

## Six memos for teaching Italian as a foreign language: Creativity, storytelling, and visual imagination in the language classroom\*

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### ABSTRACT

**EN** By combining pedagogical, linguistic, and literary perspectives on creativity, storytelling, and visual imagination with their application in the language classroom, this article proposes storytelling and creative writing techniques in teaching Italian as a foreign language (FL). The main objective of this contribution is to provide some concrete examples on how creative approaches can be incorporated in Italian language courses at different proficiency levels. Therefore, the procedures and the theoretical assumptions of three creative projects involving communicative means such as mimes and gestures, and technological tools such as Twitter and meme generators, will be illustrated in detail and put in relation to linguistic research on creativity.

**Key words:** FL TEACHING PRACTICES, STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES, CREATIVE WRITING, TECHNOLOGY, ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

**ES** Al combinar las perspectivas pedagógicas, lingüísticas y literarias de la creatividad, la narración y la imaginación visual con su aplicación en el aula de lenguas, este artículo propone técnicas de narración y escritura creativa para la enseñanza del italiano como lengua extranjera (LE). El objetivo principal de esta contribución es proporcionar algunos ejemplos concretos de cómo los enfoques creativos pueden incorporarse en los cursos de italiano en diferentes niveles de competencia. Para ello, se ilustrarán en detalle los procedimientos y los supuestos teóricos de tres proyectos creativos que involucran medios comunicativos como mímicas y gestos, y herramientas tecnológicas como Twitter y generadores de memes, y se relacionarán dichos proyectos con las investigaciones lingüísticas sobre la creatividad en una lengua extranjera.

**Palabras clave:** PRÁCTICAS DE ENSEÑANZA DE LE, TÉCNICAS DE NARRACIÓN, ESCRITURA CREATIVA, TECNOLOGÍA, LENGUA Y CULTURA ITALIANA

**IT** Combinando prospettive pedagogiche, linguistiche e letterarie sulla creatività, la narrazione e l'immaginazione visiva con la loro applicazione nella classe di lingua, questo articolo propone tecniche di narrazione e scrittura creativa per l'insegnamento dell'italiano come lingua straniera (LS). L'obiettivo principale di questo contributo è fornire alcuni esempi concreti su come gli approcci creativi possano essere incorporati nei corsi di lingua italiana a diversi livelli di competenza. Pertanto, le procedure e i presupposti teorici di tre progetti creativi che coinvolgono mezzi comunicativi come mimi e gesti e strumenti tecnologici come Twitter e generatori di meme, saranno illustrati in dettaglio e messi in relazione alla ricerca linguistica sulla creatività.

**Parole chiave:** LS PRATICHE DIDATTICHE, TECNICHE DI NARRAZIONE, SCRITTURA CREATIVA, TECNOLOGIA, LINGUA E CULTURA ITALIANA

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## 1. Introduction

This teaching-oriented article provides practical ideas for in-class activities to engage learners in creative language production. Pedagogical, linguistic, and literary perspectives on the relevance of creativity—in contemporary educational systems in general and, more specifically, in language courses—are tackled in depth so as to explore the potential of creative practices for language learning. The next section introduces the value of creativity, drawing on both theoretical and empirical arguments in favor of creative tasks in the language classroom. Subsequently, we illustrate three creative projects implemented at different Italian proficiency levels at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. Each project is described in detail, including the methodological framework underpinning it, the teaching techniques and rationale for each task, and the didactic materials and digital resources employed.

Project 1 is entitled *Story-miming* and focuses on Italian gestures. After an overview of scholarly contributions and teaching resources on this topic, we provide a comprehensive description of an activity involving the creation of a humorous storyline with gestures. Project 2, a *Tweet-storytelling challenge*, requires students to investigate Italian cultural figures and to participate in a creative writing activity on Twitter. Project 3, *Storytelling through iconic images and memes*, is centered on Dante's legacy in Italian popular culture and provides food for thought on how to introduce this pivotal figure to language learners by manipulating iconic images and creating memes.

In addition to illustrating these projects and presenting related resources that may be of interest to both language teachers and scholars, the overarching goal of this article is to contribute to a *creative turn* in FL/L2 teaching practices. As observed by Bell and Pomerantz (2014), in the language classroom more often than not “acts of linguistic creativity, and in particular those that play with form, are either ignored or considered deviant” (p. 32). However, in light of recent developments in FL/L2 research and of the social, technological, and educational changes that contemporary generations have undergone, it is crucial to reiterate the importance of creativity in the language learning context. While there has been a growing scholarly interest in the impact of creativity on second language acquisition, there is still a gap between current theoretical discussions on creativity and their translation into suitable learning materials and daily teaching practices. With the latter in mind, this article ultimately aims to provide concrete examples of creativity-driven tasks to apply in the language classroom, while simultaneously opening up further theoretical and practical discussions on how language teaching strategies can foster students' creative involvement, learning autonomy, and cultural growth.

## 2. The value of creativity in the context of language learning

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures that Italo Calvino was invited to hold at the University of Harvard and that were published posthumously in 1988, an entire chapter is devoted to the concept of “visibility” in its relation to creative expression. In the incipit to this section, Calvino quotes a notable line from Dante's *Purgatorio* (XVII.25): “Poi piovve dentro a l'alta fantasia (Then rained down into the high fantasy...)” (p. 81). Through this intertextual reference, Calvino emphasizes how the world of fantasy can be poetically conceived as an infinite flux, a locus where, borrowing Dante's image, a constant flow of rain precipitates. He suggests that the ideal vehicle to express the fantastic visions that come to mind is creative writing and, in a broader sense, the creative act. Although he does not explicitly utilize the term *creativity*, it is clear that this concept is deeply entangled with his conception of the imaginative process.

