Exploring Cultural Competence: A Qualitative Study of the Role of Culture Emerging from Undergraduate Italian Language Programs in the Midwest of the United States

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

Despite the recognized importance of foreign language teaching and learning in current times, research is still lacking with respect to the understanding and transmission of foreign culture in undergraduate language programs at the college level. Furthermore, most of the research which has been conducted has been of a quantitative nature, and it has focused on linguistic aspects of learners of second or foreign languages in order to measure and better understand the mechanics of their learning and acquisition.

This qualitative study was thus undertaken to draw attention to how foreign language programs, in this case Italian language programs, at the college level in the United States contribute to the understanding and diffusion of foreign cultures and how they comply with the national Foreign Language Standards (1999) with respect to the culturally oriented standards.

Specifically, this study explored how three large Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level defined and operationalized the notion of cultural competence; what aspects of cultural competence the Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level emphasized; in what ways these programs attempted to teach culture and/or cultural competence, and to what extent, if any, the curricula of Italian programs were aligned with the Standards (1999) regarding culture and cultural competence. The study consisted of a singular-entity case analysis approach as well as cross-case analysis of three Italian undergraduate programs, and it included the following data collecting methods:
questionnaire, interview, observations, departmental document analysis, such as syllabi, textbooks, and evaluation tools (i.e. quizzes, exams, and projects).

One of the study’s major findings suggests that the national standards do not receive significant attention with respect to culture and cultural competence, and, if an attempt is made to align the curriculum with these standards, the implementation in the elementary classroom, especially of ‘perspectives’ and ‘practices’ (two important components of the standards), is limited. In addition, the overall analysis of the data suggests that there is a lack of clarity and understanding when it comes to the key notion of cultural competence.

This qualitative study was the first investigation that attempted to measure the treatment of cultural competence across Italian undergraduate language programs (though the number of programs involved was limited). Instead of looking at just one program, this study sought to compare and contrast across programs in order to construct a more comprehensive picture of what takes place in the cultural domain. It is hoped that the exploration of the culturally-related situation found in the individual programs and across the three Italian programs investigated may provide useful data for future program assessment purposes and for documenting the status of culture and cultural competence since the publication of the standards in 1999. To summarize, this study was designed and intended to benefit a number of stakeholders: a) educational law makers; b) institutions providing foreign language courses; c) educators and governmental
institutions involved with and studying the impact of the national standards for foreign language learning; d) pre-and in-service teacher education programs; e) learners of Italian. To one degree or another, its findings offer valuable input for each of those groups. In addition, due to its transferability, it may provide useful information for programs teaching other foreign languages.
Dedication

Dedicated to my mother and father, and to my very much missed grandparents who have been watching me from heaven.

Dedicated to all those people who believe that education can change people’s lives and convey that there are no boundaries of any sort when it comes to knowledge and people.

Dedicated to all the students who could not complete their educational journeys due to circumstances beyond their control.
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I'd like to sincerely thank my friends, classmates, professors, colleagues, and supportive voices as well as chance acquaintances who believed in me and encouraged me to persevere and to achieve what at times seemed unachievable. Sharing what they call the bittersweet moments with all of them kept me strong and focused.

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I was blessed to have Dr. James-Brown for the methodological support. Her availability and willingness to help and provide direction were constant throughout the writing process. Your compassion and sensitivity combined with your empowering and charismatic personality have helped me through difficult times, and I will never forget what you have done for me.

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Vita

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Publications

Fields of Study

Major field: Education: Teaching and Learning

Specialization: Foreign Language Education

Minor fields: Italian Pedagogy and Applied Linguistics;
Latin American Literature and Culture
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background of the study

The study of foreign languages and cultures provides insights into the language, thought, and character of other cultures and is essential to an understanding of other parts of the world. Goethe (1827) sagely held this belief, noting “whoever is not acquainted with foreign languages knows nothing of his own.” An education in foreign languages and cultures is vital preparation for a growing array of careers sprouting up in our increasingly globalized world. Reasons for the importance of foreign language learning emerge not only in the present time, but they are also deeply rooted in the past, where “various forms of migration, some forced and some voluntary, have traditionally been the primary source of cultural contacts among people of different cultural beliefs and practices […] Industrial revolution triggered a mass movement of migrant workers [and] it was followed by information revolution that carried alien ideas into far-off places” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 12).

Hence, what is critical to understand today is that the ability to speak more than one language and to be knowledgeable about other cultures contributes significantly to mutual understanding among nations, global competitiveness, and national security, as
well as academic development and personal fulfillment. In fact, beyond practical reasons linked to the globalized society, there are many studies that have claimed advantages about knowing other languages and cultures beyond the native one (Genesse, 2000; Grosjean, 1989; Hakuta, 1986; Marcos, 1998). Among them, Marcos (1998) suggested that students exposed to foreign language instruction are more creative and better at solving problems, and they perform better on tests of intelligence.

It is also important to note that studying a foreign language means being exposed to differences that exist among people in society. Students become aware that there are different ways of living and interpreting life. It is extremely important for language educators, especially in a society like the United States, where in the ever-growing, increasingly diverse national community, people should be aware of and know how to interact with individuals who have different approaches to life. That is why it is equally important to educate students about culture(s) other than their own. To ensure the inseparability of language and culture that is considered crucial in contemporary foreign language theory and pedagogy, new terminology has been promoted, such as the use of the word ‘linguaculture’ (Fantini, 1997; Kramsch 1993). As emphasized by Fantini (1997), to avoid becoming a ‘fluent fool’, meaning someone who speaks a foreign language well but does not understand the social or philosophical content of that language, people need to understand more completely the cultural dimension of language (p. 16). Moran (2001) observed in a recent publication that in a culture, its language is literally everywhere and vice versa. Significantly he stressed what he calls ‘the obvious’: that language and culture are clearly fused; one reflects the other […] Language embodies the products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons of a
The words of the language, its expressions, structures, sounds, and scripts reflect the culture, just as the cultural products and practices reflect the language. (p.35)

Moran’s (2001) comments underscore the implications for people involved in the foreign language teaching field. That is, the practices and perspectives of the contemporary target culture need to be brought to the attention of learners along with the appropriate use of the target language. Without an understanding of the cultural dimension of a language, there may be ineffective use of it.

It has been reiterated extensively that learning a foreign language and especially the culture embedded in the language is a complex process (Savignon and Sysoyev, 2005; Saville-Troike, 2006). In addition, pedagogical decision making must reflect what is known about the process of learning, usually in the domain of second language acquisition (SLA) (Gass and Selinker, 2001, p.3). To this end, foreign language programs cannot seek simplistic solutions, but rather they need to be aware of how to transmit their cultural as well as linguistic knowledge because of the repercussions of their instruction on the learners.

What is stressed and illustrated about culture in the National Standards for Foreign Language Education (1999) developed by the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has contributed to recognizing the urgency of analyzing what is produced and transmitted by foreign language programs. Here it may be useful to look at which changes, in the teaching of culture, have been made since the publication of the Standards (1999) as well as how the understanding of target cultures has changed under the influence of globalization. These are only two of many possible inquiries
which, if answered, could fill important gaps that foreign language research is addressing today.

Foreign language programs appear to have a mission, one which is not free of difficulties. It is significant in this perspective to report the following comment made recently in the ACTFL volume entitled *2005-2015: Realizing Our Vision of Languages for All*:

> While some educators outside the field of language education see the need for more language education for all Americans at all ages and stages of life, many administrators would not make learning languages a priority in schools and universities today. Many areas of the curriculum compete for increasingly limited dollars. Language and cultural knowledge are not a part of the tested curriculum and therefore not ‘on the educational radar screen’ of the vast majority of educational policy makers and administrators. (Grandin, 2006, p. 7).

Those policy makers and administrators are underestimating “the fact that the shrinking, leveling, and ‘flattening’ of the world have changed the kinds of qualifications needed and expected of today’s young professionals” (Grandin, 2006, p.176). These young professionals are future employees of companies competing worldwide; they work and are in contact everyday with coworkers who speak different languages and symbolize different cultural behaviors and beliefs. This is one of the reasons why knowing other languages and cultures and competently communicating cross-culturally is in high demand in the global workplace. Unfortunately, as stressed by Grandin (2006), higher education in the U.S.A. still fails to see the urgency of reforming foreign language education in order to provide those crucial communication skills.
As a result, foreign language programs have one of the most difficult and important jobs in today’s society; they have the dual responsibility of bringing language and cultural knowledge on the educational radar screen and carefully analyzing their mission by considering the impact of language and cultural knowledge on students who are preparing to be workers and travelers of the 21st century.

**From cultural knowledge to developing cultural competence**

It has been almost ten years since Lange (1999) stressed one particularly important element of culture: its impermanence. He emphasized that what is important is that we recognize not only the importance of the inclusion of culture in the language learning curriculum, but also concomitantly we recognize that we need serious discussion, debate, and resolution of how to teach it …[culture] is constantly in flux and changing. We teachers approach culture as though it were static, that we can know culture X. It is probably important for us to recognize the limits of this static nature and to understand that the teaching of culture is more related to the process of discovery that it is to static information. (pp. 59-60).

This comment addressed the changes in the curriculum initiated with the publication of the National Standards for Foreign Language Education (1999). Lange proposed to look critically at how to teach culture and, because of its impermanence, he encouraged educators to see their teaching of culture as a never-ending process of discovery. It is worth pointing out that those Standards (1999) emphasized that “in reality the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the
language, but the cultures expressed through that language. It is important that students become skilled observers and analysts of other cultures” (pp. 47-48).

Not without reason, and with the goal of giving new life to foreign language teaching and learning, ACTFL’s initiative focused, among other issues, on contextual communication and culture. ACTFL acknowledges the need to have authentic cultural aspects and real-life uses of the target language not as a partial but as an essential part of the language learning process. It asserted that more than ever, there is now a need to socialize students into the language through exposure to culture. In response to the Standards (1999) and their emphasis on culture, Lange (1999) also added that “one can make the case that culture permeates all of the standards, that it appears in any of the topics related to communication, in any of the disciplines suggested in connections, and in any use of language in communities” (p. 59).

All cultural aspects emerging from everyday life as well as from the literary and artistic domains are viewed as inseparable in the Standards (1999), and students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the ‘practices’ and the ‘perspectives’ of the cultures studied as opposed to mere knowledge or awareness of the various ‘products’ of the target culture. In other words, this means knowing what to do, when, and where according to the target culture’s view of the world; in addition, learners should demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied. Within the Standards (1999), tangible or intangible products should be presented and taught according to how they reflect the perspectives (beliefs and values) of the target culture.
The assertion found in the Standards (1999) that “the approach to second language instruction found in today’s schools is designed to facilitate genuine interaction with others, whether they are on another continent, across town, or within the neighborhood” (p.11) is a call to examine what foreign language programs promote culturally and to identify how they, at present, adhere to this assertion with regards to the teaching of culture. The Standards articulate a situation that requires that a shift should be made by foreign language programs, one that involves moving from simply supplying cultural knowledge in their instruction to developing and providing cultural competence.

Cultural competence is in this study defined as the ability to interact effectively with members of the target culture. It involves the understanding and the explanation of all aspects of a culture, and particularly, the way things are done (practices), and values and beliefs of people; it also implies the awareness of one’s own cultural viewpoint(s), and having a positive attitude, knowledge and skills in order to successfully perform/communicate in the target culture. In other words, being culturally competent implies understanding the how, when, and why of culturally related matters and knowing how to explain them.

Generally speaking, it is the ability to work and respond in a manner that acknowledges and respects individuals’ culturally-based beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and customs. This understanding was applied to this study to primarily investigate undergraduate Italian language programs.

In addition, it is also constructed as a “developmental process” which requires on the part of a program and teaching force constant attention to and acquisition of new
cultural knowledge and ongoing evaluation of what is acquired and how it is acquired (Adjusted from Diller and Moule, 2005).

**National Standards for Foreign Language Learning and culture goals**

As briefly mentioned in the preceding pages, the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1999) created by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), and mostly mentioned simply as Standards, are composed of five important elements known as the 5 Cs. They include: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. A total of eleven standards are organized into those 5 Cs or goal areas. Each area consists of two or three standards and sample progress indicators for teaching and learning in grades 4-12. Six languages, among them Italian, have expanded the indicators to grade 16, to include the undergraduate years of university study. This document, inclusive of language-specific standards for eight foreign languages and the classical languages (Standards, 1999), follows the publication of a previous version of the same document published in 1996 which dealt with a generic set of standards for foreign languages and focused mainly on French, German, Spanish and Portuguese.

As explained by Watzke (2003),

in terms of classroom practice, the goals and content standards are illustrated in a series of learning scenarios for each language. The learning scenarios provide a third-person account of how content standards are met in actual instructional activities or units. The scenarios describe the thematic topic, the setting and classroom activity, unit or project, the content standards targeted by the activity,
and reflections on how each targeted content standard is met as well as additional instruction that might further meet these standards (p.84).

Reproduced below, as an example, is what appears in the publication of the Standards (1999) and related to Italian culture in one of the culture standards (2.1), and the first of the sample progress indicators (grade 4):

Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of Italian culture.

This standard focuses on patterns of social interactions that reflect the attitudes, values, and traditions of Italians.

Sample Progress Indicators, Grade 4

- Students observe, identify, and/or discuss simple patterns of behavior in various settings such as school, family, and community.

- Students use appropriate gestures and oral expressions for greetings, leave takings, and common interactions (e.g., handshaking, kissing on both cheeks, tu vs. Lei, salute, scusi, permesso).

- Students participate in games, songs, celebrations, storytelling, and skits (e.g., Gioco dell'oca, Palla pallina, Paroliere, La befana) (Standards, 1999, p.293).

Other than becoming aware of these progress indicators for the beginning level of Italian instruction, what is important in relation to this research study is the contribution made by the Standards in defining culture as practices, products, and perspectives (Lange, 1999) as they are here reproduced:

**Practices:** Patterns of behavior representing the culture studied. Together with the perspectives, practices represent the knowledge of ‘what to do when and where’ according to the culture in examination.
Products: Tangible or intangible creations of the culture studied.

Perspectives: The underlying beliefs and values of the culture studied.

Practices, products and perspectives are integral elements of Standard 2.1 (reproduced above) and Standard 2.2, which states that “students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and the perspectives of Italian culture. This standard focuses on the cultural products of Italy (language, literature, art, music, architecture, fashion, cuisine, sports, educational system) and how they relate to the perspectives (attitudes, values, ideas) of Italians” (Standards, 1999, p.294).

Analyzing closely the definitions given and interpreting what those standards may strive to convey in regards to culture at the elementary level, I formulated an explanation of them. The first standard (2.1) stresses the importance for students to become acquainted with the practices (more technically called patterns of social interactions) and understand as well the association that those practices have with the viewpoint(s) of people (their attitudes, values, and traditions). The first standard then invites undergraduate programs (teaching force) to organize their culture teaching in such a way that students should at least be exposed to and identify simple practices in various familiar settings (i.e. family, school, on the street…), be encouraged to use/reproduce appropriate social interactions, culturally relevant to the target language, and hopefully be able to discuss those practices and compare and contrast them. (Examples for Italian may be formal greetings, gestures and manners, and games among many others usually available in textbooks). The second standard (2.2) not only relates to products and their illustration/introduction in the classroom but also to the connection that those products have with the viewpoint(s) of people belonging to a particular culture, in this case Italian.
Similarly to what was explained for the first Standard, this second Standard invites undergraduate programs to systematically think about their culture teaching in order to have students exposed to culture and be able to identify Italian products in connection with the perspectives which accompany them, that is, what those products signify with respect to connotations and meanings associated with them. Ideally, they would also be able to discuss and compare and contrast those products with products belonging to their native culture.

Considering the complexities inherent in the teaching and learning of foreign languages and cultures, the Standards (to which language programs are not obliged to adhere, and which have encountered critiques, as later reviewed in chapter 2), were created to serve as both a broader set of pedagogical guidelines and a curricular framework which provides a structure and a rationale, in addition to a set of examples, for teaching foreign languages (Eisner, 1985, cited in Watzke, 2003). As directly addressed in the Standards (1999), their scope is to inform about “the types of content and curricular experiences needed to enable students to achieve [them]” (p.28). In addition, the Standards serve as an example for individual states and educational settings to work on developing their own standards for foreign language instruction (Watzke, 2003, pp. 84-85). Something to focus on and act upon, as underlined by Watzke (2003), is that “although standards in math, science, and history offer more specificity in their content, standards in foreign language rely more heavily on local school curriculum development to define content in specific languages” (p.85).

The publication of the Standards in 1999 was a crucial development in the teaching of foreign languages in the United States, as the Standards set forth the most
comprehensive framework yet seen for foreign language pedagogy. They also presented foreign language programs with a significant new challenge: determining how they should align their curricula and pedagogical practices with the goals and guidelines articulated in the Standards. In the K-12 context, where teacher licensure laws and accreditation processes play central roles in how foreign languages are taught, the issue was essentially ensuring that how in-service teachers teach and how pre-service teachers in teacher education programs are prepared to teach matches the intentions outlined described in the Standards. At the college level, which was the sole focus of this study, all foreign language programs in the United States faced the complex question of whether, and to what extent, their practices should be aligned with the Standards. Because (unlike programs in K-12 settings), technically, they are not required to align their practices with the Standards, they can maintain their already established practices. On the other hand, given that the national organization charged with providing guidance to their practices had articulated a broader and more inclusive vision of foreign language instruction (one that brought culture, in particular, much more into the foreground of classroom instruction), it has been difficult, in reality, to ignore the Standards. Thus, a key question at the college level has been the degree to which, and ways in which, the Standards should play a role in the reshaping of curricula and classroom practices. This includes determining at what levels of instruction (beginning, intermediate, advanced) the Standards should be implemented with respect to all of the 5 Cs referenced earlier in this chapter. This question has been faced not just by those who administer and teach in such programs, but also by textbook authors and publishers. As will be discussed in Chapter 2,
there is no consensus among foreign language specialists as to whether, or how, college level programs should attempt to align themselves with the Standards.

With respect to college level foreign language programs, then, a central issue is what has happened to such programs since the publication of the Standards in 1999. Because the Standards appeared so recently, it has been difficult to determine what effect(s) they have had on college level foreign language instruction. The desire to learn more about this situation motivated this study.

**Statement of the problem**

The overview above hints at the numerous challenges faced by foreign language programs, including at the college level. Interest in practical issues related to the teaching and transmission of culture has increased during the past few decades, but no significant research has been conducted that specifically addresses what has been done by foreign language programs to ensure the transmission of target culture understanding and appreciation (i.e., cultural competence) as outlined by the Standards. Despite the widespread importance of foreign language teaching and learning in current times, the awareness and understanding of approaches adopted to promote cultural competence in light of those Standards is still insufficient.

Most of the foreign language research conducted thus far has focused on linguistic aspects of learners of a second or foreign language in order to measure and better understand the mechanics and outcomes of their learning and acquisition processes and experiences. Not long ago, Lange (1999) called attention to this important shortcoming and asserted that “culture still remains a superficial aspect of language learning in K-12
and post-secondary language programs […] further, research of either a quantitative or qualitative nature on the teaching and learning of culture in language learning is almost non-existent” (p.58-59). Thus, conducting this kind of research has become an urgent need, particularly in the post-1999 Standards era. Educationally, the notion of culture, and in particular that of the role of a target culture in the language classroom, is still unclear and sometimes not defined, but it “is quickly gaining momentum both in scholarly explanations and in the everyday lives of people as a key aspect of explaining their social reality […] [Culture] is perhaps the most important thing to know about people if one wants to make predictions about their behavior” (Baldwin et al., 2006, xv).

It cannot be denied that foreign and second language educators face a complex task with respect to the pedagogical treatment of culture. Problematizing even more the concept of culture, it cannot be forgotten that globalization and linked contemporary phenomena, such as Americanization, homogenization, and hybridization have repercussions for cultural understanding. Globalization, for example, brings into contact global and local cultures, and in the process produces complex and unpredictable outcomes, such as the homogenization of tastes, preferences, and lifestyles among the middle classes of all developed nations (Smith, 2001). Italy is a good case in point in this regard. This is what Italy has been experiencing recently, as it faces an influx of immigrants, an increase in mixed marriages, and a steadily growing number of multicultural classrooms. Contemporary society in Italy must deal with the effects that the varied cultural traits have on what was seen before simply as Italian culture. In other words, what happens with globalization complicates the teaching of culture because, as pointed out by Atkinson (1999, p.631), there is no longer one distinct social group that is
not affected or influenced by outside influences. Realizing that Italy, among other nations, is a society in flux and continuous change, there is an urgent need for Italian language programs (as well as those teaching other foreign languages) to examine how to transmit cultural aspects explicitly and effectively.

**Purpose of the study**

*Rationale for focusing on Italian programs*

This study examined the situation regarding the teaching of culture and cultural competence in undergraduate Italian language programs, with a focus on three large programs in the Midwest section of the United States. A primary reason for the exploration of Italian language programs was the recent growth of interest in studying Italian as a foreign language. For example, in 2005 Italian was added to the prestigious advanced placement (AP) program (later withdrawn) for high school education in the United States. The AP course, in the recent past still available in the last year of high school, did not use any prescribed curriculum or text, but it offered support to teachers qualified to teach the course through different resources available on the website of the College Board, which created and administered the entire AP program. Alignment with the National Standards was promoted as a key feature of the AP Italian course, according to the College Board the course helped “prepare students to demonstrate their level of Italian proficiency across three communicative modes (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) and the five goal areas outlined in the National Standards (1999)” . The inclusion of Italian within the AP framework was a significant marker of its growing popularity and stature in the world of foreign language education in the United States.
In addition, according to the 2003 report issued by Order of Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) on enrollment on Italian language programs, “Italian language enrollment is increasing at both high school and university levels. A survey of nearly 3,000 U.S. colleges and universities reveals that the number of students studying Italian both at the undergraduate and graduate levels rose from 49,287 in 1998 to 63,866 in 2002 (+ 29.6%). Enrollment in Italian, in high school and universities is increasing at a faster rate than enrollments in Spanish, French and German” (pp.1-2). This information is corroborated in a report published online by the Modern Language Association (http://www.mla.org/2006_flenrollmentsurve) entitled “Enrollments in Languages other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2006.” It shows that Italian has shown remarkable expansion, with a rate of growth of over 20% from 2002 to 2006 at the college level. It also notes that Italian is now ranked 5th among the languages most commonly studied in undergraduate courses at American universities, with only Spanish, French, German, and American Sign Language ranking ahead of it.

A second primary reason for this study’s focus on Italian undergraduate programs was the relative lack of research in this area, particularly since the advent of the 1999 Standards and the rapid expansion of interest in Italian as a foreign language. As more and more students are drawn to study Italian, it is essential to gain a thorough understanding of how Italian language programs define such crucial constructs as culture and cultural competence and how and to what extent they incorporate these constructs into their curricula. In other words, it is necessary to explore their treatment of culture at the undergraduate level, where, as the Modern Language Association report cited earlier indicates, 90% of Italian language instruction takes place (the remaining 10% is at the
graduate level). It is particularly important to do so at the elementary, or introductory, level, since this is where students receive their first contact with the language and form their first impressions of it, as well as the culture it is situated within. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the treatment of culture, particularly cultural competence, at the elementary level of Italian undergraduate education.

**Research questions**

This study was undertaken because of the inadequate attention given to how foreign language programs, including Italian language programs, at the college level in the U.S. contribute to the understanding and diffusion of foreign cultures and how they comply with the Standards (1999) with respect to the culturally oriented standards.

Specifically, this qualitative study explored how three large Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level define and operationalize the notion of cultural competence; what aspects of cultural competence the Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level emphasize; in what ways these programs attempt to teach culture and/or cultural competence, and to what extent, if any, the curricula of Italian programs are aligned with the Standards (1999) regarding culture and cultural competence. The study sought answers to the following questions:

1) How do Italian undergraduate programs define cultural competence?
   a. Focusing on the elementary level, how much importance is given to culture in the language course compared to other aspects?
   b. Are cultural topics illustrated and characteristics pointed out directly by the faculty, or is culture taught indirectly through linguistic features?

2) What aspects of cultural competence do the Italian undergraduate programs operationalize?
a. What do the programs do to provide students at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication?

b. Are there specific guidelines established by the programs and reflected in the syllabus related to the teaching of culture content at the elementary level?

3) In what ways do Italian undergraduate programs attempt to teach cultural competence?
   a. What pedagogical approaches are used by Italian undergraduate programs to teach cultural competence?
   b. Is there any kind of document which shows this attempt?
   c. In the case that cultural competence is not addressed how do students at the elementary level in the program acquire it?

4) What evaluation tools are used by Italian undergraduate programs to assess student cultural competence outcomes?
   a. How do these evaluation tools prepare/help students to be culturally competent in a foreign language?
   b. Which testing format/criteria are the evaluation tools based upon?
   c. What is the rationale behind the testing format/criteria of the evaluation tool(s)?

5) To what extent, if any, is the curriculum of Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level aligned with the National Standards (1999) regarding culture and cultural competence?
   a. How do the elementary language courses operationalize products as aligned with the National Standards?
   b. How do the elementary language courses operationalize perspectives as aligned with the National Standards?
   c. How do the elementary language courses operationalize practices as aligned with the National Standards?

