

ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES: DESIGNING A COURSE ON ITALIAN FOR HEALTHCARE

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Abstract: *This article will discuss the design and implementation of an intermediate level Italian for Healthcare Language class. Since 2016, the language of Dante has experienced a marked decline in enrollment in many higher education institutions in the United States. Some recent studies related to this issue suggest that providing students with a wide variety of course options, including ones related to professional fields, is key to reversing this trend. Nevertheless, Italian presents somewhat of a challenge in this regard as it is the norm rather than the exception for learners to first encounter the language only when they begin their studies at college or university. However, in many instances, such as in healthcare, language for specific purposes courses target more advanced students. Therefore, introducing these types of classes earlier in the learning experience might prove to be instrumental in encouraging more students to continue studying Italian at advanced-level and perhaps even beyond. The present course was offered to learners who had previously completed three semesters of college-level Italian from beginner level to intermediate. People enrolled in the class had already attained an upper-intermediate level of skill in the target language. Since the course focused on healthcare, it emphasized the acquisition of new terms and communicative modes to help learners better interact with patients or clinicians in a medical setting. It was also designed around the Five C's (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) made popular by ACTFL's World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. Overall, Italian for Healthcare Professionals relied on both an experiential and project-based methodology through which students completed tasks that reflected challenges that they might realistically encounter while working in the allied health professions in Italy or with Italian-speaking diasporas in other parts of the world. Learners reported benefiting from both the variety and realistic nature of the activities. This article will explore the need for such a course in Italian Studies, its structure, as well as examples of projects and activities that it might include. Ultimately, student response to the course suggests that such offerings can be made available to intermediate-level learners of Italian with promising results.*

Keywords: Italian; Intermediate Level; Healthcare; Experiential Learning; Project-Based Learning

1. Introduction

Imagine arriving to your bi-weekly Italian language course to learn that today you and your classmates will assemble a model of the human body together using only

terms in the target language to complete your work. At your next class, you play *L'allegro chirurgo*, the Italian version of the popular boardgame *Operation* to help you continue to master this new and complex vocabulary. Later, you put your recently acquired knowledge of these terms to use creating an entry for an Italian-language encyclopedia of the human body. In this case, you are probably enrolled in Italian for Healthcare Professionals, a course for intermediate-level learners who have already completed three semesters of Italian in college. What could be the advantages of offering such a class for an Italian Studies Program? Let us examine this question in more detail.

1.1. Career-Focused Courses and Italian Studies

According to the Modern Language Association's 2016 report on enrollments in languages other than English, in the fall of that year, Japanese displaced Italian to become the fifth most commonly taught world language in the United States of America (Looney and Lusin, 2019:4). During the same year, enrollment in Italian courses plummeted by 20.1% across the nation (Looney and Lusin, 2019: 4). Meanwhile, in 2016, the number of degrees in Italian awarded by higher education institutions in the United States dropped as well by a noteworthy 30% (Looney and Lusin, 2019: 19). The Modern Language Association's most recent report, issued in November of 2023, indicates that Italian has now fallen in popularity behind Chinese and enrollment has ebbed by 20.4% (Lusin et. al, 2023: 5). Regrettably, these developments appear to be the peak of a prolonged period of decline for the discipline that began in 2002 for graduate study and seven years later, in 2009, for undergraduates (Looney and Lusin, 2019: 9).

Despite what might initially appear as a cascade of negative news for the future of Italian, the Modern Language Association does note areas where the discipline still thrives. Citing the case of St. John's University, which offers a very successful Italian program, the organization observes: "In short, colleagues at St. John's have developed a curriculum that responds to their students' needs, providing a range of courses in the Italian cultural tradition, taught in *Lingua*, as well as courses that emphasize career options..." (Looney and Lusin, 2019: 10). The example of St. John's University suggests that courses centered on language for specific purposes could prove instrumental in reversing the decline in Italian enrollments while also providing students with invaluable opportunities to apply their newly acquired language skills in a professional context. Why, then, should this professional context be healthcare?

1.2. Why choose an Italian for Healthcare Course?

As observed by Risner et. al., numerous studies on professional abilities that are increasingly important for success in the modern workforce list "global communication and intercultural skills" as crucial (2017: 37). This suggests that courses in the field of language for specific purposes are also gaining popularity among today's undergraduate students. In addition, Ruggiero observes that community-based initiatives can be easily included in this type of class, making these offerings not only useful vehicles for preparing students to excel in the global economy, but also for allowing them to contribute something meaningful to their own campus or town (Ruggiero, 2022).

