

BLACK ITALIANS AND THE CASE OF *ZERO*:
DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH AUTHENTIC
AUDIOVISUALS IN THE BEGINNER ITALIAN CLASSROOM

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When it comes to *realia* or authentic materials, which to use, when, and how to use them in the language classroom is a potentially never-ending source of opportunity, excitement, discovery, and—many instructors would concur—chagrin. While written authentic materials have long found a somewhat stable collocation within lesson plans and tests at the college level (and increasingly already in the K-12 system), audiovisual materials not conceived for language learners have had a harder time being incorporated—at least systematically—in beginner courses and have traditionally been more prominently employed in intermediate and advanced ones. But films, television and web series, podcasts, and YouTube videos present such a rich repository of pedagogical opportunities that to regard them as occasional “extras” or, as I mentioned, to confine them to upper-level courses is a limitation in need of being addressed. This contribution explores the use of audiovisual *realia* to both enhance students’ linguistic learning and develop a more comprehensive intercultural competence on issues at stake in contemporary Italy. Specifically, it stems from a project developed within first-semester Italian classes at the University of Alabama, a large, public, R1 institution. The recent Netflix original series *Zero* (2021), portraying the extraordinary adventures of a group of young Black Italians in a fictional Milanese neighborhood, was embedded in the syllabus, almost becoming an additional audiovisual “textbook” to complement and expand the traditional course materials. Thanks to the unique, and still largely marginalized, perspective presented in *Zero*,¹ students had the opportunity to learn about a reality that is too often left out of textbooks, especially those designed for early Italian learners. In this article, I contextualize this project within the rich scholarly debate concerning the teaching of culture in the language classroom, especially relying on the use of authentic audiovisual materials.² I problematize this by asking *what* these materials might be today, *why* they should

¹ *Zero* is the first Italian series focusing on the lives of Black Italians and based on the work of a Black Italian writer, Antonio Dikele Distefano. This product, however, is not an isolated one. In the panorama of Black Italian filmmaking, the works and activism of Fred Kudjo Kuwornu have helped pave the way for other Black Italian voices. Most notably, his documentaries *18 ins soli: il diritto di essere italiani* (2011) and *Blaxploitation: 100 Years of Black Italian Cinema* (2016) have brought issues of subalternity, human rights, and media representation to the forefront of public discussion, in and out of academia.

² On this topic more broadly, see Martínez-Flor 2007, 245-280.

be incorporated at all, and offer a few ideas as to *how* to incorporate them at the very beginning of a student’s journey into the Italian language and culture.

1. CULTURE IN/AS LANGUAGE TEACHING

The place of culture in the language classroom is a topic that has spurred debate, and continues to do so, not only among instructors, but also among students. Several scholars have pointed out that, while most foreign language students in the US are eager to learn about the target culture, it is not uncommon for some learners to feel intimidated by it (Kramsch 2013, 59). The feeling of unease can also be shared by instructors who are not native speakers of the target language, careful as they might be about imparting knowledge about a culture they might only know as “outsiders” (Kramsch 2013, 59). While there might undoubtedly be some truth to this sentiment, the issue is further complicated by the fact that even teachers who are native speakers, were raised within the target culture and are, for all intents and purposes, intimately familiar with the cultural codes they plan to teach in the classroom, are not absolute, all-knowing authorities. In the case of Italian, for instance, it is widely known that local identities play an enormous role in the experience of Italian culture one might encounter. Matters, however, are not just complicated by the inherent—and arguably proud—internal fragmentation of Italian identities according to geography; they, as this article intends to highlight, are also complicated by the increasingly notable shifts at play in the very make-up of contemporary Italian society. The experiences of migrants and their progeny—first-generation Italians and beyond—need to be included in the picture alongside, say, the well-known dichotomy between North and South, and so forth. Teaching these experiences is fortunately becoming more and more widespread, at least in North American academia, although, to this day, it is mostly confined to “content” courses or advanced language ones. The perspective of who is teaching the migrant experience in Italy is also largely that of, yet again, “outsiders” who tend to be third-party observers of this phenomenon, no matter how qualified they might be. When it comes to the elementary and intermediate levels, incorporating the new faces of Italy and Italians while still providing students with a comprehensive outlook on local identities and, certainly not least, enhancing their progress in the target language, can be nothing short of a monumental task. The challenge, however, is a necessary one; and while techniques and learning goals may vary, it is important for instructors—native and non-native speakers alike—to meet the moment and problematize the stereotypical, postcard Italy framework that is generally expected, especially in the US.