**Significance of the study**

This study was valuable in several ways. One is that it is necessary to analyze undergraduate language programs because of their role in preparing future foreign language teachers. The K-12 foreign language teacher preparation field and the scholarly literature will be better informed by learning about the views, pedagogies, and general practical issues related to culture and cultural competence in three large Italian language programs located in the Midwest of the U.S. As a result of this qualitative study, teacher
educators involved in the foreign language field in the U.S. will be better prepared to address cultural issues in their foreign language teacher licensure courses and thus create more culturally competent future teachers of Italian and other foreign languages. Knowing what is taking place in the language programs and how language and culture is taught will inform pre-service language teacher education programs as much as in-service teacher professional development. This, in turn, will help inform future research and scholarship arising from teacher preparation programs.

Second, this study’s qualitative analysis and comparison of three different language programs located in different institutions offers a unique view of undergraduate foreign language instruction at the elementary level. Normally research focuses on just one program or institution. The foreign language field will benefit from the richness of the data and analyses arising from this study’s cross-case analysis. This will be particularly true with respect to Italian language programs in the United States.

Finally, the study is a timely contribution to understanding beyond as well as within Italian language programs. In the increasingly ‘global village’ we live in nowadays, better understanding between countries and cultures is more important than ever before. For this reason, cultures and languages that are part of the European Union, in their role of foreign cultures and languages in the U.S. educational system, are particularly important to analyze, because of the historical, political, and economic rapport with the United States. According to Archick (2006), a specialist in European Affairs, “the security and the prosperity of the U.S. and Europe remain inextricably linked […] they share the largest trade and investment relationship in the world; annual two way flows of goods, services, and foreign direct investment exceed $ 1.1 trillion,
while the total stock of two way direct investment is over $1.6 trillion. Additionally, they share membership in major international organization such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations” (p.5).

Recently, reporting on some historical information, the Italian ambassador to the United States, Ronald Spogli, in a speech given at a symposium at Stanford University in 2007, stressed the long and strong relationship between Europe and the United States. He reminded the audience that from the time that Christopher Columbus discovered America and ‘unified’ the two continents, the U.S. and Europe have made history together. There are no other countries in the world that share so much in common and that are connected by general interests. He added that for almost a century, through the two World Wars and the Cold War, the U.S. fought to bring and maintain democracy in Europe. It is important to underscore that both the United States and Europe have been fighting for and working together for freedom and democracy because they mostly contribute to the peace, stability, and security in the world. In addition, the relationship between the continents is sustained and strengthened by cultural roots; in fact, many citizens have origins, relatives, or some kind of family history in the other continent. In the end, Ronald Spogli recalled the well-known business and economic relationships, and on this specific topic he added that the U.S. and Italy maintain a ‘dynamic business’ in many fields such as natural resources, agriculture, finance, automobile, and airplane industry, and the entertainment and travel industry. In addition, the widespread ‘free market’, the easiness achieved in communications, and the boom in travel deals contribute to making the relationship stronger.
Those reasons help explain why Italian is the fourth most commonly spoken foreign language in U.S. homes according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Italy is also one of the top five economies in the world and is a leading member of the G8 Group of the wealthiest democracies in the world. What is encountered at a macro-level within the amply studied relationship between Europe and the U.S.A., is visible on smaller scale with an estimated number of 7,500 American companies which do business with Italy, and more than 1,000 U.S. firms that have offices in Italy, including IBM, General Electric, Motorola, Citibank and Price Waterhouse. Italy is a world leader in machine tool manufacturing, with advanced technologies in robotics, electro mechanical machinery, shipbuilding, space engineering, construction machinery, and transportation equipment. Many of these firms have offices in the United States. The reality is that the Italian economy has slowly been changing, opening up its markets to American investment.

Significantly, as reported by the Embassy of Italy in Washington DC (2004), Italy has not only been an important ally and ‘global partner’, it has been appreciated in its role as a cultural force. About this important role, the Embassy emphasized that today, this aspect is the fulcrum of our country's influence on the American society, which is extremely receptive to the contribution of outside culture and talent. And partly for that reason, the concept of the Italian way of life has penetrated the collective imagination of the American people, to which new ideas have been added over time ranging from fashion to design to traditional food and wine products. On the other hand, the Italo-American community, the fifth largest ethnic group in the U.S., has been an unparalleled driving force for the development of cultural and economic bonds between the two countries. This is particularly true in light of the community's striking dynamism.
which has, in many cases, led its members to achieve high economic and social positions. (Embassy of Italy in Washington, 2004).

Given these circumstances, it cannot be forgotten how useful and essential the Italian language and culture can be for high school and college students planning careers in art, fashion, history, music, linguistics, education and international relations. For example, art historians in particular need to know Italian. According to UNESCO (the cultural and educational agency of the United Nations), over 60 percent of the world art is preserved in Italy. In addition, Italy is a world leader in the culinary arts, interior design, fashion, furniture design among others.

With this study’s focus on how Italian undergraduate programs treat the important topic of cultural competence, it will thus help shed light on deeper issues related to relations between the United States and Europe, and Italy in particular, since cultural understanding plays such a crucial role in preparing people to engage meaningfully and successfully in cross-cultural experiences, whether for business, political, or personal reasons.

**Definition of key terms**

**Cultural Awareness**: It is in this study intended as the condition of being conscious of cultural facts, products, events or patterns, and of knowing that they exist. Awareness does not necessarily imply understanding.

**Cultural Competence**: It is the ability to interact effectively with members of the target culture. It involves the understanding and the explanation of all aspects of a culture, and particularly, the way things are done (practices), and values and beliefs of people; it also
implies the awareness of one’s own cultural viewpoint(s), and having a positive attitude, knowledge and skills in order to successfully perform/communicate in the target culture. In other words, being culturally competent implies understanding the how, when, and why of culturally related matters and knowing how to explain them.

Generally speaking, it is the ability to work and respond in a manner that acknowledges and respects individuals’ culturally-based beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and customs. This understanding was applied to this study to primarily investigate undergraduate Italian language programs.

In addition, it is also constructed as a “developmental process” which requires on the part of a program and teaching force constant attention to and acquisition of new cultural knowledge and ongoing evaluation of what is acquired and how it is acquired (Adjusted from Diller and Moule, 2005).

Current: This refers to the period soon after the National Foreign Language Standards were published, in other words, from late 1999 to 2007.

Evaluation tools: All the materials such as quizzes, exams, or portfolio (or others) used by a program to assess students’ cultural knowledge.

Standard 2.1: “Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of Italian culture. This standard focuses on patterns of social interactions that reflect the attitudes, values, and traditions of Italians” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1999, p.293).

Standard 2.2: “Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and the perspectives of Italian culture. This standard focuses on the cultural products of Italy (language, literature, art, music, architecture, fashion, cuisine, sports,
educational system) and how they relate to the perspectives (attitudes, values, ideas) of Italians” (Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1999, p.294).

**Perspectives:** The underlying beliefs and values of the culture studied (Standards, 1999)

**Practices:** Patterns of behavior representing the culture studied. Together with the perspectives, practices represent the knowledge of ‘what to do when and where’ according to the culture in examination (Standards, 1999).

**Products:** Tangible or intangible creations of the culture studied (Standards, 1999).

**Rapport:** “It is s stance vis-a vis the person being interviewed. Rapport means that I respect the people being interviewed, so that what they say is important because of who is saying it…Yet, I will not judge them for the content of what they say to me” (Patton, 1990, p.317).

**Assumptions**

The following assumptions guided the present study:

1. The study of a foreign language implies and requires the understanding of the foreign culture.

2. Cultural competence is not an inherent result or direct product of language instruction.

3. Cultural competence is a complex and developmental skill which cannot be understood, especially at the beginning levels of language instruction, without the assistance and competency in the target culture held by the program and transmitted through its educators.

4. Language programs are accountable for assessing their cultural competence and should systematically direct culture teaching towards cultural competence.
5. The participants were considered the best and only sources capable of candidly discussing the Italian undergraduate programs and their culture-related situation.

6. The analysis based on qualitative methods of data collection would add understanding about cultural related issues in foreign language programs in higher educational institution.

7. The triangulation obtained through the use of different methods of data collection would reduce the researcher’s biases.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

“Many people never acknowledge how their day-to-day behaviors have been shaped by cultural norms and values and reinforced by families, peers, and social institutions. How one defines ‘family’, identifies desirable life goals, views problems, and even says hello are all influenced by the culture in which one functions” (Cross, 1988, p.2 in Diller and Moule, 2005).

Introduction

This literature review concentrates on literature directly related to the focus of this study: cultural competence and undergraduate programs. Numerous studies have been conducted and literature has been written concerning the teaching of culture in foreign language classes, but the purpose of this study was not to analyze methods, approaches to teaching culture, or foreign language teachers’ beliefs, attitudes or practices. Also, although a fair number of articles have been published in relation to assessment tools used in educational settings, very few studies are related to testing in foreign language classes. Mostly, this literature focuses on the testing or assessment of the four language skills and not on culture. Thus, many of the publications are not relevant for the research presented in this dissertation.

Because the main focus of this study was cultural competence, an area which is new in the foreign language field and thus not yet explored in-depth by foreign language
programs or researchers, the search conducted did not locate relevant literature which dealt with the status of culture/cultural competence in language programs at college level. Consequently, the literature reviewed is that which is most closely related to the major themes found in the research questions formulated for this study.

Thus, this literature review is not meant to be all-inclusive and it was organized to purposefully and succinctly provide background information necessary to understand and motivate the choice of the topic under investigation. As the researcher I have chosen background information that could best explain and justify the scope of this study, and I divided this review into three sections which are ultimately related to one another: (a) The role of culture in language programs; (b) The National Standards and the emphasis on culture; (c) Assessment and culture in language programs.

The role of culture in foreign language programs

For centuries, cultural understanding was not considered nor supported in the foreign language teaching curriculum (Kelly, 1969). As Kumaravadivelu (2008) reminded us, cultural understanding was assumed to be a by-product of language learning (p.23), not one of its goals, and it was only after 1945, due to the improved post-war economy and the increase in international commerce, that language educators in the United States finally recognized the need for the explicit teaching of culture. However, culture was linked to linguistic explanations, such as grammatical and lexical constructions, rather than standing as a topic on its own. Accordingly, in the 1980s, as the communicative approach became popular, “the teaching of culture was seen mostly as an endeavor to help L2 learners develop the linguistic ability necessary to use the TL in
culturally appropriate ways for the specific purpose of performing certain speech acts in
certain specified contexts” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p.176). Then, as Kumaravadivelu
(2008) continued to explain, a turning point came during the 1990s due to the policies
and practices of teaching culture delivered by the National Standards for Foreign

The limitations of mainly focusing on linguistic mechanisms in language teaching
and learning are further stressed by those scholars who, while acknowledging the
importance of the outside reality or social context, have in the last twenty years been
embracing socio-cultural perspectives, such as the Vygotskian sociocultural theory,
learning as participation in situated practices, the dialogic Bakhtinian perspective, and
critical theory (Thorne, 2005; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Zuengler and Miller, 2006).

It is not surprising to see how culture can be at the core within the sociocultural
perspectives which “view language use in real-world situations as fundamental, not
ancillary, to learning” (Zuengler and Miller, 2006, p.37). In other words, as explained by
Thorne (2005), cognition within sociocultural theory is investigated in joint relation with
the social context and human agency. In a very powerful way Thorne illustrated the type
of inquiry and understandings related to sociocultural approaches in the excerpt that
follows:

What kind of world do we want to live in? How are our actions as researchers,
activists, interpreters, scientists, educators, or the other identities we perform
through our daily professional practices, changing, and we hope improving, the
conditions of knowledge about language and the mind and the teaching and
learning of additional languages? Though certainly not unique among theoretical
perspectives, SCT approaches take these questions seriously by understanding
communicative processes as inherently cognitive processes, and cognitive
processes as indivisible from humanistic issues of self-efficacy, agency, and the
capacity to lead a satisfying if not fulfilling life. And none of these qualities
exists independent of culture or institutions or language policies or circuits of
power. This view suggests that culture exists as an objective force in the world,
one that is inscribed in artifacts and in the building and transformation of social
relationships. (p. 403-404).

This crucial role for culture has been well documented by scholars in the literature. One
entire career to promoting context and culture in language teaching. She explained that
language proficiency is more easily attained by becoming aware of the cultural
background of the target language. Furthermore, in these past few years, with the desire
for more learners to use critical thinking in the language learning process, culture
teaching has come to involve learners in a struggle between their own cultural meanings
and those of native speakers of a target language. Moreover, meanings pertaining to the
target culture and in the past taken for granted should nowadays be challenged,
problematised, and questioned.

In other words, it is believed that taking cultural teaching to another level would
only be beneficial for the development of overall language proficiency. Schulz, Lalande,
Dykstra-Pruim, Zimmer-Loew, and James (2005) explain that culture is present in all
communicative acts, and culture impacts on components of these acts:

information (meaning) as well as interaction are influenced by the social/cultural
identity of the speaker(s) / listener(s) / viewer(s) or reader(s) / writer(s) and their
culture-specific schematas. Social/cultural identity in turn is influenced by gender, age, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, education, power status in the social hierarchy, religious beliefs, regional variations—all factors that can have culture-specific manifestations and that affect interaction, code, and meaning. Language uses culture-specific meanings in words, concepts and symbols reflecting the mostly sub-conscious cultural schematas and belief systems of the presenter and receiver of messages. (p.173).

Thus, the importance of culture in language teaching is indisputable in contemporary views of foreign language pedagogy. Brooks (1975) reiterated the point that “in culture, although everything may appear to be in flux, there are important matters that remain relatively fixed. For example, the pronunciation of the native language and the modes of friendship and of fair play show a stability that is not to be observed in the hem line or in popular slang” (p.23). The function of the language is strongly dependent on the cultural system, as the same author explained in the following excerpt:

In order to understand fully any given culture we need not only to know but to make use of the language that is the coin of its societal system. So intimate is the interrelation between culture and language that we can perceive it showing through even in syntactics. As we use language, it is culture that dictates the distinctions we are to make between masculine and feminine (or neuter), between animate and inanimate, one and many, intimate and courteous, fact and fancy, for voice or for print (p.25).

It would be appropriate to add here that the key component in the excerpt is indeed in the use of the language, and to make an appropriate use of it requires after all a certain level
of cultural competence. This competence appears to be an inherent feature in the acquisition of a foreign language.

In alignment with Brook’s argument, Seelye (1993) stressed that becoming linguistically knowledgeable is meaningless if cultural perspectives are not learned and understood as well. He stressed that “no matter how technically dexterous a student’s training in the foreign language, if the student avoids contact with native speakers of that language and lacks respect for their world view, of what value is the training? Where can it be put to use? What educational breadth has it inspired?” (p.21). Twenty years earlier, Seelye (1974) explained that unless a student studies the language while fully immersed in the target culture, he or she will need to learn the cultural referents necessary to understand native speakers of the target language. As a consequence, students’ knowledge of cultural referents should later be assessed in order to more appropriately evaluate their understanding and learning.

More recently, Krasner (1999), Seelye (1997), and Sellami (2000), among others, stressed that cultural knowledge is the key to success in target language communication, while linguistic competence alone does not necessarily produce successful communication. Indeed, the failure to teach culture may not only lead to miscommunication and misinterpretation but also create a kind of culture shock on the part of learners (Krasner, 1999).

As Fisher (1996) observed, the purpose of learning a foreign or a second language is to know about other people, and the way they act in their societies. In fact, it is “the study of foreign cultures through foreign language which enables students to develop awareness of the patterns of behavior that order other people’s world, as well as an
understanding of the contributions of other cultures in our society” (Nugent, 2000, p.39) in addition to broadening students’ perspectives about the world outside of their own and to help with their participation in the global community (Byram, 1989; Sellami 2000).

As a consequence, among the important objectives of a language class, the exposure to the target culture in combination with empathy, understanding and acceptance are fundamental for the acquisition of cultural and linguistic proficiency (Krasner, 1999). More than thirty years ago, Hymes (1972) made clear that language competence includes the target language speaker’s ability to use language appropriately in various sociocultural environments, but in order to do so, it should be argued that cultural competence also needs to be developed for successfully interacting in those sociocultural spaces.

Brooks (1975) asserted that “those who teach foreign languages are entitled to be high-minded about their opportunity to make the term ‘liberal education’ meaningful for their students. [Indeed], insights into another culture can help to free the monolingual from the confines of the single life-way he has known thus far” (p.20). Despite the impact that culture has in the language learning process, and the reiteration recently made in the National Standards (1999) regarding this matter, many scholars in the last decade noted that not enough was done to develop systematically the teaching of culture; they indeed expressed their doubts that culture played a substantial role in the language classroom, despite efforts to incorporate it into foreign language pedagogy (Berman, 2002; Lafayette, 1997; Lange, 1999; Sellami, 2000; Shanahan, 1998).

Along these lines, Klein (2004), studying teachers’ beliefs and practice in the language classroom, pointed out the lack of systematic way to talk about culture and
understanding of culture theory. More than twenty years ago, Robinson (1981) commented that the inclusion of culture may not be taken as a serious goal in language courses and made the following remark: “we may have never taught toward the socio-cultural goals, having assumed that cultural understanding is a natural result of any second language instruction” (p.26). Allen (1985) pointed out that culture is difficult to grasp, to translate into instructional goals, to test, and to evaluate. Seelye (1993) noted the lack of agreement on a definition of culture and pointed out that the debate over its meaning dated back to the 1950s and 1960s. On one side there were the humanists concerned with accomplishments in literature and history (what is known as big ‘C’ culture), and on the other side the social scientists were concerned with details concerning daily life and not just high accomplishments (what is known as small ‘c’ culture). In the end, “these argumentative, often hotly polemic, discussions served to keep the question of culture before the reluctant audience of a profession preoccupied with grammar, literature, geography, and history”(p.14), but without a successful resolution of the definition of culture problem. It has continued to be difficult to find a common denominator among the various definitions, and culture, if not broadly defined, is “defined almost exclusively in terms of the fine arts, geography, and history (p.15).

This definition of culture, which may be construed as narrow, is unable to provide students with the necessary background to completely understand the attitudes and behavior of native speakers of the target language (Seelye, 1993). Seelye, in an effort to address this problem, stressed the work done by Brooks (1968, cited in Seelye, 1993), who identified five different types of culture: biological growth, personal refinement, literature and the fine arts, patterns for living, and the sum total of a way of life. The
‘patterns for living’ notion that emerged from this definition, a concept defined as “the individual’s role in the unending kaleidoscope of life situations of every kind and the rules and models for attitude and conduct in them”, allows people to relate to the order established in their society. In other words, because culture pertains to life situations and people, it should be more broadly illustrated (p.16). Finally, “the parameters of culture-based instruction are limited only by the experiences and imagination of the teacher-guide”(Seelye, 1993, p.22).

Lafayette (1997) also argued that the study of culture remains insubstantial and sporadic, and that culture stands behind language and literature in terms of the importance given in the classroom rather than being on an equal footing with them. One of the reasons for this could be what Jourdain (1998) noted: that in presenting culture, “teachers often resort to the old ‘sage on the stage’ mode, dispensing facts and figures” (p.441). Only a year later, Lange (1999) asserted that culture still remains an insignificant component of language programs at secondary and post-secondary level, a result confirmed also in the Final Report on Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom conducted by the Social Science Education Consortium (1999). There it was also stated that culture remains peripheral in both texts and instruction. The second-class status accorded to the teaching of culture in foreign language classrooms was also more recently confirmed anew by Sellami (2000). Yet, foreign language departments and the programs they offer are the most important centers on campus in terms of providing others the concepts, perspectives and practices belonging to other cultures.

With respect to specific problems associated with the teaching of culture, the professional literature has emphasized the following causes: teachers’ lack of knowledge
and first-hand experience of foreign language culture, lack of effective training of teachers, inadequately developed methods for teaching culture, lack of time devoted to culture teaching in curricula that prioritize linguistic aspects of the language and literary texts, and a lack of research which focuses on the measures to be taken to offer help and support to educators on both theoretical and practical level (Byram, 1989; Hadley, 1993; Lafayette, 1997; Lange, 1999; Social Science Education Consortium, 1999).

For example, some teachers are not comfortable with other culture(s) and perhaps have not yet learned what to talk about and what to avoid, or they are unfamiliar with nuances of the target language and/or cannot grasp the cultural referents of discussions (Seelye, 1993). Seelye (1993) adds that only “the intercultural communication teacher can make it easier to understand someone from another culture by building bridges from one cognitive system to another” (p.23). The ability to communicate accurately and with an understanding of the ways in which people in the target culture live does not necessarily mean that teachers need to profess or internalize them, but they do need to be able to share what they know in their classes (Seelye, 1993).

Schulz et al. (2005) commented on the necessity of the development of a theoretical as well as a practical framework for culture teaching and learning. In addition, they encourage the development of a professional consensus on many cultural issues and questions which remained unanswered belonging to the following categories: Definitions, Contents, Objectives/Assessments, Approaches/Materials, Teacher Development.

Among many other individuals who are involved in the field of foreign language instruction, these shortcomings especially affect students, who are not only majoring in a foreign language, but also in international business, engineering, nursing, and other
disciplines where proficiency in a second language will enhance their career opportunities (Brecht and Walton, 1995; Klee, 2000). Meanwhile, some surveys conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s reported that most students in foreign language programs expressed a deep interest in learning about the target culture. Benefits accruing from their learning about the target culture were confirmed by the students being surveyed (Bacon and Finneman, 1990; Morello, 1998; Roberts, 1992).

Because of the general situation found in relation to culture in foreign language programs and the publication of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1999), research studies appear to be highly needed in order to gain insights into what the single foreign language programs do with regards to culture nowadays, if and how they adhere to the Standards (1999), as well the amount and type of emphasis they give to cultural competence and instruction.

**National Standards and emphasis on culture**

The Standards (1999), as previously illustrated, are composed of five important elements known as the 5 Cs. A notable aspect of the five Cs is how they depart from the traditional notion of foreign language teaching and learning which is centered on the four core language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and is focused on mastering linguistic components of the target language. A key objective underlying the five Cs is for teaching practice to take into consideration “the discoursal and sociocultural features of language use” (Schwartz, 2002, p.115), not just its technical, linguistic characteristics.

Focusing particularly on the culture goals of the standards, Lange (1999) discussed the planning and use of them. He pointed out that there are important aspects to
consider such as the non-agreement among teachers on what culture to teach and on how to integrate culture and language into teaching and learning. What is shared among language educators is the need for discussion, debate, and resolution of how to teach culture. These aspects are accompanied by the fact that “research of either a quantitative or qualitative nature on the teaching and learning of culture is almost non-existent” (Lange, 1999, p.59). He further acknowledged that “the National Standards are credible, flexible, and useful. They project high expectations”(p.70). To achieve the changes which must be made to align curricula with the Standards, Lange (1999) proposed what he calls a curriculum which is ‘recursive’ and ‘thematic’. The curriculum should be organized around cultural themes, and these themes will recur throughout. Knowledge and comprehension about cultural themes would progress through the students’ different developmental levels.

For changes in the curriculum as much as in the assessment (discussed later in the chapter) to become realistic, Schwartz (2002) asserted that “change agents involved in the dissemination of the innovation should devise ways of encouraging in-depth reflection on the Standards” (p.125). She stressed that a method of diffusion for innovation could be thinking about teachers “as both initiators and collaborators on change” (p.126), and as well promoting a sense of ownership would be crucial for adopting any sort of curricular innovation (Markee, 1997, cited in Schwartz, 2002). Initiating the change at the teachers’ level, as explained by Schwartz (2002), has to take into consideration the time constraints faced by teachers (whose lessons may only run 40 to 50 minutes) so as to engage meaningfully in professional discussions and/or research projects, and the limited resources available to do so. Limitations are present in this
bottom-up method for change because of the lack of money and time to support professional development (Crookes, 1997, cited in Schwartz, 2002). Schwartz (2002) argued that the best option would be to combine a top-down approach to innovation diffusion with the above discussed bottom-up method. In this way, curricular innovation would consider “applied research and development followed by testing and mass production” (p.123). In other words, while taking into account various factors, curriculum innovation would primarily involve changes in pedagogy, methods/approaches, and teaching skills, and secondarily changes in curricular materials, meaning textbooks. If innovation happens only in one area, the change cannot be effective (Markee, 1997, cited in Schwartz, 2002). The effectiveness of the innovation is based on the combination of methods, as Schwartz (2002) described:

Teacher initiatives for change (problem solving) are supported through the resources of collaborating organizations (research, development, and diffusion). Organizations, like ACTFL, also receive support and resources from federal monies (center-periphery). What allows these three methods to work together is the sharing of an objective such as the formulation of foreign language standards (Schwartz, 2002, p.128).

In the end, as explained by Phillips (2003), “the Standards do not propose anything radically new in terms of culture; they do attempt to refocus teacher’s attention upon culture as the core so that it may become the central outcome of student learning, long exposed but seldom achieved” (p.163). Thus, what is important is for experts in specific languages and cultures to help teachers to initially acquire cultural knowledge; these teachers will then need to continue to update themselves with respect to the practices and patterns of the target culture. This is as an important step to take because “by focusing on
traditions, conventional approaches to culture frequently failed to track changes occurring in all modern societies” (p.168). As stressed by Phillips (2003), what seems to be a real impediment to a ‘culture-driven curricula’ is the apprehension demonstrated by teachers in dealing with culture. However, the goals for teaching culture embedded in the standards, which focus attention on perspectives, practices and products, entails that teachers have to do it right in order not to perpetuate the stereotypes. They have to be lifelong learners themselves; they have to have confidence that it is not essential that they have all the answers but that they know how to investigate the issues with their students, how to observe cultures, how to analyze them […] An important charge lies ahead for teachers educators, for faculty with expertise […] as well as for material developers, to assist teachers and learners in using an effective framework for the acquisition of cultural knowledge and the understandings that accompany it (Phillips, 2003, pp.170-171).