Healthcare is a particularly interesting subject in this regard. In a 2017 survey conducted by Sánchez-López et. al., LSP scholars ranked this area as the sixth most popular topic for research in their field (2017: 18-19). That conclusion aligns with ACTFL's *21st Century Skills Map*, which also lists Health Literacy as one of the four major categories of interdisciplinary themes that world languages courses should emphasize (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2011). Additionally, healthcare opens up many possibilities for community-based initiatives, as students might be asked to volunteer as interpreters in clinics or doctor's offices or to create "peripheral messaging," or promotional materials that are designed to appeal to certain demographic groups (Kreuter and McClure, 2004) in the target language. Therefore, healthcare represents a particularly fertile and rewarding field around which to design a new Italian language course. How could instructors develop a class that focuses on this important subject while also providing a stimulating experience for its students? In the sections that follow, I will explore the design and implementation of a similar course at the University of Virginia.

2. Intermediate Italian II for Professionals, Healthcare

Intermediate Italian II for Professionals was developed in 2017 by Dr. Sandro Puiatti to offer a course to those students who are interested in studying in a specialized field or working in Italy following graduation. The course is designed to have a varying focus. In other words, it concentrates on a different career path each year. *Intermediate Italian II for Professionals* covers the same grammar topics presented in our textbook, *Immagina* (Cummings and Pastorino, 2016), as the more traditional offering, *Intermediate Italian II*, but replaces the vocabulary, readings, and films emphasized in this course with content related to the special interest topic under consideration in *Intermediate Italian II for Professionals*. It also offers assessments focused on applying new grammar and vocabulary in a relevant professional context.

Since this class was first introduced, it has consistently met an enrollment threshold of at least (and often surpassing) 8 students, which confirms the earlier hypothesis that there would be an audience for an Italian language course for specific purposes.

Previous iterations of *Intermediate Italian II for Professionals* are: *Italian for Business* (Sandro Puiatti, 2018), *Italian for Intercultural Mediators* (Francesca Calamita, 2019), *Italian Food Industry and Culture* (Stella Mattioli, 2020), *Italian for Language Educators* (Hiromi Kaneda, 2021), and *Italian for Public Relations, Television, and Social Media* (Stella Mattioli, 2022).

Although the above list clearly illustrates that there has been a fascinating and appropriately diverse slate of subjects covered in *Intermediate Italian II for Professionals* since the course's inception, prior to spring 2023, there had not yet been any version of it that focused on healthcare. Given the importance of health literacy to the contemporary workforce, this seemed like an important topic to explore with interested students. Nevertheless, in most cases, language for specific purposes courses that focus on healthcare target more advanced learners.

However, since many students of college-level Italian in the United States only encounter the language when they arrive at university, attracting more learners to the discipline through a class that focuses on healthcare would be effective earlier on. Thus, introducing Italian for Healthcare at the intermediate level could determine students to grow an interest in Italian that might motivate them to study it even beyond the beginner to intermediate course sequence. In fact, Sheffer proposes integrating business content into the basic course sequence for German in order to achieve a similar objective (2017). Therefore, Intermediate Italian II for Professionals is the ideal setting to facilitate a course on Italian for Healthcare because its target audience consists of students who have already completed three previous semesters of Italian, starting with elementary level. At this point, we must turn to another question: how can an instructor create such a class?

2.1. Designing the Course

Risner et. al. discussed designing language courses for specific purposes in a K-12 setting. In fact, one of the examples that they explored was Spanish for Healthcare. Their findings indicate that such a class should prioritize communication in various modes, and therefore emphasize the acquisition of appropriate vocabulary and grammatical constructions to allow students to better communicate with patients and colleagues (Risner et. al, 2017). This information proved critical to shaping the ultimate design of Intermediate Italian II for Professionals. In addition to the observations described by Risner and her co-authors, I also organized the course's structure and activities around the Five C's (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) popularized by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages *World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015).

Finally, in terms of in-class activities and assessments, the course was designed around both an experiential and a project-based methodology. A study by Yaeger et. al. (2014) discovered that tasks that emphasize pro-social behavior and a sense of purpose for learners make them more motivated and eager to study. Additionally, Project-Based Learning (PBL) encourages students to work independently, develop critical thinking skills, and utilize different learning strategies, all of which are vital for future success in a profession (Herget, 2020). Finally, experiential learning methods, when deployed in language courses, promote more authentic use of the target idiom and provide students with increased opportunities for meaningful communication (Knutson, 2003). Hence, I theorized that asking my learners to complete projects and tasks based on real-life situations that they could one day encounter as healthcare professionals would facilitate better learning outcomes for the class and livelier discussions.