When Calvino wrote about the role of visual imagination in his *Lezioni Americane*, the Italian title of the aforementioned lectures, he was not referring to the microcosm of the language classroom. Yet, many of his reflections constitute an insightful starting point to interrogate the role and reassess the value that creativity and visual imagination play in the twenty-first-century language classroom. Indeed, Calvino explicitly advocates for “some possible pedagogy of the imagination that would accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it” (1988, p. 92). In the 1980s, before the advent of social media and the pervasiveness of cyberspace and technology in our daily lives, the creative power of imagination was already perceived to be under threat as a consequence of the image-overload that inundated contemporary society. As Sartori observed at the turn of the third millennium, today we can irrefutably say that the metamorphosis from *Homo Sapiens* to *Homo Videns*—that is, a shift from a view of human beings as individuals capable to think, reflect, and communicate knowledge, towards a more passive conception marked by a preponderance of vision, conceived as the quintessential characteristic of our society—has fully taken place (1999). The ubiquity of images and technology on a societal level forces us to rethink our traditional approaches to FL/L2 teaching and to ponder the pedagogical decisions that we make as language educators.

As teachers, we constantly have to make choices. Yet, the selection of teaching material and learning tasks is inevitably influenced by external constraints. In an attempt to concisely define the ideal features of a language learning activity, an activity checklist consisting of six features can guide teachers in the selection of activities and materials for language courses. As will be shown, these six criteria are anchored in a holistic combination of multiple approaches to language learning and language pedagogy and aim to provide teachers with general and yet practical principles that may guide the design and delivery of language activities. With these *six memos* in mind, the ideal language learning activity should be:

- 1) *Communicative*, i.e., it should have a clearly communicative goal and involve students in a variety of interaction patterns, with an emphasis on increasing the learners' communicative competence, that is, their ability "to weave utterances together into narratives, apologies, requests, directions, recipes, sermons, scoldings, jokes, prayers, and all else we do with language" (Finegan, 2004, p. 10);
- 2) *Relevant* to the syllabus and learning goals as well as to the realistic application of the target language, therefore, emphasizing the social dimension of language learning by bridging the gap between the classroom environment and the "real-world performance" (Atkinson, 2013, p. 594);
- 3) *Appropriate* to the students' level and profile, bearing in mind all the variables that may influence the learning approach to be put into place, with the ultimate objective "to better harness the positive desire of young students to learn an L2 and maintain this enthusiasm over an extended period of time" (Lasagabaster, 2013, p. 47);
- 4) *Motivating*, so as to foster students' participation in class and maximize their learning by carefully balancing the creation of an enjoyable atmosphere in class with the necessity to reach pre-established objectives. In Jere Brophy's words, the learning process "should be experienced as meaningful and worthwhile, but it requires sustained goal-oriented efforts to construct understandings" (Brophy, 2004, p. xii);
- 5) *Cultural*, i.e., it should include pertinent cultural notions, which can help students to expand their intercultural competence. As remarked by Alptekin (2002), "learning a foreign language becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers" (p. 58);
- 6) *Creative*, so as to promote students' creative and critical thinking skills. In the words of Burnard (2011), "the creativity agenda encourages teachers to take risks, be adventurous, and explore creativity themselves" (p. 51).

While classroom tasks frequently meet the first four aforementioned features, it is more challenging to incorporate the final two criteria. From a pedagogical perspective, the language classroom is the perfect context where to explore the true meaning of being creative and critical, precisely because it is through the encounter with another language and culture that students can learn to become more aware of their own selves.

The importance of integrating cultural facets in the language classroom has been at the center of numerous scholarly discussions (Brown, 2000; Byram, 1991; Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Kramsch, 1998; Moran, 2001; Schulz, 2007; Sercu, 2005). As observed by Celentin and Serragiotto (2015), "[l]a lingua infatti non è uno strumento astratto fatto solo di regole e costruzioni morfosintattiche ma è supportata da una cultura specifica che si manifesta attraverso di essa" (p. 2).<sup>1</sup> In other words, language cannot be separated from the culture, to the point that Agar (1994) coined the neologism *languaculture* to refer to these two inseparable notions in order to reiterate how "actually using a language involves all manner of background knowledge and local information in addition to grammar and vocabulary" (Agar, 2006, p. 2). If language cannot be dissociated from culture, then language learning and cultural learning should be inseparable. However, despite the evident relevance of culture in the FL/L2 context, it is not always easy to integrate simultaneously culture and creativity in the language classroom. The act of crafting a truly cultural and creative dimension in the language learning context requires time, patience, and a deep awareness of the empowering potential of creativity, both in its linguistic and imaginative acceptance, as a critical thinking tool in language courses.

Additionally, in the reality of contemporary education, it is increasingly difficult to break the classroom routine punctuated by exams, quizzes, credits, and grades, so as to envision a space for students' creativity to wander freely. In 1970, Paulo Freire insightfully voiced this concern by bringing to the foreground

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<sup>1</sup> "language, in fact, is not an abstract tool made up solely of morphosyntactic rules and constructions, but is supported by a specific culture that manifests itself through it" (our translation).

the contradiction of an oppressive educational system in which the deficiency of creativity is a consequence of a *banking concept of education*:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. [...] But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. (Freire, 2005, p. 72)

More recently, Tan Bee Tin, in a case study on the advantages of divergent tasks—that is, open tasks that are not oriented towards a single solution, therefore, involving a higher degree of negotiation among participants—has commented that “[i]n education, the idea that learning is not only discovery and problem-solving, but also creative, has recently become popular” (Tin, 2003, p. 244). Yet it is still challenging to translate this idea into concrete teaching practices. Indeed, while arguing for the importance of balancing structure and improvisation in teaching strategies, Sawyer (2011) observes that “[t]eachers are rarely allowed to do whatever they want, even in schools committed to constructivist and creative learning” (p. 2). David Berliner, in his forward to Sawyer (2011), goes as far as to define the current state of affairs in business-oriented educational systems as a “creaticide” (Sawyer, p. xiv). This neologism brings us back to the original meaning of the word “creativity” and leads us to reflect on its annihilation: the term derives from the Latin verb *creare*, “to make, bring forth, produce,” and it is etymologically related to another Latin verb, *crecere*, to grow (Online Etymology Dictionary). This concept is interlaced with the Greek notion of *poiesis*, which designates the artistic power of making, creating, composing. However, an exhaustive definition of creativity is difficult to achieve: as Albert (2013) observes, the term is at least four-fold and can refer simultaneously to “the *processes* involved in creativity, the *person* and the personality traits that are in the background, the properties of the creative *product*, and the *pressures* or characteristics of the environment” (p. 144).

