Enhancing Foreign Language Learning and Interaction Inside and Outside the Classroom Through Video Streaming Services

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Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic completely disrupted people's lives and teaching methodologies, instructors and researchers have incessantly worked to find new ways to incorporate the latest technologies to create engaging learning environments both in online and blended courses.

One of the major concerns for language educators has been ensuring that all students could achieve effective learning experiences and receive enough opportunities to practice the target language by interacting with their peers and instructors alike, even in a virtual setting.

On the one hand, Zoom (in addition to similar platforms) has proved to be an effective venue to present content both in synchronous and asynchronous modes, foster collaborative work, and record live sessions that students could pause, rewind, and re-watch at their own pace. But, on the other hand, many instructors have shared the suspicion that Veronica Vegna mentioned in her reflections on teaching through the pandemic: Zoom, like other virtual platforms and environments, often "hinders communication" (Vegna 48) in any course, but especially in language courses. Indeed, in face-to-face instruction, teachers usually promote interaction—a crucial component in second or foreign language acquisition (Loewen and Sato 2018)—through pairs or group discussion, dialogues, role-playing exercises, and specific oral activities, which sometimes cannot be adapted to or are not conducive to meaningful interaction if directly transposed into the online format or the breakout room model.

Hence, language educators have searched for practices and tools that could foster interaction even in remote instruction. Many researchers have observed that the internet, TV, pop culture, and, more recently, streaming can motivate students outside the classroom and can positively affect the development of their linguistic and culture competencies (Lin & Siyanova-Chanturia 2014, Murray 2008, Alm 2019, Dizon 2018 and 2021). Specifically, Gilbert Dizon has shown the great potential of Video on Demand (VOD) services, particularly Netflix, as a powerful tool to enhance foreign language instruction at all levels. Drawing on these studies and my experience in implementing VOD in teaching Advanced Italian II remotely (in Spring 2021),

this contribution aims to show how streaming services were optimal tools to promote student discussion and participation in online classes and to make synchronous and asynchronous instruction more fluid and connected.

Given the popularity of streaming video services, more and more consumers have chosen to subscribe to Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, HBO Max, YouTube Premium, Apple TV, Disney+, or Netflix, which although its recent loss, emerged as a leader in the VOD market with 221.8 million global members in 2021.[1] As expected, the number of subscriptions significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which crucially shaped users' viewing habits and practices.[2] Similarly, streaming services' use for pedagogical purposes has risen exponentially in the last two years since many language educators have leveraged Netflix in foreign language instruction. Several studies have proved that Netflix can significantly benefit students' learning experience of a second language since it allows them to watch foreign films or TV series in their original version or dubbed and with subtitles in their native or target language.

Specifically, Dizon has discussed how Netflix can provide learners with opportunities to hear the target language in a context, interact with an authentic input, develop, and practice crucial skills (such as listening comprehension and vocabulary learning), improve pronunciation and intonation, introduce different aspects of the target culture, and discuss topics or issues that are relevant to students' lives (Dizon 2018). Many of the advantages listed above are indeed valid for films or authentic videos in general, but what is at stake with video streaming services, and particularly with Netflix, is that students are already familiar with this tool, and they know and use it in their daily routines. Similarly, Dizon continues, Netflix allows a great dose of flexibility compared to TV or movie viewing because users can access content not only on their laptops but also on smartphones, tablets, game consoles, as well as televisions. It also permits students to pause and repeat viewings of scenes or films and offers complementary applications such as the Chrome Extension "Language Learning with Netflix" and "Netflix Party" that provide dual subtitles, control speed, and collaborative viewings respectively, all of which can "enhance the language experience" (Dizon 2021: 14). Hence Netflix appears an ideal tool for achieving language learning purposes, although, as Dizon observes, it does not come without potential drawbacks. For instance, the cost of a monthly subscription and the complexity of colloquial expressions, slang, or even inappropriate language have been identified as possible

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[1] For more information about numbers and subscriptions see Tony Maglio. See also Alex Hern.
[2] See also Michael Brenzel.

downsides (Dizon 2021:11). However, instructors can easily overcome these challenges by identifying alternatives that best respond to students' needs and guiding them in their learning processes.[3]

