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An interdisciplinary approach to texts as a model for a truthful approach to reality

Lucia Salvato*

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano, Italy

Abstract

This paper proposes how academic teaching based on the use of texts can be fertile soil for educational processes in younger generations. For this purpose, the work recommends grounding university courses that make extensive use of texts in an interdisciplinary approach. This suggestion results from didactic experiences with paintings and pieces of music analyzed as ‘texts’ in terms of communicative semiotic events and the interpretation of their meaning as a process of inference. By means of the proposed approach, university courses may become opportunities to educate students to faithfully approach reality as it is, within the broader experience of knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Currently, education tends to be related to the intense effort that adults are required to make in order to allow younger generations to grow in their identity and to learn how to face life’s challenges. According to this view, adults are the ‘custodians’ of knowledge, and should simply fill (the Latin verb is *instituo*, *imbuo*) empty containers, i.e. the minds of younger students. As a consequence, teaching becomes for many simply a disinterested transmission of knowledge, while the serious challenge of education turns into an ‘educational emergency’.

This paper reflects on education as something more than a disinterested effort. The reflection is based on the wider sense that the ancient Greeks gave to instruction, without separating it from its educational purposes, beginning from the three functions that are contained within all speeches (*docēre*, *delectāre*, *movēre*; cf. Cicero,

* Lucia Salvato Tel.: +39.02.72342761; fax: +39.02.72343667.

E-mail address: lucia.salvato@unicatt.it

2001, II, 27; 28; 77). This viewpoint was highlighted last year in a questionnaire that a number of students of schools in Milan (Italy) were asked to complete. Their spontaneous comments were all related to the opportunities they look for in learning to be awakened as individuals and to become adults in facing life's challenges.

The originality of the proposed viewpoint and the method used emerge from the didactic experience in university courses on German as a foreign language based on the analysis of “*intersemiotic translations*” (Jakobson, 1987, 429-430) of famous works of art (paintings, films or pieces of classical music). Both translations and works of art were considered as forms of ‘text’, i.e. as communicative semiotic events, whose meaning is understood through a process of inference.

The paper proposes the consideration of the arts as a potentially powerful factor in student education. The use of the arts in a didactic project to enhance student learning has always created a positive reaction in them, giving them the opportunity to make a twofold reflection: on the foreign language (its structure and style) and on themselves, especially on their mode of thinking and judging reality in comparison with the standpoint expressed by the authors of the analyzed texts.

Before an artist's creation, people are implicitly invited to analyze it in order to infer its meaning through their identification with its content. This identification can be particularly fruitful when it succeeds in awakening the individual to his profound desires and requirements, by moving his free curiosity for life and his open attitude towards reality as a whole. The aim of this work is, therefore, to explore this identification in order to investigate the response of younger generations regarding works of art.

This contribution is grounded in the theory of contemporary linguists and literary scholars such as Calabrese (1985; 2006), Cattrysse (2000), Eco (1977), Jakobson (1987), C.S. Peirce (1931-1958), Pieretti (1983), and it begins with the teachings of the ancient Greeks, especially with Aristotle's idea of education as referred to Athens (Aristotle, 2013).

2. The teaching of the ancient Greeks

A focus on the concept of education by the ancient Greeks permits an in-depth analysis of this wide-ranging and delicate process. Beginning from its etymological sense, the verb “to educate” (It. *e-duco*, “bring out”) signifies something more than a disinterested effort. It signifies helping a human being disclose his peculiar talents through learning activities. This implies helping him to set out to discover his identity by gaining an awareness of his relationship to himself and his environment, i.e. to other things and human beings.

Moreover, the main distinguishing feature that should be taken into account is the essence of man as a human being, which is the conception of his nature and identity both as an individual and as a member of a community. In addition, as man is the only living creature endowed with reason, he is also the only one able both to use language by formulating meaningful utterances as well as to understand them according to specific codes. Returning to its cultural roots, this concept corresponds, in Aristotle's philosophy, to the term *λόγος*, whose basic understanding has a threefold interpretation: “reason”, “word”, and “speech”. As a consequence, education had for the Ancients a broad sense, as it should have nowadays in all societies.

In the eighth chapter of his work *Politics*, Aristotle indicates the character of youth education (*παιδεία*) and the way it should be imparted. The question was what should be taught and how, and the objective a man intended to pursue within this framework. As indicated by the Greek philosopher, any occupation, art or science should respect body, soul and mind, and it should make a free man (*ἐλεύθερος*) more fit for the practice and the exercise of virtue (gr. *ἀρετή*; It. *virtus*). As a consequence, only such kinds of knowledge that were “useful” (*χρησίμιον*) could be imparted to young children. At the same time, a man should do or learn anything for his own sake (or for the sake of his friends) with a view to excellence, otherwise any action would be thought menial and servile.