As Anthony J. Liddicoat argues, culture has long been regarded as “some sort of fifth macro-skill, which is introduced once the skills of speaking,

listening, reading and writing have been established” (Liddicoat 2004, 18). The scholar continues to point out that this attitude has been favored by the very structures of textbooks, which tend to feature cultural sections of varying length as something resembling sidenotes to the grammatical and/or lexical topics presented in a chapter. In contrast to this attitude, H. Douglas Brown reinforced the notion that language and culture are so deeply intertwined that “the acquisition of a second language [...] is also the acquisition of a second culture” (Brown 2007, 177; also see Balboni 2018, 116). To this effect, the idea of content-based language instruction—which Roy Lyster defines as “a means for providing second language learners with enriched opportunities for processing and negotiating the target language through content” (Lyster 2007, 2)—has emerged as a methodological paradigm which can bridge the gap between language acquisition and intercultural competence.³ But can this principle be applied productively from the earliest stages of language acquisition? Is it feasible to use cultural products—whatever form they might take—as the subjects themselves of the linguistic learning process? Are there ways to fruitfully navigate the inevitable distance between the theoretical and the practical in language teaching? Over the coming pages, I will make a case for this by referencing the *Zero* project at the University of Alabama, and then provide some additional considerations about the successes and limits of using authentic audiovisuals at the beginner level.

2. THE *ZERO* PROJECT

The project from which this contribution stems was implemented starting from the fourth week of the Fall 2021 semester in three sections of Italian 101, which met 2 days for 50 minutes and 2 more days for 75 minutes every week. The delayed beginning is motivated by the necessity to give students time to absorb basic vocabulary and structures needed to conduct work on both the series and the additional *realia* involved in the project. The threshold concept chosen was, as I already mentioned, race, diversity, and contemporary Italian identities, with a particular emphasis on the experience of African-descent youths. The Netflix original series *Zero*, loosely based on the novel *Non ho mai avuto la mia età* by Antonio Dikele Distefano (Mondadori, 2018), was screened—with Italian and English subtitles—approximately once every two weeks during the fourth day of class (75 minutes), right before the weekend break. Each short episode, averaging around 30 minutes, was introduced by one or two pre-viewing activities, accompanied by one more during-viewing task, and then capped off by different types of post-viewing exercises. While always

³ I am referring here to the range of competences outlined in the ACTFL Cultures, Connections, and Comparison standards.

connected to the episode at hand, the activities also often involved the use of additional materials—newspaper articles, book extracts, web sources (i.e., www.blackitalia.info)—which touched upon issues of varying nature, from the foundational debate on *ius soli* and the ensuing issue of denied citizenship for the Italy-born children of immigrants, to food cultures, music, and stereotyping.