I have been using Netflix for educational purposes since 2011, basically, since I started teaching Italian at a university level. Mainly, in pre-pandemic times, I used it to show clips from movies or TV series in class to attract students' attention and introduce new vocabulary or infer grammatical and cultural aspects of the target language. Then, depending on their level and proficiency, students would watch the video clips with English or Italian subtitles and would complete short communicative activities that aimed at developing a specific skill or discussing a cultural topic. In the past, I have designed teaching materials based on Italian films or American TV series dubbed in Italian or with Italian subtitles to cater content to students' interests. However, Advanced Italian II, a bridge course for students in their fifth or sixth semester of the language sequence, requires a different approach because it is entirely designed around an Italian film, used as a source of authentic language and meaningful input as well as a point of departure to explore contemporary Italian culture.

When I joined the University of Pennsylvania during the pandemic and started planning this course for Spring 2021, I wondered whether the original course format could have worked in a virtual setting or if new digital tools, out-of-class activities, and new practices were needed. I found Kieran Donaghy's "Using Film to Teach Languages in a World of Screens" inspiring and rich in ideas that could be easily adapted to the needs of online teaching. Donaghy identifies an alternative methodology to screen the whole film in one sitting, proposing multiple viewing sessions, which students could have done at home (Donaghy 11). Following his suggestions, I planned to devote class time to pre-view activities and preliminary discussions on Zoom. Students instead could watch and re-watch the assigned film scenes at home and do the post-viewing activities in class during the next meeting.

This pedagogical model included some aspects of the "flipped classroom approach," which UPenn students already used before the pandemic and required them to complete pre-class activities so they can spend more in-class time performing interactive assignments. Hence, I believed this model would have helped me to create a more vibrant learning environment, increase the

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[3] Students can consult with Student Financial Services to find out what support they are eligible to receive to cover course and material costs. Instructors can also recommend that students share streaming services' memberships and accounts or check if the film is available on other platforms. In special cases, weekly group screenings can be organized. From a linguistic point of view, instructors can signal when the film adopts inappropriate language or slang and offer explanations and suggestions to translate those occurrences into a formal or more appropriate register/context.

interaction between students and teacher, and engage "the students in learning through application and practice" (Danker 174). Equally importantly, I thought this model would allow students to join the sessions prepared and more motivated to share their experiences and findings.

The next step was to review the learning goals required for the course and the ACTFL criteria related to the level and search for an Italian film that could satisfy those objectives and whose content offered stimulating perspectives to investigate the culture of Italy. At the time, *L' uomo senza gravità* (2019), a film directed by Marco Bonfanti, was available on Netflix USA. Combining comedy and drama, this "modern fairy tale" (Vosa 2019) tells the story of Oscar Clerichetti, a special kid who struggles his whole life in search of freedom and acceptance by society. I chose this film because it could encourage a discussion of central themes, such as diversity and exclusion, and the depiction of physical abilities and disabilities in Italian culture. Moreover, it could serve as a starting point to encourage the analysis of gender roles in Italian matriarchal families, youth unemployment, the influence of the USA in Italian society and pop culture, and to critique portraits of consumerism, the influence of TV on people's lives, and the complex relationship between fiction and reality.

After choosing the film and the streaming platform, it was necessary to consider different options in case not all the students enrolled in Advanced Italian II used Netflix or had a valid membership to this streaming service. Thus, I included a specific question in a pre-course survey that students needed to complete in our Learning Management System (Canvas) a week before the classes started.[4] I found out that all students enrolled regularly used Netflix and that no alternative arrangements were necessary. That allowed me to implement VOD in Advanced Italian II and to design an online course that would provide students with a different and more organic learning experience—using digital materials and a balance between synchronous and asynchronous work.