3. Education through academic teaching

In line with these aspects, this contribution develops from a crucial question, which is how academic teaching (and particularly teaching foreign languages) can be fertile soil for contemporary educational processes of younger

generations.

Looking at the variety of technological opportunities that are in the hands of contemporary students, education has become a real challenge for teachers at all grades and levels of instruction. In many schools, new technological systems have been introduced alongside new experimental methods, according to which teachers have to make use of new hi-tech support in order to keep up with the times. The same is happening inside the university system where academic professors can develop their teaching methods in different ways. However, by teaching foreign languages through the arts, the challenge spreads even further afield, because the arts are not included in government programs and must therefore attract the attention of students by other means.

Education has always had a key role in leading younger generations into the challenges of life's difficulties. Yet, this process of building through the arts is something more than a general introduction or a preparatory phase in life. It is a primary way of living it, a way of taking possession of reality, because man learns how to confront situations only as soon as he starts to accept his own responsibilities (cf. Pieretti, 1983, 236). Moreover, as the first responsibility is honed during the learning years, the subjects taught at school and at university acquire even greater importance.

According to the spontaneous and anonymous comments by students of university courses in foreign languages at the Catholic University of Milan, a very useful method of educating them in their approach to reality is the analysis and the practice of translations. As a matter of fact, every form of translation is a very productive activity and, at the same time, a worthwhile opportunity in improving the knowledge of the foreign language, as well as for personal development.

More specifically, if each text demands that it be approached and comprehended with the respect that it is due (cf. Pieretti, 1983, 236-237), the practice of *intersemiotic* translations induces students to a much more conscientious effort. On one hand, as in all other translations, it compels the students towards a mature analysis of the original text by paying attention to all its details, including its cultural and historical background. This allows students to be educated in observing works of art and welcoming them as they are, being open and receptive in the encounter with them until the students reach their proper and profound meaning. On the other hand, this kind of translation encourages students to develop the meaning using another code, and if this code is a foreign language, the earnest effort of reviewing the meaning becomes an occasion to reinforce one's own abilities in that foreign language.

As a consequence, education in the arts implies not only an education in aesthetic values, i.e. an education in beauty, but also in important human values related to personal development (Beauty, Goodness, and Truth, which every person feels attracted to), and this can enrich students in the awareness of their own identity (cf. Bergoglio, 2013).

As already stated, the didactic experience on which this contribution is based regards the practice on a Master's degree course in German as a foreign language. The practice was achieved through a series of exercises on both concepts of translation and text that were considered as communicative semiotic events. Thanks to the autonomy of the outlines of university courses, it was possible to ground the course in an interdisciplinary approach. By joining different modes of thinking and methods from different subject areas, this approach is currently emerging as a precious resource in modern teaching methods.

4. The value of an interdisciplinary approach

Since the very beginning of this didactic experience, it was clear that academic lessons on foreign languages should benefit from the same concept of comprehensive knowledge of the ancient Greeks. In this regard, interdisciplinary studies can lead in the right direction by extending, for example, both concepts of text and translation through closer collaboration with each other in the corresponding sciences.

According to the traditional concept in linguistics, for example, each text is part of a verbal communication and can therefore be considered as *a communicative* event. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of semiotics, not only is verbal communication made up of texts, but also each meaningful phenomenon can be considered a text in terms of a *sign* (cf. Peirce, IV.447; II.148). Therefore, dialogues or writings, as well as footprints, knocks on doors, or paintings and musical pieces are 'semiotic events' (cf. Eco, 1977), and this propels the analysis of texts into a much

larger domain than linguistics alone. As a matter of fact, the combining of different scientific disciplines into the same activity (in this case, an *intersemiotic* translation) allows the ‘creation’ of something new by crossing traditional boundaries while analyzing the same text.

At the same time, the associated study experimented with certain specific theories in Translation Studies, such as the *polysystem theories of translation*. By describing translations/adaptations as phenomena that function as translations/adaptations in a specific time-space context, the *polysystem* approach has given rise to a considerable expansion of its object of study and consequently has also led to a re-definition of the concept of text. This has made possible the investigation of many phenomena inside a working field that covers all possible translational experiences (cf. Catrysse, 2000, 253-254).

In addition, the method proposed in this analysis also has its roots in the pedagogical approach called CLIL (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*), according to which teachers and professors make use of a foreign language as a vehicle, and not just as a learning tool, to teach their subject. This method is based on *cooperative learning* - students are asked to actively participate and cooperate with teacher and classmates through a series of oral questions, which they must argue during the lesson and through written exercises (cf. Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010).

5. Education with the help of the arts

In the didactic experience at the foundation of this analysis, attention was drawn to “*intersemiotic* translations” as these give students the opportunity to experiment with innovative methods of learning a foreign language by analyzing and ‘re-writing’ different types of text.