Creativity is relevant for language learning for a multiplicity of reasons. The relationship between the concept of creativity and the process of second language acquisition (SLA) is complex and varied. To fully understand it, it is necessary to resort to a multidisciplinary approach that has its roots in applied linguistics, neuroscience, psychology, and pedagogy. Drawing from Roman Jakobson’s functions of language, Balboni (2008) associates the *poetic-imaginative function* to the “mondo fantastico,” the world of fantasy (p. 79). He remarks that this function takes place “quando si usa la lingua per produrre particolari effetti ritmici, suggestioni musicali, associazioni metaforiche ecc., oppure per creare situazioni e mondi immaginari. Sono propri di questa funzione tutti i generi ‘letterari,’ dalla fiaba al poema epico” (Balboni, 2008, p. 84).<sup>2</sup> The *poetic-imaginative function* is therefore related to an inventive employment of language in order to create imaginary stories through literary and non-literary means. As a multi-dimensional concept, creativity has multiple resonances if applied to the language classroom, since it can refer simultaneously to the above-mentioned imaginative and artistic ability of human beings as well as to the linguistic skill of creating new utterances (Chomsky 1966, 2002, 2006; D’Agostino, 1984; La Licata, 2012).

Creativity thus involves students’ linguistic output and encompasses primarily, although not solely, the productive skills, speaking and writing. Indeed, from a neuroscientific pedagogical perspective, research shows that “students will absorb new material much more readily and meaningfully if they are given opportunities to *do something with it*” (Danesi, 2003, p. 50). However, as Danesi points out, it is essential to combine the left-brain analytical mode with the right-brain experiential mode as a guiding principle in inductive language learning strategies. In other words, analytical and rational tasks should not entirely be put aside by more creative and explorative ones: on the contrary, effective classroom strategies should aim to merge the two modes, especially when new language input is proposed. In an empirical study on language creativity in poetry writing tasks, Tin (2011) investigated the correlation between language play and language development. By creating a dialogue between linguistic perspectives on creativity (Cook, 2000) and approaches that see creativity as a process (Finke, 1996) and as a product (Boden, 2001), Tin demonstrated the “emergence of complex language” through creative tasks that include “formal constraints,” i.e., constraints that encourage “form-focus attention” (p. 219). Therefore, creative tasks, while allowing for a higher degree of freedom in

<sup>2</sup> “when language is used to produce particular rhythmic effects, musical suggestions, metaphorical associations etc., or to create imaginary worlds and situations. All the ‘literary’ genres, from the fairy tale to the epic, belong to this function” (our translation).

comparison to analytical tasks, can be even more beneficial if they also provide learners with opportunities to focus and reflect on form, so as to expand simultaneously their creative *and* linguistic competences.

Creative speaking and writing activities, especially if proposed as collaborative tasks, can also foster the learners' "integrative motivation" (Krashen, 1981, p. 26; Stevick, 1976, p. 113), that is, their desire to be part of the FL/L2 communicative world, which can lower in turn their affective filter. It has been acknowledged that motivation constitutes the springboard for the language learning process. The spark of creativity can also nurture the students' intrinsic motivation (Brophy, 2004; Deci, 1975; Deci & Ryan, 2000), which arises from one's own self, feeds students' curiosity, and leads them to be active protagonists of their learning. It is, therefore, essential to leave room for "self-creation of media and texts" in order to encourage a "liberatory learning" (Shor, 1980, p. 108). In the language classroom, liberatory experiences and language play are deeply interlaced: as remarked by Bell and Pomerantz, "some L2 users may find it liberating to play with their L2, finding license to be creative in ways they are not normally able or allowed to do in their L1" (2016, p. 42). Furthermore, the employment of a creative approach to language teaching is not a one-way process: in addition to impacting students, it can influence teachers themselves, as they are pushed to explore new ways to teach the stock formulas that books often propose to explain specific language items. In other words, in a truly creative classroom environment, the teacher has the opportunity to test more all-involving approaches, in an osmotic creative process that mutually involves both teachers and students.

Following a brief review of the pedagogical use of creative storytelling, the remainder of this article will describe three such educational projects that focus on developing the students' creativity, storytelling skills, and visual imagination.

### 3. Creative storytelling in the language classroom

Both traditional and digital storytelling strategies can be employed as successful tools to enhance language learning. This view is central to Palmer, Harshbarger and Koch's (2001) definition of storytelling as a "rich interactive process that facilitates imagination, creative thinking, language abilities and cooperative learning" (p. 199). Similarly, Reinders (2011) observed that "stories combine different aspects of learning pedagogy, including: student engagement, reflection for deep learning, technology integration, and project-based learning" (p. 1). In particular, literary fiction, along with other non-fictional storytelling genres, fosters the pleasure of knowledge, a pleasure which is intertwined with the emergence of an emotive sphere. Due to the subjective dimension of the FL/L2 learning process, the manipulation and creation of narratives by language learners also becomes a vehicle through which students can explore and vocalize their personal ideas and thoughts through activities that are more apt to engage them in a creative and less predictable usage of the language they are learning. In the words of Gianrenzo Clivio and Marcel Danesi,

A narrative is a text that is constructed to describe in sequence a perceived causal and interconnected sequence of events involving characters in time and space. The narrative may be purely fact-based, as in a newspaper report or a psychoanalytic session, or fictional, as in a novel, comic strip, film, for instance. (2000, p. 172)

Creative storytelling tasks in the L2 classroom can therefore involve literary, digital, and audio-visual texts that can be appropriated and reworked in a multiplicity of ways. To this end, the texts act as cues from which to elicit the student's total involvement and creative participation. As stated by Kalaja (2015) in a study on beliefs, agency, and identity construction in language teaching and learning, "[a]mong other turns, applied linguistics, or language learning and teaching has been undergoing a narrative turn" (p. 124). Although Kalaja in this instance refers to narrative as a method to investigate the students' beliefs about their own learning, language teachers can resort to narrative not only as a research tool but also as an effective in-class teaching technique. Indeed, narrative is quintessentially a means to encounter another culture. In a study on a didactic project involving migrant learners, a group of L2 Italian teachers observed how

Ogni narrazione, orale o scritta, per il fatto che presuppone la partecipazione di un pubblico, uditore o lettore, permette a ciascun soggetto narrante di incontrare l'altro. In quest'incontro, nell'ascolto reciproco e nello scambio comunicativo, avviene inevitabilmente una negoziazione di significati, in cui tutti i soggetti coinvolti contemporaneamente affermano e ridefiniscono la propria identità. (Fiorentino et al., 2015, p. 55)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Any narrative, written or oral, presupposes the participation of an audience, as auditors or as readers, and therefore allows the narrating subjects to meet each other. In this encounter, in this mutual listening and communicative exchange, a negotiation of meanings inevitably takes place, by means of which all the subjects simultaneously involved affirm and redefine their own identity" (our translation).