More specifically, Quinn Allen (2001) added that the Standards, in general, should be investigated in relation to teachers’ pedagogical beliefs. She argued that even though programs are slowly adapting their curricula to the Standards, the change in the curricula to reflect the Standards does not automatically guarantee that teachers are able to or willing to modify what they do in the classroom. Other than providing teachers with knowledge of the standards, professional development work should consider engaging “teachers in the identification and clarification of their own beliefs about teaching and learning” (Quinn Allen, 2001, p.33). A priority for the teachers’ development should be to practice self-reflection because they are inclined to rely heavily on their personal pedagogical choices in what they organize, instructionally speaking (Quinn Allen, 2001).
More recently, particular attention has been paid to issues regarding cultural understanding and what foreign language specialists call ‘the pursuit’ of cultural competence, as demonstrated by the AATG (American Association of Teachers of German). Schulz et al. (2005), as part of the AATG task force, elaborated on the challenges encountered with what is expected by the Standards regarding culture and gave recommendations considered fundamental for the development of cross-cultural understanding and intercultural communicative competence in line with the Standards.

What is currently done pedagogically speaking apparently suffers from a lack of common agreement on theories to draw from as well as concepts about culture or common learning objectives to build upon, and it only infrequently addresses the ‘products’, ‘perspectives’ and ‘practices’ proposed in the standards (Schulz et al., 2005). There is no evidence for a theory-based and practical approach to preparation of teachers, or precise goals for cultural teaching and learning, as specified by the Standards (Altmayer, 2004, cited in Schulz et al, 2005).

Referring to the definition of culture taken from the field of anthropology, which presents culture as a dynamic social construct where all aspects of everyday life, perspectives of worldviews, and behaviors are inherent parts of the definition, Schulz et al. (2005) emphasized that the problem for educators and developers of instructional materials is to decide “whose philosophical perspective, which behavioral practices, and which products to select for inclusion in the curriculum” (pp.174-175).

Above all, ‘perspectives’ remain the most challenging aspect to deal with, and according to the AATG task force, perspectives require an insider as much as an outsider view which can be guaranteed only if immersed in the culture for a long time. As added
by Schulz (2007) in a later publication, “teachers lack sufficient background knowledge and experience to be able to explain students the relationships between practices and products and the cultural perspectives that generate them” (p.11), and only through a reorganization of teacher education programs would it be possible for teachers “to critically examine attitudes, values, and beliefs and relate these to concrete examples of products and practices in the target culture as well as their own” (p.11).

When and if cultural awareness or competence is taught at all, it is apparently done unsystematically and often focuses on limited topics such as foods and statistics about the target culture or country, among others (Schulz et al., 2005). Challenges are recognized by the authors, who pointed out the following aspects which need to be taken into consideration: culture practices and perspectives are constantly changing, and the fact that the explanation of perspectives in the context of the communicative language classroom is not an easy task because of the focus on the target language. What is also important to bear in mind in attempting to create better practice is that “college students do not necessarily share a common definition of culture or share the view that culture can be taught in classroom-or even that it should be taught” (Chavez, 2005, cited in Schulz et al., 2005, p.176). Generally speaking, the situation pertaining to the role of culture post-publication of Standards appears to be complex because how culture should be defined operationally in the context of foreign language curriculum, and in terms of instructional objectives and assessment, remains a topic lacking consensus (Schulz, 2007, p.9).

Collectively, all these challenges have stressed even more the call for prompt theory-building, development at any level, and curricular reforms. Ultimately, the
importance and value for alignment and full implementation of the Standards, in particular referring to the culture goals, is poignantly underscored by Phillips (2003):

Understanding perspectives, that is the meanings, attitudes, values, and ideas of cultures studied, is the ultimate goal for learners of the world’s languages. Perspectives are the common thread in the two standards that fashion the culture goal. The profession recognizes that for both pragmatic and humanistic reasons the standards needed to feature prominently the study of many diverse cultures. Many members of the business and government community who support the study of the other languages and cultures do so out of a desire for students to become citizens who can live and work in a world with fewer cultural misunderstandings. Likewise in the academic community, those who place priority on culture for humanistic, aesthetic, or personal development reasons find the framework to be an effective organizer. (p.165)

Assessment and culture in foreign language programs

Before focusing on the impact of the Standards on the assessment of culture in the foreign language classrooms, it is important to review the situation preceding the development of the Standards. Historically speaking, the assessment of culture learning, if included and/or conducted at all, has been problematic and of secondary importance compared to the assessment of linguistic features. After all, assessment techniques were generated and aligned with the dominant instructional objectives and methods (which focused almost exclusively on linguistic aspects of language learning until the late 1980s and early 1990s) in the U.S. educational context.

During the first 100 years or so of foreign language teaching in the U.S., up to the 1950s, the grammar-translation method was the predominant pedagogy, and it was based
on the reading and translation of literary texts (Lado, 1964), so that the assessment of outcomes was limited to measuring students’ abilities in translation and memorization. As a consequence, big ‘C’ culture was only indirectly taught and was considered of minor importance in literary excerpts read and translated (Titone, 1969). As a result, there was little or no incentive to assess cultural knowledge, let alone understanding.

The situation regarding culture did not substantially change in the 1950s, when the audio-lingual method moved to center stage in language teaching pedagogy, because a strong emphasis was still given to more technical aspects of language learning: grammar, vocabulary, and reading, with grammar dominating. The assessment practices employed then revolved around translation exercises, vocabulary lists, and dictation, with the primary purpose of measuring linguistic competence. As observed by Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2000), culture learning “was an expected by-product resulting from the study of literature, geography, and other factual and tangible elements of the target culture referred to as Big ‘C’ culture” (p.58). As a by-product and not a focus of language teaching, culture was thus not deemed necessary for assessment. Discrete point testing was the norm, and teaching and learning, which focused on the listening and repetition model and did not account for context or social interaction, permitted students to be exposed to culture only indirectly while doing application activities and practicing drills and dialogues (Omaggio, 1984).

A similar situation continued with the language teaching pedagogy influenced by cognitive approaches, and where the learner’s mental or internal processes were privileged and observed. The focus was primarily on understanding internal rules or mechanisms governing language learning and acquisition and analyzing input and output
related issues. As anticipated, some aspects of culture were learned indirectly through applications activities, but there was still no particular interest in assessing cultural knowledge or understanding because it was not seen as the primary goal of foreign language teaching, and, as explained by Johnson (2004): “The outside reality, or social context, is acknowledged indirectly, abstractly, and superficially” (p. 84).

The outside reality or social context began to be acknowledged as the sociocultural perspectives were applied to language teaching and beginning in the 1980s. Creating opportunities for meaningful interaction in the target language became an important goal of language teaching in concert with the rapid growth of the communicative movement as well as the rise of a sociocultural orientation in second language acquisition theory and research. Within this new environment, the surrounding environment in which communication takes place and generally the nuances of social reality were considered important factors for language acquisition. As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, culture became recognized for its contextual importance during this period because of the influence of the emerging socio-cultural theories and their underlining philosophy for teaching and learning. As noted by Lafayette (2003), it was during the 1980s that the “teaching materials were more and more influenced by the prior work of linguists and sociolinguists in the domains of functional notional and communicative competence. The language of textbooks became more communicative and contextualized. This change, in turn, resulted in increased attempts to explain the cultural context wherein the language was found” (p. 56). At the same time, while teachers had an opportunity through materials available to eventually include culture as an integral part of teaching and learning, the widespread use of the grammar-based
syllabus continued to be the number one priority for many foreign language teachers, so that it remained difficult to make meaningful time for culture (Lafayette, 2003). Moreover, as stressed by Lafayette (2003), “many textbooks failed to support their claim concerning the importance of culture by neglecting to evaluate it significantly in the tests that accompanied the materials” (p. 57).

In the end, despite the importance placed on communication and culture, grammar and vocabulary continued to prevail in pedagogy as well as the assessment practices employed. As a justification of this situation, Allen (1985, cited in Lafayette, 2003) suggested the following explanation:

grammar offers several advantages over culture: it is the concept around which most textbooks and materials are organized; it is finite and can be ordered in either a linear, sequential plan of study or else in a cyclical one; mastery of it can be easily tested and evaluated; and, finally, it is a subject matter the classroom teacher can teach him or herself, if necessary, using an advanced grammar text, and which, once mastered, is unlikely to change. Culture, by contrast, is diffuse, difficult to grasp, translate into instructional goals, test, evaluate, order; prodigious in quantity; and ever-evolving (p.145).

Allen (1985) was one of several scholars addressing issues and challenges found in the assessment of culture. Among others, Damen (1987, cited in Paige et al., 2000) pointed out that teachers encountered difficulty in choosing which aspects of culture to teach, and it was believed that culture learning could only be assessed by the students’ themselves or through informal (and thus unreliable) means. These beliefs persist today.

According to Paige et al. (2000), teachers who do attempt to include culture in their assessment practices often focus their tests on big ‘C’ culture, and included topics
such as art, geography and architecture. It may be that they do so “to avoid the uncertainty that comes with taking into account the cultural diversity of the target culture” (p.62). The test questions teachers create are factual in orientation, and the information needed by the students to respond to them is easy to memorize. A focus on discrete elements of cultural knowledge is preferred for practical reasons, and as a result tests within this framework are easy to prepare and evaluate (Valette, 1986, cited in Paige et al., 2000).

Kramsch (1991) found that a large number of topics, including high ‘C’ culture, were the topics appearing and included in most of the foreign language textbooks used in the U.S. and indeed guided this type of knowledge and testing. Seelye (1994, cited in Paige et al., 2000) further observed that five main topics were regularly found in testing, and all pertained to big ‘C’ culture: history, trivia items, toponyms, vocabulary, and the arts.

Additionally, a review of the literature suggests that sometimes educators prefer not being involved with assessment of culture learning because of the enormous challenges involved in doing so in meaningful ways and the limitations associated with the memorization of discrete facts which are not considered appropriate for cultural understanding. When teachers do attempt to create culturally-oriented assessments, there may also be problem(s) associated with the reliance on their personal experiences and backgrounds.

Other challenges attributed to culturally-oriented assessment are recognized by Lessard-Clouston (1992) and Byram and Morgan (1994) in relation to the instruction given. They emphasized that assessment can only work effectively if it is able to
reproduce what is done instructionally in the classroom, and this is not always easy to
achieve. Another complexity faced by language educators relates to students’ learning
styles, which may vary considerably and thus calls for a variety of assessment practices
to be used in order to be fair to test takers (Paige et al., 2000).

Looking beyond the challenges encountered by assessment in the classroom with
respect to content, teachers, instructional practices, or learning styles, Paige et al. (2000),
discussing the nature of assessment more at a macro level, pointed out that assessment is
connected to the cultural values of a country, such as objectivity, fairness, and efficiency.
These values have implications for foreign language teaching and learning, and, as
suggested by Robinson and Nocon (1996, cited in Paige et al, 2000), students are exposed
to objective tests which only measure knowledge of culture facts studied objectively as
opposed to experiencing culture as a process of producing meaning according to people’s
way of being. Kramsch (1991) has addressed problems associated with this situation and
has noted that the treatment of culture is far from being objectively approachable. Paige
et al. (2000) argued that assessment “should be formative, behavioral, and affective as
well as cognitive” (p.61) and expanded to include different types of assessments,
including those that account for cultural understanding, not mere accumulation of cultural
facts or awareness.

The validity of this argument should be framed in the shift seen in assessment that
took place in the 1990s. As explained by Liskin-Gasparro (1996), the focus on
performance-based assessment as opposed to measurement of knowledge appeared with
the publication of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the Oral Proficiency Interview
(OPI). These initiatives contributed to a focus on functional and communicative abilities
within five areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture. They eventually came to serve as a benchmark for the assessment of foreign language proficiency, with proficiency conceptualized as including cultural understanding. The situation further progressed with the publication of the Standards (1996, 1999). The 1990s are thus significant because they represent the beginning of the performance-assessment era (Shohamy, 1998) and confirm culture as a necessary component of assessment and instruction. Culture, as previously described, appears as one of the goal areas in the Standards. This new assessment paradigm involves the use of portfolios, diaries, and reflective journals, among other alternative methods, in addition to the creation of rubrics which include performance criteria (Hancock, 1994; Shohamy, 1988). The call for alternative forms of assessment is essential because many of the traditional methods of assessment do not lend themselves to evaluating culture learning (Byram, 1997; Lange, 2003; Moore, 1997; Ramirez, 2004; Schulz, 2007).

On the other hand, fairly recently Schwartz (2002) pointed out that the situation for assessment, meaning in regards to the change in the methods used, is far from being widespread. She asserted that many attempts to change curricula are often stopped due to a lack of changes in methods of assessment employed. Progress in assessment is marked by abandoning an emphasis on discrete-point tasks and moving toward the adoption of multiple and formative forms of assessment (Schwartz, 2002).

Although the implementation of alternative assessments has been suggested in the literature for over 20 years, analyzing the general situation and not focusing specifically on culture, Nuessel (1991) suggested that many foreign language educators were not found to use the newer approaches (generally speaking) to improve the learning of
undergraduates. Many programs were found to still assess foreign languages through the convenient discrete-point grammar tests (Sieloff-Magnan, 1991). When it was seen, the use of those alternative assessment methods was only occasional and there was no evidence of comprehensive attempts to change assessment practices in progress (Liskin-Gasparro, 1999). This may not be surprising given the fact that “the profession has no tradition of assessing cultural understanding in the context of language instruction, either at the pre-collegiate or collegiate level” (Schulz, 2007, p.10).

In the end, as this brief overview suggests, little is known about the assessment of culture of foreign language departments and programs and whether or not and in what degree changes have occurred in terms of methods employed and a shift from an emphasis on cultural knowledge to cultural competence as recommended in the Standards.

Conclusions

Despite the recognized importance of foreign language teaching and learning in current times, research is still lacking with respect to the understanding and transmission of foreign culture in undergraduate language programs at the college level. In particular, there is an absence of in-depth research on how cultural competence is operationalized and taught in undergraduate language programs in the U.S post-publication of the Standards, and also with regard to the cultural competence of foreign language students, particularly those who will go on to become foreign language teachers themselves.

Furthermore, most of the research which has been conducted has been of a quantitative nature, and has focused on linguistic aspects of learners of second or foreign
languages in order to measure and better understand the mechanics of their learning and acquisition. However, to produce effective and competent communication both inside the foreign language classroom and outside in the globalized world, studies which qualitatively examine cultural competence are indeed necessary nowadays.

Within that spirit, this study was designed to draw attention to what takes place in Italian undergraduate programs instead of teachers and/or students to see how they stand in their transmission of cultural competence, an important characteristic needed in the current educational and societal environment.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Historical and philosophical roots of qualitative inquiry

“One of the essential characteristics of research is that it is purposeful. The researcher sets out deliberately to discover something about the world with the intention of eventually making claims on the basis of the evidence gathered.” (Richards, 2003, p.3)

Exploring different research paradigms in order to choose the most suitable one is the primary step required in initiating the research process. Because the general agreement is that prediction is found in the positivist tradition, while understanding and emancipation are found in the post-positivist view (Lather, 1991), in seeking to discover meaning from the acquired data, I embraced a post-positivist worldview for the purpose of my qualitative study. That is, in order to answer the research questions I worked under the interpretivist paradigm and followed an inductive process, in that I built concepts from the details and the people found in the settings under investigation. I was interested in the meaning and understanding gained through the participants’ words. It was necessary in this study to interpret the meaning that people make of their experiences. In addition, I was the primary instrument for data collection and was involved in fieldwork.
I conducted on-site visits of each institution in order to acquire hands-on data in its natural setting (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 1994).

To further understand why the methodological choices preferred for the completion of this study were of a qualitative nature, it is necessary to stress the difference in ontology (how we come to know) and epistemology (how we obtain knowledge) regarding positivist or quantitative versus post-positivist or qualitative research. While, ontologically speaking, positivist researchers assert that reality is one and discoverable, i.e., there is one absolute truth that can be unveiled through objective research methods, the post-positivist researchers believe that reality is a multiply constructed complexity, thereby yielding truth as a multiple construction of reality and rejecting the notion that there is one single truth. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Green and Stinson, 1999; James-Brown, 2004; Sipe and Constable, 1996)

Furthermore, differences are evident in the research methods selected: positivist research utilizes systematic and scientific techniques (i.e. questionnaires and surveys) which attempt to predict outcomes and establish measurable truths that can be generalized to similar contexts. Post-positivist research methods vary (direct observation, in-depth interview, participation in the setting, and document analysis) due to the attempt to look for multiple perspectives and meanings, and to honor participants’ voices. Instead of starting with a hypothesis, post-positivists prefer to initiate the research process by asking broader questions. Therefore, it is not uncommon for post-positivists to start without a specific theory and to have a research design of an emergent nature, suggesting that the researcher cannot know/predict in advance what his/her investigation will uncover and what issues will arise (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Green and Stinson, 1999).
Qualitative research came into the research picture as a response to what was seen as missing and unachievable within the quantitative world, and it brought to light a new research philosophy that was characterized by several crucial elements. One of those elements is the main purpose of qualitative research: to provide in-depth description, understanding, and eventually interpretation of the human experience. In qualitative research participants’ words/voices are honored over numbers, and so direct quotes are used in order to better describe the findings and honor the participants’ involvement (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). As stressed by Sipe and Constable (1996), maintaining a dialogue between researcher and participant(s) is critical; only through a dialectical process can a deeper understanding of the social world be achieved.

Methodologically, qualitative researchers tend to ask why, how, what, when, and where questions. Because these researchers are interested in meaning and interpretation, they do not use or test hypotheses. As elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (1990)

researchers[...] really enjoy working with data, not simply with ideas in the abstract. They relish the interplay between themselves and the data [...]They are unaffected by their own experiences when analyzing materials because they realize that these become the foundations for making comparisons and discovering properties and dimensions. (p.5)

The study of a situation or a person or a thing in its entirety is preferred to the selection of specific variables; natural settings are chosen and preferred in which researchers interact with, interview, or observe the participants. The interpretations given by the qualitative researcher are based on what is found in a particular context or situation and time.
Since qualitative research does not follow one particular way of doing things, dynamism and fluidity are important constituents of the research process (Lichtman, 2006; Patton, 1990, 2002). Not surprisingly, while traditional positivist research follows a definite order, the qualitative research process does not follow a linear order and instead “moves back and forth between data gathering/collection and data analysis […]” (Lichtman, p.15).

**Sample and sample selection**

I purposefully focused on undergraduate Italian foreign language programs located in the Midwest of the United States, keeping in mind the lack of research on undergraduate language programs, particularly regarding issues related to culture teaching, and the alignment of curricula with the National Standards for Foreign Languages.

Initially, seven institutions were randomly selected (Patton, 1990, 2002) in a perimeter of about 400 miles within my residence. Important pragmatic issues contributed to the sample selection: because of practical constraints I could only select institutions in a limited perimeter from my residence. More specifically, because time and access issues for conducting fieldwork were limited, I needed “to pick cases which are easy to get to and hospitable to our inquiry” (Stake, 1995, p.4). The initial choice of the institutions was primarily contingent upon a basic search for undergraduate Italian programs done through the use of the World Wide Web.

In the end, only five of the initial seven undergraduate programs were selected for the present study. Chairs from two of the seven institutions never replied to the
introductory statement (Appendix A) sent via e-mail. Initially, the decision to contact seven Italian programs was made to assure that the study had a sufficient number of research sites in case of non-response or non-agreement in granting permission for conducting research. The decision on the number of the institutions was deliberately taken, keeping in mind that “the researcher can develop an estimate by considering the scope of the project, the complexity of the research problem, the accessibility of potential participants, and the time and resources that are available for working in the field” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p.129).

Moreover, the choices I made concerning the sampling selection are in agreement with the principle that above all “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (Clifford, 1988; Patton, 1990). I did not know and/or did have any personal experience with the programs selected prior to my study (except for one which in the end I did not discuss in this study). The original sample consisted of Italian programs in four public universities and one Italian program in a private smaller university located in four different states in the Midwest section of the United States. Eventually, the sample was reduced to three Midwestern sites, for reasons discussed later in this chapter.

This qualitative study focused on undergraduate Italian foreign language programs at the elementary level. I made a list of the department chairs in each of the institutions so as to seek permission for conducting research in the Italian programs. I collected the contact information for each of the institutions using the direct links to the institutions available online. Through e-mail communication (see Appendix B), the five
chairs contacted gave me permission to enter the sites and provided me with contacts pertaining to the primary participants of the study: the undergraduate Italian language directors in charge of the elementary level courses. Upon receiving the approval from the chairs (see Appendix B), I contacted via e-mail the Italian language directors responsible for the elementary level at each institution in order to check on their willingness to participate. Upon receiving confirmation from the participants, I made the needed arrangements for the data collection process.

**Establishing entrée**

In order to gain permission and study the undergraduate Italian foreign language programs, an introductory statement (Appendix A) was sent via e-mail to each chair in the seven institutions initially considered. The selection ultimately depended upon the permission of the chairs for accessing the site as well as the availability of the undergraduate Italian language directors, considered the primary participants in this study. Upon receiving approval from the chairs (see Appendix B), and establishing the contact via e-mail communication with the undergraduate Italian language directors, I began with phase one of the research, which consisted of sending the consent form (see Appendix C) considered appropriate for research of the “exempt” type as defined by institutional review boards. Written informed consent addresses the following issues: a clear explanation that participation is voluntary and that there is an ongoing opportunity to withdraw consent at any time, the purpose and scope of the study, the types of questions which are likely to be asked, and the use of the results (Denzin and Lincoln,
Primary participants were given time to both consider their participation and to ask questions of the researcher, with the understanding that [s]he could withdraw at any time.

In order to study the undergraduate Italian language programs, it was necessary to establish rapport with the primary sources of information; in fact, “the primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the ‘others’ who make up the organization or carry out the process” (Seidman, 2006).

**Sample bias and reflexivity**

Biases and subjectivity, this latter intended as opposite to objectivity in doing research, are inevitable elements throughout the research process held by the qualitative researcher (Groves, 2003; Roberts and McGinty, 1995). It is important to emphasize that the qualitative researcher is the human instrument of inquiry and “is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, ranging from interviewing to intensive self-reflection and introspection” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.6). In agreement with what Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explained, I recognized myself in what the authors called “interpretive *bricoleur*” who “understands that research is an interactive process shaped by her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (p.6).

The decision to study undergraduate language programs in the Midwest of the United States emanated from my background as a learner of foreign languages and my direct experience in teaching Italian as a foreign language in the Midwest of the United States. Because of this background, I felt I held an insider’s perspective at the micro
level. This positioning could perhaps lead to pre-conceived notions and/or biases towards the study’s scope. Succinctly, the following bias may be inherently interwoven within the study: a) my direct involvement with the Italian teaching at the undergraduate level for a period of seven years, in which I developed concerns related to the curriculum as it relates to the applicability/practicability of the Standards (1999) for what pertains to assessing culture at college level; b) the ‘insider’ position I held, due to my belonging to the teaching community/field, may have guided myself as the researcher to a narrower focus in the analysis and interpretation of findings; c) the difference in age and my experience in comparison to the five participants, with four out of five being women, three of them with many years of experience in the teaching field, and one out of five being a man (experienced as well), may have created power issues during the questionnaire discussion and interviewing process; as such, participants may have controlled and/or manipulated the answers’ content; and d) as the researcher, in my role of observer I relied on my own perceptions, and so I was susceptible to bias from my subjective interpretations of situations.

Thus it was essential for me to engage in the process of self-reflexivity to acknowledge my biases and to avoid their interference with the trustworthiness (validity) of the study. In order to keep track of biases, I took notes about the entire research process, during active field work, while analyzing data, and reporting and interpreting findings. In addition, I also conducted member or procedure checks, and I engaged two peer-debriefers to further assist in the analysis and interpretation of findings.
Data collection

The study consisted of a singular-entity case analysis approach as well as cross-case analysis of, initially, five Italian undergraduate programs. The purpose was to shed light on the role of cultural competence in Italian language programs located in the Midwest. This study included the following data collecting methods: questionnaire, interview, observations, departmental document analysis, such as syllabi, textbooks, and evaluation tools (i.e. quizzes, exams, and projects).

It is necessary to underscore that case study is undoubtedly one of the most common approaches used in qualitative research. Despite the fact that there seems to be little agreement about what a case study is (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a definition given by an Australian researcher with considerable experience of writing case studies appears to be successfully explanatory:

Case study is a generic term for the investigation of an individual, group or phenomenon. While the techniques used in the investigation may be varied, and may include both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the distinguishing feature of case study is the belief that human systems develop a characteristic wholeness or integrity and are not simply a loose collection of traits. (Sturman, 1994, quoted in Bassey, 1999, p 26).

In alignment with other researchers involved in case-study research, I believe that “to explain why things happen as they do, and to predict from a single example requires an in-depth investigation of the interdependencies of parts and of the patterns that emerge” (Sturman, 1994, quoted in Bassey, 1999, p 26).