These considerations explain why Intermediate Italian II for Professionals, with a focus on healthcare, was ultimately designed around five modules: The Italian Healthcare System, Studying Medicine in Italy, Illnesses and Parts of the Body, Diagnosis, and Communicating with Patients. These topics facilitated interactions both among learners and, later on in the course, between students and more advanced speakers. The modules also encouraged cultural investigations and comparisons, as learners used the target language to write and talk about healthcare in Italy and, in particular, to evaluate it in relation to the practices and

structures of their native countries. Students additionally worked on forming connections between the information they came across regarding the Italian medical culture and areas of personal interest. For example, one person enrolled in the course who was considering applying to medical school took advantage of the opportunity to interview a neurosurgeon from Italy to ask about the difficulties of achieving a functional work and life balance as a physician. Finally, learners also applied their newly acquired knowledge to developing projects that could be adopted in the future by the University of Virginia's Healthcare System to offer interpreting and translating services in Italian, which enabled the class to think about how to interact with the larger community while in turn learning how to interact with patients.

In order to be effective, each module began with a general overview and a targeted vocabulary list designed to help the students learn about and discuss its topic with one another. On average, these lists contained approximately 71 terms or expressions related to the module in question. All new vocabulary was in turn subdivided by topic. For instance, the list dedicated to illnesses and parts of the body featured a section on various organs, bones, and joints and then a second section specifically about illnesses and medical conditions. The module on diagnosis emphasized key questions used to inquire about personal details, medical history, or information about symptoms, while the unit about communicating with patients included questions used to obtain crucial data like phone numbers or email addresses, interact with people during a medical examination, assess the cognitive function, and give advice.

Grammar points were also introduced in accordance with the content of each chapter of *Immaginaso* that students of Intermediate Italian II for Professionals covered the same concepts as their peers who were enrolled in the more traditional Intermediate-level Italian language course. This was deemed appropriate to ensure that each learner who opted to continue their pursuit of fluency in the language of Dante after completing the intermediate level would have a similar foundation.

Additionally, the modules featured a reading assignment related to each unit's overall topic. For example, while studying about the healthcare system in Italy, students read excerpts from *La sanità in Italia* (Toth, 2014) to better understand the origins and structure of Italy's National Healthcare System. Modules also featured listening activities based on videos in the target language that related to each unit's primary subject. During the lessons on Medical Education in Italy, the class watched a YouTube video in which a young nurse explained how interested people can join her profession, describing both the process for gaining acceptance to a nursing program and what you will study once admitted. After watching the materials, students filled out questionnaires to check their comprehension and then completed follow-up activities with their peers, activities that required them to briefly research a topic related to what they had learned and then present their findings to the rest of the class. Finally, every module concluded with a film or episode of a Netflix series from Italy that related to the main points covered in that unit. Learners usually wrote reflections on these items as well as their reading assignments on an online discussion board offered through our course's Learning Management System. With all their assignments completed for each module,

students demonstrated overall mastery of the topics covered through two types of assessment.

2.2. Measuring Progress

Due to the importance of understanding the correct terminology to use in a healthcare setting, the first of these assessments was always a short quiz focusing on the vocabulary required in each module. The students completed these quizzes during class time and received a grade out of 25 points on each of them. While this type of assessment encouraged memorization of key terms, learners still needed to demonstrate the ability to apply the grammar issues that they had reviewed to a meaningful context that could also utilize some of the cultural information that they had encountered through their readings, listening activities, and films or television episodes. These goals were achieved through original projects.

Therefore, I designed four projects for each module. Module five did not feature its own project as the material in this unit was later incorporated into the final project, which served as the course's final exam at the end of the semester.

2.2.1. The Five Projects

The first of these assignments required students to work with a partner to produce a presentation comparing and contrasting Italy's National Healthcare System with the healthcare system in the United States. The students were asked to create a slide show for the United States Senate in which they explained the origins of Italy's system, its organization, and then examined ways in which it was similar or different from the healthcare system offered in the United States. Students also reflected on what benefits each country could adopt from the other's healthcare system.

