ITALIAN IDIOMS IN L2 ACQUISITION
PHRASEOLOGY, CULTURE, AND PEDAGOGY IN U.S. CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role of idiomatic expressions in the acquisition of Italian as a second language among American university learners. Building on research on formulaic language (Wray 2002; Nation 2001; Ellis 1996; 2008) and corpus-based analyses of recurrent sequences (Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard 2008), it argues that idioms—understood as non-compositional, culturally grounded multiword units—are central to communicative competence. Studies within Italian L2/LS pedagogy (Vedovelli 2002a; 2002b; Autelli 2021; Caiazzo and Giovannini 2023) similarly demonstrate the cultural, pragmatic, and discourse functions of idiomatic expressions.

The article pursues three main goals:

1. to clarify the definition of idiom in Italian L2 pedagogy by distinguishing true idioms from transparent collocations and regular verb–noun constructions;
2. to analyze how introductory U.S. textbooks represent idiomaticity and where they conflate distinct types of formulaic language;
3. to propose a phraseological–cultural model for curriculum design, teacher preparation, and early-level instruction grounded in authentic input, corpus evidence, multimodality, and guided cross-linguistic comparison.

It concludes that Italian L2 pedagogy in the United States should be reoriented toward a more accurate, culturally informed, and systematically integrated approach to idioms from the earliest levels of instruction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Idioms constitute one of the most culturally saturated components of Italian phraseology. They encode conceptual metaphors, sociocultural scenarios, and pragmatic routines that are indispensable for participating meaningfully in Italian communicative life. Research on formulaic language (Wray 2002; Nation 2001; Ellis 1996, 2008) has shown that fluent discourse relies heavily on fixed and semi-fixed expressions, which native speakers process as holistic units. Corpus-based studies (Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard 2008) further demonstrate that the frequency and internal cohesion of multiword sequences significantly shape their cognitive accessibility.

Within Italian L2/LS scholarship, authors such as Vedovelli (2002a; 2002b), Autelli (2021), and Caiazzo and Giovannini (2023) highlight the centrality of idioms and collocations for communicative and intercultural competence. Yet this research contrasts sharply with the treatment of idiomaticity in many introductory U.S. textbooks. Transparent expressions such as *avere fame* or *avere sete* are routinely labeled "idioms," while genuinely non-compositional, culturally motivated idioms appear sporadically, often decontextualized and without explanation of their metaphorical or sociolinguistic grounding. The resulting pedagogical landscape obscures crucial distinctions be-

tween idioms, collocations, and regular verbal constructions, limiting learners' development of phraseological and cultural awareness.

This article addresses this gap by adopting a pedagogically robust definition of idioms as fixed, metaphorically or culturally motivated expressions processed by speakers as "long words," and by distinguishing them from transparent or semi-transparent multiword patterns. Building on this definition, Section 2 outlines the theoretical and definitional foundations of idiomaticity in Italian L2. Section 3 examines how introductory U.S. textbooks represent idiomaticity and conflate different types of formulaic language. Sections 4 and 5 explore the role of idioms in American learners' linguistic, communicative, and intercultural development and propose pedagogical strategies for teaching idioms from the earliest levels. Section 6 discusses curricular, teacher-training, and textbook implications. The conclusion synthesizes these strands and argues for a phraseological–cultural reorientation of Italian L2 pedagogy in the United States.

2. IDIOMS IN ITALIAN L2: THEORETICAL AND DEFINITIONAL FOUNDATIONS
2.1 Formulaic language and chunking processes
Lexical and usage-based approaches show that linguistic competence emerges gradually from repeated exposure to recurring sequences in the input (Ellis 1996; 2008). As learners encounter these patterns across different contexts, the sequences become increasingly entrenched and are consolidated into chunks—prefabricated units that can be processed holistically rather than word by word. Chunking plays a crucial cognitive role: it reduces the load on working memory, facilitates automatization, and supports faster and more fluent language production. In this perspective, fluency results less from faster grammatical computation than from efficient retrieval of stored multiword units.

Corpus-driven research provides empirical support for this view. Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard (2008) show that two quantitative parameters—frequency and Mutual Information (MI)—are strong predictors of the internal cohesion of a multiword sequence. Frequency captures how often an expression appears across a corpus, while MI assesses the strength of association between its components. Taken together, these indices help distinguish sequences that are genuinely conventionalized from those that arise as incidental combinations.