Among various qualitative approaches, case-study was the most appropriate research approach to be adopted in considering the nature of the research questions to be
answered within the study’s scope. This research employed the case-study approach to investigate the cultural competence held by five undergraduate Italian language programs located in higher education institutions in the Midwest, and asked questions such as: *How do Italian undergraduate programs define cultural competence? How do the evaluation tools prepare students to be culturally competent? How do the elementary language classrooms operationalize perspectives as aligned with the National Standards?* The goal was to build an interpretive understanding of the emic perspective which was held by each of the programs.

Thus, because the use of case study was undertaken to understand and focus on cultural competence as it relates to each program, the type of case study employed is properly called instrumental. That is, this study was meant to accomplish something other than understanding the in-depth context or nature of a particular institution and program (Stake, 1995). This instrumental case study approach was useful to investigate culture and cultural competence in Italian undergraduate programs. In this situation, the case becomes of secondary importance, because it is limited to a supportive role (Stake, 1995).

In addition, this inquiry is an example of what Bassey (2002) called “educational case study” which is “conducted within a localized boundary of space and time” (p.109), and it pertains to an interesting aspect, here recognized as the approach to cultural competence adopted by five selected undergraduate programs and transmitted/taught at the elementary level, which needs to be explored in order to understand what is happening in a particular educational context.

Although minor differences are recognizable under the large umbrella called “case study”, and styles such as ethnographic, evaluative, educational, and action
research help better define it (Stenhouse, 1988, in Bassey, 1999), two essential features are common to all case studies:

[1] sufficient data are collected for researchers to be able to explore significant features of the case and to put forward interpretations for what is observed [...];
[2] the study is conducted mainly in its natural context. [Notably] a case study of playground behavior would require observation of playgrounds: interviews with teachers about playground behavior would be insufficient, for it would be difficult to test for the trustworthiness of the data without triangulating them with observational data (Bassey, 1999, p. 47).

In preparing procedural entrée steps within the context of the present study, which is an essential research tool for the researcher involved in a qualitative endeavor, the organization was the following: upon receiving entrée from the chairs and further establishing contact and agreement with the primary participants (undergraduate Italian language directors), the consent form was sent to be signed. Upon receiving the signed consent form (with the exception of one institution which changed the consent procedure and requested no signature for their participant), a questionnaire was sent via e-mail to the primary participants. I was able to arrange to visit four out of the five institutions during autumn of 2007, while the last visit (because of the time needed to obtain research permission by the local institutional review board) was completed during spring of 2008. I collected the data while conducting on-site visits at each of the five universities for three days (from 8am to 5pm), which further enabled the establishment of rapport with the undergraduate Italian language directors. During the three day visits, I discussed the questionnaire completed by the undergraduate Italian language director, conducted one
(1) face-to-face interview, and collected the documents needed to conduct the document analysis. I also observed as many elementary level class sessions as I was permitted by the programs and by the limited time available.

**Questionnaire**

A questionnaire (See Appendix D) was sent via e-mail to each of the participants prior to the visits. The questionnaire consisted of the following sections:

1) Demographics of instructors/faculty teaching at the elementary level, 2) education and preparation of instructors, and 3) information about the program and the teaching of culture. The answers requested were in the form of numbers, checks and comments.

During the three day visits, the participant and I discussed the questionnaire during our first meeting, before moving to the interview stage. Questionnaires were later examined by myself and discussed as well with two peer-debriefers, two experienced peers not involved in the study.

**Interview**

In particular, interviewing was utilized because it is an important window that opens to the unique knowledge possessed by the informants, important figures and sources in the research setting. Moreover, “researchers [use] interviewing to gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means” (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, p.174) and to validate and/or triangulate information obtained from other sources (i.e. questionnaires, observations, and on-site documents).

In practice, the interview (Appendix E) was held from a designated area (personal office or conference room) where comfort and confidentiality needs could be met. In the role of researcher I acted as the learner in this context because “ultimately, the
investigator’s bridge to the participants’ world is the act of listening with genuine interest to what is being said and how it is said” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p.185). Before initiating the interview with the undergraduate Italian language directors, I established rapport with them through e-mail and face-to-face communications. As documented, rapport begins with the researcher’s clarity of purpose in conducting research. As suggested by Lindlof and Taylor (2002), participants were given clear, honest reasons for why they had been contacted and what the conducted research focused upon and its scope (See Appendix C).

The actual interviews utilized the general interview guide approach and the standardized open-ended format described by Patton (2002). The reason for choosing this format is explained by the same author in stating that “time is used efficiently, the analysis is facilitated by making responses easy to find and compare and the exact instrument is available for future reference and inspection” (p.346).

I recorded the interviews after each of the directors gave me permission to do so. I transcribed the interviews, and the informants received a copy of the transcripts pertaining exclusively to their interview and were asked to check for errors in fact or intent (i.e., member check).

I was directly responsible for the transcribing of the recorded interviews. The voice-recordings will be kept for a period of five years and then destroyed as required by the institutional review board. I will keep any data confidential and store it in a file cabinet kept locked at all times in my residential setting and under my exclusive access. The interviews served the need of clarifying, expanding, comparing, and triangulating what already was asked in the questionnaire.
Observation

Freed from subjects’ whimsical shifts in opinion, self-evaluation, self-deception, manipulation of self-representation, embarrassment and outright dishonesty, observation rests on something researchers can find constant: their own direct knowledge and their judgment. It thus stands as the fundamental base of all research methods. (Adler and Adler, 2003, p.105).

The qualitative researcher must actively witness the phenomena she is studying in action. Adler and Adler (2003) emphasize the fact that researchers’ observations are extremely valuable as alternate sources of data for producing cross-checking and/or triangulation, and in other words enhancing consistency and validity in the findings (p. 89-90). Above all, “not only is observation one of the earliest and most basic forms of research, but it is the most likely to be used in conjunction with others” (Adler and Adler, 2003, p.80)

In addition to the questionnaire and the interview, the participants gave me permission, during the consecutive three day visit, to conduct the observations in the Italian undergraduate elementary classroom offered at each selected research site. In one of the five programs (in the end this program was not discussed in this study, as later explained in this chapter), the participant allowed only one classroom visit. The number of Italian language classrooms observed (at the elementary level, first semester of instruction), in each institution ultimately depended on the selection and choices made by the primary participant (the language directors in charge of the elementary level) and according to instructors’ agreement on having their classroom observed. The obtrusive non-participant classroom observations I conducted took place during the designated
mornings from September 2007 to March 2008. Each observation lasted the entire class period of 48 to 50 minutes.

Observing humans in natural settings assists in understanding their behavioral complexities and noticing all the cues a human eye is possibly able to catch (Angrosino and Pérez, 2000; Lichtman, 2006). In qualitative practice observation “entails being present in a situation and making a record of one’s impressions of what takes place […] the primary research instrument is the self, consciously gathering sensory data through sight, hearing” (Jones and Somekh, 2005, p.138). I did not audio or video-tape observations because my focus was not on paralinguistic clues and/or the instructors and students. The focus of my investigation was the undergraduate programs and the cultural competence in Italian found at the elementary level. Hence, notes were taken throughout the study and a reflective journal was kept as well during the time of data collection. Field notes are particularly important for the fact of being “gnomic, shorthand reconstructions of events, observations, and conversations that took place in the field” (Van Maanen, 1988, p.123). In this way “researchers will be rewarded with a dense, fact-filled archive that they can later use to create explanations that are informed by theory” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p.163).

In the end, because “being observed can make people self-conscious and generate anxiety” (Patton, 2002), the instructors were informed of the focus of the observations made by the researcher, in that they were made fully aware that the researcher’s evaluation was exclusively on the Italian culture and any related topics found in their classroom. In other words, the quality of their teaching was not being evaluated, and student involvement in the class sessions was not being investigated. The focus was
solely on the culturally-related content of the class sessions. In this way I attempted to make the observations as nonthreatening as possible and minimize their obtrusiveness so as to protect the validity of the study. It was my hope that the instructors observed would not alter their instructional practices so as to satisfy my research expectations or try to create positive impressions of their teaching ability. It should also be noted that, as a researcher, I was unable to triangulate my obtrusive observations with completely non-participant unobtrusive observations which may have helped in further strengthening validity. This was due to constraints imposed by the short duration of my campus visits: three days. Still, it must be acknowledged that conducting obtrusive observations may have altered instructor’s teaching choices in regards to culture and content.

**Documents**

In different ways than questionnaires, observations, and interviews, documents and member check analysis enriched the data collection by providing feedback and additional information not always possible to capture in the succinct answers on a questionnaire or in an interview. Documents, also called “material culture” (Patton, 2002) in the field of anthropology, constitute another rich source of information, especially in the investigation of programs and institutions. In order to produce an accurate analysis, I decided to compare official information found in the documents with what was observed in the classrooms and what was reported by the participants in the face-to-face interviews and completed questionnaires. As stated by Patton (2002), “these kinds of documents provide the evaluator with information about many things that cannot be observed. They may reveal things that have taken place before the evaluation began […] they can reveal goals or decisions that might be otherwise unknown to the evaluator” (p.293).
Permission was given by the primary participants to collect documents pertinent to the undergraduate Italian language program. I was aware of the fact that documents “can provide a behind-the-scenes look at program processes and how they came into being” (Patton, 2002, p.294) and thus collected and analyzed documents belonging to the elementary level, such as programs’ syllabi, quizzes, exams, and projects.

The most important point to be made here is that by using documents with a variety of other sources, “the evaluator observer can build on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimizing the weaknesses of any single approach” (Patton, 2002, p.307). The triangulated approach proved critical to my evaluation of the culture competence issue in the Italian undergraduate programs. All together, the triangulation of methods for data collection deepened the analysis related to cultural competence issues and the overall findings of the study. In the end, the analysis and examination of the documents confirmed and strengthened the results suggested by the other research methods used for this study. For example, the evaluation tools were found to be in alignment with what reported by the participants during the interview session.

**Member check**

Member checking consisted of talking to the participants about their answers on the questionnaire and showing the transcript of their interview for accuracy checks. Member checks meant a restatement of what was heard from the participants or found in the written format of the questionnaires or the documents collected to ensure that the information received was in fact correct (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln and Guba, 1989). After the on-site visit, where member checks were conducted face-to-face with participants, member checks were held with participants via e-mail. Member checking
yielded to establishing trustworthiness in validating that the questions asked and the responses given confirmed the a-priori-research inquiry and thought. To further ensure the integrity and credibility of the research process, data collection was discussed with participants and also competent peers. Two peer debriefers were engaged to strengthen the validity of the analysis.

**Peer debriefing**

Peer debriefing, a method consisting of having external evaluator(s) checking and controlling issues and interpretations made by the researcher, was used in this study for establishing credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The role of the evaluators was helpful in validating the researcher’s methodology and interpretations. Thus, because the researcher may have encountered at some point methodological and/or ethical dilemmas, especially in the final stage of her study, the peer-debriefing method happened to be necessary because it helped keep the researcher as honest as possible by probing for meanings, biases, and understandings [sic] (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

**Confidentiality**

Pseudonyms were used instead of real names for both participants and institutions, and as well as for data collection, analysis and interpretation. A file with coding created to protect confidentiality was kept separately from the data collected and securely stored in my private computer. Any of the data collected (comprised of interview voice files, transcripts, and programs’ documents) remained locked at all times in my private residence. To reiterate, upon completion of the study, all data collected will
be kept locked and securely stored for a period of five years, and afterwards shredded and destroyed.

**Trustworthiness**

Conventional criteria for judging a research study, and which consists of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, cannot be applied to a qualitative study. Parallel qualitative criteria called credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) substitute for the above mentioned conventional criteria. The importance is in the acknowledgement that “whereas the criteria for the credibility of quantitative research is based on the validity and reliability of instruments and internal validity, in qualitative research the primary criterion is the credibility of the study” (McMillan, 1996 cited in Lather, 2001).

Here follows a concise explanation of the exclusively qualitative criteria used for this study and generally for any qualitative work:

1) Credibility refers to the truthfulness of particular findings. As stated by Lather (Unpublished paper): “Credibility is defined as the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy as based on a set of standard practices. Markers of credibility include triangulation, the use of different methods, samples of people, and/or times or places” (p.3). In this regard, Fontana and Frey (2000) suggested that because “human beings are complex, and their lives ever changing, the more methods we use to study them, the better our chances to gain some understanding of how they construct their lives and the stories they tell us about them” (p.668). I adopted different data collection methods (questionnaire, interview, observations, departmental
document analysis, such as syllabi, textbooks, and evaluation tools) well-established in qualitative investigations. Thus, this combination of methods, commonly called triangulation (a term also used when incorporating multiple investigators, data sources or different perspectives), contributed solidly to the trustworthiness of the data. In addition, the following strong markers for credibility were found in this study: the random sampling of institutions, member checking, peer debriefing, the examination of previous research findings, and a solid description of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Glesne, 1999; Shenton, 2004).

2) Transferability refers to how applicable the research findings are to another setting or group. In this context “external validity shifts from generalizability based on sampling to reader assessment of transferability” (Lather, 2001, p.4). The term transferability assumes a key role in qualitative research, meaning that the validity implies documenting accurately the cases under investigation with a “thick” description, so that the reader can determine the degree of transferability (Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 1973). As stressed by Shenton (2004), the study’s results must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the institutions and the geographical area in which the fieldwork was carried out.

3) Dependability refers to the findings, which should be consistent and reproducible. In other words, it is critical to describe accurately the research design and its implementation (Shenton, 2004). Because of the nature of a qualitative investigation, what was observed by the researcher is tied to a specific time/institutional situation when studied and mostly not repeatable to obtain the same results, and it is more common to focus on reporting accurately the processes involved. In fact, in achieving accurate
dependability within the study’s scope, I ensured that “the fit between what occurs and what is recorded” (Lather 2001, p.4), occurred by me keeping and conducting “detailed field notes, a team approach, use of participant quotations, and an active search for discrepant data” (Lather 2001, p.4).

Lastly, is 4) confirmability, the criterion which refers to the ‘validity’ of findings. Findings should be “grounded in events” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.324) and not a product of the researcher's preconceptions. What appears from the data collection must be interpreted respecting participants’ voices, beliefs and behaviors. I took the necessary steps to ensure as much as possible that my study’s findings were a result of the experiences and ideas of the participants rather than my own judgments and/or preferences (Shenton, 2004). I agree in the fact that internal validity does not “have meaning as a criterion in a paradigm that rejects a realist ontology. Additionally, external validity or generalizability has little meaning if realities are multiple and constructed” (Lather, 2001, p. 244). Hence, other than emphasizing the role of triangulation in promoting confirmability, I consider important, as stressed by Miles and Huberman (1994, in Shenton) as an additional criterion, the extent to which the researcher admits her own predispositions.

As Jones (2002) poignantly stated, “in addition to inductive analytic strategies, findings also emerge from the sense, intuition, creativity, and artistry of the researcher...the text to be written should emerge in a process of co-creation as participants’ stories infuse researchers’ interpretations in a way that the boundaries between the two become at once distinct and blurred.” (p. 468) Mutual responsibility was
a major concern in the relationship between researcher and participant(s) found in this qualitative research.

Moreover, there is a need to stress that the researcher, as the ‘bricoleur’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and the puppeteer, is the real instrument in any of the qualitative research approaches chosen. As described in Lichtman (2006, p.12), “it is through [the researcher’s] eyes and ears that data are collected, information is gathered, settings are viewed, and realities are constructed. [And all information] is influenced by his or her experience, knowledge, skill, and background. [That is why] most qualitative researchers acknowledge the dilemma of trying to be unbiased and objective” (p.12).

Because the researcher is the instrument of data collection, the credibility of the study depends on the credibility of the researcher. The analytic procedures used to produce credible findings were based on, among many, triangulation, member checks, and constant reflexivity throughout the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

**Ethics and politics of qualitative research**

A responsible work today seems to me above all to be one that shows, on the one hand, a political commitment and an ideological lucidity, and is, on the other hand interrogative by nature, instead of being merely prescriptive. (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 1991, p. 149)

The above citation is very significant as an introduction to what are considered additional key components of qualitative research. The aforementioned author continues the exploration of what are considered ethical and political issues in the research process by
encouraging researchers to produce “a work that acknowledges the difference between lived experience and representation; a work that is careful not to turn a struggle into an object of consumption, and requires that responsibility be assumed by the maker as well as by the audience, without whose participation no solution emerges, for no solution exists as a given” (p.149). From this inspiring citation surfaces the belief that mutual responsibility is a major concern in the relationship between researcher and participant found in qualitative research. The qualitative researcher is not an "uninvolved and unbiased spectator who simply collects the data from subjects" (Gergen, 2001). Ethical and political issues should be addressed because of the researcher/participant relationship and possible power differences. As a matter of fact, as previously stated, the “control-power lies only within a jointly-contracted relationship between/among them” (James-Brown, 2004).

Regarding this matter, Fisher (2000) recognized that both researcher and participant have power that can be altered to promote their own agenda. In particular, I chose and hoped for power relationships which were complementary and non-coercive. As suggested by Fisher (2000), I tried to the best of my capabilities to value the moral claims of both myself and the research participants.

Thus, one of my goals was to be aware of the hidden agendas, which may be recognized, but not limited to, factors such as: funding, time constraints, and changing curriculum. It is not uncommon during fieldwork, and because of research procedures and/or personal characteristics, that the researcher faces many ethical dilemmas in assuming roles such as: exploiter, reformer, advocate, and friend (James-Brown, 2004).
There is a moral and professional obligation to decide how to act to avoid those dilemmas and also to protect the privacy and rights of participants who might be unaware of ethical issues (Neuman, 1991; Glesne, 1999). Participants have the right to expect protection of their confidences and anonymity. It is the researcher’s responsibility to respect confidentiality regarding what she/he saw or heard. The researcher, thereby, will be a trusted user of information in the scenario of sensitive data revealed (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) proposed that “all personal data ought to be secured or concealed and made public only behind a shield of anonymity. Professional etiquette uniformly concurs that no one deserves harm or embarrassment as a result of insensitive research practices” (p.139). Keeping those recommendations in mind, I adopted all the necessary measures to assure confidentiality measures throughout the entire process of the study.

I agreed that avoiding insensitive research practices requires proper respect for the participants, which seems to be initiated by written informed consent addressing the following needs: a clear explanation that participation is voluntary, and there is the opportunity to withdraw consent anytime, the purpose and scope of the study, and mutual understanding of the “political, emotional, psychological, cultural and economic ramifications of the research process” if any (James-Brown, 2004), the types of questions which are likely to be asked, and the use of the results. Participants in this study were given time to both consider their participation and to ask questions about the research. In the nature of qualitative research, unexpected findings can arise during the analysis; therefore, the researcher should declare explicitly that the potential uses of the data are
not always clear at the beginning of the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Neuman, 1991).

Deception, another central issue, will not be feasible if the researcher can accomplish the same thing without presenting ambiguous messages. In order to avoid stating half-truths and allow hidden personal motives or political issues overriding the truth to come into play, the following question were addressed using self-reflexivity during the entire research process: “Do I (as a researcher)-ambush, bribe, deceive, manipulate and/or patronize just to receive the data?” (James-Brown, 2004).

Finally, it is impossible as a qualitative researcher not to keep in mind what reciprocity means and implies. It is not a matter of remuneration; it is more complex than a materialistic way of giving something in return, because of the close collaboration in co-construction of meaning established with the participants has created sensitive personal bonds. Glazer (1982, quoted in Glesne, 1999) defined reciprocity as “the exchange of favors and commitments, the building of a sense of mutual identification and feeling of community” (p.126).

Reciprocity, thereby a reciprocal and not hierarchical relationship, is one of the seven emerging criteria for quality deriving from a work “on trying to understand the ways in which the ethical intersected both the interpersonal and the epistemological (as a form of authentic or valid knowing)” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.182). The above is based on the consideration that “the way in which we know is most assuredly tied up with both what we know and our relationships with our research participants” (p.182). There is reason to believe that the degree of indebtedness is meant to be present for a lifetime. Therefore, I am aware that without the fundamental role played by the participants and
the sharing of their perspectives/thoughts, the realization of this qualitative study would be practically impossible.

In the end, I tracked my reflexivity process in order to control for subjectivity or biased interpretations, and promotion of my own agenda. In addition, during the entire research process I made use of my internal dialog by repeatedly asking myself: “Is my self-talk basis oriented? Are my inner-tensions contradictory to outer dialog? Am I honestly remaining with the participants?” (James-Brown, 2004).

**Data Analysis**

During data analysis I went through the following phases: organizing the data, re-familiarizing self with the data, coding the data, interpreting and writing the findings (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle, 2006; Patton, 2002). I believe that in the research process, data analysis is eclectic and there is no right or wrong; as suggested by Creswell (1994), it entails to feel at ease when developing categories and making comparisons and contrasts.

Initially, I made sure that data were in a form easy to be analyzed. The beginning of the process involved the transcription of the five interviews after listening multiple times to each recording. After transcribing them, the preparation consisted of going through the filed questionnaires, interviews, observations, and departmental documents, such as syllabi, textbooks, and evaluation tools (i.e. quizzes, exams, projects) to carefully look over them and familiarize myself with what was collected. The collected data was kept in five separate files, one per program. Each of the files was analyzed one at a time; only later did I move to a cross-analysis to report the findings.
Before choosing interviewing as part of data collection, and during the analysis, I asked myself repeatedly: What status do I attach to the interview data? Is my analytic position appropriate to my practical concerns? Do interview data really help in addressing my research topic? Am I making too-large claims about my research? Does my analysis go beyond a mere list? (Silverman, 2000, p.824-825).

I did not search for details during the first approach; rather, I focused and fully immersed myself in the exploration of the various types of data collected (i.e. questionnaires, interviews observations, departmental documents) by reading and re-reading several times. The primary goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the collected data before moving into the detailed assignment of codes to sections of text. The re-reading exercise automatically brought me into the coding process, which meant the identification of different segments of the data, that described phenomena or themes (related to the research questions), and the assignment of broad category names to these segments (Lodico et al., 2006). The frequent reexamination of all data was extremely important to avoid inappropriate coding. The process of coding was conducted by hand. I wrote the code in the margin of the data source and then organized the data into piles with the same codes, cutting up data cards as needed. The codes were later reviewed and used to construct descriptions of the data. Only after coding and initiating what in qualitative research is called “thick description” of the experiences, perspectives, and practices in the data was I able to step into another phase of analysis which consists of identifying major and minor themes in the coded data. Major themes were intended here as the themes interlinked to the primary research questions and which I used to provide an explanation of my findings. Themes were subsequently combined to build tentative
explanations of the processes and perspectives, underlying what was observed during fieldwork (Lodico et al., 2006). As explained by Erickson (1986) in reviewing the fieldnotes and other data sources to generate and test assertions the researcher is looking for key linkages among various items of data. A key linkage is key in that it is of central significance for the major assertions the researcher wants to make. The key linkage is linking in that it connects up many items of data as analogous instances of the same phenomenon (p.147-148).

Data was consequently examined for confirming and disconfirming evidence. Because of validity purposes, it is important to keep in mind how much of the researcher’s argument includes the interpretive analysis of rare events. As suggested by Erickson (1986), assertions should be made based on patterns found across both frequent and rare events. As he went on to explain, “in conducting such analysis and reporting it, the researcher’s aim is not proof, in a causal sense, but the demonstration of plausibility […] The aim is to persuade the audience that an adequate evidentiary warrant exists for the assertions made, that patterns of generalization within the data set are indeed as the researcher claims they are” (Erickson, 1986, p.148-149). In controlling the diverse aspects for validity issues and following suggestions given by qualitative literature experts such as Patton (2002) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000), I repeated the steps until I felt I had enough material to provide answers to my research questions.

In the end, because interpretation meant attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations and making inferences (Patton, 2002), my interpretive analysis was the result of a collaborative effort between myself, the participants, and the peer debriefers. This collaboration, when needed, helped with challenging possible biases,
eliminating misinterpretations, and/or suggesting other ways of seeing the data. My interpretation process for the collected data, as previously noted and tested in the collaboration process, kept one primary aim, as aptly noted by Seliger and Shohamy (1989): “The ultimate goal of qualitative research is to discover phenomena such as patterns [...] not previously described and to understand those phenomena from the perspective of participants in the activity”(p.120).

In summary, the data analysis was primarily based on the interviews with the participants, and the questionnaires I sent prior to the interviews and on-site visits. The interview and questionnaire data was then triangulated with my field notes from the classroom observations and the evidence(s) found in the documents collected on site. My focus on the interviews with the language program directors and the following analysis of the transcriptions was necessary and optimal to best answer the research questions. Above all, the language program directors (the department chairperson in one institution where there was no language program director at that time) were considered the best sources to report the current situation with regard to culture and cultural competence at the elementary level.

In the course of analyzing the undergraduate programs and what was found, the number of institutions was eventually reduced from five to three due to complexities inherent in the kind of research I conducted. Language programs are more than collections of course descriptions, curricula, and textbooks and other teaching materials. They are also collections of people, of ideas, of goals, and of practices that cannot be fully governed by rules and procedures. It is in the nature of language teaching to allow for individual freedom in practices and perspectives. This, in turn, brings into play
individual investment in what takes place in language courses and programs. This makes the examination of individual programs, as well as cross-case analysis of them, an extremely complex process that is unavoidably subjective, regardless of the efforts made to ensure validity and reliability. In the case of this study, during the analysis of data and the attempt to present it, I chose, in consultation with members of the dissertation committee, not to include two (out of the five) institutions. With one of the two institutions I had considerable contact prior to the study and held an insider view of it, thus raising concerns about researcher bias, while in the other institution only one observation was allowed. Thus, despite the careful recording of data, it was evident that the study’s research questions could not be addressed in a meaningful way if all five institutions were included in the study. After careful consideration, including significant input from members of the dissertation committee, it was decided that it was necessary to restrict the focus of the study to the remaining three institutions, and so only they are presented and discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. These issues are addressed again in a self-reflective note at the end of this chapter.