A first example is the description of a painting in one’s own words. This means ‘decoding’ the original message of the text from its ‘iconic’ into a linguistic code. As a first step, students should be taught how to approach a text, i.e. how to be involved in a wide-ranging observation of it, by stating their personal interpretation only as a last resort in the entire analysis. Indeed, in their first reaction before a painting, people usually identify it with an image they already have in their minds, but this implies giving at once a personal interpretation, forgetting to observe the painting in the proper way. To let students persist with this sort of instinctive reaction means allowing them to be led astray towards an improper practice with each type of text and, consequently, with reality.

The way of ‘meeting’ a text offered on a university course should instead be an example of a truthful encounter with ‘something else’ that must be embraced as it is. Reality is a rich and complex soil, which requires that it be known with respect regarding all its aspects. Not surprisingly, the German philosopher Husserl spoke of reality as a “Givenness” (*Gegebenheit*), as something that the knowing subject did not create and which therefore has priority in the process of knowledge. The term expresses the quality or the state of ‘being given’. It indicates that things are given (*gegeben*) as contents, as gifts to the human mind, which can transform their manifestation into meaning and concepts. The term should therefore focus on the encounter between man and reality as it is, by teaching a fundamental attitude in approaching the realm of “phenomena”, i.e. as they are, as a given reality (Husserl, 1966; cf. Marion, 2005). Consequently, reality challenges man to approach it considering all its features, i.e. as it actually is, and not in relation to the expectations man may have.

One of the paintings proposed for the analysis was *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso (1937). This famous masterpiece permits students to come into contact with the process of “*intersemiotic* translation” from the dramatic facts that shook the Spanish painter into the vivid and metaphorical figures he realized.

The painting was analyzed in the following way. As the concept of text as ‘communicative event’ was the starting point, students had to infer its meaning through a proper analysis. Firstly, this was solicited through questions on the details of the iconic text, which helped the students to approach the entire meaning. They were then given a paper with a number of photos and a short description of the historical background, which gave them the opportunity to gain appropriate insight into the dramatic facts that gave birth to the painting and thus to deepen what was only superficially known. As a second step, the students received a sheet of paper with the images of the main sections into which the painting can be divided. With each image, there was a short caption including technical terms to be learned and used for homework. The descriptions were read and analyzed by the students together with the teacher.

This permitted focus on style and technical terms, consideration of the details that surround each dramatic figure, and the realization that the depicted world is a metaphorical translation of the real one.

Only after these steps were carried out, students were ready to reflect on the content of Picasso's painting by expressing their personal opinions. Thanks to a personal confrontation with the meaning of the painting and with the opinions of teacher and classmates, students could reflect on their own mode of thinking and judging. This important phase can lead to personal development, which has its origin in the interior change that the arts can ignite in the individual.

A second example concerns music. In a course on the analysis and the use of expressive techniques in the German language, Beethoven's 9th *Symphony* (1824) was analyzed in its final part, the "Ode to Joy" written by Friedrich Schiller and set to music by the German musician (the version offered to the students was taken from the concert on occasion of the 60th birthday of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland in front of the Brandenburger Tor). As for the painting by Picasso, the first step aimed at the observation of the work of art in its main details by leaving aside the personal interpretation as the final phase of the analysis.

Although according to Combarieu it is impossible to understand the meaning of music fully, nevertheless it is possible to try to give it an explanation, which should not be restrictively committed to a single science (Combarieu, 1980, 11; cf. Bellini, 2009, 45). The interdisciplinary approach acquired its proper importance also in this case. Students had to analyze the Ode in a twofold way. On one hand, they were invited to study the key terms in the text which conveyed the ideals that Schiller had intended to express. On the other hand, they had to focus on the way Beethoven had translated Schiller's ideals of humanity and brotherhood into his musical notes. As a second step, students were given two critical texts that expressed two different viewpoints on the hymn. Thanks to these texts, they could approach the content of the Symphony from different modes of thinking, thus becoming conscious also of the partiality of human judgments. Only as a final step could the students compare these viewpoints with their own opinions and personal interpretations of the analyzed text.

This aspect emphasizes how the use of the arts within a didactic project (at school or at university) can be linked to instructional and educational purposes. Although the analysis was not made by experts, students acquired a method of approaching a work of art they knew only superficially. Moreover, according to the comments received at the end of the course, it is clear that there is a confirmation of an important aspect of education: demonstrating to students a learning method with which they can approach a single text can be useful in showing them how to approach almost everything they want to know.

The majority of the comments regarded three main points. The first is the possibility that such a teaching method gives students the opportunity to both express their own attitude towards life and to compare their standpoint with those of authoritative commentators, especially those validated by a personal experience or based on a specific theoretico-historical background. At the same time, the interaction with teacher and classmates gave them the opportunity to extend their personal viewpoints and to develop their own interpretations in a thoughtful way.