This quantitative approach has clear pedagogical implications. By identifying expressions that are both frequent and highly cohesive, it becomes possible to establish objective criteria for selecting which formulas should be prioritized in Italian L2 instruction. Corpus-informed metrics thus help

bridge the gap between descriptive linguistics and classroom practice, ensuring that teaching materials reflect the actual distribution and degree of entrenchment of idiomatic units in the language.

2.2 Phraseology and idioms in Italian as an L2/FL

In the context of Italian L2, phraseology constitutes a structural component of communicative competence. Scholars such as Vedovelli (2002a; 2002b), Imperiale and Schafroth (2017), Autelli (2021), Tomassetti (2022), Maggini (2021), and Caiazzo and Giovannini (2023) emphasize that idioms, collocations, and semi-fixed sequences form an essential part of native speakers' linguistic repertoires and play a decisive role in the development of learners' discourse competence. Mastery of these multiword units is not a marginal dimension of proficiency: it enables learners to participate in culturally situated interactions, recognize recurrent patterns of expression, and align their linguistic behavior with the sociolinguistic expectations of Italian-speaking communities.

Corpora represent a crucial resource for identifying the phraseological texture of real Italian. Large written corpora such as CORIS/CODIS and *la Repubblica*, and spoken corpora such as LIP and KIParla, provide extensive evidence of frequent, typical, and contextually salient multiword sequences used by native speakers. Drawing on these data makes it possible to ground pedagogical selection in empirical observation rather than intuition or decontextualized lists. Integrating corpus findings into curriculum design and materials development allows L2 instruction to reflect more accurately the phraseological patterns that underpin effective communication in Italian (Maggini 2021).

Within this broader phraseological landscape, this article adopts a working definition of idioms as fixed, non-compositional, metaphorically or culturally motivated multiword units that are processed by speakers as "long words." They are distinct from: • regular constructions (e.g., *andare a* + infinito), which are productive and compositional; • transparent collocations (e.g., *fare una foto, avere fame*), which follow predictable verb–noun patterns and retain literal compositional meaning.

This definitional clarity underpins the critique of textbook practices in Section 3 and the pedagogical proposals in Sections 4–6.

2.3 Conceptual metaphor and Italian idioms

Idioms are deeply rooted in systems of conceptual metaphors, as described in the well-known model proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1981). Far from being arbitrary, they reflect culturally shared interpretive patterns

and presuppose access to the experiential scenarios that motivate them. Understanding an idiom typically requires activating the underlying metaphorical mapping that connects a concrete source domain with a more abstract target domain—a process that is always culturally situated.

Recent research on Italian L2 acquisition supports this perspective. Caiazzo and Giovannini (2023) show that idiom comprehension is closely tied to learners' familiarity with the cultural practices, embodied experiences, and communicative routines in which these expressions occur. For L2 learners, idiomaticity is therefore not simply a linguistic competence but also a form of sociocultural competence, requiring the ability to reconstruct the pragmatic frames that give idioms their meanings. Idioms crystallize metaphorical patterns anchored in the cultural lifeworld, making metaphor a key mechanism through which linguistic forms, shared imagery, and cultural knowledge intersect.

2.4 Idioms, pragmatics, and communicative competence

Idioms contribute substantially to all dimensions of communicative competence as defined in the foundational work of Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). Beyond their contribution to grammatical competence, idiomatic expressions shape pragmatic competence by enabling speakers to convey stance, evaluation, irony, and affect through culturally conventionalized meanings that are often more nuanced than their literal equivalents. From a sociolinguistic perspective, idioms function as markers of group membership and social alignment: they help speakers negotiate roles, degrees of formality, interpersonal distance, and shared cultural knowledge.

Idioms also support discourse competence by enhancing textual and interactional cohesion, signaling topic shifts, evaluative framing, or conversational closure. Strategically, they provide ready-made formulas that facilitate fluency, support turn-taking, and allow learners to compensate for lexical gaps through culturally recognized routines. Mastery of idioms and other fixed expressions enables L2 speakers of Italian to align with community norms and decode implicit meanings that permeate everyday discourse (Tomassetti 2022).