In order to describe what I found, according to what was asked by the research questions, it was appropriate to firstly produce an overall description of the three institutions and the programs for contextualization purposes. Because of confidentiality reasons, and also because “case studies are here instrumental case studies and certain contexts maybe important but other contexts are of a little interest to the study” (Stake, 1995, p.64), the descriptions that follow in the next chapter are not meant to be complete. Instead, they focus on that data which was most pertinent to the goals of this study.
Furthermore, it was priority for me, whenever possible, to present direct quotations from the participants. As well established in qualitative studies, “a widely used method for describing themes is the presentation of direct quotes from respondents-quotes that lead the reader to understand quickly what it may have taken the researcher months or years to figure out. The researcher chooses segments of text-verbatim quotes from respondents –as exemplars of concepts, of theories, and of negative cases” (Ryan and Russell Bernard, 2000, p.784, cited in Denzin and Lincoln). Thus, in support of my analysis/interpretation, I reported the words of my participants as evidence for the investigation.

At the beginning of the next chapter, background information and data per each of the institutions are provided, followed by cross-case analysis guided by the study’s research questions. The final chapter then summaries and discusses the findings, reviews implications arising from them, and offers recommendations for future research.

**Self-reflection note**

In the process of conducting data collection and analysis, I encountered several difficulties unavoidable in conducting this kind of research. My role as the researcher and outsider entering the program settings was not experienced without obstacles, especially in relation to the analysis and assessment of each program. Although this investigation included an established methodology upon entering the sites and considerable efforts made to address validity issues and needs, I needed to operate on the terms of participants, programs, and institutions. This led to some unavoidable unevenness in terms of the amounts and kinds of data obtained. My original hope for the findings
chapter (Chapter 4) was to describe each situation in the same exact way. However, this proved to be impossible because of various factors beyond my control and ultimately inherent in the organization of the single programs. This aspect of the study was something I did not anticipate while designing it or fully recognize while the data was being gathered. Likewise, it was difficult to fully anticipate the professional and emotional attachment individuals held with respect to their programs and the concerns about participant and researcher bias this generated. It is apparent to me now, however, that the kind of study I conducted, while a valuable contribution to the field, is especially difficult to control, despite my thorough efforts to avoid the kinds of difficulties that later arose. This represents an important cautionary note for others who may choose to conduct such research.
CHAPTER 4

Results

Introduction

The first part of this chapter provides background data about and contextualizes the three Midwestern-based Italian undergraduate programs and their language instruction at the elementary level under investigation in this study. Each institution is presented separately and is identified by alphabetical letters. As well, for reasons of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used where indicated for participants who were interviewed. Each of these institutional sections includes factual information about each of the institutions, followed by presentation and analysis of different types of data: interview and questionnaire results, textbook analysis, and classroom observations. The second part of the chapter addresses the research questions and the results obtained through cross-case analysis by extrapolating and combining findings from all three institutions.

As a reminder, the findings focus only on matters related to the teaching of cultural competence, which is distinguished from cultural awareness as follows: Cultural Awareness: In this study it is intended as the condition of being conscious of cultural facts, products, events or patterns, and of knowing that they exist. Awareness does not necessarily imply understanding.
Cultural Competence: It is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with members of the target culture. As such, it involves more than mere possession of information about the target culture; instead, it includes an understanding of the way things are done (practices), and values and beliefs of people within that culture; it also implies an awareness of one’s own cultural viewpoint(s), and having a positive attitude, knowledge and skills necessary to successfully perform/communicate in the target culture.

Because the national foreign language standards call for the creation of cultural competence in foreign language learners and not simply cultural awareness, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which attempts are made in elementary level Italian courses to begin building cultural competence among students. This is constructed as a “developmental process” which calls for the teaching force and course designers to account for the acquisition of new cultural knowledge and ongoing evaluation of what is acquired and how it is acquired (adjusted from Diller and Moule, 2005).

Another key term in this section is the elementary level of the Italian undergraduate programs. In this study elementary level refers to the first course in the undergraduate course sequence, that is, what is commonly known as the 101 course. Data are presented and analyzed with respect to the ways and degree to which cultural competence was treated in the 101 course. It is also important to bear in mind the importance of the national standards for foreign language education, which, as noted earlier, place a strong emphasis on the development of cultural competence. A key component of this study is the extent of the alignment between the Italian programs at the elementary level and these
standards as they relate to cultural competence, particularly given the beginning level orientation of elementary level courses. A key question faced by foreign language teachers involved in elementary level teaching is the degree to which instruction at this level can and should account for cultural competence, as compared to higher level courses.

**Part One: Institutional Case Studies**

**Institution A**

*Overview*

Institution A was established in the mid-1800s and is among the premier public research universities in the United States. Indeed, it is ranked as the one of the ten best public universities in the nation. The university is composed of approximately 40,000 students, among whom 30,000 are undergraduates. Eighteen countries are represented by the student population beyond the fifty American states. The institution has over 150 undergraduate majors and more than 4,000 courses.

What the institution looks for in admitting new students is the following: High school coursework requirement (which consists of 2 years of a foreign language, among others), ACT or SAT I scores (critical reading and math), cumulative high school percentile ranking at the end of the junior year, and application essays (i.e. related to students’ academic interest, extracurricular activity). The academic calendar is comprised of two semesters, fall and spring, and two abbreviated summer sessions.
The Italian Undergraduate Program at Institution A

Questionnaire and Interview Data

The data for this study was collected during autumn of 2007, and the focus was on the Italian undergraduate program at the elementary level, first semester (Italian 101). During this semester, the enrollment at the elementary level consisted of 250 students. The data from the questionnaire revealed that the elementary level courses during fall of 2007 were mainly taught by graduate teaching assistants, where the female gender was equal in percentage to the male gender. The average age of the GTAs was mid-thirties, and the predominant ethnicity was white. In addition, the first language was Italian for 75% of the instructors, and their second language was English; 25% of instructors at the elementary levels held a Master Degree or a PhD in Italian. As reported by the participant, Mrs. White (a pseudonym is here used), instructors are not assessed for cultural competence in Italian, and the participant elaborated that instructors are either native speakers of Italian or graduate students in Italian, and so they are assumed to possess extensive cultural competence. In consideration of this pool of instructors (the academic year I was there was an exception because it is generally composed mainly of American native-English speaking graduate assistants), Mrs. White expressed the following regarding cultural competence: “All our instructors are either Italian natives or graduate students in Italian; therefore, they come with extensive cultural competence.” (Questionnaire 3, 10/30/2007) Mrs. White rated the cultural competence of the teaching force as excellent. At the departmental level, training designed and focused specifically on Italian culture and developing culture competence was not offered.
As explained by Mrs. White, although their definition of culture is inclusive of high C culture and small c culture, culture is not after all the main focus of teaching at the elementary level:

there is no official definition of culture...if I had to provide one based on what we are doing I would say that our definition of culture is really open and of course by culture we don't...we mean a variety of things going from ...you know...the arts and ...you know...the writers ...the official culture of Italy to the way of living of the regular people on the street so we are trying to provide a little bit at all levels...and of course at the elementary level is not that they can’t...it is at the intermediate level in which we really make it one of… if not the main goal of our teaching.

(Interview 3, 10/30/07).

The teaching of culture relies on the textbook used and the teaching force, who are invited to expand on Italian culture whenever possible. As Mrs. White explained both in the questionnaire and in the interview: “Our textbook, *Avanti!*, offers many opportunities for culture teaching while teaching the language. More specifically, each chapter has an *Ascoltiamo!* section, which is a lecture on aspects of Italian culture presented by the instructor as a listening activity, followed by a comprehension activity with comments by the students” (Questionnaire 3, 10/30/2007). In the interview she added that:

...we are mostly relying on *Avanti!*...and students read the culture sections of the textbook and then practice...and then they have assigned homework and which I do online...the manual that accompanies *Avanti!*...but …we are also trying to… insert culture in the teaching at any given time maybe it is not the main purpose of the
lesson that day but we are always open and perceptive to cultural
openings even if we are teaching structures for example there are opportunities to
start from the activity at hand and to expand it into cultural awareness that we want
to provide our students with. (Interview 3, 10/30/2007)

From the latter excerpt, it appears that culture awareness is the focus in the classroom.
Mrs. White, in explaining the importance on showing students that some of the previous
ideas that they had about Italy and Italians do not match reality at all, went on to say:

[…]I believe that putting an awareness in our students' mind that what they have
been thinking all along may not be true as a goal in itself that is worth promoting
and I think all our instructors are almost by instinct I would say being most of them
Italians they are trying to focus on that and to expand the students' awareness
and...if not competence...at least awareness in this area. (Interview 3, 10/30/07)

The situation regarding the presence of cultural awareness in this program was confirmed
by the assessment tools in use at the elementary level:

as far as the evaluations it occurs mostly in the chapter test and the chapter test
out of 20 points 5 points are culture related...it is a multiple choice format …
they are either testing the readings that the students did independently on
Avanti! in those culture paragraphs or they are testing their understanding of the
Ascoltiamo! the listening activity that they did...(Interview 3, 10/30/2007).

Chapter tests available in the instructor’s manual were used in this program to assess
students’ cultural understanding of facts (limited to the content appearing in the
textbook). No other formal written exams (such as midterm and final exam) were used.
The tests showed that one fourth of the total points are culture related (generally 5 points out a total of 20 points), and for the first four chapters the assessment is in English instead of Italian due to the readings being written in English. As reported by the participant, readings are usually assigned to be done at home and performed autonomously by students. A passive response consisting of students answering multiple choice questions related to Italian culture is preferred to an active type of response (such as writing an essay). Mrs. White acknowledged her concern regarding the language issue (passages appearing in English instead of Italian) and expressed the following during the interview:

I am glad that in the second edition the issuing edition… the culture paragraph will be in Italian...because I think that it will open the possibility of maybe doing that in the classroom and the class together...and therefore maybe making the assessment more meaningful of that portion...it is not something that they quickly read on their own but something that received attention in the classroom...the result of work done together with the instructor...so I think that will definitely be an improvement and...make the assessment probably more comprehensive not just something quick going through in few paragraphs. (Interview 3, 10/30/2007)

Other than discussing her hope for a more meaningful and comprehensive cultural assessment, Mrs. White added that the evaluation tools “can serve as an introduction to the much more intense cultural content presented at the intermediate level” (Italian 103 and Italian 104) (Questionnaire 3, 10/30/07). The cultural assessment and the evaluation tools currently used at the elementary level suggest that the ultimate goal is not to prepare
students to be culturally competent; instead, the emphasis is on developing cultural awareness, with the intention of bringing cultural competence into the learning process in later courses.

Regarding the program’s alignment with the National Standards (1999) for foreign language learning regarding culture, Mrs. White described the situation in these terms:

I think it is mostly aligned but it is truly a question that would be better directed to the authors of the textbook...because again when we decided to adopt this book we accepted and made ours the choices of the authors...so since we are not creating raw material but we are using Avanti as a package which includes these components... then...I think that...it is a choice that was made at a different level or a higher level....it is not something that we as a program have analyzed or questions that we have asked ourselves because they came...the answers already came with the textbook that we chose. (Interview 3, 10/30/07)

Mrs. White stressed that the program’s decisions for teaching culture are strongly dependent on the textbook’s content. The consideration of the National Standards (1999) is a lower priority for the program at the elementary level because this program is “mainly focused on the textbook and its underlying philosophy and methods” (Questionnaire 3, 10/30/07). In discussing how she felt about the practicability of the Standards, Mrs. White added that “they can be a good guide in defining the philosophy and the practical choices of an Italian language program and it depends on what you want to get out of them” (Questionnaire 3, 10/30/07).
Due to the strong dependency on the textbook, when Mrs. White was asked to provide examples of how the program at the elementary level attempts to incorporate the Standards into instructional activities, she provided her own point of view:

well I think the fact itself of having these periodical lectures on different aspects of Italian culture... by culture meaning the way Italians think...we have a lecture on the way Italians eat...il galateo...xxx...and on the other hand we also have lectures on the case di Pompei...how Romans had organized homes in Pompei...so the fact that we have such variety of cultural topics and they are on a regular basis presented to the class and offered to the students ....shows that there is a serious attempt to them...it is not explicitly incorporating standards but I believe to make culture a significant part of our teaching. (Interview 3, 10/30/07)

These comments suggest some sensitivity to cultural issues, with the standards playing more of a facilitative or background role as opposed to being a very direct force in course planning. Whether the kind of coverage Mrs. White described leads to the development of cultural competence is difficult to say, but it does appear that culture, more broadly defined, is assigned a role at the elementary level.

As Mrs. White’s comments make clear, the textbook played a crucial role in this program’s construct of culturally-based teaching. Thus, in the next subsection I provide information about the textbook used in the elementary level course. Here, in particular, I look at the textbook and its alignment with the National Standards (1999) regarding culture.
The description and analysis of the textbook which follows focuses mainly on culture treatment and its characteristics. Generally speaking, the textbook, *Avanti!*, is meaning-based, and it involves both comprehension and production activities. The textbook has a total of 16 chapters (the average length is 30 pages per chapter), which are covered in the first year of instruction (in the semester system, the textbook is entirely covered in two courses, Italian 101 and 102). Listed as the second characteristic which contributes to make this textbook different from other first-year Italian texts is that “*Avanti!* strives to satisfy students’ desire to communicate in everyday situations right from the start and to explore the rich and unique Italian culture in meaningful ways”; on the other hand, the first characteristic addresses the following practical objective: “In response to instructor’s concern that most textbooks attempt to cover too much material in the first year, we have designed an elementary course that reflects reasonable expectations for the amount of material that most beginning learners can acquire in one year of classroom instruction” (Preface, p. xvi).

Every chapter contains the following sections: Chapter opener (a photo or work of art suggests the theme chosen for the chapter), *Strategie di comunicazione*, *Lessico*, *Strutture*, and *Cultura*. In the first section, called *Strategie di comunicazione*, high-frequency or commonly used expressions are presented to students; students are exposed to Italian native-speakers and the use they make of those expressions in spontaneous speech through a video. *Lessico* is the section where vocabulary is presented in a contextualized manner, and *Strutture* introduces the grammatical structures. The textbook specifically seems to promote the teaching of culture in the last section of each chapter called *Cultura*.
which is subdivided into 5 sections: *Ascoltiamo!* (Let’s listen!), *Leggiamo!* (Let’s read!), *Scriviamo!* (Let’s write), *Parliamo!* (Let’s talk), and *Guardiamo!* (Let’s watch!). Of these five sections, three particularly focus on culture (*Ascoltiamo!, Leggiamo! and Guardiamo!*). The topic, in these three sections, mostly conforms with the main topic of the chapter. Students are exposed to mini-lectures done in Italian by the instructor on cultural aspects (such as gestures, last names, time for eating habits, family, table manners, music, fashion, and Italian holidays at the elementary level), and in *Leggiamo* they “read and respond to authentic texts that include literary excerpts, magazine ads and articles” (xxi). In addition, students can be exposed to movie-clips (the *Guardiamo!* section offers succinct information about movies and brief comprehension and expansion activities). Culture is also present in small boxes called ‘In Italia’ which are embedded throughout chapters and contain extra cultural information (written in English) related to chapter topic. In the same boxes it is often possible to find a feature called ‘Clicca qui’, which suggests to students to go online on the *Avanti!* Website to explore the cultural topics further.

Regarding the National Standards and their suggestions about culture, the Instructor’s Manual (p.6) concisely mentions one of them, and states that the textbook reflects the spirit of Standard 2.1, which states: “*Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied*”.

After discussing, as follows, what the Standards suggest at the very beginning stage of language instruction and learning, I use one chapter of the textbook (I selected the same topic in each text under analysis in the three programs) to examine its alignment with the Standards. The first standard stresses the importance for students to become
acquainted with practices of the target culture (more technically called patterns of social interactions) and understand as well the association that those practices have with the viewpoint(s) of the people (their attitudes, values, and traditions). Due to the association to be made, a certain degree of assistance and engagement from the teaching force is needed in approaching culture teaching in such a way that students should at least be exposed to and identify simple practices in various familiar settings (i.e. family, school, on the street...), be encouraged to use/reproduce those appropriate social interactions, and hopefully be able to simply discuss those practices in relation to values and attitudes. In addition students may be able to compare and contrast them (Examples for Italian may be formal greetings, gestures and manners, and games among many others usually available at the elementary level of textbooks). In other words, the general challenge textbooks face in the presentation of cultural topics is the way they are able to include and present viewpoint(s) in connection with practices and products, and to reflect as well Standard 2.2, which states: “Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and the perspectives of Italian culture.”

In Chapter 5 of Avanti!, taken as a sample and included at the 101 level, the cultural treatment revolves around food. Numerous opportunities throughout the chapter are available to the teaching force for the illustration of products at the elementary level and included in the sections called ‘In Italia’ (i.e. ‘La pizza napoletana’ p.138; ‘La pasta’ p.130) as much as in the Leggiamo! (‘La dieta mediterranea’ p. 147). The Ascoltiamo! dealing with Italian table manners offers the possibility here to introduce a practice, the way of behaving during a meal in social setting. Other possibilities to briefly touch upon practices are found in ‘In Italia’ boxes on p.128 and p.144. In a different way,
perspectives or viewpoint(s), in other words attitudes, values and beliefs Italian have about food and which are related to eating practices, are not directly found in the sections of this chapter. Looking at the cultural treatment in this chapter suggests that the alignment with the Standards may depend as much on the competency of the program itself as reflected through the teaching force’s ability to extrapolate, point out and introducing perspectives or viewpoint(s).

Syllabus and Classroom Observation Data

The syllabus for the 101 course indicated that culturally-based topics were specifically addressed and presented by instructors through the Ascoltiamo section eight times (once per chapter) throughout the semester (composed of a total of 16 weeks). It is during these eight times that cultural topics receive particular attention and are directly explained by the teaching force through lectures (in Italian). Leggiamo! and Guardiamo! appear the same amount of times in the daily syllabus, and they serve primarily to develop listening and reading skills, and putting language in a cultural context as suggested by the follow-up activities contained in the textbook. The overall examination of the 101 syllabus Italian program values the importance of cultural knowledge, but specific guidelines and/or structured rules to provide students (and instructors) at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication in Italian were not identified. In the goals and objectives’ section of the syllabus, reproduced below, the focus was primarily on developing linguistic skills:

[...] the first year of Italian study is designed to develop your ability to
communicate in Italian in everyday, practical situations. A second, and equally important, goal is the acquisition of the skills necessary to read effectively in Italian. The approach is comprehension-based; this means that initially you will be able to understand a great deal more than you can produce in Italian.

In order to look for the transmission of culture at the 101 level, two obtrusive observations were conducted in two different 101 classes (on 10/31/2007), the day scheduled for *Ascoltiamo!* (Chapter 6, topic: Music in Italy). The Italian 101 course met four days a week, and each class period was 50 minutes in length. In the first observation, the presentation of culture lasted approximately 10 minutes: Italian artists were presented (Jovanotti, Pavarotti & Zucchero, Pino Daniele), and the mini-lecture given on those singers and the type of music played by each of them focused on the content suggested in the script of the *Avanti!* Instructor’s manual (p.94). In addition, the cultural practice related to the way concerts are held in main squares of cities was briefly mentioned. In the second observation, the culture topic took most of the class time (approximately 35 minutes). The same artists were presented and music was played in class (one song for Jovanotti, one for Pavarotti & Zucchero, and one for Pino Daniele) with the use of a CD player. The fill in the gap activity following the *Ascoltiamo!* (the lecture given) was completed but not discussed or commented on. During this second observation, there was an attempt to describe ‘la serenata’, a cultural practice involving men singing a love song outside the house of women they intend to marry. In both the observations the target language was used during instruction.
On the whole, the two obtrusive classroom observations confirmed the importance given to culture teaching and the attempt made to introduce cultural practices related to music in Italy, rather than focusing strictly on products, such as songs. What seemed to be missing was an attempt to approach cultural perspectives related to music and alluded to in the Standards; that is, perspectives related to Italian music were not extrapolated and/or pointed out independently by the instructors. Music appeared to be presented more as matter of fact information, a product to be acquired rather than a practice to be understood in relation to viewpoint(s) of Italian people. The script contained in the Instructor’s manual reveals that, in the elementary classroom, cultural lectures contain samples of both high C and small c culture in relation to Italian music, as also confirmed by the lectures given in the two classes observed. This suggests that the textbook expects some elaboration on the part of teachers which supports the development of cultural competence.

Institution A Conclusion

In sum, the data gathered above revealed that culture was valued at the elementary level, but in the form of cultural awareness, not cultural competence, with the textbook expected to serve as the foundation from which culturally-based instruction was built. Thus, it appeared that at the elementary level, this program believed in providing students primarily with an introduction to cultural products, with a corresponding belief that cultural competence falls more in the domain of intermediate level courses. Specific guidelines and/or structured rules to provide students (and instructors) at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication in Italian were not detected in the syllabus. The evaluation tools used at the elementary level indicated that the
ultimate goal was not to assess cultural competence. There was, however, an attempt in them to assess cultural awareness.

Mrs. White expressed that although there is no definition of cultural competence provided by the program or its instructors at the elementary level, importance is given to it. Here follows her comment:

I would say a good deal of importance...we want to teach the language but we also want to...for students completing the beginning level we want them to have learnt something about Italy and Italians and to be...to know that there is a lot ...for their learning to do if they are interested in pursuing it (Interview 3, 10/30/07).

These comments suggest a developmental view for the elementary level course, one in which the creation of linguistic competence is of foremost importance, but this is not separated from cultural issues. The program considers it important for students to gain knowledge of Italian people and Italian culture, but at this initial stage linguistic knowledge and production are considered more essential.

**Institution B**

**Overview**

Institution B is one of the top three largest Catholic universities in the U.S. and was founded in the late 1800s. It is comprised of different campuses and study centers located abroad. *U.S. News and World Report* has ranked this institution among the top national universities. It has a general enrollment of over 15,000 students, and it offers over 70 undergraduate majors, 80 masters, and 30 doctoral degrees. Seventy-five percent
of its students are undergraduates, and the student population originates from all 50 states and 82 countries.

There are various admission recommendations made by this private institution to its applicants, including: 2 or more years of foreign language for the college preparatory curriculum in high school, a writing sample, counselor’s recommendation, active participation in student activities, high school grades, and standardized test scores. The freshman class entering in fall 2007 had 50% ACT ranges between 23-28 and an average GPA of 3.68. The academic calendar includes two semesters: fall and spring, and summer sessions.

**The Italian Undergraduate Program at Institution B**

*Questionnaire and Interview Data*

The data for this study was collected during the autumn semester of 2007, and the focus was on the Italian undergraduate program at the elementary level, first semester (Italian 101). During this semester the enrollment at the elementary level consisted of over 250 students. The data resulting from the questionnaire revealed that the elementary level courses offered during autumn of 2007 were mainly taught by part-time instructors. Among them, only the female gender was represented, the age varied from less than 30 years old to over fifty, and the predominant ethnicity was white. In addition, the first language was Italian for 50% of the instructors, and the other 50% had as their first language English or Spanish, or two other languages beyond English, Spanish, and French. For all the Italian native speaker instructors except one the second language was
English. Pertaining to the education of the instructors, the participant specified that at the elementary level, 25% of them held a Masters degree or Ph.D. degree. According to the participant, generally speaking in the hiring process it is important that instructors have knowledge of the Italian language and have language-teaching experience; cultural knowledge and cultural competence are not decisive factors. The participant rated the cultural competence for the teaching force during fall 2007 as excellent.

This undergraduate Italian program did not have a language director or coordinator position for the Italian undergraduate program during fall of 2007, and Dr. Brown (a pseudonym is here used), the department chair and person in charge of the Italian Studies section, offered to be my participant. As articulated by Dr. Brown: “culture is not necessarily considered in relation to notions of cultural competence, this is an underdeveloped area in our current program” (Questionnaire 4, 10/26/07). As appearing in the answer given in the questionnaire, instructors are not assessed for cultural competence in Italian, and at the departmental level, training designed and focused specifically on the teaching Italian culture and acquiring culture competence was not offered.

To the first question I posed, asking if there was a definition of culture promoted by the program at the elementary level, Dr. Brown offered the following response:

Hmm...I say that we understand...when we are interviewing teacher... right... and every time we talk about our program ...I think that our definition of culture is...the idea ...our idea of culture is that we want in all courses including Italian 101 to make sure our students understand certain products and basically we have always thought of it as making sure they see certain films generally recent films rather than...
older ones ...and songs or also occasionally literary works or things that would be like documents so ...or especially for 101 something like understanding the Sistine Chapel or regions ...but I think culture would be more the Italian culture as traditional culture because we are a literary department ...even mentioning Dante. I think that our definition of culture would be often high culture meaning Italian culture as the studying of Italian history and art ...(Interview 4, 10/26/07).