The rationale for choosing to incorporate this audiovisual product into my 101 syllabi to bring attention to the issues of race and diversity in contemporary Italy was strengthened by several additional factors. To begin with, the series is very recent (released in April 2021), and its streaming platform widely known in the US; its protagonists are roughly in the same age range as the students following their adventures; the show combines familiar elements of the “teen drama” genre—love, friendship, rivalry, betrayal—with a distinctive comic superhero narrative line, and a generally light tone, despite the seriousness of the matters represented. As previously mentioned, the series originates from the successful novel *Non ho mai avuto la mia età*, in which the Black Italian author Antonio Dikele Distefano fictionalizes his coming-of-age story in a country that repeatedly forgets—or, rather, ignores—the very existence of people like him. The idea of the book’s “invisible” protagonist is transposed and materialized in the series by means of the supernatural: Omar (Giuseppe Dave Seke), a first-generation Italian son of Senegalese parents living in the fictional “Barrio” neighborhood on the outskirts of Milan and working as a pizza-boy aspiring to become a comic book author, finds out and comes to terms with his ability to become invisible.⁴ At first, invisibility arrives as a reaction to stressful circumstances, but then, thanks in no small part to the collective help of a group of fellow African-descent youths, he learns how to use his power for good. The young friends in the “Barrio”—all men except one woman, Sara (Daniela Scatolin), who is arguably the leader of the whole group—are seen fighting against the gentrification process that is threatening to end life in the neighborhood as they know it. This evil effort is led by an obscure real estate colossus, whose ties to Omar and his love interest—a wealthy, white architecture student named Anna (Beatrice Grannò)—put to the test the very fight that he is waging against exploitation. In addition to this ostensibly mundane narrative, the show—in a somewhat haphazard way—also attempts to explore the mysterious backstory of Omar’s own past, marked by the abrupt, and ultimately unexplained, disappearance of his mother during his childhood. While there are clear flaws in both the storyline and realization of the show, *Zero* still provides an enjoyable watching experience, especially for the younger generations for whom it was ulti-

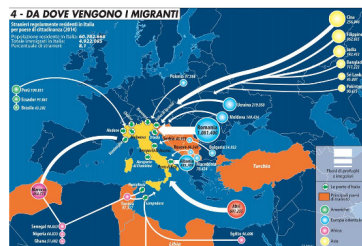
⁴ Zero is the name of the superhero in the comic book on which Omar is working, and eventually becomes his own nickname, thanks to his newly found friend group.

mately intended. Despite it being based on Distefano’s novel, the pool of directors, which includes personalities such as Margherita Ferri, Mohamed Hossameldin, Paola Randi, and Ivan Silvestrini, and the series creator Menotti (a well-known comic-book writer himself) are almost entirely Italian-born and white,⁵ which raises the question of whose voice is actually being showcased; a difficult question that would need to be more comprehensively addressed in the context of a monographic study of the series, be it in a content-specific class or a scholarly contribution. As far as my use of *Zero* in Italian 101, socio-historical and genre contextualization was employed to amend some of the show’s shortcomings and present it as a productive—albeit fictional—entry point into a reality with which students were completely unfamiliar, as I will outline in the next section.

3. SAMPLE ACTIVITIES AND STUDENT FEEDBACK

In preparation to the first screening, I presented students with a reading comprehension cultural context activity based on an adapted authentic text outlining the interconnected issues of migration and *ius soli*. As shown below, the activity starts with a visual representation of the migratory movements towards Italy, then moves on to a short text adapted from the Ministero degli Interni website and concludes with a simple true or false exercise—to be completed in pairs—solidifying the text comprehension:

I. Sample Pre-Viewing Activity: Cultural Context



L'immigrazione e la cittadinanza in Italia

Lo “*ius soli*” (in Latino: diritto del suolo) significa che le persone che nascono in uno Stato sono automaticamente dei cittadini; al contrario, lo “*ius sanguinis*” (in Latino: diritto del sangue) significa che le persone che nascono in uno Stato sono cittadini solo se anche i genitori sono cittadini.

⁵ Egypt-born Hossameldin is the only outlier in this group. His work on the subject of migration also includes a well-received short movie entitled *Yousef* (2018).

L'Italia non usa lo “*ius soli*.” Per questo motivo, molte persone che nascono in Italia da genitori immigrati non sono cittadine italiane. Negli ultimi anni, molti politici hanno provato [*have tried*] a cambiare questa legge, ma ancora senza risultati.

La cittadinanza italiana si può acquisire [*can be obtained*] con altri metodi, per esempio il matrimonio.

(basato su

https://www1.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stamp/notizie/stato_civile/app_notizia_22786.html)

Vero o falso?