As a consequence, narrative-oriented learning tasks can encourage students to explore their own identity as FL/L2 speakers and to do so by performing, interacting, and negotiating meaning with their peers in the target language. However, a narrative approach can naturally be challenging for some students, who may feel reluctant to get exposed to unconventional creative activities in the foreign language. Nonetheless, if mindfully planned, storytelling tasks can actually contribute to build the learners' self-confidence and encourage their collaborative interaction.

#### 4. Three creative storytelling projects

The three storytelling projects presented in this article aimed to encourage creative and critical thinking skills in the language classroom. With this objective in mind, each project included a “pre-task planning” phase which helped learners in the construction and development of their narratives in oral, written, and audio-visual forms. Indeed, research on the impact of planning on SLA (Ellis, 1987; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Robinson, 1995) demonstrated that “giving learners the opportunity to plan a narrative before they speak it (i.e., pre-task planning) resulted in significant gains in both fluency [...] and complexity” (Ellis & Yuan, 2004).

These projects then employed alternative storytelling techniques, including non-verbal communicative means such as mimes and gestures, and incorporated an array of technological tools, such as social networks, storytelling platforms, and meme generators. Although each project occurred through different media and textual forms, they all involved the narration of a story. The following sections revolve around these activities and their related teaching techniques:

- Project 1 – Beginner Level: Story-miming
- Project 2 – Elementary Level: Tweet-storytelling challenge
- Project 3 – Intermediate Level: Storytelling through iconic images and memes

Before delving into each project, it is worth noting that the target language (Italian) was used in all the core stages of the activities presented. Students became accustomed to understanding instructions in Italian from the very beginning. The teacher's monitoring and the usage of concrete examples in the initial stages of each activity (i.e., the video in Project 1 and samples of story-chains and memes in Project 2 and 3) helped students to comprehend the tasks not only verbally but also visually. However, in the pre-task planning phase, students drew on their L1, in order to set the bases for the main activity. The cooperative dimension of these projects encouraged mutual support among students in implementing the tasks collaboratively.

##### 4.1 Project 1: Story-miming

The first project focused on Italian non-verbal language and involved a class of beginners (Level A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR]). The emphasis on non-verbal communication allowed for an integration of Italian culture-specific traits in the learning tasks. The use of gestures in everyday life in Italy is undoubtedly one of the most widespread stereotypes embedded in the notion of *Italianness*. Parodies and comedy sketches of Italians caught gesticulating abound across the world and across the media. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that Italian FL/L2 teachers frequently incorporate this element in the classroom as a cultural curiosity that arouses interest and amusement in language learners. This cultural facet lends itself to humorous interpretations that more or less realistically mirror a conventional pragmatic habit in Italian. However, gestures are relevant and worth teaching not merely because they constitute an enjoyable cultural trait but also because they have a clear illocutionary intent and a close relation to discourse structure (Kendon, 1995, p. 247). Gestures “participate in the construction of the utterance's meaning” (Kendon, 2000, p. 60): not only do they play an important role in linguistic exchanges but they can also add layers of meaning to the communicative act (McNeill, 1992). Indeed, Kendon and McNeill draw attention to the manner in which gestures can perform a variety of functions, in that they can simultaneously complement a description, provide visual exemplifications, and frequently embed linguistic expressions with further non-verbal nuances as well as with a more precise and circumscribed significance.

Many of these gestures, including the well-known *mano a borsa* or *purse hand* (Kendon, 1995, p. 250), have made their appearance in various books as early as in 1832 in Andrea De Jorio's *La Mimica degli Antichi Investigata nel Gestire Napoletano* and, more recently, in Munari (1963), Efron (1972), Poggi (1983), and Diadori (1990). The *Dizionario dei Gestii degli Italiani* (Caon, 2010) responded to the intercultural need to understand the semiotic dimension of Italian gestures as well as the idiomatic expressions associated with

them. It provides useful descriptions of gestures, along with physical depictions, verbal and visual explanations, situational contexts, and intercultural misunderstandings that may arise when using specific gestures in countries other than Italy. As recently as 2017, a further contribution to this field took shape in *L'Italiano a Gesti: Attività per lo Sviluppo della Dimensione Non Verbale* (Caon, Giovannini & Meneghetti, 2017), which confirms a growing interest in the field of teaching Italian to foreigners towards gestures as depository of communicative meaning and markers of cultural identity.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, gestures belong to the sphere of non-verbal codes that effective “social actors in multilingual settings” (Kramsch, 2008, p. 400) need to be able to master in order to interact confidently with other language speakers. Building on complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997), Kramsch associates the skill of communicating efficiently with Bourdieu’s concept of *sens pratique*, which is encapsulated in the all-encompassing *symbolic competence*, that is, “the ability not only to approximate or appropriate for oneself someone else’s language, but to shape the very context in which the language is learned and used” (Kramsch, 2008, p. 400). On a pedagogical level, elements such as gestures are intrinsically embedded in the performativity of a language and are therefore pivotal in gaining a deeper understanding of another culture, as they can help students realize the dissimilarities and inconsistencies between their own culture and the new culture they are learning. From this point of view, these paralinguistic elements contribute to accepting the limits—or niches of untranslatability, we might say—in the encounter with another language. In fact, as Balboni and Caon (2014) comment, “non-verbal body language such as gestures, expressions, proximity to speakers” (n.p.) are frequently taken for granted and considered to be universal, when in truth they are actually deeply rooted in specific cultural frameworks and thus need to be taught in the language learning context in order to develop the students’ intercultural competence.