For their next project, learners received a visit, via Skype, from an Italian neurosurgeon who answered their questions about studying medicine in the boot-shaped land. In preparing for this activity, they read and discussed excerpts from *Pappagalli verdi* (Strada, 1999) a surgeon's memoir of his time treating patients in war zones and sites of natural disasters around the world, then examined a brief biography of our future guest before preparing questions to ask. They conducted a 50-minute-long interview with Dr. Luigi Sigona (ASL 2 Napoli Nord), which concluded with a 25-minute group discussion and debriefing on what they had heard during their conversation. Finally, each student wrote a brief reflection on their experiences interviewing the doctor.

Project three also required learners to collaborate with a partner to create an entry on an organ system for a fictional encyclopedia of the human body. Finally, for their last project, the students pretended to be doctors and they interviewed their tutors, who acted as patients. Learners were required to ask their patients questions so that they could set a diagnosis of whatever health condition the patient had. Following their interviews, each student produced a short video reflecting on the experience and what they learned from it.

Although the topic of the final project did focus more on Module five than the previous four, it was also meant to be comprehensive so that it could substitute for

a traditional final exam. In this case, the learners once again joined forces with a partner to draft a proposal for a new program that would train Italian students to work as volunteer interpreters at UVA Health Systems. While these proposals were never formally submitted for consideration to the University's healthcare division, they were intended to determine learners to think about how they could apply their knowledge of medical Italian to a real-world context that might benefit their community. While this project assessed overall mastery of grammar and vocabulary and measured progress in the development of reading and writing skills, the class also participated in an original escape room activity to assess their speaking abilities. During this task, students completed a series of puzzles together and, after finishing each one, they received a clue that helped them to correctly diagnose the cause of a mysterious illness affecting an Italian hospital. Like the proposal, this activity was also comprehensive and brought together materials they had worked on throughout the entire semester.

All of these projects were graded with rubrics that the students had access to before beginning their work. In this way, they were able to understand what would be required of them and to ask questions about it if necessary. Traditionally, in PBL-based courses students can develop their own ideas for projects based on their personal interests (Herget 2020). However, in Language courses this can prove impractical since students must develop so many different skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing, and cultural competency) in one discipline. This is why I chose to create project topics for them that were designed around a variety of approaches and options.

Although assessments were obviously a significant aspect of this course, an arguably even larger component were the week-to-week activities that we completed during each lesson.

2.3. Class Activities

Intermediate Italian II for Professionals met twice per week for 75-minute intervals and was taught in the target language. This format allowed ample time to organize and facilitate a variety of activities, each of which was designed to practice a different essential skill while adhering to the guidelines of the Five C's.

While students did complete drills to review important grammar issues or new vocabulary, they also engaged in more communicative activities such as role-plays and they periodically played games or completed puzzles that would enable them to brainstorm together in Italian. In addition, they conducted short research inquiries in pairs to deepen their understanding of readings and films.

2.3.1. Practical Examples

For example, during module 3, in which they learned the correct terminology for illnesses and parts of the body, students identified the instruments in a doctor's bag, provided to them via a toy version of such an item. In addition, they later played a round of *L'allegro chirurgo* together and disassembled and reassembled a toy model of the human body. During these tasks, they could only communicate with one another in the target language and therefore were asked to help their peers recall and accurately utilize the new terminology where applicable.

The learners also brought their wealth of new vocabulary into play when discussing films and readings, which were an essential part of the course. The inclusion of these items in the syllabus not only ensured that students would receive essential practice for reading several types of texts in the target language, but also assisted them in making progress on their listening and speaking abilities. However, films and readings were additionally key to promoting cultural competency. This last goal was often accomplished not only through whole group discussions but also mini-research inquiries that the learners undertook in pairs or small groups. In one instance, they viewed the Netflix film *Sul più bello* (Filippi, 2020), which is about a young woman suffering from Cystic Fibrosis. Since this movie originated from a book of the same title (Gaggero, 2020), while preparing to watch it, students first read an excerpt of the original source material. They then discussed the film and compared the segment of the novel to the corresponding scene in the movie. The class concluded this exploration of the film and novel by visiting the *Lega italiana fibrosi cistica (Italian Cystic Fibrosis League)*, or the LFC's website where, along with a partner, they read one of the patient testimonials featured on the site and then reported back to their peers on what they had learned.

While these mini-research inquiries allowed them to deepen their knowledge of each topic, role-play activities were also key to helping students further develop their speaking and listening skills. For instance, in one task, they imagined a group therapy session that included characters from every film or television episode that they had watched up until that point in the course. Each student played a different character, and both responded to, and posed questions from that individual's point of view.