3. IDIOMS IN CURRENT U.S. TEXTBOOKS: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

While phraseological research and Italian L2 scholarship emphasize the centrality of idioms (Section 2), idiomaticity plays a much more marginal and conceptually imprecise role in many introductory U.S. textbooks.

3.1 Marginalization and decontextualization of idioms

In many beginning-level materials, idioms—when included at all—tend to appear as marginal vocabulary "add-ons": isolated lists placed in culture boxes (e.g., *Lo sai che…?, Cultura, Espressioni utili*) without explanation of their structure, semantic opacity, or cultural function. Students encounter idioms not as part of a coherent phraseological system but as curiosities.

3.2 Blurring idioms, collocations, and constructions

More critically, introductory textbooks frequently fail to distinguish fully fixed idioms, semi-fixed collocations, and productive constructions. Transparent combinations such as *avere fame, avere sete, fare una passeggiata, dare un esame,* or *fare una foto* are often labeled "idiomatic expressions," despite being high-frequency, semantically transparent collocations that follow regular verb–noun patterns.

This blurring obscures the difference between idioms proper—non-compositional and culturally dense units such as *essere al verde* or *piantare in asso*—and ordinary lexicalized patterns that belong to the core syntax of Italian. Even genuine idioms like *in bocca al lupo, che barba!* or *non vedere l'ora di…* often appear without clarification of their figurative motivation, fixedness, or sociolinguistic constraints. At the same time, textbooks sometimes present multiword grammatical constructions (*ci vuole, stare* + gerundio, *andare* + *a* + infinito) as "idiomatic," reinforcing the confusion between formulaic language and idioms.

Several factors contribute to this systematic blurring. Pedagogically, authors tend to simplify by collapsing idioms, collocations, and "useful phrases" into undifferentiated lists meant to support immediate communicative goals. Culturally, U.S. textbook traditions have long used the term "idiom" to mean any expression not directly translatable word-for-word from English, regardless of its semantic or structural properties. Market pressures further incentivize materials that prioritize functional tasks over linguistic accuracy, leaving little room for nuanced phraseological distinctions.

3.3 Consequences for learner development

This imprecision has significant consequences. Students often treat expressions as idioms when they are not, especially in the case of the highly productive **fare + Noun** construction (*fare la spesa, fare una foto, fare una passeggiata*). These combinations may seem "idiomatic" because they lack a literal English equivalent, but they belong to a regular and productive pattern in which *fare* combines with activity nouns to denote performing that activity.

Recognizing this productivity is crucial, because it enables learners to generalize to new expressions such as *fare un tentativo* or *fare una telefonata*.

When textbooks label such expressions as "idioms," students lose the ability to distinguish between regular constructions and true idioms, which are non-compositional and culturally motivated (e.g., *essere al verde, farsi in quattro*). Moreover, delaying exposure to genuine idioms deprives beginners of early opportunities to develop metaphorical awareness and formulaic processing. Without systematic attention to fixedness, register, and cultural meaning, idiomaticity remains marginal rather than a core component of communicative competence.

3.4 Toward a clearer typology for pedagogy

Against this backdrop, it becomes necessary to reassess what counts as an idiom in Italian L2 pedagogy. Transparent expressions such as *avere fame* or *fare una foto* behave as regular items of the basic lexicon and should not be treated as idioms. A more precise definition—viewing idioms as non-compositional, culturally motivated units processed by speakers as "long words"—aligns better with phraseological research and offers a stronger foundation for curriculum design. A clearer typology distinguishing transparent constructions, collocations, and authentic idioms can guide more coherent instructional choices and remedy the shortcomings identified in this section.

4. ITALIAN IDIOMS AND AMERICAN LEARNERS: LINGUISTIC, COMMUNICATIVE, AND INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

If textbook practices tend to marginalize idioms, research on Italian L2 acquisition suggests that idioms play a crucial role in multiple dimensions of learner development.