An excellent example of how Italian gestures can be introduced and re-used in a story-miming activity is provided by Roberto Tartaglione and Daniela Mancini’s video available on the Alma Edizioni website<sup>4</sup>. In this performance, Roberto and Daniela enact a non-verbal sketch by using exclusively gestures. What follows is a description of how this video can be incorporated into an in-class activity that fosters the creative employment of Italian gestures in the language classroom by alternating traditional miming-activities and technology. Each stage is illustrated in detail and different options are given, depending on the class time and technological tools that are available:

- 1) *Warm-up activity*: Students were asked to match pictures of gestures with their meaning. This initial activity aimed to teach students how to express emotions in Italian (i.e., I am happy, I am angry, I am sad, etc.), and how to accompany these emotions with a specific gesture. To this end, cards with emoticons and gestures were created so as to make the activity more engaging. Each emoticon was printed on yellow paper and was accompanied by a specific gesture. For instance, a piece of paper showed an emoticon with an angry expression accompanied by a picture of the “purse hand” gesture. In pairs, students had to practice the enactment of these emoticons/gestures.
- 2) *Video task*: Students watched “Il linguaggio dei gesti” by Tartaglione and Mancini, which worked as a template for the subsequent storytelling activity. While watching the video, students worked in pairs in order to guess the topic of the conversation and identify at least three of the previously-taught Italian gestures.
- 3) *Storyboard task*: The class was divided into small groups. Each group was given a topic card (Figure 1) and a storyboard (Figure 2). The topic card, originally written in Italian but presented here in English, aimed to guide students in the subsequent writing activity by providing them with a context and a set of characters and emotions to enact. Students then had to write the script of a humorous performance in a storyboard template, divided into six sections. For each section, students wrote down and/or drew at least one sentence alongside the gesture that would accompany it. An alternative option for this step could be a comic strip with speech bubbles instead of a storyboard. The same activity could also be set on an online interactive comic-creator platform such as Read Write Think Comic Creator<sup>5</sup>, rather than on paper. On this user-friendly website, students can set the name and subtitle of their comic strip, select the template and number of panels, choose the background, protagonists, props, balloons and save their comic strip as a pdf file.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.almaedizioni.it/almatv/grammatica-caffe/il-linguaggio-dei-gesti/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/comic/index.html>

- 4) *Final performance*: The storyboard functioned as a script for the final performance. Each group enacted the scene from their script, using exclusively mimes and gestures. The other groups had to guess, in the target language, the context, characters, and emotions of each sketch. One point was awarded for each correct answer and the winning group received a prize. Depending on the availability of technological means, students can alternatively use the platform, Flipgrid<sup>6</sup>, to record a video of their performance. Then, through Flipgrid, each group can access the videos of other groups and guess the context, emotions and characters of the classmates' performance.

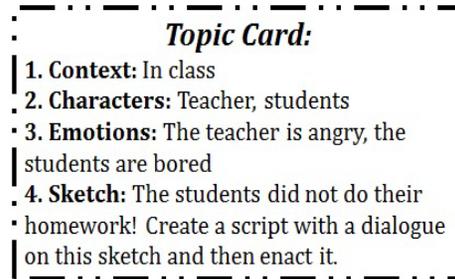


Figure 1. Sample topic card

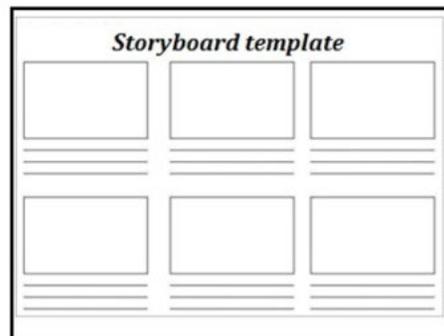


Figure 2. Storyboard template

This guided non-verbal storytelling activity is an example of how both writing and speaking productions can be incorporated effectively into a single lesson with a focus on non-verbal communicative means. By decoding non-verbal acts and then transcoding linguistic acts using kinesthetic storytelling strategies, students simultaneously learned specific Italian gestures and how to express emotions in Italian. Furthermore, the sketches allowed for an integration of humor into the language classroom.

The topic cards used in this activity suggest sample familiar contexts and scenarios that can be easily translated into gestures—and, at a later stage, into words—by complete beginners. Other equally conventional scenarios were provided at this level, such as humorous incidents occurring in the supermarket, at the shopping mall, or at the restaurant. In this case, we intentionally selected common settings and every-day circumstances generally introduced in a beginner course and not requiring complex linguistic output. However, this same activity can be proposed at higher proficiency levels by providing more unfamiliar scenarios that might further stimulate students' creativity and push their linguistic and extra-linguistic skills. For instance, higher-level students may be asked to enact a sketch in a context that demands a more challenging language use, such as an unpredictable circumstance occurring in a museum or at a gas station in Italy, to name a few alternatives. If teachers wish to venture into more unreal settings that may push the students' imagination further, the sketch may even be set on a spaceship or on another planet or in any other imaginative context that may prove useful to trigger the students' involvement. Naturally, the possibilities to adapt each activity are boundless, but they should be aligned with students' profiles and proficiency level, as well as with the learning objectives initially set by the teacher.

<sup>6</sup> <https://info.flipgrid.com/>

Overall, this project allowed beginner students not only to strengthen their basic *linguistic repertoire* (Finegan, 2004, p. 540), a term which includes different registers, styles, colloquial expressions and language varieties, but also to broaden their contextual and cultural awareness, in other words, their *communicative repertoire*, which embraces precisely a variety of non-verbal dynamics such as “gesture, dress, posture and even knowledge of communicative routines” (Rymes, 2014, p. 290). In addition, students had the opportunity to plan and devise a sketch collaboratively. Therefore, they resorted to *multimodal resources*, both verbal and non-verbal, along with cooperative learning strategies (Tabensky, 2008). In sum, through this activity, by performing a role as actors on stage, students created their own imaginative storylines, developed their metalinguistic responsiveness, and appropriated the non-verbal cues of the foreign language as their own.