None of these activities received an individual grade because they were meant to be formative. However, at the end of each week, students received a score for their contributions to course discussions and tasks throughout the previous class meetings. These grades were also assessed with a rubric that the learners had access to from the beginning of the course onward. In this way, the activities that they performed in class did not become too stressful for them, yet they were encouraged to attend and proactively partake in every task, knowing that they would receive participation points for their overall efforts to use the target language and communicate with their peers.

2.3.2. Reflection is Key

In addition to regular course activities, the students also frequently wrote reflections on their discussion boards that asked them to either answer specific questions about the readings, television, episodes or films that they encountered or to offer general thoughts about a new topic that they were studying. Although these interventions did not receive individual grades, at the end of the semester students were also evaluated on their overall contributions to the discussion board. That grade was also assigned through a rubric that was made available to them at the beginning of classes.

In general, creating their activities required variety and consideration for how each task could contribute to making the students more fluent users of the Italian

language and deepen their knowledge of the healthcare profession. However, this invites a question: in the end, what did the learners take away from their experiences?

3. Student Response

Twelve students participated in Italian for Healthcare Professionals. All but one of them had previously completed three semesters of college-level Italian. The final person was a heritage speaker who enrolled in the course to learn professional jargon. As previously mentioned, one student was preparing to apply to medical schools, another was studying engineering, and a third was interested in a career as an interpreter or translator. The other learners enrolled to fulfill the final semester of their language requirement. However, in at least one instance, they selected this course with the hope that it would be more challenging than the more traditional intermediate-level class.

All students frequently expressed their views on the course and its components both in their end of semester evaluations and their discussion board assignments. There were certain learning tasks that drew particular attention. Overall, most students were extremely interested in the opportunity to interview a neurosurgeon from Italy in the target language. In fact, in a written reflection in his online diary, one learner referred to this activity as his “favorite day” in the course. They also enjoyed interacting with, and “diagnosing” their tutors with various fictional medical conditions. In the video reflection that followed this activity, a student expressed the view that doing this assignment with a more advanced Italian speaker who was not a member of their class made it feel more realistic. Learners also appreciated the escape room activity. In a course evaluation one student observed: “I really liked the escape room! Doing another one maybe at the midpoint of the year, and including more board games, I think could make the class a lot more fun.” Students additionally praised the variety of activities and formats of projects as this kept the class interesting to them. In a reflection posted to the discussion board, a learner noted that she appreciated “the mix” of activities. Another person praised the use of games in the course in her own reflective essay. Finally, in their online diaries two students noted that knowledge of medical issues would be useful to them during their upcoming study abroad experiences if they needed to see a doctor. However, in course evaluations some learners also expressed the view that focusing the entire class only on healthcare became repetitive: “As someone who isn’t going into the medical field, I found my passion waning toward the end of the semester. Perhaps focusing on two or three professional careers would allow for comparison and a chance to hone a larger class interest.” Therefore, these comments confirmed some of the hypotheses that influenced the course design, such as the idea that a plethora of project topics and activities would be preferable and that experiential tasks would prove more stimulating. However, students also suggested other areas where the course could be improved.

3.1. Better is Always Possible

The most intriguing suggestion for enhancing the experience of a language for specific purposes course for Italian Studies is the idea of dividing it into separate modules that each concentrate on a new professional field. In many cases, Italian

Studies programs do not include numerous faculty members, so this could be a way of offering more career track options to students despite having fewer people to teach courses about these areas of expertise. In cases where the instructor is still interested in focusing on healthcare, a possible variation on this idea would be to offer a variety of modules that each focus on a different career track within the healthcare field such as: medicine, nursing, dentistry, or veterinary medicine, depending on preference and student interests. Variety, whether in terms of topics covered or assignments and activities developed, seems to be a key factor in stimulating student interest in the subject matter.

4. Conclusions

Although it might be more customary to offer a course centered around healthcare to advanced learners, or even to healthcare professionals who are already living or studying in Italy, creating a class of this nature for the intermediate level is also possible. As the present study indicates, the key components to this are: incorporating both an experiential and project-based design, implementing a variety of assessments and activities, pairing grammar components with issues that students would typically encounter in a more traditional intermediate course, and placing emphasis on the acquisition of key terms and expressions for success in a medical setting.

Instructors of Italian may wish to consider implementing similar courses not solely in healthcare but also those focusing on other professional fields at the intermediate level to entice more students to continue learning Italian even beyond the basic beginner through intermediate classes. Since Italian Studies programs also often include a smaller number of faculty members than other more commonly taught languages such as Spanish, implementing language for specific purposes courses at intermediate level might also compensate for the limited instructional resources that some programs face.

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