purpose is to provide guidance for authors, teachers, experts, curriculum developers, etc. UNESCO (2009, 1) has also addressed this issue by publishing a guidebook that is meant to serve:

as a useful guide for peace-oriented approaches to textbook studies, seminars and projects aiming at the modernisation of content and methodology in the field of social studies, and, in particular, at overcoming biased presentations of different cultures, religions or issues of national pride.

Textbooks are never a neutral vehicle in forming and transforming knowledge. They are capable of proposing interpretations of reality that serve the interests of particular groups and shape learners’ understanding of social reality.

Foreign language textbooks, precisely because of their strong cultural and intercultural content, addressing learners from other cultures, have also always been at the center of the debate on the need to present other cultures in correct ways, avoiding stereotypes and pre-judgments.

Gray points out that language textbooks are the result of a decision-making process in which the interests, beliefs, and values of the [authors] play a key role (2010, 1). He also states that (2000, 274):

ELT materials produced in Britain and the United States for use in classrooms around the world are sources not only of grammar, lexis, and activities for language practice, but, like Levi’s jeans and Coca Cola, commodities which are imbued with cultural promise. In the case of ELT coursebooks, it is the promise of entry into an international speech community which is represented in what tend to be very idealized terms.

Language textbooks contain the official view of dominant cultural knowledge. By studying through these books, international students learn to recognize and interpret aspects of a particular national identity. Textbooks are cultural artifacts that contain particular ideologies and legitimize specific patterns of knowledge. Because the public tends to associate them with truth rather than opinion, textbooks can contribute to the circulation of specific (and partial) representations and stereotypes. And to present them through the lens of the authors.

Textbooks and their authors can also be in a difficult balance between an objective and a subjective representation. But they can also be manipulated by those who deliberately pursue a propaganda purpose through a distorted representation of a culture. We will see in the following paragraphs some examples along these lines.

#### THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE/CULTURE AS A PROPAGANDA TOOL.

We mentioned earlier that the promotion of language/culture as an instrument of cultural diplomacy can become propaganda especially in the presence of a precise persuasion strategy.

This is what happens, for example, in authoritarian regimes. Fascism, Nazism, communism, have always regarded education as a key tool for maintaining their power at home and improving their image abroad.

Nazism, for example, launched an intensive campaign to promote the German language abroad. As Hollm (2004, 3) writes, Nazi Germany intended to spread German as a lingua franca in Europe. And even in countries such as the United States it initiated an intensive propaganda campaign through the teaching of German language and culture.

Within Nazi Germany, the racist vision of fascism was extended to the teaching of foreign languages: the teaching of Germanic languages was favored at the expense of Romance and Slavic languages and French in particular. English, as a Germanic language became the most taught language, followed by Latin, as evidence of the Nazi regime’s admiration for the Roman Empire (Hollm 2004, 2-3.) During World War II, attitudes toward English changed completely and Great Britain began to be portrayed as a false, untrustworthy, inferior race nation where the English aristocracy was conditioned by Jews (Hollm 2004, 4). See, for example, Figures 1 and 2:

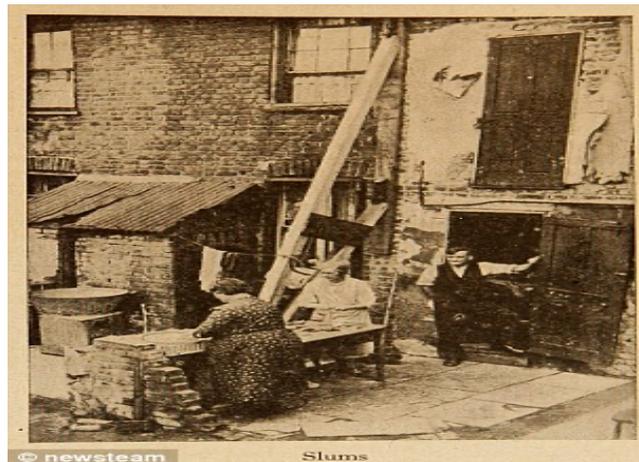


Fig. 1 Hirt’s Englandkundliches Lesebuch für die Oberstufe an Oberschulen (1942)