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. In Italia esiste lo “ <i>ius soli</i> ” | V | F |
| 2. Se una persona nasce in uno Stato è sempre cittadina | V | F |
| 3. I politici non vogliono cambiare la legge | V | F |
| 4. La nascita è l'unico modo per essere cittadini | V | F |

Another type of pre-viewing activity, frequently employed to regain useful vocabulary and brush up on the previous episode before delving into the new one, is a fill-in-the-blanks summary exercise, to be completed in small groups either as a lower-pressure task or as a higher-pressure competition (the group who gets the most correct guesses faster wins). In either case, the exercise is capped off by a plenary oral re-telling of the previous episode, using the sentences as prompts, and adding connectors:

Zero

Riassunto episodio 3

*la partita di poker diventa invisibile si baciano va via insieme decide di aiutare
vincono tanti soldi vanno a una festa*

- Omar _____ i ragazzi del quartiere a raccogliere soldi per il generatore elettrico.
- I ragazzi scoprono il segreto dell'invisibilità di Omar: lui _____ quando sente emozioni forti.
- I ragazzi _____ elegante per giocare a poker.
- Durante _____, Omar è invisibile.
- Omar vede Anna durante la partita di poker e _____ a lei.
- I ragazzi _____ alla fine della partita.
- Omar e Anna _____, ma lui inizia a scomparire...

During the screening of each episode, I have usually opted to maintain a familiar activity format throughout the semester, so that students could enjoy

the show without having to worry too much about a different type of challenge every time. An ordering of sequences, outlined by short sentences read together for lexical clarity before the start of the episode, has been the format of choice. To avoid confusion as to which sequence would be the first (often the first few seconds are flash forwards of later sequences, which can be confusing), I usually provided the first one already:

***Zero* – Episodio 6**

Ordina le sequenze da 1 a 11

- ___ I genitori di Anna le fanno una festa per la borsa di studio.
- ___ Awa va a fare una visita dall'oculista.
- ___ Anna scopre che ha vinto la borsa di studio per studiare a Parigi.
- ___ Il padre di Anna va alla festa della famiglia di Rico e litiga con lui.
- _1_ Anna va a trovare Omar nella pizzeria dove lui lavora.
- ___ Il dottore racconta a Omar che sua madre aveva problemi psichiatrici.
- ___ Omar dice ad Anna che l'azienda di suo padre vuole distuggere il quartiere.
- ___ Omar e Anna parlano della distanza.
- ___ I criminali di Rico inseguono i ragazzi.
- ___ Anna e suo padre parlano dei suoi progetti per il quartiere.
- ___ Omar e i ragazzi discutono su cosa fare con Rico.

At the end of the episode, I would call on students to check their work on the exercise completed during the screening and then move on to one or two post-viewing activities. The ones that I am sampling below are based on Episode 2, an episode which provides many opportunities for cultural expansion. The first activity is the analysis of a sequence (about 2 minutes long) in which the “Barrio” friends attend an open-air screening of a soccer game between Nigeria and Ghana and eat couscous together in the square. The sequence is screened again and accompanied by three concise questions:

***Zero* – Episodio 2**
Analisi di una scena



PRIMA PARTE

Comprensione

1. Che cosa mangiano?

2. Perché il gruppo di amici è in piazza?

3. Che cosa guardano in televisione? Quale squadra gioca?

After wrapping-up this exercise, which takes under than 5 minutes, the class would approach its conclusion with two additional activities; sometimes, these would be assigned as homework for the weekend, to be uploaded on BlackBoard or VoiceThread, depending on the nature of the tasks. The samples provided here are a short non-authentic text (which I wrote based on a couple of different web sources) on the tradition of couscous, with questions to be answered orally; and the transcript of a lighthearted—yet charged—exchange between two of the characters, which brings into question the issue of national identity within members of the friend group itself. The latter exercise can be completed as a written task, such as a short blog post, or used as a prompt for discussion either done in class or recorded as homework.

SECONDA PARTE

Espansione culturale – 1

Il cous cous: un’antica tradizione



Il cous cous (scritto anche *cuscus*) è un piatto originario dell’Africa del nord. È un piatto molto antico, nato intorno al XII secolo, ed è molto diffuso ancora oggi in Marocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egitto ed altre nazioni africane. Alcuni [*some*] tipi di cous cous sono tipici anche in Sicilia e in Sardegna, ma in Italia è diventato diffuso [*widespread*] soprattutto grazie agli immigrati che arrivano dall’Africa. Il cous cous è a base di [*made of*] piccoli granelli di semola di grano duro cotti al vapore e conditi con verdure e carne.