4.1 Idioms and linguistic development

For American learners of Italian, idioms are not simply an additional expressive repertoire but a crucial catalyst in linguistic development from the earliest stages. Many Italian idiomatic expressions display strong syntagmatic cohesion and high recurrence in natural discourse, making them indispensable for authentic communication and sociocultural integration. Psycholinguistic studies show that frequently occurring multiword combinations with strong internal associations are processed more rapidly than analytically generated constructions, as they are retrieved as prefabricated units from memory (Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard 2008). This evidence confirms the status of idioms as core components of communicative competence: they support fluency, enhance pragmatic appropriateness, and facilitate alignment with the sociocultural norms governing Italian interaction.

For L2 learners, chunk-based processing has immediate consequences. When idioms are treated as units, they reduce the demands on working memory and allow learners to focus on global meaning rather than the incremental assembly of individual elements. Recurrence in the input promotes automatization, and the availability of "ready-made" phraseological units makes production more fluent even at beginner levels.

Many Italian idioms are morphosyntactically simple—often built around high-frequency verbs such as *essere, avere, fare,* or *andare* in the present tense—and are therefore accessible to novice learners. Expressions such as *sono al verde, è un gioco da ragazzi, va a gonfie vele, è acqua passata,* and *farsi in quattro* illustrate how idiomaticity allows learners to express complex evaluative or interpersonal meanings using elementary verbal forms. Lexical development, basic morphosyntax, and pragmatic competence can thus progress simultaneously, without requiring mastery of advanced grammatical structures.

A crucial mechanism in this process is "noticing" (Schmidt 1990). The semantic markedness and partial opacity of idioms tend to attract learners' attention, encouraging deep memorization and conscious reflection. As Jafrancesco and La Grassa (2021) note, lexical acquisition advances through the formation of associative networks; idioms—given their metaphorical density and strong internal cohesion—serve as highly interconnected nodes that help consolidate durable semantic links and contribute to the emergence of structured phraseological competence.

4.2 Communicative impact: sounding "natural"

In the trajectory of American students, the appropriate use of idioms often marks a qualitative threshold: the shift from "textbook Italian" to Italian perceived as "natural." Research in interlanguage pragmatics shows that naturalness depends largely on mastery of conventional formulas, sociopragmatic routines, and idioms.

Expressions such as *mi sta a cuore, buttarla sul ridere, tenere gli occhi aperti, mettercela tutta, non stare più nella pelle* allow learners to regulate tone, social distance, and communicative intent, contributing to the construction of a discourse identity more closely aligned with contemporary Italian usage.

Many idioms also perform mitigation functions particularly relevant in Italian communicative culture, where indirectness and *leggerezza* can soften tensions or reduce the emotional weight of a topic. *Buttarla sul ridere*, for example, makes it possible to lighten potentially sensitive issues without resorting to direct strategies often perceived as excessive in Anglo-American pragmatics. In this sense, idiomatic usage becomes an indicator of advanced sociopragmatic competence.

4.3 Cultural literacy: seeing the world through Italian metaphors

Idioms also function as interpretive lenses on Italian culture, providing access to the metaphorical systems that structure perception, social interaction, and everyday experience. Pedagogically, these metaphorical domains are particularly valuable because much of the vocabulary they mobilize is introduced in the early stages of instruction. Learners can therefore anchor new idiomatic meanings to lexical items they already know, facilitating the integration of cultural content into the linguistic syllabus. The metaphorical coherence of idioms provides a conceptual framework that helps learners interpret the worldview encoded in Italian phraseology.

These idioms can be grouped into several major conceptual domains, each revealing culturally salient ways of categorizing experience:

a) *Food as a social metaphor*—Food metaphors reflect not only culinary habits but the social and ritualized nature of Italian mealtimes. As Ghelli (2018) notes, the structure of the meal—its sequentiality, expectations, and symbolic closure—is deeply embedded in Italian cultural practice. Expressions such as *essere alla frutta* presuppose familiarity with the traditional order of courses, where fruit marks the conclusion of the meal. Idioms in this domain encode culturally specific scripts of conviviality, timing, and social cohesion.

b) *The body as the locus of emotions*—Italian exhibits a pronounced bodily orientation in the expression of emotions and psychological states. Whereas English often resorts to abstract metaphorization, Italian frequently grounds affective experience in the physical body. Idioms such as *mangiarsi il fegato* or *avere il dente avvelenato* exemplify this embodied conceptualization and highlight the culturally shaped nature of emotional discourse.