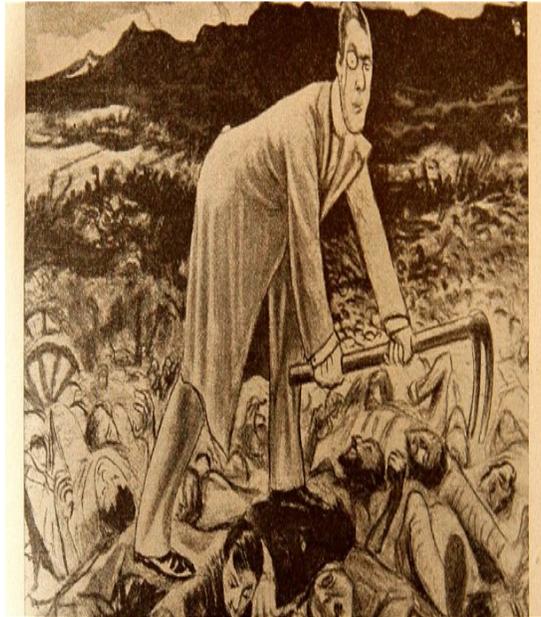


Fig. 2 Hirt's *Englandkundliches Lesebuch für die Oberstufe an Oberschulen* (1942)

Figure 1 depicts the slums in which, according to the Nazis, the British working class lived, who, as is depicted in Fig. 2, were exploited by the aristocrats. The intent was clear: to provide a false representation of the enemy, the ruling class, and to justify the war.

In the Soviet Union, the regime embarked on a strong campaign of Russification and adoption of Russian as a *lingua franca* internally and in the nations that were part of its sphere of influence. (Ornstein 1959). Interest in foreign languages, with the onset of the Cold War and the closure to the outside world, dropped considerably but recovered with the Khrushchev era and until the 1980s when the Soviet Union opened up more and more to the outside world (Ivanova and Tivyaeva 2015). On the reasons why foreign languages, particularly English, were taught, however, it is interesting to report the words of a prominent linguist Aneta Pavlenko (2010) who begins one of her articles with a personal note:

As a Soviet teenager studying foreign languages, I witnessed early on how much foreign-language (FL) study in the USSR was permeated with ideology and propaganda. My inculcation process started in 1975 when as a fifth grader I chose my foreign language, English, and attended the first class. The teacher welcomed us with a passionate speech: ‘My dear fifth graders, today is a very important day in your life – you are starting to study English. Your knowledge of this lan-

guage will prove crucial when we are at war with the imperialist Britain and United States and you will have to decode and translate intercepted messages. (313)

The scholar’s words are confirmed by a few pages from English language books used in schools in the Soviet Union in the 1960s in which the ideological use of language is evident:

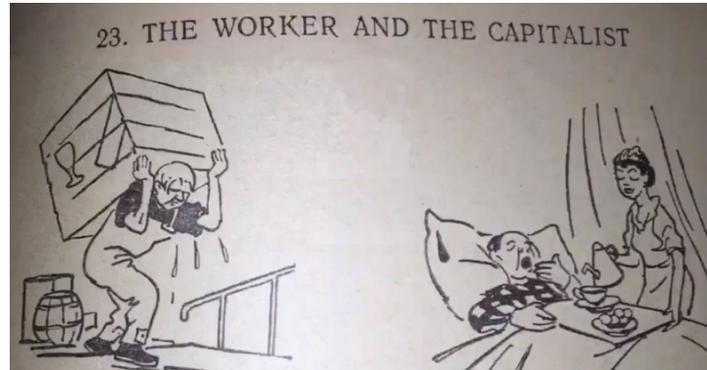


Fig. 3. English in pictures (1959)

In Fig. 3 it can be interpreted as an attempt to depict an authentic scene of life in an English-speaking country where the worker is clearly exploited by the capitalist. This ideological intent is already evident in the title of the lesson “We Love Our Mother Country” shown in Fig. 4 where the image of Stalin accompanies a text extolling “the great leader comrade”:



Fig. 4 English in pictures (1959)

Somewhat amusing, however, is Figure 5 where we see a group of “pioneers” marching along a road with red flags. It is a scene that can hardly be taken as an example of cultural contextualization.