#### 4.2 Project 2: Tweet-storytelling challenge

In the preface to *Grammatica della Fantasia*, Gianni Rodari recounts his reflections on the function of the imagination, the techniques to foster it, and “sul modo di comunicare a tutti quelle tecniche, per esempio di farne uno strumento per l’educazione linguistica (ma non soltanto...) dei bambini” (Rodari, 1980, p. 9).<sup>7</sup> Although Rodari was directing his creative writing strategies to a profile of Italian L1 young learners, his insights can provide imaginative food for thought for FL/L2 Italian teachers as well. By creatively adapting Rodari’s techniques to the language classroom, we can craft a teaching approach that truly “pone al suo centro l’apprendente, ‘creatore’ consapevole del suo stesso apprendere” (Sciarrino, 2013).<sup>8</sup>

Creative writing activities in language courses are frequently assigned as homework because they tend to use up extensive class time (Balboni, 2008, p. 160). However, by modelling a writing task using a platform such as Twitter, teachers can take advantage of the brevity and rapidity embedded in this social network for in-class guided creative writing tasks. The second project, therefore, entailed a storytelling challenge on Twitter and involved students of Italian at an elementary level (Level A2 of the CEFR). This activity shows how teachers can turn social networks such as Twitter into a creative storytelling instrument.

Neither the teacher nor the students need to be expert Twitter users to carry out this task. However, Twitter was introduced in our course as a learning tool from the very beginning of the semester: on a weekly basis, students posted tweets related to the main topic and/or grammar point covered in class. Therefore, by the time this activity was proposed, students were already acquainted with this platform. There are several advantages in using Twitter to launch a storytelling challenge: first of all, as a social network widely used across the world, Twitter is closer to the virtual communicative world of current generations; secondly, Twitter has a rigid length-limit of 280 characters per tweet, and is, therefore, a good resource to teach communicative conciseness and effectiveness. However, should the use of Twitter not be possible, teachers could alternatively employ Storybird<sup>9</sup> and model the following creative writing activity to this platform, where students can create a picture book as a visual support for their story. Maneschi (2017), building on Bruner’s (1986; 1990) conception of narrative as a central cultural and human cognitive mode, provides practical advice on how to use this platform in a language activity focused on “visual storytelling” (p. 30).

To provide cultural background for this creative writing task, the activity was linked to a previous project in which students conducted research on illustrious Italian figures. In small groups, students had to briefly brainstorm the information they had gathered on the Italian figure they had formerly researched. They then re-wrote these biographies into fictional stories to be published on Twitter. This creative writing activity was divided into four stages:

- 1) *Pre-writing task - Brainstorming in groups*: Students received large sheets of paper to jot down ideas and key words, focusing on the main features of the story (i.e., genre, protagonists, setting). They initially had to write a *story map*, which constitutes the first “basis for immediate assessment of students’ stories” (Yang & Wu, 2012, p. 340). Since the latest lesson focused on the topic of travelling, this theme was integrated in the writing activity by asking students to include a journey and/or a means of transport in their stories.
- 2) *Collaborative writing task - Tweet-story*: Each student was assigned a part of the story, which he/she wrote in a tweet (e.g., Tweet 1: beginning and setting; Tweet 2: central story and twist; Tweet 3: resolution and ending). All the tweets were linked logically and thematically, as a story-chain.

<sup>7</sup> “how the techniques might be disseminated so that everyone could use them, for example, as instruments for the linguistic education of children, but not just for this purpose alone” (translated by Jack Zipes, 1996, p. 3).

<sup>8</sup> “places the learner at its center, as a ‘creator’ of his/her own learning process” (our translation).

<sup>9</sup> <https://storybird.com/>

- 3) *Post-writing task*: Each student was assigned a role. For instance: *proofreader* (who edited the story to ensure it was grammatically correct and coherent); *creative director* (who made sure that the micro-story was original and unique, if necessary by adding a plot twist); *marketing editor* (who chose the images to accompany the story on Twitter). After revising the first draft with the help of the teachers, who acted as facilitators, students published their stories on Twitter.
- 4) *Peer-correction and oral story-sharing*: Each group read the various stories published on Twitter and carried out a peer-correction activity. These peer-editing strategies reflect an engagement with the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) pedagogy (Zawacki & Rogers, 2012). After this peer-correction stage, each group shared their narratives through a dramatized reading with the rest of the class. At this stage, space was given for a freer speaking production activity. Students were encouraged to resort to their artistic skills and to other resources, such as visual presentations and background music, in order to reproduce their stories in an engaging manner. Here, the Tweet-stories served as basic scripts, but students had the freedom to enact them differently. For instance, they could change the narrator's voice into a dialogue between the main characters of the story. While each group performed their stories, the other groups gave an anonymous mark from 1 to 5, based on the inventiveness of the story and the performance. The winners received an Italian-themed prize.

In our course, all the stories showed an imaginative approach to the biographies of eminent Italian figures. Twitter functioned as a sharing device and the Tweet-stories became screenplays for the subsequent oral performance. These forms of “collaborative fantasy” lend themselves to a higher level of creativity. In Norrick's words,

The participants in a collaborative fantasy intend to amuse themselves and share high-involvement talk, rather than to engage in a logical exercise. Cleverness and creativity take precedence over consistency and credibility. With no specific remembered events to verbalize, co-tellers are free to develop any sort of plot they can agree on. (2000, p. 132)

The winning story (Figure 3) was written in the fashion of an historical novel. It narrated the life of Michelangelo and his conflict with a rival architect while he was working at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Another story (Figure 4) was a thriller-retelling of Dante's life in modern days.

**#ITAL112 #Storytelling challenge: Group 1**

**#Tweet 1:** Questa storia si è svolta nel secolo sedicesimo nella città di Roma. Roma è la più grande città di Italia. Molti artisti lavoravano per il Papa a Roma. Michelangelo era un bravo scultore, ma Papa Giulio II gli ha fatto un torto.

**#Tweet 2:** Quando Michelangelo stava lavorando alla cupola di San Pietro, un altro architetto Giacomo Della Porta ha convinto il Papa a non pagare Michelangelo. Michelangelo si è arrabbiato e ha lasciato Roma. Il Papa ha capito che lui aveva bisogno di Michelangelo per un altro progetto.

**#Tweet 3:** Il Papa ha ordinato alla guardia svizzera di riportare Michelangelo a Roma. La risoluzione della storia è stata che il Papa ha deciso di pagare. Michelangelo ha detto a Giacomo che voleva una scusa ufficiale in pubblico.