The promotion and transmission of culture means primarily teaching high C culture, and as stressed by Dr. Brown, because the language program is part of a literary department, the goal is preparing students within the framework of the liberal arts and architecture. More emphasis is given to Italian products related to high culture, such as literature, history and art, as further pointed out by Dr. Brown: “...we teach and we encourage teachers to teach through Dante, or architecture, sculpture…”(Interview 4, 10/26/07).

Dr. Brown explained that importance is given to culture teaching at the elementary level and suggested the following:

I would say that we emphasize that it is important... and we urge that professors try to consider culture...both high c and small c as much as possible...but sometimes we do not have much time to discuss it ...the main discussion is left up to the individual instructors to determine how they will work it into their lesson... and of course every instructor has to cover what's in the book ...and we tell our instructors to have personal projects that will allow presentations of culture such as presentations on an artist, regions, going to see a recent film and giving reports
in English or Italian so...if you look at that… we emphasize culture...we emphasize it as important...(Interview 4, 10/26/07).

In the classroom practice, culture transmission receives less attention compared to the teaching of linguistic aspects of the target language, and the following reasons emerged as explanations for this:

1. Lack of time in the classroom to dedicate to culture (classes meet 3 times a week for 50 minutes)
2. Although encouraged to have personal projects on culture, instructors decide independently about their teaching and the emphasis given to culture. Instructors are also not required by the department or program to follow a precise teaching method or approach.
3. Culture is in the end defined by the textbook used. Brief cultural notes and readings written mostly in English for the elementary level are the main source for conveying culture knowledge.
4. The undergraduate program is in a restructuring phase.

(Facts extrapolated from Interview 4, 10/26/07)

In other words, because of the priority given to the linguistic aspects of the language, time issues, and the textbook choices and organization, culture treatment is left to the discretion of instructors. With regard to the priority given to grammar, Dr. Brown pointed out that it could not have been otherwise because it came with the choice of the textbook adopted:

...in other words it wouldn't necessarily be that an instructor said I have got to teach culture or that the cultural aspect is going to be the main topic in every lesson and
we would object that...but I think that when you make choices like [name removed]...even if you look at other books ...I think if you cover those kind of books...you need different kind of books and different kind of exercises to do that so...what I can say is that I think that culture is defined by the book we use...

(Interview 4, 10/26/07)

Other than underlying the fact that culture teaching is connected to the textbook used, interestingly, Dr. Brown stressed that there is not really an understanding of cultural competence at the elementary level from the program’s perspective, and his concerns about this matter are reflected in the comments below:

I do not think so...If you look at our classes and see whether ...we keep telling questions where you have to understand what to appropriately say in a situation...you know when walking to a certain place...ciao come stai and using the proper form...or even say if you are using the correct form when requesting a cappuccino...in all the situations we set up ...cultural competence is important because ...just the way we teach but...we don’t ...we really don't have an understanding of it...and that's why it is very interesting what you are doing...I think we should ... (Interview 4, 10/26/07)

It appears, then, that culture was incorporated into the elementary courses, but because it was not treated systematically, the effectiveness of efforts to expand upon and transmit culturally related matters was difficult to ascertain. Ultimately, though, the program apparently does attempt to account for it. Regarding the instructors’ teaching differences and the importance of culture at the elementary level, Dr. Brown explained that:
...as I said if there is a teacher who is very linguistic I don't think that it will be very important for the teacher because that teacher will make references to Italian culture but the course is about making sure you acquire the linguistic features ...it really depends on how the teacher uses the language...and I think that there are teachers who are grammar oriented and they say although they are wrong that the culture is out there...that if you talk to people you spoil the culture... xxx...so the idea is that in theory yes in practice ...hum um...it is left up to the discretion of the instructor...it is certainly there in the way we teach and the material that we use...(Interview 4, 10/26/07).

The cultural situation suggested by Dr. Brown within this program was further analyzed through the assessment tools and their criteria found at the elementary level. These tools were created by one professor teaching at the 101 level, who offered to provide me with what was available. While the first four quizzes did not assess culture, quiz five, the midterm, and the final exam dedicated slightly more than 10% of their total points to culturally-related items. In quiz five and the midterm exam, culture was embedded in readings where true/false questions on geographical facts (about Italy in general or related to an Italian city) were proposed for assessment. Quiz five contained a brief reading comprehension task on “Le bici in Italia” (Bikes in Italy) where students answered 2 out of 3 questions in English, and a mini-section of true/false questions (3) on the geography of two Italian regions; a similar situation was found for the midterm, where a reading comprehension task on the geography of a city and a section with general statements about the geography of Italy required true/false answers in Italian. In
the final exam, two sections were related to culture: one section contained culture incorporated in reading comprehension (about what Italian eat and drink) with true/false questions in English and Italian, and the other section specifically entitled “cultural awareness” included true/false questions related to discrete geographical information. The rationale behind the assessment tools used was that vocabulary, grammatical structures, and reading skills were the main focus at the elementary level. Culture awareness was present and culture was taken into consideration in some of the evaluations, but the approach used suggested that the ultimate goal was not to prepare students to be culturally competent. Commenting on how the evaluation tools assessed students’ knowledge of Italian culture, Dr. Brown explained that “the assessment on culture is not done systematically” (Interview 4, 10/26/07), and the reasons why, which strongly depend on the structure of the program, are highlighted in the following interview excerpt:

[...] if you posit the idea of a student taking the course and getting an A with no reflection on culture is certainly possible…even with certain teachers that emphasize it …because the way our program is and the testing is …it is all inspirational invitational it is there but …that’s why it is important what you are doing and I think it is interesting to look at this aspect…I think it is done indirectly especially with some of the most interesting things…again thinking that the evaluation is not only quizzes…you know midterms, finals, all presentations in class, compositions that people would do, things that students are doing on blackboard, activities where they have to imagine to be immersed in the
culture…so we want to make those more important in lot of different ways…I think it is important to study those Standards and yeah looking at the Standards too…there are some problems that are hard to and they take a lot of time to that’s another thing too …that our current structure isn’t great… (Interview 4, 10/26/07)

In the end, from the questionnaire and interview data, it appeared that the curriculum was not aligned with the National Standards (1999) regarding culture. In this regard, Dr. Brown shared the following observations when answering if the curriculum was aligned with the Standards regarding culture:

No I don't think so... it is all inspiring...that's why this is so interesting ...I don't think so...we try to align with the other language skills but not culture and those skills are problematic because we are not able to touch questioning or speaking too much ...yeah so...we know the problem with culture but we our teachers want to try to get that grammar to speak so more kind of speaking skills... so speaking skills may be what we try to align with the most and the other ones such as...the thing is that reading I think is tricky ...I think that just because for practical reasons we are not necessarily great in looking at their sense and applying them...I would say that we try to grasp the sense of speaking skills so we try to get them in some situations trying to do an activity or answering some questions....we try to align with other skills but with culture the answer is not.(Interview 4, 10/26/07).

In sum, there was an effort to try to align the curriculum at the elementary level with the four language skills, especially speaking and reading skills, which was considered by the participant to be challenging, but pertaining to culture the effort appeared to be minimal at best. Because of the particular situation encountered at this program, for example with
the teaching force operating independently, ultimately the transmission of culture is mostly defined by the textbook used. Thus, in the next subsection I provide information about the textbook used in the elementary level course. Here, in particular, I look at the textbook and its alignment with the National Standards (1999) regarding culture.

**Textbook Data**

The description and analysis of the textbook which follows focuses mainly on the treatment of culture and its characteristics. The textbook, *Prego!*, in its 7th Edition, emphasizes the four skills approach to language teaching; it is comprised of 18 chapters (the average length is 15-20 pages per chapter). The preliminary chapter and the first 6 chapters are covered in the 101 course. The entire textbook is covered in 3 semesters of (meaning Italian 101, 102, 103). Chapters are organized around themes whose vocabulary is presented at the beginning, featuring a list of words and expressions that are used in a short dialogue, called *Dialogo lampo*. Each chapter is comprised of five sections: *Vocabolario preliminare* (preliminary vocabulary), *Grammatica* (grammar), *Piccolo ripasso* (brief review), *Invito alla lettura* (invitation to reading), *Videoteca* (video section), and *Parole da ricordare* (words to remember). *Vocabolario preliminare* introduces the thematic vocabulary for the activities found in the whole chapter.

*Grammatica* is the section where grammar points are presented. *Piccolo ripasso* contains exercises to review vocabulary and grammatical structures. *Invito alla lettura* pertains to the reading section of the chapter; as specified by the authors, it “explores the chapter’s theme in the context of the regions of Italy” (xviii), and it is followed by a comprehension activity. The video section proposes video segments (made and shot for
the textbook) and pre- and post-view activities which follow a story of two individuals in Italy. Regarding cultural treatment, each Grammatica section contains a cultural information box called Nota culturale that is related to the theme of the chapter (in English through chapter 5; in Italian only beginning with Chapter 6). These cultural readings at the elementary level include topics such as titles (the equivalent in Italian of Mr., Mrs., Miss, etc.), Italian words used in English, searching for the right word, the school system, university, sports in Italy, coffee shops, meals, etc. Follow-up activities related to these cultural boxes are not found. More brief cultural descriptions are included in Curiosità (which for the first six chapters include the following topics: ATM machines and Internet cafès, the Italian flag, an old university, ‘Il Giro d’Italia’ and ‘La Gazzetta dello Sport’, the cocktail, and parmesan cheese), a box found at the end of the Invito alla lettura section. Additional features are the Flash culturali, cultural pages (2) appearing after Chapter 4 (for the elementary level), include four brief readings which deal with Italian society, and introduce students to people, products, places and events (xvii-xxi).

In relation to the two Standards (2.1 and 2.2) regarding culture, in the instructor’s edition of the textbook a reference to them was not found. After discussing, as follows, what those Standards suggest at the very beginning stage of language instruction and learning, I use as one chapter of the textbook (I selected the same topic in each text under analysis in the three programs) to explore its alignment with the Standards.

As previously explained, this first standard states that: “Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.” Thus, it stresses the importance for students to become acquainted with practices of the target culture (more technically called patterns of social interactions) and
understand as well the association that those practices have with the viewpoint(s) of the people (their attitudes, values, and traditions). According to the first standard, students should at least be exposed to and identify simple practices in various familiar settings (i.e. family, school, on the street…), be encouraged to use/reproduce those appropriate social interactions that are culturally relevant to the target language, and hopefully be able to simply discuss those practices in relation to values and attitudes and compare and contrast them (examples for Italian may be formal greetings, gestures and manners, and games among many others usually available at the elementary level of textbooks).

The general challenge textbooks seem to face in the presentation of cultural topics at the elementary level is the way they are able to include and present viewpoint(s) in connection with practices and products, and reflect as well the second Standard, which states: “Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and the perspectives of Italian culture”. Due to the association(s) to be made, a certain degree of assistance and engagement from the teaching force may be needed in approaching culture teaching in a way that those associations are pointed out and recognized at the elementary level.

In Chapter 6 of Prego!, included at the 101 level, the cultural treatment revolves around food. There are opportunities in this chapter available to the teaching force for the illustration of cultural products at the elementary level. These opportunities are included in the sections called Nota culturale, which focuses on what Italians eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner, in Curiosità with the history of parmesan cheese, or in Invito alla lettura, where products of the region Emilia-Romagna are present in the reading. The Nota culturale, illustrating what takes place in Italian meals and at what time they usually
happen, offers the possibility for the teaching force to expand upon and introduce eating practice(s) (i.e. where they eat, the family eats together usually at dinner time, etc…). In a different way, perspectives or viewpoint(s), in other words attitudes, values and beliefs Italians have about food and which are related to eating practices, are not directly found in the sections of this chapter. Looking at the treatment of culture in this chapter suggests that the alignment with the Standards may depend as much on the competency of the teaching force in extrapolating, pointing out and introducing practices, perspectives or viewpoint(s).

Syllabus and Classroom Observation Data

From the overall examination of the of the available 101 ‘standard’ syllabus (which instructors are not obligated to follow or adopt), it appeared that the Italian program recognizes the importance of culture, but specific guidelines and/or structured rules to provide students (and instructors) at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication in Italian were not identified. The course description, which appears below, suggested that the focus was primarily to develop linguistic skills:

First year Italian language courses are designed to help beginning students obtain functional and basic competency in speaking, reading, writing and listening in Italian. This course promotes the acquisition of language skills in everyday communication as well as the understanding of target language and behavior in relation to distinctive social and cultural norms.

The place of culture is reflected in the following sentence found in the course objectives and listed after the explanation given for speaking, listening, reading and writing skills:
By the end of Italian 101, students will be able to understand common cultural facts with a broader awareness of the cultural relativity of values, gestures, notions.

The available ‘standard’ syllabus showed that a new cultural topic was to be found every 2 weeks throughout the 15 week semester (with classes meeting 3 times a week for 50 minutes), but there was not a specific assigned day when the cultural topic appeared to be treated in the classroom. The syllabus did specify which chapter was covered on a biweekly basis, as well as the general objectives expected to be met, but and it did not specify daily content to be covered in class. In a document provided to me which pertained to the general content of the fifteen weeks of Italian 101, extra material to be used in class and related to the textbook’s cultural themes (such as video, audio, songs, movie clips), was listed as “work in progress”. This material (not part of the textbook) was intended to be slowly integrated in the elementary classrooms. This document suggested that some changes related to the importance of culture were gradually being developed.

In order to attempt to look at the transmission of culture at the 101 level in this program, three obtrusive observations were conducted in three different classes (the first two on 10/24/2007, and the last one on 10/25/2007). According to the syllabus and textbook, sports in Italy (Chapter 4) was the expected cultural focus during the days of my visit and observations. In the first class observed (on 10/24/2007), the instructor used music (the text of a song by A Branduardi) as a tool to review verbs; no cultural elements were explained directly, and the entire lesson appeared to concentrate on a review of
Some cultural traits appearing in grammar exercises were not pointed out by the instructor. This first observation found the target language was used during the instruction. In the second class observed (on 10/24/2007), the cultural presentation was about music (Paolo Conte). Here the topic was discussed for 30 minutes and music was played with a CD player; in addition, the instructor briefly mentioned certain practices related to everyday life (i.e. superstition, holiday, store receipts) through the correction of a grammar exercise. Here both the target language and English were found to be used. In the last class observed (on 10/25/2007), the entire class period was dedicated to grammar review and instruction.

From the obtrusive observations it appeared that in practice the treatment of culture varied substantially among the instructors, who are free to decide about the emphasis given to culture and when to include cultural illustration(s) in the classroom. While in one observation a cultural product (in this case music) was taken into consideration by the instructor, who also attempted the description of practices non-textbook related extrapolating cultural aspects from a grammar exercises, in two of the observations a strong emphasis was given to the grammatical side of the target language.

**Institution B conclusion**

At the time the data was gathered, when the linguistic side of the language was emphasized, culture was present in the elementary classroom to the extent of treatment provided in the textbook and in the ways preferred by the individual teachers. Primarily, this program provided students at the elementary level with basic competency in the four
language skills, and basic knowledge of cultural facts related to topics found in the
textbook and/or of choice of instructors.

Culture was incorporated into the elementary courses, but because it was not
treated systematically, the effectiveness of efforts to expand upon and transmit culturally
related matters was difficult to ascertain. Ultimately, though, the program apparently does
attempt to account for it. The program appeared to provide students with cultural
illustration of facts, and an element of basic cultural awareness was present to varying
degrees. The textbook and the classroom observations suggested that while attention was
given to cultural products, less or no attention was dedicated to practices and perspectives
related to Italian culture.

Culture is considered by Dr. Brown an underdeveloped area in this program. The
program does not offer specific guidelines and/or structured rules to provide students at
the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication in Italian,
and an understanding of what cultural competence is and means at the elementary level
from the perspective of the program is missing. Furthermore, instructors are not assessed
for cultural competence in Italian.

The rationale behind the assessment tools used was that vocabulary, grammatical
structures, and reading skills were the main focus at the elementary level. Culture
awareness was present and culture was taken into consideration in some of the evaluation
measures used, but the approach used suggested that the ultimate goal was not to prepare
students to be culturally competent. In the end, while there was an effort to try to align
the curriculum at the elementary level with the four language skills, especially speaking and reading skills, the effort to align with the standards was minimal at best pertaining to culture.

Institution C

Overview

Institution C is one of the oldest universities in the U.S. This university was founded in the late 1700s, and it now offers 100 undergraduate-level degree options in over 10 different colleges and more than 2,000 courses. Looking at the general enrollment during autumn of 2007, it consisted of a little less than 30,000 students, and the College of Arts and Sciences (which housed the Italian Department) had the most undergraduates among all of the university’s colleges. The undergraduates came mainly from the same state where the institution is located; only 1/5 of the students represented other states, and a small minority were international students, representing approximately 100 countries.

What this institution looks for in admitting new students is the following: the official high school transcript, the performance on the ACT or SAT I, and supplemental material consisting of an essay and a letter of recommendation. The calendar at this institution shows the following terms: fall, spring, and summer.
The Italian undergraduate program at Institution C

Questionnaire and Interview Data

The data for this study was collected during spring of 2008, and the focus was on the Italian undergraduate program at the elementary level, first semester (Italian 1). During this semester the enrollment at the elementary level consisted of 140 students. The data resulting from the questionnaire revealed that the elementary level courses during spring of 2008 were mainly taught by graduate teaching associates, where the male gender almost equalized the female gender in percentage, the average age for 75% of the teaching individuals was less than 30 years, and the predominant ethnicity was white. In addition, the first language was English for 75% of the instructors, and their second language was Italian or French. Regarding the education of the teaching force at the elementary level, 25% of them held a Masters degree in Italian. According to what was reported by the participant, in the GTA selection process, the “previous course work and study abroad experience are closely considered,” while for lecturers, both a Masters in Italian and/or post graduate study in Italian or education and previous language teaching experience are required. Instructors are not specifically assessed for cultural competence in Italian, and the department does not offer any mandatory training specifically for teaching culture and/or acquiring culture competence. However, as reported by the participant, the program does ensure that instructors are knowledgeable about contemporary communicative teaching methodologies and the ACTFL standards, including those concerning culture. Ms. Green (a pseudonym is used here) rated the cultural competence of the teaching force during spring of 2008 as very good.
Culture teaching is an element taken into high consideration at the elementary level, although there is not a concrete definition of culture to be found in any of the written documents belonging to the program. Ms. Green emphasized that in her opinion, the elementary and intermediate levels reflect a definition consisting of artifacts, practices, and points of view, but in the end culture is mostly defined by the instructors teaching at the elementary level at their discretion. (Interview 5, 3/20/2008). How much importance is given by those instructors to culture teaching is ultimately very difficult to quantify, as Ms. Green revealed:

yes Italian 001...I think it is hard to put a quantitative number on it...quantitatively it is very difficult...I do not want to give our TAs a certain percentage of time, for example saying ...ok 25% of your lesson should be cultural content...and that's simply because each lesson, day to day, will vary greatly depending on the objective of the lesson or the content or the function so ...if quantitatively they are spending 5 minutes on culture everyday I am not sure how that looks, and it is probably something we'd like to work on in the future...really defining that and clarifying what we expect in the classroom.. (Interview 5, 3/20/2008).

However, the program stresses the importance of having a cultural component in every lesson. This importance is emphasized through the methodology course taken by every teaching associate during the first semester in the Masters program, looking at the actual Standards, in part discussed during mini-workshops offered in the orientation week, and the suggestions for lesson planning given by Ms. Green, the coordinator. Whether it is
high C culture or small c culture, the program encourages instructors to employ cultural content in the lessons. About 80% of the time this happens via the use of authentic materials (realia) and 20% through an implicitly culture-oriented content lesson (Questionnaire 5, 3/20/2008). The attention given to culture is also confirmed by the evaluation grid used by Ms. Green to assess instructors during observations. In regards specifically to culture, the scope is “to determine if the content of the lesson is culturally relevant and then discuss it in follow-up meetings” (Questionnaire 5, 3/20/2008).

At the same time, it appears to be difficult to say if culture receives the same amount of attention and/or time in a lesson as, say, grammar or reading do. As Ms. Green observed on this point: “I think that it would be really very difficult for our beginning instructors for example to try to incorporate culture in most part of the lesson or giving as much time as to the condizionale...” [smile] (Interview 5. 3/20/2008). In other words, at the elementary level grammar ends up receiving more attention in the classroom compared to culture.

Beyond the limited experience of beginning instructors who also possess different native cultures (i.e., non-Italian) background, cultural teaching is linked to the following factors:

Lessons are conducted in the target language (Italian).

The daily syllabus is left to the discretion of individual instructors.

Time availability.

Quantity of material to be covered in one unit.

(Extrapolated from Interview 5, 3/20/2008).
The teaching of culture relies mainly on the choices made daily by instructors, and cultural awareness is what appears in their elementary level classrooms, as Ms. Green explained: “Cultural awareness...yes we are always at the xxx point where we think about cultural awareness first...especially at the elementary level because we try to keep everything in the target language so we don't really come to appreciate the nuances of culture...” (Interview 5. 3/20/2008). In the end, the presentation of culture appears to be limited because of the use of the target language in the classroom. That is, given that students are at the beginning level, this restricts what they are able to understand, thereby making it difficult to focus on deeply cultural issues.

All points considered, this Italian program appeared to not formally operationalize cultural competence at the elementary level. According to Ms. Grace, “cultural competency is something that is more developed in an intermediate or advanced level,” and that at the elementary level it “is very hard to define what cultural competence looks like other than a beginning knowledge of Italian culture” (Interview 5, 3/20/2008). The elementary level generally provided students with a presentation of cultural products and practices (when themes such as school life or wedding preparation permitted so) taken from the textbook, and cultural awareness was indeed observable. Ms. Green added that at the instructor level there is not a good understanding of what cultural competence means in practice, and about the complexity of this issue she expressed the following comments:

...but even at the instructor level that's not very good of what cultural competence is, and meaning and defining that as… again you know… in this sense of the actual standards, or practices and perspectives and realia, so using material and things like
that...we try to keep things as authentic as possible because we aim to adopt
immersion like setting, you know, speaking in the target language from the first
day and so we try do that ...it is difficult xxx but we try to do the best we can...and
it is not too difficult or impossible to find resources that help with that...(Interview
5, 3/20/2008)

Cultural competence is not systematically considered or assessed at the elementary level.
However, the program, during spring of 2008, was found to be working on a new mission
statement, and Ms. Green emphasized that in a globalized multicultural society, where
culture is considered a hot topic, there is a need to look at the national level at how to
develop a better understanding of what culture means in the classroom (Interview 5,
3/20/2008).

The evaluation tools used at the elementary level (written and oral exams, quizzes,
projects) generally contained the assessment of the following elements: organization,
grammar, vocabulary, task completion, spelling, comprehensibility, and content and
creativity (as specified in the rubrics). Culture was not found as a component for
assessment in quizzes, written or oral exams, and final exam. In one rubric, for the
written projects (called ‘Progetti’), cultural material, although not specified or listed, was
expected to be included by students. As pointed out by Ms. Green: “The portfolio-style
projects that we use, are a space where students can reflect on culture in a contextualized
setting” (Questionnaire 5, 3/20/2008). For example, the cultural aspects included in the
‘Progetti’ may consist of: the form and look of an Italian city, traditional Italian cooking,
and the differences between American, Italian American, and Italian cuisine. Ms. Green,
elaborating on the situation regarding cultural competence and assessment, shared the following observation:

Hmm...our formal written oral and final exams... there is not an explicit space where they are assessed for cultural competence... if we ask our students to write about a topic they should have...we would expect some kind of cultural information but then… it is something in our rubric for example...the one place where you do find an evaluation specifically looking at culture as a component of the rubric or as a component of the guidelines is the portfolio based what we call progetti so the portfolio based process is something where they produce out of a presentation or paper in which there is some kind of cultural material that's also being assessed so for example we have them design an ideal house which should take the form of an Italian house ...then for example for the progetto is in the form of a recipe and recipe presentation that also has to be culturally specific ...so it should be an Italian food product with Italian ingredients of course all the target language there and it should even take the form of grammar so the grammar use in explaining around the things...and I believe that's cultural too what kind of language you do use...but on exams quizzes the more traditional method of assessment it is really not assessed in a formal way (Interview 5, 3/20/2008).

The participant expressed as well her optimism and strong hope for future developments regarding what cultural competency is, how to define it, and what to expect from students in this regard (Interview 5, 3/20/2008).
Ultimately, this program was reported by the participant to use the Standards in the creation of the curriculum and in the assessment of students and the courses themselves, but specifically regarding culture the situation appeared complex. For general guidance on the treatment of culture, the program seemed to be mostly aligned with the National Standards (1999), but Ms. Green asserted that the Standards seem to be generic and not very clear in giving directions for transmitting cultural knowledge or competence:

I think it is to the extent where the National Standards give guidance or guidelines on culture yes … because I think that the National Standards for example are somewhat more there are a little bit more vague with how to define what is culture how culture is used in the classroom … so as far as the National Standards it is hard to say if absolutely we are aligned with the National Standards but as far as they can take us … so I don't think that they can take us much more than students having a beginning appreciation of Italian culture but then how is that defined… that's little bit more hard to say… but at the elementary level it is very hard to pinpoint exactly what our… what is cultural competence and even the Standards don't really reflect that so we don't reflect the clarity of what that means so… (Interview 5, 3/20/2008).