c) *Family as a social category*—In the Italian sociocultural landscape, the family carries a central organizational function, extending beyond the private sphere into broader social and relational networks (Caiazzo and Giovannini 2023). Idioms reflecting kinship relations or hierarchical roles reveal how deeply these structures permeate interaction. Expressions such as *essere un figlio di papà* or *fare il bello e il cattivo tempo* articulate values of loyalty, authority, and relational positioning.

d) *Animals as social behaviors*—Animal metaphors illustrate culturally specific mappings between character traits and animal behavior. Calling someone *un orso* evokes a stereotype of introversion or gruffness, while *essere una mosca bianca* conveys rarity or deviation from the norm through imagery distinctive to Italian cultural imagination. These idioms model how Italians interpret behavior, personality, and context through metaphorical projection.

Ultimately, cultural literacy acquires a metaphorical dimension: each idiom operates as a miniature anthropological narrative that encapsulates values, attitudes, and interpretive patterns characteristic of Italian society. Developing competence in this domain prepares learners not only for linguistic fluency but also for deeper intercultural understanding.

4.4 Idioms as intercultural bridges

The comparison between Italian and English idioms provides a privileged arena for intercultural reflection. Within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1981), idioms can be seen as surface realizations of deeper cultural mappings that structure how communities perceive, evaluate, and categorize experience. Exploring these mappings fosters core dimensions of intercultural competence identified by Byram (1997), such as tolerance of ambiguity, cultural decentering, and suspension of automatic judgment.

Questions such as:

- Why does *essere al verde* mean "to have no money"?
- Why do Italians say *salvare capra e cavoli*?
- Why does bread symbolize moral goodness in *essere un pezzo di pane*?

activate interpretive processes through which learners uncover the symbolic associations embedded in Italian cultural experience. These inquiries encourage connections between linguistic forms and the cultural narratives, historical practices, and shared schemas that motivate them. Idioms become gateways to understanding how Italians conceptualize scarcity, conflict resolution, or moral character.

Contrastive analysis reveals both metaphorical convergences and divergences. Convergences, such as *rompere il ghiaccio* / "to break the ice," show how different languages may draw on similar embodied experiences. Divergences are even more instructive: while English attributes kindness to a "heart of gold," Italian conceptualizes generosity through *essere un pezzo di pane*, grounded in the cultural centrality of bread as a symbol of nourishment, simplicity, and moral integrity.

Idioms thus become laboratories of cultural and semantic negotiation. By engaging with them, learners are not merely enlarging their lexicon; they are learning to "see the world" through Italian conceptual metaphors, transforming phraseological competence into a form of cultural literacy.

4.5 The emotional dimension of idiom learning

As Balboni (2015) argues, the emotional component of input is a decisive factor in long-term learning: experiences that surprise, move, or engage learners affectively tend to be encoded more deeply in memory. Within this *glottodidattica* perspective, idioms—because of their imaginative force and vivid imagery—naturally elicit reactions such as surprise, irony, amusement, or empathy. These responses, in turn, trigger deeper cognitive processing and facilitate durable memorization.

Idiomatic expressions like *avere un diavolo per capello, cadere dalle nuvole,* or *avere il prosciutto sugli occhi* generate powerful mental images that anchor meaning in sensory or emotional experience. Their metaphorical immediacy enhances memorability and often produces a sense of discovery that strengthens learner motivation. For American learners, who encounter Italian as a language rich in corporeality, metaphor, and cultural symbolism, the emotional impact of idioms serves as an especially effective bridge toward deeper cultural and linguistic understanding. Idioms thus operate as multimodal stimuli—cognitive, affective, and cultural—capable of activating multiple pathways in the learning process.

Taken together, these dimensions clarify what is at stake when idioms are marginalized or mischaracterized in textbooks: learners risk losing access to key mechanisms of linguistic development, communicative naturalness, cultural literacy, and intercultural reflection.

5. TEACHING ITALIAN IDIOMS: PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

Against the backdrop of the theoretical foundations, textbook limitations, and learner needs, this section outlines pedagogical principles for integrating idioms into Italian L2 instruction from the earliest stages.