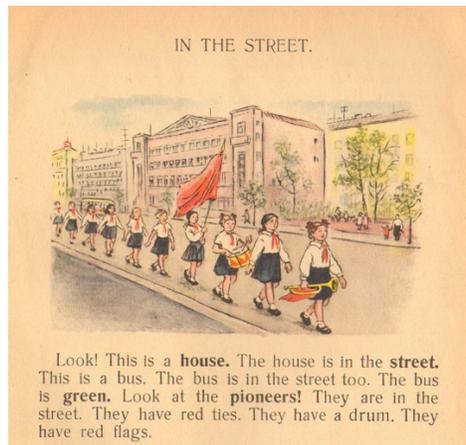


Fig. 5 English in pictures (1959)

Over the past two decades, China has developed a very aggressive policy of promoting Chinese (Mandarin) language teaching abroad. Since 2004, when the first branch was opened in Seoul, there are now more than 500 institutes opened in dozens of countries on all continents. In recent years, Chinese cultural diplomacy has often been criticized, and some scholars and policymakers have spoken of “sharp power” rather than “soft power.” In the United States, for example, since the first one opened in 2004 at the University of Maryland, it has grown to 120 Institutes in just a few years. Now, however, only about 30 remain open.<sup>8</sup> Concerns about propaganda use of the Institutes have also grown in the European Union, and many countries have decided to close or to review agreements.<sup>9</sup> Some countries such as Finland have accused the Institutes of having espionage purposes.<sup>10</sup>

Within the country, foreign language teaching has been conditioned by ideology, just as it was in the Soviet Union. Even until recent times. This conditioning has led to considering foreign language learning solely for utilitarian purposes, trying to “cleanse” it of more cultural connotations. As Yeting Liu (2015, 66):

<sup>8</sup> Si veda <https://china.usc.edu/confucius-institutes-united-states>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/644207/EPRSATA\(2019\)644207EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/644207/EPRSATA(2019)644207EN.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/shortnews/finland-shuts-down-confucius-institute-amid-censorship-espionage-accusations/>.

[...] the wax and wane of this instrumentalist view of foreign languages and the fear of cultural infiltration manifested in China’s FLEP have accompanied the demise and formation of different governments up to the 21st century.

Especially in English language textbooks published in the 1960s-70s, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, one can find references to ideology, a Chinese contextualization, and a total lack of English or American cultural references.

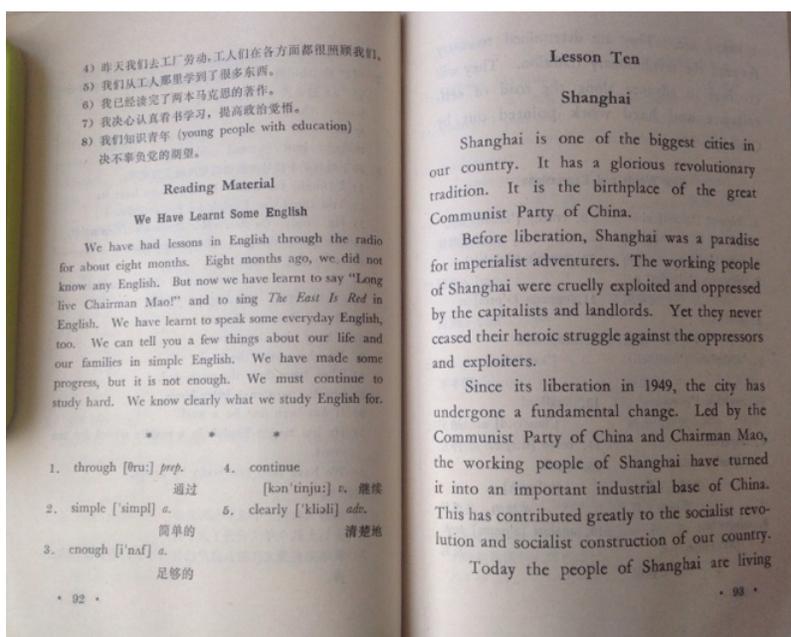


Fig. 5

The text of Lesson Ten narrates that before the liberation of the city of Shanghai by the Chinese Communist Party led by Chairman Mao, “the working people of Shanghai were cruelly exploited and oppressed by capitalists and landowners.” While in the reading “We have learned some English,” the proud students claim to have learned to say, “Long live Chairman Mao” and sing “The East is red.” The reading ends with a convincing statement “We clearly know what we are studying English for.” As a final example, we cite that of Italian language teaching abroad during Fascism. The propagandistic use made by the fascist regime of teaching Italian language abroad is well known. For example, teachers who were sent by the regime to teach Italian abroad had to take an oath whose formula was (Cavarocchi 2010):