In discussing how she felt about the practicality of the Standards, Ms. Green said that “they are readily adaptable to any program that has considered their objectives “ (Questionnaire 5, 3/20/2008). However, with regards to culture, she added that for the elementary level, the program interpreted the Standards as mostly focusing on looking at specific products (Interview 5, 3/20/2008). The illustration in the elementary classroom,
especially concerning practices and perspectives, remains problematic because it depends entirely on instructors and how knowledgeable they are about Italy and Italian culture. As Ms. Green explained:

I feel that the perspectives and practices that are demonstrated in the classroom depend largely on the instructor and their “relationship with Italy. It would be difficult to impose a way of looking or analyzing a culture since each person comes from a very different background. I advise our instructors to use cultural comparisons as a departure point… (Questionnaire 5, 3/20/2008)

Textbook Data

The description and analysis of the textbook which follows is mainly based on the treatment of culture and its characteristics. The textbook, _Parliamo Italiano!,_ encourages the learning of five core language skills by pairing cultural themes with essential grammar points. It is comprised of 12 units (the average length is 30-35 pages per chapter) in addition to the preliminary chapter. The entire textbook is covered in 2 semesters. Each unit starts with the _Unit Opener,_ and it is divided into the following content areas: _Si dice così, Incontro, In altre parole, Punti grammaticali, Lo sapevi che...?_ Units end with a section called _Immagini and parole._

The _Unit opener_ contains a photograph which introduces the thematic and cultural focus of the unit content, and a list of the communicative goals for the unit. _Si dice così_ consists of a thematic presentation of vocabulary followed by activities. In _Incontro,_ a conversation with contextualized vocabulary is presented. _In altre parole_ pertains to boxes which list frequently used and up-to-date idioms and expressions. _Punti_
grammaticali presents grammar points and a variety of activities for practice. Culture is embedded throughout the units, but it is most in evidence in Lo sapevi che...? in the form of cultural notes which supply information on concepts found in the units. Each unit ends with Immagine e parole containing a prose passage, where additional cultural information is available to students as well as realia, and magazine and newspaper articles among other features and activities. The following cultural topics are presented at the elementary level and embedded in the first five units: geography and cities, school life, family, houses and structures, shopping, food and places where to eat, spare time and sports (IAE 6-13.)

The following comments about culture and its treatment appear in the instructor’s guide:

…themes of Italian culture are strategically paired with essential points of grammar and units are organized around situations, functions, and regions, reflecting the text’s communicative stance and its culture-centered approach to the teaching of Italian

Culture notes prompt students to reflect on cultural differences and comparisons, stimulating their critical thinking process. Because language is culture and culture is language, learning a new language opens the door to a new way of thinking and of perceiving the world. When we discover more about others, we truly discover more about ourselves (IAE 6-7).
Interestingly, in the instructor’s guide, under the category of philosophy and approach, cultural competency is mentioned as the fifth skill students achieve:

One of the goals of Parliamo Italiano! is to develop concurrently a fifth skill we want our students to achieve: cultural competency. It is important to articulate this as one of the goals of language teaching and to assess cultural competency along with the other four skills, instead of taking for granted that students assimilate cultural information while practicing vocabulary or grammatical constructions. By using a contextualized approach, worlds of information about the culture of the target language can be imparted (IAE 6).

In relation to the two Standards (2.1 and 2.2) regarding culture, in the instructor’s annotated edition of the textbook a reference to them was not found. After reiterating here (as done with the previous programs) what those Standards suggest at the very beginning stage of language instruction and learning, I use one chapter of the textbook to explore its alignment with the Standards.

This first standard, which states that: “Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied”, stresses the importance for students to become acquainted with practices of the target culture (more technically called patterns of social interactions) and understand as well the association that those practices have with the viewpoint(s) of the people (their attitudes, values, and traditions). Students should at least be exposed to and identify simple practices in various familiar settings (i.e. family, school, on the street…), be encouraged to use/reproduce those appropriate social interactions culturally relevant to the target language, and
hopefully be able to simply discuss those practices in relation to values and attitudes and compare and contrast them (Examples for Italian may be formal greetings, gestures and manners, and games among many others usually available at the elementary level of textbooks). The general challenge textbooks seem to face in the presentation of cultural topics at the elementary level is the way they are able to include and present viewpoint(s) in connection with practices and products, and reflect as well the second Standard, which states: “Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and the perspectives of Italian culture”. Due to the association(s) to be made, a certain degree of assistance and engagement from the teaching force may be needed in approaching culture teaching in a way that those associations are pointed out and recognized at the elementary level.

In Unit 5 of Parliamo Italiano!, included at the elementary level, the cultural treatment revolves around food. There are many opportunities in this chapter available to the teaching force for the illustration of cultural products and included in the cultural notes called Lo sapevi che...? found throughout the chapter and covering the following topics: the ‘Bar’ in Italy, Liguria and places in this region, Italian meals, eating places and characteristics, the ‘pesto’ sauce, wine, cheeses, Italian dishes, etc. In addition, the section at the end of the chapter, Immagini and parole, provides other possibilities for description of products with content such as Italian cooking, ingredients, and a recipe. The unit offers the possibility for the teaching force to expand upon and introduce eating practice(s). For example the practices of drinking wine and ordering at the ‘bar’ are introduced in this unit. However, perspectives or viewpoint(s), in other words attitudes, values and beliefs Italians have about food and which are related to eating practices, are
not directly found in the sections of this chapter. It can be said that the alignment with the Standards, in the case of what culturally emerges in this chapter, may be dependent on the competency of the teaching force in extrapolating, pointing out and introducing practices and especially perspectives or viewpoint(s).

*Syllabus and Classroom Observation Data*

The syllabus and the approach to teaching mentioned in it were found to be in alignment with the philosophy and approach used in the textbook adopted by this program. The course objectives at the elementary level listed firstly the importance of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, though it is important to remember that the textbook did identify cultural competence as a fifth skill. The emphasis given to culture was detectable from the following content which appeared in different sections of the syllabus:

- We want to develop to the greatest possible extent a competency in comprehending and producing both spoken and written Italian, as well as socio-cultural competency in communicating with people who speak it.

- Begin to develop an awareness of Italian culture.

- Our approach is also integrated in the sense that language and culture are not treated as separate but inter-related: You are learning about Italian culture not only when you listen to a song or analyze a cultural document but also when you and your instructor use the language itself which is social and cultural tool.
It appeared that the Italian program values the importance of culture, especially looking at the objectives and the description of the approach to teaching and learning found in the syllabus; in regards to specific guidelines and/or structured rules to provide students (and instructors) at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication in Italian, they were not identified.

To examine the transmission of culture at the elementary level, two obtrusive observations were conducted (the first one on 3/20/2008, and the second one on 3/21/2008) in two different Italian I classes. The Italian I courses met five days a week, and each class period was 50 minutes in length. The general program in the syllabus specified that Unit 4 was covered on those days; the daily syllabus was left to the discretion of single instructors, so there was not a specific day when a cultural topic was scheduled to be treated in the classroom. The syllabus did specify the start dates for units and exams and projects. In the first observation (on 3/20/2008), the lesson consisted of introducing and practicing grammatical points included in Unit 4, and no direct or indirect explanation of cultural aspects was present that day. In the second observation (on 3/21/2008), culture was directly presented, and the presentation lasted about 25 minutes. The topic was the Easter holiday. Through a PowerPoint presentation (and exposure to authentic material, in this case photographs), the instructor illustrated in the classroom a topic of her choice which did not appear in the assigned unit of the textbook. The presentation consisted of illustrating products, and introducing practices and perspectives related to the Easter tradition(s) found in the U.S. and Italy in addition to briefly commenting on the Greek-Orthodox tradition. In both classes the target language was used for instruction. From those obtrusive observations it appeared that in practice
the treatment of culture may have varied substantially among the instructors, who are free to decide about the emphasis given to culture and when to include cultural illustration(s) in the classroom. However, because it was not possible to ensure scheduling of observations on days when culture was certain to be treated, it was difficult to determine just how individual instructors handled culture, and only two instructors were observed. Still, variation was observed in these two class sessions.

**Institution C conclusion**

In sum, the data gathered above revealed that culture is an element taken into high consideration at the elementary level in this program. Cultural awareness appears to play an important role, with the textbook serving as the foundation from which culturally-based instruction was built. The teaching of culture relies mainly on the choices made daily by instructors, but how much importance is given by those instructors to culture teaching is ultimately very difficult to quantify. Cultural competence, in its early developmental stage, appeared to not be systematically or formally operationalized or assessed by this program at the elementary level. On the other hand, the textbook adopted by the program placed considerable emphasis on culture and appeared to value the notion of cultural competence. All points considered, it appeared that at the elementary level, this program believed in providing students primarily with an introduction to cultural products, with a corresponding belief that cultural competence falls more in the domain of intermediate level courses. Thus, it is hard to define what cultural competence constitutes at this level. Specific guidelines and/or structured rules to provide students (and instructors) at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday
communication in Italian were not detected in the syllabus. Again, though, the textbook used did account considerably for culture.

While culture had its role and importance in one of the evaluation tools called ‘Progetti’, the rationale behind the formal assessment tools used suggested that linguistic skills were the main focus for assessment at the elementary level. From the evaluation tools it appeared that the ultimate goal was not to prepare students to be culturally competent.

Ultimately, this program appeared to use the Standards in the creation of the curriculum and in the assessment of students, but specifically regarding culture the situation appeared more complex. The Standards are considered by the program to be generic and not very clear in giving directions for transmitting cultural knowledge or competence. However, with regards to culture, at the elementary level, the program interpreted the Standards as mostly focusing on looking at specific products. The illustration of perspectives and practices remains problematic because it depends entirely on instructors and how knowledgeable they are about Italy and Italian culture.

**Part 2: Cross-Case Analysis**

As previously mentioned, this study featured a singular entity case analysis approach to the study of three Italian undergraduate programs located in the Midwest; the purpose was to shed light on the role of the development of cultural competence in Italian within those programs. This interest was motivated to a large extent by the adoption of
the ACTFL National Standards for foreign language education in 1999, in that these revised standards place a much greater emphasis on the importance of cultural competence than was seen in the previous version of the standards. Thus, the main intent of this study was to see to what extent this emphasis is being enacted in Italian language programs at the elementary level, where students have their initial encounters with the language. A key question underlying the study was the extent to which the Italian programs incorporated cultural competence into this initial exposure to the language. This qualitative study was able to produce results through the analysis of the data collected by the following methods: questionnaire, interview, observations, departmental document analysis (such as syllabi, textbooks, and evaluation tools, e.g., quizzes, exams, and projects). Part 1 looked at each institution individually. Part 2 consists of a cross-case analysis of the three institutions intended to provide a more comprehensive look at the degree to which cultural competence is incorporated into their elementary level courses. The cross-case analysis is conducted through the framing of the study’s research questions. Major themes and conclusions arising from the discussion of the results as seen through the cross-case analysis are presented in Chapter 5.

**Research question # 1: How do Italian undergraduate programs define cultural competence?**

a. Focusing on the elementary level, how much importance is given to culture in the language course compared to other aspects?
b. Are cultural topics illustrated and characteristics pointed out directly by the faculty or is culture taught indirectly through linguistic features?

Because cultural competence remains an unexplored area of language courses at the elementary level, the way the programs defined it is difficult to ascertain. Particularly in two (A and B) out of the three programs, the participants acknowledged that there was
a need to examine and develop in more depth what culture and cultural competence mean in the classroom settings. The analysis of the data suggests that there is a lack of clarity and understanding when it comes to cultural competence.

To begin with, and across the three institutions, there was not a general or concrete definition of culture promoted or operationalized by the Italian language programs. Based upon the explanations provided by the participants, it appears that culture may be thought about in different ways, such as the following:

a) as artifacts, practices and points of view but in the end mostly defined by the individual instructors teaching at the elementary level;

b) as synonymous with high C culture;

c) as shaped overall by, and dependent on, the textbook in use;

The teaching of culture was considered to be important, but in practice and across the programs much less importance was given to culture than to the linguistic aspects of Italian, as also suggested by the skills expected of the teaching personnel selected to teach at the elementary level and summarized in this figure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program A</th>
<th>Program B</th>
<th>Program C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most important requirement(s) to be selected for teaching at the elementary level</td>
<td>Advanced language skills</td>
<td>Knowledge of Italian and language teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study abroad experience</td>
<td>Knowledge of communicative teaching methodologies and ACTFL Standards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Requirement(s) for teaching at the elementary level.
Among the most common reasons cited for the linguistic side of Italian language instruction to prevail, the following appeared:

1. Lack of time in the classroom to dedicate to culture.

2. There is a tendency to rely on culture as defined by the textbook used. Brief cultural notes and readings written mostly in English for the elementary level are often the source for culture knowledge.

3. Programs rely on the individual instructors, who decide independently about the emphasis given to culture. Instructors are not required by the department or program to follow precise guidelines for the treatment of cultural topics. Thus, the quality and quantity of culturally-oriented instruction varies according to the capabilities of the instructor teaching it.

4. Most programs do not emphasize culture enough. Culture remains an underdeveloped area of the curriculum.

It was observed in this investigation that cultural topics and characteristics were pointed out directly by instructors and pertained mostly to what was suggested and reproduced in the textbook or instructors’ manual accompanying it. Only one case (in Program C) was found where the topic was of a choice made by the instructor. On the other hand, the indirect transmission of cultural topics and characteristics through grammar exercises and/or readings was not detected during the observation made, though these observations were confined to a very small number of class sessions.
In addition, the rare elaboration of cultural topics found in the textbooks may be attributed to a range of different factors which were extrapolated from interview and observation data:

1. The tendency to mostly focus on grammar and vocabulary; in other words, prioritizing the linguistic side of language.
2. Lack of time available in the 48-50 minutes of class time.
3. The variation in beliefs, cultural knowledge, and style/method of teaching among the instructors.
4. The use of the target language in class may be a problem for elaboration of topics, given that these were elementary level courses and students could not be expected to know a lot of Italian at that point. This was seen by two of the programs as a barrier for good understanding of culture.

To summarize the answer to Research Question 1, cultural competence was a relatively unexplored area of language courses at the elementary level, and the way the programs defined it was difficult to ascertain. The overall analysis of the data suggests that there was a lack of clarity and understanding when it comes to cultural competence. There was not a general or concrete definition of culture promoted or operationalized by the Italian language programs. In practice and across the programs, although culture was an important component of the textbooks used, less importance was given to cultural material than to the linguistic aspects of the Italian language. This may not be surprising given that the focus of the study was on the beginning course in the Italian course sequence, where students receive their most basic introduction to the language. On the
other hand, this finding must also be considered relative to the importance placed on culture in the national foreign language standards.

**Research question # 2: What aspects of cultural competence do the Italian undergraduate programs operationalize?**

a. What does the program do to provide students at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication?
b. Are there specific guidelines established by the program and reflected in the syllabus related to the teaching of culture content at the elementary level?

As may be suggested by looking at the answer to the first question, the Italian undergraduate programs were not directly involved with practicing any aspect of cultural competence. The general situation at the department/program level may be one among several reasons why they were not directly involved with teaching cultural competence. The lack of systematic planning regarding what is culture and/or cultural competence was partly revealed by the absence of any assessment of instructors’ training, knowledge, and ability, as reproduced in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Program A</th>
<th>Program B</th>
<th>Program C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructors/faculty assessment for cultural competence</strong></td>
<td>Not present</td>
<td>Not present</td>
<td>Not present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific training or preparation required and offered by Department/Program</strong></td>
<td>Not found</td>
<td>Not found</td>
<td>Not found</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Program/Department Level Assessment of Instructors’ Cultural Competence
In practice, what the programs did was to provide some kind of cultural awareness as opposed to cultural competence at the elementary level. That is, students received some exposure to cultural elements, such as Italian music, food or holidays, but there was little or no effort to provide a deeper understanding of what these elements signify in terms of deeper representations of the target culture. This was only information to be obtained, not knowledge to be internalized toward a richer understanding of the target culture. This limitation emerged from analysis of the interviews and syllabi. The general tendency was to provide students with a basic illustration of cultural products (found in the textbook).

Interestingly, although culture carries significance in the language acquisition process and it is in fact one of the features identified in programs and textbooks, no specific programmatic guidelines were found for teaching culture. From the syllabi it appeared that culture had a minor place in content and/or reference in comparison to what related to the four language skills. Thus, specifically, the syllabi were mostly built around grammatical structures and vocabulary and in the order suggested by the textbook adopted. Few additions beyond the textbook material, if any, appeared; when they did, their focus was on developing speaking or writing skills.

It should be remembered, though, that cultural topics were addressed at least every other week during the semester, with the exception of one program (C) which did not specifically identify or target cultural items in its syllabi. In this latter program, the teaching of culture was left completely to the discretion of the individual instructors. In the programs, the average time dedicated to culture during those teaching days was 15-20 minutes in a 50 minute class period.
To summarize the answer to Research Question 2, although culture teaching guidelines were not established by any of the programs, it appeared that two of the three programs were moving towards further developments in culture transmission. In particular, in one case (Program C), emphasis was given to culture on the basis of the explanations given by the participant and provided at the beginning of the syllabus, in addition to the attention given to culture and cultural competency in the textbook’s philosophy statement. Programs were not directly involved with practicing any aspect of cultural competence, but programs did provide some kind of cultural awareness at the elementary level, as confirmed by the analysis of the collected data.

**Research question # 3: In what ways do Italian undergraduate programs attempt to teach cultural competence?**

a. What pedagogical approaches are used by Italian undergraduate programs to teach cultural competence?
b. Is there any kind of document which shows this attempt?
c. In the case that cultural competence is not addressed how do students at the elementary level in the program acquire it?

As previously explained about the absence of specific aspects of cultural competence which were operationalized by the Italian programs, similarly for this question, the cross-case analysis revealed that there were no specific ways, that is, uses of material or instructional techniques, that were directed toward teaching cultural competence. However, one of the programs (C) appeared to be in the beginning stage of the development of a revised way of teaching culture in accordance with the National Standards (1999). The attempt of this program was confirmed by the syllabus and the textbook in use, in addition to the projects which, if modified (with the inclusion of culture as integrant part of assessment in the rubric), could potentially lead to cultural
competence as much as the proper use of the integrated, culture-centered approach on which the textbook is based.

What emerged from questionnaires, interviews and observations was that the teaching of culture with the goal of providing cultural awareness relied regularly on the following pedagogical approaches and/or material:

1. Mini-presentations (lecturing) restricted to what was suggested in the textbook or teachers’ manual.
2. Readings, listening to materials (audio CDs).

Only occasionally did the teaching of culture rely on these additional approaches and/material:

3. Video(s) from the textbook.
4. Clips from Italian movies.
5. Discussions via the use of authentic materials.
6. Technology facilitated presentations inclusive of visuals.

In the end, very rarely did the teaching of culture include: a) further elaboration and explanation of culture provided in textbook or instructor’s manual and, b) taking into consideration the guidelines included in the National Standards.

Upon closer examination, two out the three textbooks in use in these programs showed in their structures and organization good potential for that elaboration and explanation to occur, but it appeared in the observations that this potential was not acted upon by the programs or the individual instructors, though it must once again be pointed out that the observations captured only a very limited amount of the class sessions taught and only a handful of the instructors employed by these programs. In addition, with
respect to the use of additional materials, during the in-class observations it was found that less than half of the elementary classes observed used audio-visual materials towards the explanation of culturally relevant topics.

To summarize the answer to Research Question 3, all in all, because cultural competence was not in fact transmitted and/or systematically considered by the teaching personnel and programs themselves, how and whether students may be able to acquire this skill remains uncertain and an inquiry not taken into consideration by programs at the time of this study.

Research question # 4: What evaluation tools are used by Italian undergraduate programs to assess student cultural competence outcomes?

a. How do these evaluation tools prepare/help students to be culturally competent in a foreign language?

b. Which testing format/criteria are the evaluation tools based upon?

c. What is the rationale behind the testing format/criteria of the evaluation tool(s)?

The evaluation tools were used primarily to assess the four language skills; in other words, they were designed to assess linguistic knowledge and principally focus on reading, writing and listening skills. Evaluation tools designed to look for cultural competence outcomes were not found to be in use across the three cases. There were, however, modest efforts to assess cultural awareness. Where applicable, quizzes and final exams had an average amount of culturally-oriented coverage of 10-25% of their total points. However, the emphasis was on a passive response concerning discrete information as reflected in a multiple-choice format, with the goal of assessing cultural facts appearing in the textbooks. These cultural facts appeared in English or Italian depending on the language used in the textbooks’ sections/chapters being tested. In one of the programs (B), culture was tested through questions (true/false) and specifically
addressed only in the final exam. In another program (C), cultural awareness was monitored to some extent through a portfolio-based project, but culture was not specifically evaluated and listed as a component of the rubric.

The rationale behind this passive approach to the assessment of culture was that cultural knowledge develops indirectly through presentations in class, compositions, and activities that students perform online, and these would be difficult to assess in an examination format, in contrast to material appearing in the textbooks. Interestingly, one of the programs (C) was found to use a portfolio based evaluation system where students produced evidence of cultural understanding of the kind considered by instructors. However, across the programs there was no systematic assessment of cultural competence. Thus, as seen in the approaches to evaluation used and from the interviews with the program coordinators, it was difficult, if not impossible, to know whether students were acquiring the kinds of cultural competence cited in the National Standards or whether they were able to fully understand/recognize cultural matters.

To summarize the answer to Research Question 4, then, there were no evaluation tools designed to look for cultural competence outcomes. Traditional evaluation tools (such as quizzes and final exams) were used primarily to assess the four language skills; in other words, they were designed to assess linguistic knowledge and principally focus on reading, writing and listening skills, and, where culture was concerned, only students’ knowledge of cultural facts or products, not their cultural understanding or competence.
Research question # 5: To what extent, if any, is the curriculum of Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level aligned with the National Standards (1999) regarding culture and cultural competence?

a. How do the elementary language courses operationalize products as aligned with the National Standards?

b. How do the elementary language courses operationalize perspectives as aligned with the National Standards?

c. How do the elementary language courses operationalize practices as aligned with the National Standards?

Before addressing this last question, it is appropriate to recall that for clarification purposes, the following excerpts from “Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st century” (1999) were included at the end of the questionnaires as guidance for participants:

Standard 2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of Italian culture.

This standard focuses on patterns of social interactions that reflect the attitudes, values, and traditions of Italians (p.293).

Standard 2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and the perspectives of Italian culture.

This standard focuses on the cultural products of Italy (language, literature, art, music, architecture, fashion, cuisine, sports, educational system) and how they relate to the perspectives (attitudes, values, ideas) of Italians (p.294).

The situation regarding the curriculum of the undergraduate programs at the elementary level and their respective alignment with the National Standards (1999) exclusively in relation to culture appeared to be complex for a variety of reasons which will be summarized below according to the three different cases.

a) For one of the programs (A), it was not practicable to provide an accurate explanation for how at the elementary level language courses operationalize products, practices, and perspectives as aligned with the Standards. In their courses, culture teaching depends on what is covered by the textbook. In other words, they reported
themselves to be aligned with the Standards to the extent, if any, that the textbook attempted such an alignment. However, to what degree the textbooks in use in these programs complied with the guidelines offered by the National Standards was essentially unknown by the participant. Specifically, the program simply stated that the National Standards were not a priority for the program, and so they were not closely considered.

From the analysis I attempted regarding the textbook in use by this program, it appeared that numerous opportunities throughout one of the chapters are available to the teaching force for the illustration of products at the elementary level and included in different sections. Possibilities are also encountered for introducing cultural practices. In a different way, perspectives or viewpoint(s), in other words attitudes, values and beliefs Italians have and which are related to practices are not directly found and/or described.

b) One program (B), although aware of and familiar with the Standards and attempting to follow them with respect to language skills, acknowledged not being aligned with the Standards related to culture.

c) Slightly differently, the curriculum for one program (C) appeared, for general guidance, to be somewhat aligned, that is, at least superficially. Nonetheless, the program considered the Standards related to culture vague in terms of translating them into practice and being able to use them (especially practices and perspectives) suitably at the elementary level. Program C interpreted the Standards as mostly focusing on looking at specific products. The illustration in the elementary classroom especially of perspectives and practices thus remained problematic because it depended entirely on the discretion of instructors and how knowledgeable they were regarding Italy and Italian culture.
Significantly, the following element was missing across the observations made (except for one observation in Program C): introductory or basic information related to perspectives in addition to explanation of practices and connection with viewpoint(s) related to Italians and culture (all important components of the Standards). Teaching culture was found not to incorporate perspectives and practices as much as products, either done through possible expansion of content included in textbooks or via instructors’ initiative. It should be remembered, though, that one observation during my study found a successful attempt to introduce products, practices, and perspectives through a cultural presentation involving the use of PowerPoint and authentic pictures and designed by a non-native Italian speaking instructor with experience of living in Italy for a prolonged time.

With respect to Research Question 5, then, the answer is that the National Standards were not closely considered with respect to culture and cultural competence and if an attempt was made to align the curriculum with the National Standards, the illustration in the elementary classroom especially of perspectives and practices was highly problematic.
CHAPTER 5
Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

The focus of this study was an exploration of the treatment of culture and cultural competence across three Italian undergraduate programs located in the Midwest at the conceptual as well as at the practical level. The five research questions considered by this study were the direct product of the following general inquiry: Does there exist in everyday foreign language classroom practice knowledge of how to deliver cultural content in light of the fact that educators nowadays are expected by the national foreign language standards to provide students with cultural perspectives and practices (beyond products) of the target language studied? How do language programs ensure and prepare for cultural competence? In the realm of Italian instruction at the undergraduate level, this topic has not previously been investigated and so these important questions have been unanswered. This qualitative study was designed so as to produce answers to these questions.