5.1 Introducing idioms early

In traditional pedagogical models, idioms are typically relegated to advanced levels, based on the assumption that figurative meaning presupposes sophisticated linguistic and cultural proficiency. Recent research challenges this view, arguing that idioms should be integrated systematically from the earliest stages to foster idiomatic competence and cultural awareness (Liontas 2017).

As previously stated, many Italian idioms are formally simple, built on high-frequency verbs such as *essere, avere, fare,* and*,* which are among the first morphological patterns acquired in L2 Italian. Their structural accessibility makes them ideal for early introduction, especially when learners are supported through contextualization, visual imagery, and guided noticing.

Introducing idioms from the earliest stages offers several benefits:

1. *Strengthening core linguistic development*
• it enables learners to consolidate high-frequency verbs and basic morphosyntactic patterns through repeated and meaningful exposure within idiomatic frames;
• it promotes chunk learning by providing prefabricated lexical units that increase fluency, reduce cognitive load, and support more natural language use.
2. *Preventing interpretive obstacles and fostering semantic flexibility*
it prevents the fossilization of overly literal interpretations;
it encourages greater flexibility in processing figurative meaning.
3. *Early access to linguistic and cultural authenticity*
• it offers a more realistic and culturally grounded representation of authentic Italian from the outset;
it supports the early development of intercultural competence by showing how Italian conceptualizes everyday experiences metaphorically.
4. *Normalizing figurative language within the learning process*
it normalizes the presence of figurative language, countering the misconception that Italian is predominantly literal.
5. *Enhancing learner confidence*
it increases learners' confidence by demonstrating that even beginners can handle seemingly complex expressions when supported by context and guided noticing.

From this perspective, idioms should not be treated as "advanced content," but as developmentally appropriate tools that support lexical growth, pragmatic sensitivity, and cultural literacy from the very beginning of instruction.

5.2 Contextualization: idioms need stories
As Diadori (2011) and Jafrancesco and La Grassa (2021) argue, authentic input constitutes the natural environment for phraseological learning. Idioms should not be introduced as isolated lexical units but embedded within narrative, dialogic, and culturally meaningful contexts. Similarly, Liontas (2017) stresses that idioms must be grounded in purposeful language use rather than treated as mere lexical curiosities or lists to be memorized.

To maximize interpretability and retention, it is therefore advisable to present idioms: within dialogues and plausible communicative episodes; through culturally situated anecdotes and micro-scenarios; in authentic audiovisual materials (films, series, podcasts, social media clips).

For instance, *essere al verde* is far more memorable when learners encounter it in a scene involving spending habits, budgeting, or financial difficulty than

when it is introduced as a decontextualized vocabulary item. Narrative and situational framing transform the idiom into a segment of lived experience, enabling learners to infer its figurative meaning, pragmatic implications, and appropriate usage. In this sense, contextualization does not simply illustrate an idiom; it provides the interpretive scaffolding through which learners can internalize it as part of their developing communicative repertoire.

5.3 Guided cross-linguistic comparison

Systematic comparison between Italian and English is a powerful pedagogical tool, as it activates learners' existing cognitive and cultural resources. Cross-linguistic work supports idiom learning in multiple ways, helping to:prevent negative transfer by raising awareness of structural and pragmatic differences; valorize learners' L1 knowledge as a scaffold for L2 development; cultivate metalinguistic awareness through explicit reflection on form, meaning, and usage; foster noticing and long-term retention by engaging learners in analytical and contrastive tasks.

Balboni and Caon (2015) emphasize that activities grounded in linguistic and cultural comparison are essential for the development of intercultural competence. Idioms—precisely because they are metaphorical, culturally situated, and often non-transparent—constitute an ideal domain for such pedagogical work. For instance, while English uses *to spill the beans* to mean "reveal a secret," Italian prefers *vuotare il sacco*, which evokes a distinct conceptual image while fulfilling a similar communicative function. Such contrasts highlight both shared cognitive metaphors and culturally specific figurative patterns.

Pedagogical tasks may include: matching idioms in L1 and L2 and discussing metaphorical correspondences and divergences; exploring etymological origins and cultural references that illuminate figurative meaning; creating bilingual glossaries enriched with usage examples, register information, and pragmatic notes.