Sul mio onore ed in piena consapevolezza dei miei doveri prometto solennemente:

- Di educare gli studenti ai più puri sentimenti di amore per il nostro paese e alla più profonda devozione al Re e alle istituzioni della madrepatria.
- Di far sorgere nei miei studenti non italiani il senso di ammirazione e rispetto che l'Italia merita.
- Infine, prometto di svolgere un'energica azione di propaganda dell'italianità e soprattutto, di armonia nella colonia cosicché si stabilisca un fascio di volontà che porti alla prosperità economica dell'Italia e al suo maggiore prestigio politico nel mondo.

Especially where immigrant communities were large and strong, fascism sought to use Italian language teaching to promote its image, using emigrants as a fifth column within the country in which they had begun a new life. See for example Dolci (2018) and the references cited there on how fascism used Italian language teaching in the United States.

Fascism invested a lot of money and resources to promote itself abroad through the Italian language and culture. With this specific purpose it founded the Italian Cultural Institutes in 1926 and the University for Foreigners in Perugia in 1925. He financed Italian professorships and Italian schools abroad. He offered scholarships to study in Italy, started an intense publishing activity specifically for the public abroad, particularly for students of Italian. With widespread distribution throughout the world. See, for example, Figure 6, which shows a page from a book for elementary schools abroad:

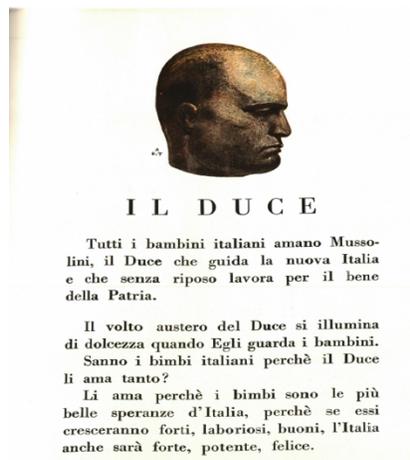


Fig. 6 Letture Classe Prima. Bagagli, C. 1938

Or a page from a high school periodical where the teaching activity is aimed at justifying the invasion of Ethiopia.

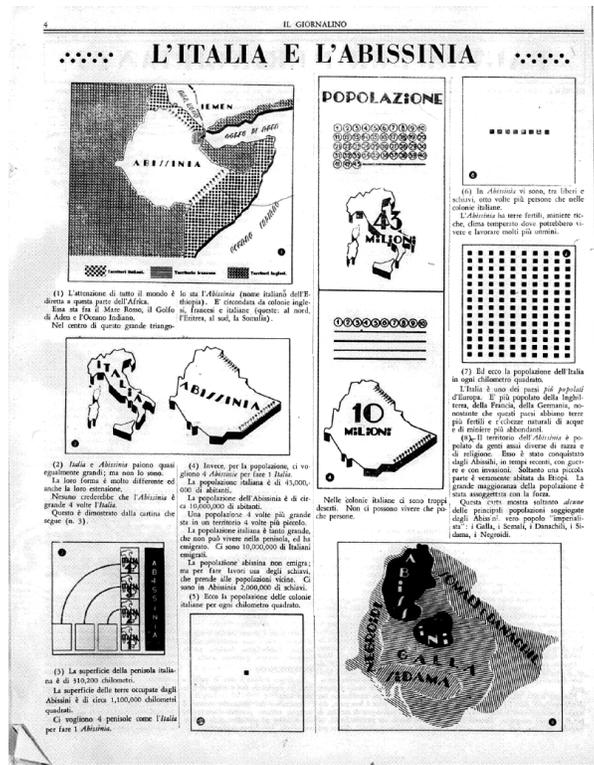


Fig. 7 Il Giornalino, 1935.