Specifically, students were asked to watch the assigned scenes at their leisure following a weekly schedule posted on the Canvas modules. The activities that complemented the film's vision followed the traditional PPP framework (Preview, Practice, Production) with the difference that students were required to complete pre-viewing activities in class and while-viewing and post-viewing tasks both inside and outside the classroom. In-class activities always included a warm-up phase, where learners needed to share their

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[4] As suggested by the Center for Teaching and Learning of the University of Pennsylvania, our program instructors conducted a confidential pre-course survey during the pandemic to learn more about their students and collect information about their learning preferences and experiences.

thoughts while watching the scenes, the visual details that caught their attention, and their comments on the characters' actions or decisions. Often, in these moments, students shared their answers to not only the assignments but also the results of their research or work that they did independently. These student behaviors seemed to confirm one of Dizon's findings of Netflix's use for language learning and, specifically, its impact on students' ability to work autonomously (Dizon 2021: 2). Similarly, during the synchronous sessions, students analyzed the scenes from a cinematic point of view, rehearsed the film's dialogue and the target language in general, reviewed grammatical content, and discussed cultural topics. While as homework, students completed post-viewing tasks that aimed to introduce and to reinforce vocabulary, to check comprehension, and to practice reading skills or to complete assignments related to other material presented in class.

L'uomo senza gravità also provided students with different opportunities to refine their critical thinking and experience multimodal learning. Indeed, they read some pages of *Batman* (Oscar's favorite superhero) and recorded some dialogues they found in the comic strips; analyzed Italo Calvino's tale "L'uomo che usciva solo di notte" (which Oscar uses to teach his friend how to read) and some excerpts that describe "la leggerezza" (from Calvino's *Lezioni americane*, which seemed to inspire the director in different moments of the film).[5] Moreover, students researched Raffaella Carrà, Agata's idol in the film, listened to her songs and discussed articles that measured her influence on women's emancipation. In addition, they analyzed clips of specific Italian TV programs that speculated on people's problems and sorrows just to reach a wide audience (crucial in the film is the specialist correspondent Carla Cartei).

Furthermore, the course included some opportunities to work collaboratively. For instance, students created an interactive map of the places where the film was shot with Padlet.[6] In small groups, the class analyzed the language of commercials and worked to create a product's advertisement, emulating Oscar's own backpack commercial. Students participated in a debate after reading Pier Paolo Pasolini's article "Sfida ai dirigenti della televisione" (1973) and discussed the pros and cons of contemporary mass and social media. They also researched and presented some TV programs in their own culture that could be the equivalent of *Uomini Straordinari* in the film and wrote an email to participate in the show.

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[5] See Sentieri Selvaggi's interview with Marco Bonfanti.
[6] An online noticeboard that allows students to collaborate and practice multimodal learning by posting texts, images, videos, and voice recordings.

In my experience, leveraging Netflix to enhance language and culture learning during the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be successful for several reasons. I observed that students worked on their home assignments more consistently than in previous semesters. Netflix also allowed them flexibility since they could access the film from different devices or even download and play it when the Internet or WIFI was unavailable. Most importantly, student engagement increased tremendously both in and out of class. As students indicated in the informal mid-term course evaluations, using Netflix and its applications motivated them to learn Italian and positively affected their learning experience since they perceived that the course content and the tools used were close to their everyday life. Similarly, implementing Netflix in the course facilitated different types of interaction (student-content, student-student, and student-teacher interaction) both in Canvas and during the virtual meetings. Through interaction, which includes "listening to others, talking to others, negotiating meaning in a shared context" (Rivers 4), learners increased their communicative competence as they listened, read, or discussed authentic material as well as the output of their classmates. Moreover, interaction provided students with several opportunities to discover and discuss aspects of the target culture and gain an inside view of other learners' cultures.

From a methodological point of view, implementing Video on Demand services in the course required adapting existing technologies and practices related to film literacy and the flipped classroom approach so that they could best serve the needs of blended instruction. Students can benefit from this platform to improve their language skills, can broaden their linguistic and cultural competences, and can develop a deeper awareness of the practices, products, and perspectives of the target culture.

Finally, given the scholarly consensus and our encouraging results, this model was also adopted for teaching Advanced Italian II in person in Spring 2022. Despite the crucial change in the teaching modality (from blended to in class), we observed similar results. Specifically, the implementation of digital tools and VOD in our courses enhanced students' engagement and participation in class discussion, promoted several opportunities for independent study, contributed to making in-class and out-of-class language learning more connected and cohesive, positively affected their learning experience, and increased their confidence with the target language.

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