Through these activities, idiom learning becomes an intercultural exercise that simultaneously strengthens linguistic proficiency, conceptual flexibility, and cultural empathy.

5.4 Multimodality: images, gestures, sound, and embodiment

Italian is a profoundly multimodal language: meaning is conveyed not only through lexical and grammatical structures but also through gesture, posture, gaze, prosody, rhythm, and intonation. Research in gesture studies and embodied cognition (Poggi 2002) demonstrates that Italian speakers routinely coordinate verbal and nonverbal channels to express nuance, emotion,

stance, and interpersonal alignment. Idioms, in particular, often contain strong embodied, imagistic, and metaphorical components, which makes them especially well-suited to multimodal forms of instruction.

Effective idiom teaching should therefore activate multiple sensory channels and semiotic modes. Pedagogical activities may include: incorporating iconic or culturally specific gestures that naturally accompany certain idioms; exploring intonation contours that shape pragmatic meaning (e.g., irony, disbelief, enthusiasm); using images, cartoons, and memes that visually render the underlying metaphor; staging role plays, dramatizations, and micro-performances to bodily enact idiomatic scenarios; analyzing authentic videos—films, interviews, online clips—in which idioms emerge spontaneously in interaction; creating posters, visual maps, or storyboards that depict idiomatic events and their figurative implications.

Multimodality renders the metaphor visible, audible, and tangible. By engaging learners simultaneously through sight, sound, movement, and narrative, it helps them bridge the gap between the literal scene, the figurative interpretation, and the sociocultural contexts in which idioms are conventionally used. In this way, embodied and multimodal approaches deepen comprehension, enhance memorability, and support the development of pragmatically appropriate idiomatic competence.

5.5 Semantic fields and vocabulary: integrating idioms into the basic lexicon

Idioms should be systematically integrated into the semantic fields in which Italian phraseology is particularly productive. These domains reflect culturally salient experiences and provide natural anchors for introducing figurative meaning, including: food and eating practices; the human body and physical sensations; emotions and psychological states; animals and associated character traits; work and everyday routines; weather and climate; social relationships and family structures.

Embedding idioms within these familiar semantic fields allows them to function as organic components of the lexical syllabus rather than decorative or peripheral additions. When idioms are linked to concrete communicative situations—ordering food, describing someone's personality, narrating emotions, commenting on the weather—learners integrate them into their developing lexical networks. This strengthens associative links, facilitates recall, and promotes a more natural and contextually grounded use of idiomatic language.

5.6 Noticing and idiomatic awareness

Developing idiomatic competence requires systematic attention to noticing, the cognitive process through which learners consciously register linguistic features in the input and detect unfamiliar forms or meanings (Schmidt 1990). Idioms are particularly conducive to noticing-based activities because their semantic and stylistic markedness naturally prompts curiosity, reflection, and hypothesis formation.

Pedagogically effective tasks include: identifying idioms in authentic materials (written texts, films, spoken dialogues); completing partially presented idioms by relying on contextual cues, thus promoting inference and pattern recognition; distinguishing between literal and figurative readings to highlight semantic shifts; formulating hypotheses about an idiom's cultural, historical, or metaphorical origins; exploring frequency and distribution through pedagogical corpora, concordances, or learner-friendly corpus tools.

Over time, such activities foster idiomatic awareness by helping learners recognize idioms as recurrent and meaningful elements of authentic Italian discourse. This repeated, conscious engagement enhances long-term retention and gradually enables learners to move from passive recognition to confident, contextually appropriate idiomatic production.

6. FROM PRINCIPLES TO CURRICULUM: AXES, TEACHERS, AND TEXTBOOKS

Implementing the principles outlined in Section 5 requires structural changes at the levels of curriculum, teacher education, and textbook design. This section outlines a phraseological–cultural model that responds directly to the textbook limitations diagnosed in Section 3.

6.1 Reorganizing the curriculum: a phraseological–cultural axis

The traditional curriculum often follows a linear sequence—basic grammar, more complex structures, authentic texts, culture—that reflects a stepwise approach no longer aligned with research on formulaic language. Idioms cannot serve as a late "capstone" of learning: they are part of the structure of Italian and must be introduced from the earliest stages in a sustained and purposeful way.