Figure 3. Winning Tweet-story

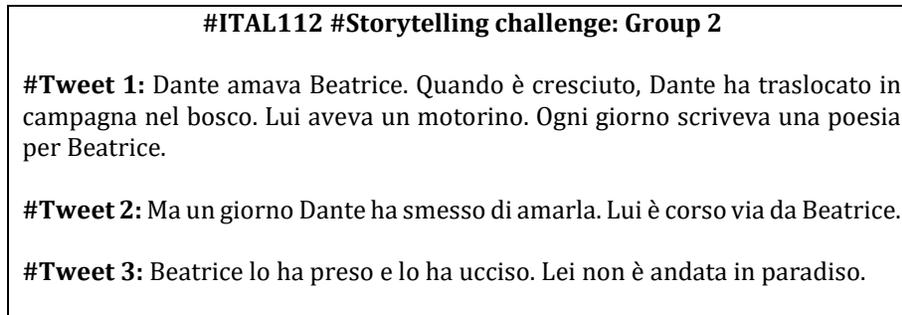


Figure 4. Another Tweet-story

It is interesting to notice that these story-creations frequently gave way to stylistically and linguistically playful associations: for instance, in Dante's tweet-story, students created a rhythmic effect between the final two sentences by making the word "ucciso" rhyme with "paradiso." This parodic retelling of Dante's love for Beatrice acquired an additional ironic twist through this linguistic pun.

#### 4.3 Project 3: *Storytelling through iconic images and memes*

The third project focused on the use of memes and iconic images for group storytelling and was implemented in an intermediate language course (Level B1 of the CEFR), by exposing students to the captivating imagery of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This masterpiece has a wide appeal in North American academia and is undoubtedly among the works of Italian literature that are best known to the international audience. The popularity of the *Divine Comedy* is closely linked to an ongoing process of remediation, that is, the process of refashioning and renegotiation through new media that Dante's work has undergone across the centuries, in Italy and abroad. This masterpiece has inspired theatrical performances and *lecturae Dantis* by renowned actors such as Vittorio Gassman and Roberto Benigni. In addition, its visual and filmic adaptations are countless, including Gustave Doré's nineteenth-century illustrations<sup>10</sup> to the *Divine Comedy*, the 1911 silent movie *Inferno*, and the 1995 American thriller *Seven*, as well as the episode of *The Simpsons* featuring Homer's donut Hell (Groening, *The Simpsons*, Treehouse of Horror IV, 1993), *L'Inferno di Topolino* (Fecchio, Monteduro & Freccero, 2016), and Facebook pages such as "Se i Social Network Fossero Sempre Esistiti"<sup>11</sup>, which repurpose, once again, playful allusions to Dante's *Inferno* in popular culture. Another example is the website, "Dante Today"<sup>12</sup> (Saiber & Coggeshall, n.d.), a crowdsourced repository for "citations and sightings" of Dante and his work. Showcasing cultural manifestations spanning from pop music to a variety of parodic re-adaptations, this site stands as further evidence of Dante's reception and renegotiation.

The popularity of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a source of visual imagination and creative refashioning can be very productive in FL/L2 courses, in which instructors face the linguistic and cultural challenge of introducing this masterpiece to language learners. This work can be overwhelming for beginner or even intermediate students, who are likely not linguistically equipped to appreciate fourteenth-century Italian vernacular, both at a literal and allegorical level. However, mediating the encounter with Dante's work through its contemporary legacy can offer a way for language learners to acquire basic literary and cultural competence in the *Divine Comedy*, while participating as content creators in its unfolding process of remediation.

In order to elicit this combined process of cultural acquisition and renegotiation in language students, teachers may find memes particularly useful. A meme is a self-contained story, generally a humorous image or video combined with a written text that is copied, with slight variations, and spread rapidly over the Internet, thus becoming viral. As Shifman (2014) highlights in her study on Internet memes, these digital artefacts are not only shared and propagated but also subjected to an endless process of remaking and remixing. In other words, their *memetic success* depends on "the probability that people will respond creatively" to them (Shifman, 2014, p. 174). Furthermore, memes are culturally significant in that they can be regarded as "reflections of cultural and social collectives" (Shifman, 2014, p. 171). Memes are, therefore, a rich channel of cultural transfer that goes beyond the mere information exchange. For their comedic language, these visual and written texts are less predictable than the language usually featured in textbooks, and they can become a means to engage

<sup>10</sup> <https://archive.org/details/GustaveDoreIllustrationsForTheDivineComedyByDanteAlighieriHQ>

<sup>11</sup> <https://it-it.facebook.com/seisocialnetwork/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://research.bowdoin.edu/dante-today/>

students in a more complex act of interpretation. Language play and humor challenge learners to face a variety of possible interpretations. By asking students to engage with “ambiguity and polysemy,” they offer “prodigious resources for language education and not merely distractions from the serious business of learning” (Bell & Pomerantz, 2014, p. 41).

Having illustrated the significance of memes in popular culture and the benefits of exposing students to language play, we will now move on to describe in detail how we incorporated these elements in an intermediate-level class. The activity focused on enhancing storytelling, writing, and cultural skills through Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and was divided into three steps:

- 1) *Introduction to Dante’s Inferno*: Students listened to an excerpt from Vittorio Gassman’s *lectura Dantis* of the initial tercets from *Inferno*, Canto 1. We then asked them to interpret the meaning of these lines in small groups. After a collective discussion, we provided an overview of the structure of Dante’s *Inferno*. We then distributed a visual map of the Nine Circles of Hell and introduced the first creative writing task. In pairs, students designed their own nine circles, based on their experience as college students. For each circle, they wrote a short title and a description of the punishment, by applying Dante’s principle of the *contrappasso*, the idea that the damned souls deserve a retribution that resembles or contrasts the sin they committed on earth.
- 2) *Group-storytelling task*: In the subsequent phase of the project, students shared the fictional images of their *undergraduate Inferno*, engaging in an activity of group storytelling that strengthened their presentational and vocabulary skills, while allowing them to socialize as a class through the creation of humorous content. There were, for example, several self-ironic representations of Hell: one group confined “undecided” undergraduates to Limbo for their inability to choose a major; another group condemned cheaters to the *Fraud Circle*, where they would retake the same final exam over and over again.
- 3) *Final creative task*: The final writing activity involved the creation in pairs of Dantesque memes. In this case, the activity was specifically linked to one of the topics students had recently covered in class: the environment. Since contemporary digital culture has often featured memes of the Italian poet in a judgmental attitude, students were asked to elaborate on this comical facet of the *Divine Comedy*’s reception. Each pair designed a meme on Meme Generator<sup>13</sup>, in which Dante expressed contempt for non-environmentally friendly behaviors, such as not recycling, wasting energy, or littering (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Samples of Dantesque memes created by the students

<sup>13</sup> <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>

Overall, this activity increased students' knowledge of both Italian culture and its contemporary reuse in a variety of media. They had the chance to experience a meaningful encounter with Italian literature and, as content creators, to participate directly in the inexhaustible legacy of the *Divine Comedy*.