A second edifying aspect refers to the mistakes that students inevitably make in the written homework they must do. The question is how students look at their mistakes. Nevertheless, the way they do this depends on the way their teachers or educators correct them and on the attitude they show towards them. If mistakes are seen as a sort of dishonor and are corrected automatically, students will never be able to appreciate education. However, if mistakes are recognized as an opportunity through which everyone can learn something about himself and consequently improve, everyone will be able to see mistakes as a barrier that demands that it be simply encountered and crossed. This concept allows, for example, younger generations to reach the awareness of their identity as human beings and as limited creatures that need to be corrected, for example, in being able to express their ideas in the best way. In addition, students are appreciative when they are taught how to improve.

The third aspect that education to the arts imposes on students is the link they are able to have with the past in terms of their cultural traditions. The course assisted them, for example, in becoming aware of part of the treasure that has developed throughout the centuries and which is now in their hands. However, as expressed by the German writer J.W. von Goethe in his masterpiece *Faust*, education should also teach how one's cultural heritage can become part of an adult's awareness. Goethe invites man to earn over again what he has inherited from his fathers, in order to own it outright. Yet, whatever is not used leaves man overburdened, because he cannot be aware of it or give a reason for it (Goethe 1986, vv. 682–684). It is also cultural enrichment that students are looking for, which

can enable them to be integrated into the social community of which they are a part.

6. Concluding remarks

This analysis has offered a way of teaching a foreign language at school or at university through which students can achieve the edification of their selves.

Learners must be challenged. According to its etymological sense, this means that they must be “pro-voked” (It. *pro- vocāre*), “called out” to answer to the stimulus of reality. Moreover, the first urgent stimuli of life usually emerge during the learning years. Only through the commitments they must fulfill, are students encouraged to a full responsibility, which is firstly experienced when they begin to answer the call of reality.

The usefulness of education is therefore strictly connected to the interest it can stimulate in learners. As a consequence, education is firstly an adult problem, and then of the youth. In addition, as young boys and girls always develop a number of questions and requirements when they come into contact with everything, the question is whether adults have a path to offer them on which they can walk in search of the meaning of things, and hence of what they must study. What they actually need is valid educators who witness how life can be approached and who encourage them towards reality with the help of a method of approaching it correctly because, as soon as they find this opportunity, they begin their journey with enthusiasm and without the fear of further hard work. The additional care and effort required by homework assigned on the course and the way they interacted with it revealed, in fact, the thirst students have for new and interesting things that have something to communicate to them and with which they can come to terms with themselves.

University or school teaching will be of interest only if learners can be edified by it. What is in question is ‘the calling’ of young men and women, who demand to become adults thanks to a long-lasting awareness of their identity. In this regard, every educational process should imply an education in the arts, whose immense contribution consists of its power to “move” (It. *movēre*) and to change man’s soul, where he finds his longing for Beauty, Goodness, and Truth. Education in the arts is the best opportunity to develop a mature approach to life as it consists of a twofold phenomenon - social and personal. It is attention to life, because it is attention to the details of universal masterpieces, and this can facilitate the proper focus on reality as a whole. The analysis of a painting teaches, for example, how to turn one’s attention from the details to the whole. As stated by Benedict XVI, art is often “a proclamation of hope, an invitation to raise our gaze to the ultimate horizon”, and it fits to man’s thirst, because human history is “a continuing tension towards fullness” (Benedict XVI, 2009). It teaches the effort required to understand the meaning of things, by paying attention to different features under which the meaning is hidden. Moreover, the analysis of works of art encourages younger generations to meditate upon the values of past masterpieces by comparing them with their own values through fruitful discussions with educators and classmates.

In this way students can become active actors in what they study, protagonists of their work and consequently of their lives. Indeed, the most profound effect of the arts on human beings has always been the stirring up of the feelings and the mode of thinking by producing an interior change. This is the reason why the arts themselves can be considered an art, the supreme “art of education” (John Paul II, 1999). All personal reflections on texts and consequently on reality, which students would otherwise leave anonymous, emerge as a consequence of an invitation. Therefore, in line with the ancient Greeks, teaching cannot be just the disinterested transmission of knowledge, but it may become a gift that students can hold and use for a comparison with each type of reality (gr. *χρῆμα*).

Not surprisingly, youth has been called “a statue of grace” (Pieretti, 1983, 254), in which life stimulates curiosity and attracts the attention of youth. It is the first stage of life in which man begins the search for meaning and in which he can be educated in the investigation of the development of things as an analogue for the development of his life. It is obviously a compelling task, but it is truly fascinating, because younger generations need help in discovering the depth of life (cf. Pieretti 1983, 255). On this long path, they should first be exposed to these very educators.

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