A model articulated along three integrated axes can be proposed:

Axis 1 — Structural

Include 8–10 idioms per unit beginning at level A1, selected based on frequency, syntactic simplicity, and cultural relevance. Idioms should be integrated into the semantic fields of the basic lexicon (food, body, family, climate, work).

Axis 2 — Phraseological

Gradually foster the ability to recognize and use: frequent collocations; semi-fixed sequences with pragmatic value; conversational routines; authentic, culturally motivated idioms.

This axis makes the formulaic nature of Italian visible and encourages learners to build a solid phraseological network.

Axis 3 — Cultural

Use idioms as access points to: Italian social history and values; implicit cultural scenarios; gesture and proxemics; conversational rituals; regional and generational identities.

In this way, phraseology ceases to be an isolated module and becomes a structural backbone of the curriculum.

6.2 Teacher training

An idiom-centered reform requires teachers who recognize phraseology as a central dimension of communicative competence. Instructors need to be able to: distinguish between regular constructions, collocations, and authentic idioms; link idioms to sociocultural scenarios and conceptual metaphors; use L1 and L2 corpora as tools for selection and validation; design multimodal activities involving gestures, video, and authentic input; assess phraseological competence as part of overall communicative assessment.

To this end, initiatives might include: workshops on phraseology and pedagogical lexicography; idiom databases organized by level and semantic domain; multimedia repositories (clips, excerpts, real dialogues) documenting idiomatic usage in context.

6.3 Textbooks: criteria for updating

U.S. textbooks require substantial revision, based on criteria such as:

1. avoiding the label "idiomatic expressions" for regular constructions like *avere fame* or *avere paura*;
2. introducing authentic idioms from the earliest chapters, selected based on frequency, metaphorical cohesion, and cultural relevance;
3. integrating multimodal input (gestures, intonation, audio, real dialogues) as a systemic, not optional, component;
4. proposing contrastive activities between Italian and English to highlight metaphorical differences;
5. making explicit learning objectives related to phraseological competence, not only grammatical competence.

These criteria are consistent with research on the psychological reality of formulaic sequences (Ellis 1996; 2008; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard 2008) and with contemporary Italian language pedagogy (Diadori 2011; Vedovelli 2002a; 2002b; Caiazzo and Giovannini 2023), and they respond directly to the problems identified in Section 3.

7. CONCLUSION

Idioms are not a luxury reserved for advanced learners but a structural component of Italian language, culture, and interaction. The literature reviewed—from phraseology and formulaic language (Wray 2002; Buerki 2020) to usage-based psycholinguistics (Ellis 1996; 2008; Ellis, Simpson-Vlach, and Maynard 2008) and Italian language pedagogy (Diadori 2011; Vedovelli 2002a; 2002b; Caiazzo and Giovannini 2023)—converges in arguing that communicative competence arises not only from grammatical knowledge but also, and crucially, from mastery of recurrent patterns and prefabricated units that form the fabric of natural discourse.

Italian idioms combine two didactically valuable features: formal simplicity (basic verbs, linear syntax); cultural complexity (metaphors, shared values, socio-communicative scenarios).

This dual nature makes them ideal tools for fostering: discourse fluency; pragmatic and sociocultural competence; intercultural and metaphorical awareness; lexical depth; and symbolic participation in the Italian discourse community.

The critique of U.S. textbooks has shown the urgency of clearly distinguishing between regular constructions and authentic idioms, to avoid diluting the concept of idiomaticity and to tap the formative potential of metaphor as a cognitive and cultural resource. Clarifying the definition of idioms (Section 2), analyzing textbook representations of idiomaticity (Section 3), and proposing a phraseological–cultural model for teaching (Sections 4–6) together fulfill the three goals set out in the abstract.

A phraseological–cultural curriculum—multimodal, corpus-based, and interdisciplinary—emerges as a promising innovation for teaching Italian L2 in the United States. Such an approach makes it possible to integrate language, culture, and identity, transforming idioms into privileged tools for accessing an Italian perspective on the world. Teaching idioms to American students ultimately means inviting them to inhabit Italian: to make its gestures, metaphors, embodied communicative practices, and cultural narratives their own. In this integration—at once linguistic and anthropological—a fully intercultural pedagogy can be realized.

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