## 5. Conclusion

The teaching techniques presented in this article allowed students to work collaboratively to create stories in the language they were learning. In evaluating the outcomes of these creative projects, it is worth highlighting that students practiced speaking and writing skills in a communicative way, with a double focus on both fluency and accuracy. A strong emphasis was placed on the relevance of the activities in relation to the course syllabus and its objectives. In the introductory stage of each activity, students were made aware that these projects were meant to provide them with further opportunities to revise topics covered in earlier lessons and to make further progress without the pressure of being formally assessed. As a result, each project was appropriate to the students' learning and tailored to their language level and profile. To make the activities more engaging, learners were encouraged to draw from their artistic and personal interests, which gave scope to a greater intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, a cultural component lay at the core of each task. Finally, a clear creative effort was incorporated in each stage, so as to stimulate the students' active contribution to their learning process. As a result, returning to the "activity checklist" proposed in the introduction, it can be seen how these projects effectively merged the aforementioned six features of the ideal language learning activity. Overall, students participated in tasks that were:

- 1) *Communicative*: Speaking and writing skills were practiced communicatively and cooperatively through tasks that facilitated group-work.
- 2) *Relevant*: Each project was clearly linked to the syllabus so as to give students the chance to revise topics and language items previously studied in class and to practice new vocabulary in a meaningful and challenging context.
- 3) *Appropriate*: All the activities were tailored to the learners' profiles and proficiency levels.
- 4) *Motivating*: Learners were encouraged to explore their personal interests and express their own ideas while developing their stories, which were as a result more inspiring and motivating.
- 5) *Cultural*: Students learned new facets of Italian culture (e.g., the meaning and importance of gestures in communicative exchanges; the biographies of Italian prominent historical, artistic, and cultural figures; Dante's legacy in Italian contemporary popular culture).
- 6) *Creative*: Learners actively sketched and performed storylines based on the above-mentioned topics, therefore putting into practice storytelling and creative writing skills.

In each activity, students had the opportunity to work individually, in pairs, and in groups. At the end of each project, students were invited to reflect on what they had learned and to provide feedback on the projects. Overall, the responses were positive: students appreciated that there was a clear link between the topics they had studied and the activities proposed, which allowed them to revisit and expand the vocabulary and language points they had learned and to increase their proficiency. Some of the less confident students, however, were initially reluctant to engage in these activities. For instance, at the initial stages, a few remarked that they were not able to be creative at all. This perplexed attitude resonates with Bell and Pomerantz's observation that "humor and indeed even serious acts of linguistic creativity always entail some degree of risk" (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016, p.176). However, as Bell and Pomerantz reiterate, this risk can be turned into an opportunity for the students' critical reflection and intercultural growth. To overcome such issues, it is pivotal for the teachers to encourage the students' output and to set a harmonious classroom environment in which everyone feels welcome to interact and express his/her own ideas. In this regard, we noted that once the groups started planning their stories cooperatively under the teacher's monitoring, even the more hesitant students intervened in the group dynamics and contributed to the final product.

As a whole, the stories students created in oral, written, and visual forms showed that their linguistic abilities were pushed towards more original language production. In addition, learners reported that they enjoyed the less predictable features of these lessons, which permitted them to approach language topics in a less controlled manner in comparison to the more conventional in-class tasks generally suggested by the textbook and mostly oriented towards a functional view of language. It can be concluded, therefore, that the six ideal features of a language learning activity—communicative, relevant, appropriate, motivating, cultural, and

creative—were met. Although these projects were tailored for Italian language courses, the same techniques can be adapted to other languages by choosing different cultural, literary, and artistic figures and using these procedures as models. There are, however, some considerations to take into account for teachers who wish to adapt and implement these lessons. Firstly, these activities require careful planning and can be unavoidably time-consuming. Secondly, it is pivotal to provide very specific and detailed instructions and scaffolds for each project. Finally, it is necessary to tailor each creative storytelling activity to the students' linguistic level, as they may feel discouraged if they are asked to produce a story beyond their language abilities.

Beyond the immediate scope of these specific projects, in this article we have advocated for the implementation of a higher degree of creativity in FL/L2 daily teaching practices. Creativity as a teaching/learning mindset can and should be integrated more frequently in the language classroom. The implications of the planning and delivery of creative tasks for language teaching are manifold. Firstly, as emphasized throughout this article, the creation of stories in the language classroom through collaborative storytelling techniques can help students to develop a sense of coherence, to organize their thoughts, and to reflect critically on their ideas in order to communicate more powerfully in the target language. Secondly, creative approaches can go hand-in-hand with an integration of technology in language courses and with an exploitation of authentic didactic materials that can induce a greater exposure to the culture of the target language. Thirdly, as a two-way process, creativity is capable of activating a rebound effect, by establishing a virtuous circle that is beneficial for both teachers and students. In other words, imagination stimulates further imagination: by experimenting with new techniques, students as well as teachers can discover and explore their own creative potential.

Despite the challenges that this *creative turn* may entail—not only as far as concrete teaching practices are concerned but also in terms of syllabus design and material development—the incorporation of creative tasks in language courses is fruitful and rewarding for both learners and teachers. These projects provide just a few concrete examples of how alternative means such as gestures, memes, and social networks can be used to the benefit of language learners. However, if we consider the vast array of media at our disposal, the possibilities for a creative involvement in the language classroom are both endless and worth exploring.

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