In Italy, fascism initiated a protectionist policy of the Italian language against foreignisms. In schools, fascism did not cancel the teaching of foreign languages, although it especially favored the teaching of German, but emphasized its study with utilitarian and practical purposes (Rapisarda 2016).

THE INTERCULTURAL APPROACH

The examples we have seen in the previous paragraphs represent deliberate distortion of culture for propaganda purposes. But even when language/culture teaching aims to educate respect, mutual knowledge and understanding, and dialogue, there is always a “risk” even if minimal, of “conditioning” the representation of a culture.

Every teacher and every textbook author know that in a course it is impossible to address all cultural practices and present their products, analyzing them from all points of view. One is still forced to make a selection. But in this way, one risks, precisely, to impose an interpretation, to feed

stereotypes or prejudices. And above all, one does not enable the student to develop his or her own idea.

Scholars and researchers developed various approaches and methods that could provide the proper tools for students to interpret foreign cultures without falling into the construction of stereotypes and prejudices.

Although all approaches, even the most grammatical or instrumental cannot do without culture, it is from the communicative approach onward that a proper scientific debate has developed on how to present and teach it. The approach that has most developed scientific reflection on the ways and purposes of teaching culture is the intercultural approach (Byram 2008). The fundamental notion that this approach holds is that of intercultural competence.

A student develops intercultural competence when he or she can recognize the attitudes, customs, and behaviors of another culture, can interpret them, and can properly use the cultural practices that carry them out, and develops an attitude of openness, curiosity, and acceptance toward cultural diversity.

The emphasis then shifts from knowledge, that is, from *savoir*, to focus on *savoir faire* to do and *savoir etre*. Intercultural competence then becomes an integral part of communicative competence and goes to form intercultural communicative competence.

Thus, it is not only a matter of transferring knowledge by presenting the cultural manifestations of a given culture and the practices that govern them, but above all, it is a matter of having students develop critical thinking, openness, and awareness that would make them become citizens of the world.

Consequently, the necessary selection one is forced to make in the presentation of culture is aimed at building the student’s intercultural competence and awareness. Thus, the role of the teacher and the textbook as mediators between the student’s culture, or rather, the students’ cultures, and the culture of the language being learned become even more essential.

All of us as teachers have been faced with the dilemma of presenting only positive or even fewer positive aspects of Italian culture. Often textbooks focus on certain themes that tend to reinforce stereotypes. Some topics, certainly particularly complex, are not addressed or summarily and partially mentioned. It is understandable that dealing with topics such as the Mafia and organized crime, corruption or terrorism involves a task that not all teachers feel able to tackle, especially without support provided by textbooks. But it is also important to stimulate a comparison between Italian cultures and those of students. Intercultural competence, in fact, not

only addresses other cultures, but also provides the tools to better reflect on one’s own.

Most likely there is no right answer to the question of whether and what cultural events or products should or should not be presented and addressed. Certainly, the ultimate choice is left to the teacher who is often left alone to make this decision. But whether in the choice of a textbook or any supplementary materials, the analysis should not be limited to the presence of as much information about Italian culture as possible, but on whether it is presented from a perspective that helps the development of critical thinking, awareness and intercultural competence.

#### CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude this brief essay — which certainly did not provide answers but hopefully provide food for thought and stimulated further necessary research — with some brief considerations and especially open questions.

The role of teachers is increasingly complex and multifaceted. They are teachers, tutors, and advisers, they are also mediators and cultural ambassadors. They are also active subjects of cultural diplomacy and, as well, possible instruments of propaganda. This role they share with the authors of the textbooks and, thus, with the materials. But theirs is still and always the last word. They are the ones on the front line, and it is they who are crucial in the construction (or destruction) of a country’s image, presentation of cultural practices and products.

Their role is essential in training students to develop intercultural competence and awareness to correctly interpret and defend against propaganda. Certainly, many are aware of this, but they often become so through experience, not through specific training.

The role of foreign language teaching in Cultural Diplomacy is a sensitive and strategic topic that should be addressed in all continuing initial training courses.

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