Insieme al/la tuo/a compagno/a di banco, rispondi oralmente a queste domande.

1. Conosci il cous cous? Se sì, ti piace? Se no, lo vuoi provare?
2. Quali sono dei piatti stranieri che oggi considerate “americani”?

TERZA PARTE

Espansione culturale – 2

Leggiamo insieme queste due battute e cerchiamo di capire cosa significano

[Sharif scherza con Inno perché lui fa il tifo per la squadra nazionale del Ghana]

Sharif: “Ché se ti chiamano in nazionale [*italiana*] canti pure l’inno!”

Inno: “Parli tu, bro? Che sei talmente bianco che se vai in Nigeria ti scambiano per turista!”

In addition to the work conducted in class and at home during the semester, *Zero* was a component in the final oral exam for the course. Drawing upon the activities and materials already employed, I provided students with 4 broad discussion questions to be prepared beforehand. The questions were both content based (i.e. “Chi sono i protagonisti di *Zero* e sai descriverli?”) and interpretive (i.e. “Qual è, secondo te, il tema centrale della storia raccontata in *Zero*? Perché?”), and complemented the other tasks required for the final exam by placing the spotlight on cultural products, something that is often left out of formal assessment at the beginner level.

After the end of the semester, I designed a poll to better assess how the *Zero* implementation project was received by students and what they had learned from the series and the accompanying materials. Here are some of the findings that are most relevant to the topics discussed in this article:

1. To the question “Did *Zero* teach you something you didn’t know about Italy?” 95% of the students polled answered in the affirmative.
2. To the question “Prior to watching *Zero* and studying additional texts, did you know anything about Black Italians?” 100% of the students polled answered in the negative.
3. To the question “Prior to watching *Zero* and studying additional texts, did you know that being born in Italy is not enough to be a citizen?” 100% of the students polled answered in the negative.
4. To the question “Do you find watching TV series helpful when learning about a foreign culture and language?” 85% of the students polled answered “very much,” 10% “somewhat,” and 5% “no.”
5. The open question “Is there one thing you found interesting or liked particularly about *Zero*?” received a wide range of generally positive replies, from linguistic comments (i.e. “Just how much culture and language I was able to pick up with it” and “I really like being able to listen to the real spoken language”) to more culturally rooted ones (i.e. “I thought it was interesting to see the poverty that exists in parts of Italy and to witness the exploitation that can come within these areas” and “I enjoyed seeing the side of Milan that is not always shown off/advertised”).

As the comments reported above—whose sentiments were similarly shared by other ones—show, the *Zero* project was well-received by first-semester Italian students, and provided added value to the whole experience, both from a language-learning and a cultural perspective. This does not mean that there were no problems connected to it, be they actual or potential. As far as the linguistic aspect is concerned, I sometimes had to pause the screening and clarify expressions or jargon that even English subtitles could not properly convey; additionally, finding supplementary authentic materials adequate to the beginner level of the students was often a challenge—a common short-coming of using *realia*—and therefore I frequently opted to implement readings of my own design, always based on relevant sources. In this regard, things got easier as the weeks progressed and more structures and vocabulary were added to the students’ repertoire: fewer and fewer adjustments were needed for authentic texts towards the mid-to-late portion of the semester, and students were able to contribute to written or oral discussions with greater

complexity and comparative argumentative roundedness, especially by the time of the final oral exam. While the project outlined here was implemented in first-semester courses, it could just as easily—perhaps even more so—be repurposed in higher levels, with adjustments to activities, additional materials, and learning goals. But the benefit of incorporating something like *Zero*, with its conceptual and linguistic challenges, at the very start of the Italian acquisition process ultimately outweighs its challenges. By making a cultural product the subject itself of linguistic learning and relying on the familiar audiovisual medium of the Netflix series, students were immediately and actively exposed to an important aspect of contemporary Italian society with which they might have otherwise remained unfamiliar for long.

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