This chapter opens with a summary and discussion of the findings which have been divided, for organizational purposes, into three major themes that emerged from analysis of the results in Chapter 4: The role of culture and cultural competence; culture and assessment; culture, curriculum, and National Standards. This first section is
designed to deliver a response to the inquiries motivating my study, although it is limited to the situation found in the Midwest and in the three programs examined. The chapter continues and closes with the following sections: additional perspectives related to the results, implications arising from the results, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and contributions made by the study.

**Summary and Discussion of Findings**

*The role of culture and cultural competence*

Cultural competence appears to be an underdeveloped aspect of Italian language courses at the elementary level, at least with respect to the three institutions examined in this study. The overall analysis of the data suggests that there is a lack of clarity and understanding when it comes to cultural competence. At the conceptual level, there is not a general definition of culture promoted or operationalized by the Italian language programs. It appears that the treatment of culture is dictated by and dependent on the textbook in use, and in the end mostly defined by the individual instructors teaching at the elementary level, all of whom were graduate teaching assistants or part-time lecturers; there was no evidence of regular faculty teaching such courses.

The complexity related to culture and its conceptualization is rooted in personal beliefs; in fact, the data showed culture to be an implicit feature of language programs usually dependent on the textbook in use that received little or no attention at the programmatic level. This finding confirms what was suggested by Kramsch (1993): that cultural pedagogy is largely dependent on individual teachers’ definition of culture, not a larger systematic definition commonly agreed upon within the discipline.
In alignment with the conceptual level, at the practical level the teaching of culture was recognized to be important, but in practice and across the programs much less importance was given to the transmission of culture than to the linguistic aspects of Italian. The dominance of grammar instruction is a recurrent finding in relation to the teaching of a second or foreign language, a reality which seems not to have changed much over the past half century (Kramsch, 1993). The fact that language instruction (e.g., grammar, vocabulary) dominates in the classroom has been previously observed (Allen, 1985; Byram and Morgan, 1994; Klein, 2004; Kramsch, 1995).

Although culture carries its importance in language acquisition theory and it is in fact a permanent feature in curricula, programs and textbooks, no specific guidelines were given, established or found in the programs (for instructors and/or students) to ensure a systematic transmission of culture. The topics on the syllabi suggested that culture remains of minor importance in comparison to the content related to the four language skills. One of the three programs (C) did appear to place some emphasis on culture, a result detectable from the explanations provided in the syllabus in accordance with the textbook and its coverage of culture and cultural competence, but there were no formal guidelines for the handling of culture.

Generally, cultural topics were pointed out by instructors and were limited to what was suggested and reproduced in the textbooks. The elaboration of cultural topics found in the texts was indeed rare, and this shortcoming was attributed to lack of time, to the knowledge and capability of individual instructors, and difficulties which may arise in teaching culture in the target language.
Another contributing factor to this situation and to the type of attention seen towards the cultural treatment might have been the absence of any system for assessing instructors’ cultural competence as well as the lack of specific training in that area. To some extent, programs were guided by the belief that being a native speaker of Italian or having studied the language (and perhaps having lived in the culture) ensured a certain degree of cultural competence, thus making formal evaluation of instructors’ cultural competence unnecessary.

As a result of the unsystematic treatment of culture and culture teaching, these Italian undergraduate programs were unable to be involved in teaching or operationalizing cultural competence. Instead, they seemed to operate on the belief that teaching culture means providing some kind of cultural awareness via providing pieces of cultural knowledge, but not cultural competence in the sense of any deeper engagement with cultural understanding. The general tendency was to provide students with a basic illustration of cultural products. Among the disadvantages and risks encountered by this tendency, one may be that “by staying at the descriptive level, teachers and students miss numerous opportunities to engage in an exploration of hidden cultural values, their own cultural filters, hidden assumptions and prejudices” (Klein, 2004). This kind of orientation did not appear to be in alignment with the construct of cultural competence embedded in the 1999 National Standards by which American foreign language programs are expected to operate. Only one program (C) appeared to be sensitive to this point; it was in the beginning stage of the development of a revised way of approaching culture in accordance with the National Standards.
The teaching of culture with the goal of providing some sort of cultural awareness relied regularly on pedagogical approaches and/or materials such as mini-presentations (lecturing) of content found in the textbook, readings, and listening comprehension tasks (audio CDs). Only occasionally was the teaching of culture reported to rely on other approaches and/material such as videos and movie clips. During the limited number of in-class observations, less than half of the elementary classes used audio-visual materials towards the explanation of culturally relevant topics. All in all, how and whether students may be able to acquire cultural competence under these pedagogical circumstances remains uncertain.

In summary, although theorists have been suggesting that culture and language should be considered simultaneously because they are seen as so deeply interconnected (Boaz, 1986; Brooks, 1967; Brown, 1986; Dewey, 1969; Whorf, 1969; Savignon and Sysoyev, 2002; Seelye, 1974; Sellami, 2000; Thanasoulos, 2001), this study revealed that in practice higher consideration is given to language. The Italian undergraduate programs were found not to be in the habit of thinking about culture explicitly and systematically.

**Culture and assessment**

The investigation of the formal assessment of culturally related matters found in the three programs uncovered the following characteristics: Traditional methods of assessment (i.e. quizzes, final exams) were used primarily to assess the four language skills; that is, they were designed to test linguistic knowledge and principally focused on reading, writing and listening skills. Evaluation tools designed to look for cultural competence outcomes were not found to be in use across the programs. In two out of
three programs (A and B), quizzes (or chapter tests) and final exams dedicated to
measuring factual knowledge about culture (i.e., products) represented an average of 10-
25% of their total points. A passive response approach utilizing a multiple choice format
information was emphasized; it assessed knowledge of cultural facts appearing in the
textbooks. These facts appeared in English or Italian depending on the language used in
the textbooks’ sections/chapters being tested. One program (B) used a true/false format
for the same purpose. Only one program (C) employed a more creative approach: projects
in which students would possibly include cultural information identified by the
instructors, but in this case culture did not appear to be specifically evaluated. In general,
given the approach to assessment that dominated the programs, it was not possible to
meaningfully assess how well students were prepared culturally and whether they were
able to function in the target culture and/or understand cultural matters.

In summary, the Italian programs continued to rely on traditional methods of
assessment. This reliance on traditional methods of assessment is an aspect previously
reported in the literature (Sieloff-Magnan, 1991). In addition, when cultural assessment
was present, albeit minimally, test items tended to include factual knowledge and to
exclude any cultural ability, understanding, or appreciation. Alternative or performance-
based types of assessment such as portfolios, diaries, and journals containing
performance criteria recommended by some foreign language assessment experts
(Byram, 1997; Hancock, 1994; Lange, 2003; Moore, 1997; Ramirez, 2004; Schulz, 2007;
Shohamy, 1998) to measure cultural understanding and competence were missing, other
than one program’s limited use of a portfolio.
Culture, curriculum, and National Standards

The situation regarding the curricula of the Italian undergraduate programs and their respective alignment with the National Standards (1999) exclusively in relation to culture appeared to be complex. Basically, they considered themselves to be aligned with the Standards to the extent, if any, that the textbooks they employed were. They acknowledged that the National Standards were not a priority for their programs (at least as the elementary level), and so they were not closely considered. Only one program (C) appeared to deviate from this approach, and only to a small degree. This was at the level of the curriculum, not the day-to-day instruction.

In summary, the extent of the alignment with the National Standards regarding culture was problematic, especially with respect to the “practices and perspectives” orientation within the Standards. As noted earlier, the teaching of culture, when it occurred, was found not to incorporate practices and perspectives as much as products, either done through short expansions of content included in the textbooks or what instructors provided on their own initiative. One observation found a successful attempt to introduce products, practices, and perspectives through a cultural topic chosen by the instructor.

In the end, because culture was not considered as essential as language instruction, there were no culturally oriented learning objectives defined and assessed as systematically as grammatical and lexical goals, and because cultural competence is complex and subjective in nature, it is not surprising that the instructional practices in those three programs did not possess those “strategies that lead students to an
understanding of the perspectives behind the products and practices, allowing them to engage in sensitive and meaningful interaction with people from the target culture(s)” (Quinn Allen, 2001, p.37). Furthermore, as explained recently by Schulz (2007), “there is no agreement on how culture should be defined operationally in the context of foreign language curriculum in terms of concrete instructional objectives, and there is even less consensus on whether or how it should be formally assessed” (p.9).

Additional Perspectives Related to the Results

In addition to the main findings and patterns within the study, as reported in Chapter 4 and in the previous section of this chapter, the results of this study offer some valuable perspectives relative to foreign language programs, especially at the elementary level. In this section I discuss several of these perspectives.

(A) The primary participants of this study, in charge of the coordination of the undergraduate programs at the elementary level, appeared to possess diverse academic backgrounds in terms of preparation for their positions. It would be interesting to look at the extent to which the academic specializations of the coordinators and/or years of experience in the position impacted on their curricular decisions. For example, it emerged that more efforts towards the implementation of culturally-based teaching and cultural competence were made by the program where the specialization of the participant and language-teaching oriented background better matched with the position held.

(B) In comparing data related to the demographics of the teaching personnel in charge of the elementary level (Table 3), specifically their first language, and the rating given for cultural competence by the participants according to their personal opinion (Table 4), it
can be speculated that the widespread belief across the participants was that cultural competence remains a strength and skill mainly possessed by native speakers of Italian. Programs A and B received the highest ratings regarding culture, perhaps due to the presence of mostly native speaking Italians teaching at the elementary level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programs</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status of teaching personnel</td>
<td>Graduate teaching assistants</td>
<td>Part-time lecturers</td>
<td>Graduate teaching associates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female and Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Almost equal Female and Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Less than 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevalent ethnicity</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First language</td>
<td>Italian (unusual situation for this institution)</td>
<td>50% Italian 50% English, Spanish and others</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second language</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>50% Italian 50% English and French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (holding M.A. or Ph.D.)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Demographics regarding the Italian undergraduate teaching personnel (at the elementary level).
Table 4. Participants’ ratings of cultural competence.

(C) Although cultural competence may seem to be a skill or type of understanding associated with native speakers of the target language, the observations made possible did not reveal any noticeable differences in the cultural transmission offered by native speakers and non-native speakers. However, it must be remembered that instructors were only observed once and the focus was not on teachers but rather on cultural content. Interestingly, the only instructor who showed competence in terms of cultural practices, products, and perspectives was a nonnative speaker of Italian who had lived in Italy.

(D) The limited number of observations did not reveal efforts taken by teachers to challenge existing stereotypes pertaining to Italian culture. The interviews revealed, in fact, that the practice of challenging learners with stereotypes or generalizations, although encouraged by coordinators, was not done systematically. To what extent it occurred at all was difficult to determine because cultural transmission was so often tied to whatever appeared in the textbook and the knowledge of Italian culture possessed by teachers and the personal choices made about cultural treatment. As one of the participant revealed:

> how the program or you as the coordinator make sure that instructor do that in the classroom...again that's more difficult...and I'd say, for example, we could have a
meeting and I 'd say… well this week we are talking about, you know, the general theme of this unit is x, you know, and then say …a lot of students would then say… oh don't they do this in Italy? And one way to confront that is saying ok let's look at this, you know, from this reading or let's look at this video, and look at that in different ways... and like I said there are so many resources, so if you want to talk about Italian cuisine you don't have to take students to a kind of fake Italian restaurant, you can go and show them like a cooking show online like xxx, and I do stress it because I think for the elementary beginning instructors it is a really great way to start off a conversation in class ...part of my strategy as a coordinator than is to really highlight that when we have our meetings, when we have our discussions about oral exams... (Interview 5, 3/20/2008).

Perhaps, further attention may be focused on what teachers know and may be able to explain and discuss in relation to generalizations and stereotypes. Further study of this practice may be useful because the approach to culture as facts or products, as previously seen in the findings, could have the effect of projecting unrealistic and homogenous images of culture which tend to encourage unjustifiable generalization and stereotyping (Klein, 2004).

(E) In trying to determine whether culturally-oriented teaching in the programs followed and took into consideration the updated and contemporary view of the Italian society, it became clear that the responsibility for this was left to the textbooks and how they were able to reflect the contemporary practices and nuances of the target culture and to the native Italian speakers’ first-hand experiences with them. In light of this important
component, an in-depth analysis of textbooks and their treatment of up-to-date cultural matters used for language instruction would be useful, especially if revised curricula and programs plan to provide students with an accurate picture of contemporary Italian culture, and to show how the culture may have changed over the years.

(F) As suggested by Hendon (1980), although culture may be taught using the native language of the students (English in this case) if needed and in case of conceptual complexities, this study found that culture was only taught in the target language across programs.

(G) Another point worth noting from the investigation concerns the limited culturally-related produced material (beyond the material accompany textbooks) in most of the programs, for example in terms of books focusing on culture beyond the textbook in use, packets, realia, and other types of tangible resources that could easily be available in the department/program for the teaching force.

As can be seen from the points above, there are many factors that could be worth investigating for their potential to play important roles in the re-organization and makeover of cultural teaching and learning in the process of making the shift from providing cultural awareness /factual knowledge (i.e., products) to the development and acquisition of cultural competence.

Implications

To further contextualize this investigation and fully understand the implications of what it has found, it is helpful to point out some statistical data recently reported by the Modern Language Association (2007) in a survey which examined trends in enrollment
for various foreign languages for fall 2006. As summarized in tables provided in the report published online (http://www.mla.org/pdf/06enrollmentsurvey_final.pdf) and entitled “Enrollments in Languages other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2006”, Italian saw a strong increase from 1998 to 2002. In addition, Italian, in the fifth position after Spanish, French, German, and American Sign Language, has shown remarkable expansion of over 20% growth from 2002 to 2006. For 2006, the introductory undergraduate course enrollments were 69,757, an interesting contrast with the advanced enrollments of only 7,593, a ratio of 9:1 introductory over advanced. Whether advanced level enrollment will increase proportionally will be interesting to watch. This will depend in part on the reasons why more people are choosing to study Italian and whether advanced level study in the language will meet their needs. The report revealed the following significant numbers for Italian course enrollments by undergraduate students specifically in 4 year institutions and by graduates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
<td>41,216</td>
<td>51,750</td>
<td>64,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>1,047</td>
<td>1,018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>42,141</td>
<td>52,797</td>
<td>65,362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Geographically speaking, the Midwest regions occupy second place (after the northwest) for largest numbers of enrollments. The importance of this information is that it draws attention to the need to dedicate attention to what is happening at the very beginning of Italian undergraduate language instruction, especially as related to culture
and the importance accorded to it in the National Standards. Since, as the figures above suggest, most of the students studying Italian will likely not proceed to the advanced level courses, accounting meaningfully for cultural competence in the elementary level courses is crucial. Thus, a great deal of responsibility falls on programs and educators to address cultural issues appropriately in their planning for elementary courses. Cultural competence, after all, is synonymous with educational quality as conceptualized by the National Standards, and so it may be beneficial to treat it systematically and plan its development accordingly starting from the very beginning days of language instruction. Thus, it should not be anymore a prerogative and expectation in just higher level courses. To this end, suggestions at the theoretical and practical level are now discussed.

(1) It may be helpful for departments to put into operation training in the form of workshops and consider some sort of system of assessment for the teaching personnel in relation to culture and cultural competence. This is important because of the unavoidable variations of beliefs, practices, and backgrounds characterizing language educators at the elementary level of undergraduate programs. Programs should create opportunities to become familiar with literature and research that deals with culture, and make these resources available to the teaching personnel.

(2) In order to enhance communicative competence, the teaching of culture should be seen as instrumental in that process and thus should be addressed more meaningfully and systematically in the language course syllabi (Canale, 1983; Canale and Swain, 1979; Hammerly, 1982; Peterson and Coltrane, 2003). The reality is that when culture is not central, there is an impediment to communicate to “the fullest extent” (Hendon, 1980). Communicative competence after all requires the following areas of competency:
grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence, and the last three are impossible to achieve without the cultural element added to teaching (Canale, 1983; Canale and Swain, 1979).

(3) Programs may benefit from considering, determining and agreeing upon a working definition of culture so as to systematically ensure the transmission of culture and the acquisition of an appropriate level of cultural competence (Hammerly, 1982; Savignon and Sysoyev, 2002). Although culture is a difficult concept to define and its complexity is undeniable, there is a need to find a mutually acceptable working definition of culture, or at least to construct a general description of what is intended for culturally-related instruction in order to effectively organize the transmission of the characteristics, aspects, and/or features of the target culture. Providing a ‘workable’ definition of culture will only be useful if it allows, for example, instructors who are both native and non-native speakers of Italian to cooperate, understand and share in classroom practices under the guidance of the coordinator/program. Cultural competence cannot be in place for programs if the foundations pertaining to culture are not firstly discussed and established.

(4) The curriculum may feature a detailed plan with identified lessons in an appropriate form and sequence that directs culture teaching. It may specify activities, assignments, and materials/resources (especially considering the Internet-mediated resources which were absent in the programs under investigation) to be used in achieving its goals: what the learner at the elementary level will be able to know and do culturally speaking (Adjusted from Moeller, 2005). In other words, there is a need for a multidimensional curriculum approach where an integrated cultural and communicative syllabus becomes essential in language teaching (Stern, 1983, p. 123). Moreover, programs may be required
to emphasize and assess each of them simultaneously and with no exceptions. Cultural sensitivity and competence (Clark, 1990) may be added as a goal across undergraduate language programs, teaching personnel, and teacher training programs (pre and in-service educators as well). However, this goal is undoubtedly not easy to achieve due to the fact that programs and teachers need in addition to keep up with a culture in flux and with continuous changes, as noted more than twenty years ago by Kramsch (1983).

(5) A key issue nowadays is the need for programs to closely take into consideration the National Standards for culturally-related matters by ensuring that the “perspectives and practices” dimensions of the Standards are indeed present in cultural explanations because students for example, according to Standard 2.1, would benefit from acquiring “patterns of social interactions that reflect the attitudes, values, and traditions of Italians” (National Standard, 1999, p.293). In short, the exposure to and identification of the relationship between products and/or practices and perspectives should be amply emphasized and visible in the elementary Italian classroom. The challenge is not as much on the products and practices dimensions, which are usually part of textbooks in use nowadays and can easily be adjusted to what is suggested by the Standards; the real challenge for programs and instructors is embedded in the complexity of the ‘perspectives’ dimension, which is not usually material language textbooks include in their beginning chapters. This complexity calls for a prompt change in the teaching of culture and in preparation/ training, and follow-up assessment of material and teaching personnel by language programs. Educationally speaking, all students should be properly and equally informed about products, practices, and perspectives and only programs restructuring their approach to culture transmission will be able to take language teaching
and learning to the level of cultural competence. Ultimately, reflection and discussion are crucial to build intercultural competence in students (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996; Savignon, 2002).

(6) There is an urgent need for Italian programs to become better acquainted with the idea of culture teaching and learning as a process and not a sum of facts or unrelated chunks of events to be regurgitated according to what is often found in the textbook. With this object in mind, programs may promote cooperation with departments and colleagues in other languages and disciplines (such as anthropology, sociology, and history) to further develop understanding and possibly meaningful teaching practices appropriate to revisiting the traditional teaching of culture.

(7) Eventually, the possible implementation of the above suggested changes and the different approach taken toward cultural transmission would drive programs to consider alternative methods for assessing cultural competence. In the reality of a changing and globalized world where cultures and languages nurture each other, language testing is exposed to many more challenges, especially with regard to culture. Such challenges demonstrate why the practice of culture testing as much as the teaching should be further developed. Language tests play a powerful role “acting as gateways at important transitional moments in education, in employment, and in moving from one country to another” (McNamara, 2000, p.4). In light of the reasons mentioned above and others not included here, it is necessary that “language teachers need to be able either to make informed judgments in selecting appropriate language tests or to plan, construct, and develop appropriate tests of their own” (Bachman and Palmer, 1996, p.8). This is not any different for culture assessment as well.
Along these lines, there is a need to become familiar with alternative forms of cultural assessment which have the potential to move beyond the mastery of isolated factual knowledge. The reliance on traditional discrete-point testing should be at least minimized, despite the admitted challenges involved in creating more meaningful means of measuring cultural competence, especially with the constraints that accompany classroom instruction (such as limited amounts of time available for assessment within short class periods). Several problems are associated with the use of discrete-point tests: the absence of functional and sociolinguistic considerations, isolated items presented in single-sentence frames, lack of a context, and no opportunity to test competence (only knowledge). As explained by Schwartz (2002), “assessment of progress in terms of the standards requires a move away from discrete-point tasks […] Instead of items, authentic assessment includes projects, whose completion is not restricted to a short period of time. Such projects can be used as both summative and formative measures of learner progress. Their completion involves learners’ reflection on past performance to improve their future performance” (p.128).

It would only make sense and enhance motivation even at the lower levels of language instruction if students find items in the domain of alternative assessment (i.e. journal, portfolio) matching with their communicative needs and interests and reproducing authentic language and culture.

(8) Finally, it may be beneficial to add text(s) (in English or Italian) focusing on Italian culture in addition to the required textbook material, especially considering that learners may have never taken Italian or have heard much about Italy and Italians before.
Limitations of the study

The following limitations were acknowledged for the present study:

1. This study was geographically limited to the Midwest of the United States, and it reflected the situation found, in the end, in only three programs, all situated in large universities.

2. This study focused exclusively on the culturally related aspect(s) of programs, and specifically looked at the cultural competence present and transmitted by programs.

3. The findings were restricted, in the end, to three Italian undergraduate programs and to their situation at the elementary level. The situation found about culture and/or cultural competence may not be applicable to other Italian undergraduate programs, and/or other levels.

4. The on-site visits were limited to three (3) days per each institution. Thus, the analysis of the collected data reflects that limited time frame.

5. Instructors were informed by the participants about the scope of the researcher’s observations and in general of the purpose of her study. This may have influenced what they did during the observations and thus contaminated those results to some extent.

6. The number of observations made possible was ultimately dependent on non-controllable factors (such as permission given by participant, agreement of teaching force instructing at the elementary level, and others).

7. This study entered the sites with an established methodology, but in the end as a researcher and in the role of an outsider I operated on the programs and participants’ terms.
Recommendations for future research

Due to the status of the Italian language at the college level and the growing number of undergraduate students choosing Italian as a foreign language, research studies of quantitative and qualitative nature are necessary to assess and to document what is happening, when and how, especially in consideration of culture teaching, in practice an unexplored area of research. For example, longitudinal studies are needed for Italian as a foreign language which will be significant in monitoring from beginning to the end the transmission and possible acquisition of cultural competence, an educational, social, as much as professional necessity in the globalized era. It would be both interesting and valuable to see case studies of students as they move through an Italian language program as well as Italian teachers over the course of their teaching of, say, elementary courses over an extended period of time to see how and in what ways their approach to culturally-oriented teaching changes. In the latter case, it might be especially interesting to track the changes experienced by teachers directly exposed (by a researcher) to the National Standards regarding culture in order to see how those standards shape their instructional practices as they become more familiar and comfortable with them.

Thus, ongoing Italian program evaluation (for the elementary as well as intermediate and upper levels), used for decision-making purposes, should be promoted by institutions/departments belonging to all major areas of United States where Italian language instruction is present (i.e. the Midwest as much as the Northeast, South Atlantic, and South Central). The documented research obtained and combined for areas could be used for comparison and be able to provide constructive feedback. As explained by Lodico et al. (2006), “program evaluation examines programs to determine their worth
and to make recommendations for programmatic refinement and success” (p.317). The program evaluation would include and benefit from using both formative and summative types of evaluation. To elaborate on this idea, while formative data are collected and reported back to project staff when the program is taking place, summative data are collected at the end of a project to measure outcomes. For further details on program evaluation, Lodico et al. (2006) offer a helpful description of its implementation.

Any innovation and or adjustment in the curriculum or practice of Italian language programs in relation to cultural matters should be followed by research focusing on assessing learners’ cultural understanding and level(s) of competence. Studies considering a mixed methodology should compare and contrast the effects and/or outcomes of the teaching and learning of cultural competence through the use of printed materials versus online sources, especially in considering the complexities involved in teaching and learning cultural practices and perspectives.

Finally, attention should be given to “the paradigm shift in research approaches that involves teacher-researcher partnerships” (Schwartz, 2002, p.127), a paradigm known as action-research, which may be better suited to illustrating the practice of educators involved at the undergraduate level. For example, because teachers hold beliefs regarding culture teaching and learning as a result of their own background and experience as language and culture learners themselves, it would be interesting to design studies investigating how much their background influences the way they transfer cultural knowledge, and if teachers’ preparation or training has a positive impact on those beliefs and is in fact able to affect their classroom practice regarding culture. Furthermore, what type of changes, if any, occur in the educators’ practice once they
have opportunities for in-depth reflection on the Standards? Would they make the same use of the culture provided in the textbook?

Finally, a content analysis of the most popular textbooks for Italian language instruction should be conducted to closely examine their role in, and potential for, the transmission of cultural competence and their alignment with the National Standards.

**Contributions of the Study**

This qualitative study contributed in several ways to the field’s understanding of how culture and cultural competence are (or are not) promoted by Italian undergraduate programs. For instance, this was the first investigation that attempted to measure the treatment of cultural competence across Italian undergraduate language programs (though the number of programs involved was limited). Instead of looking at just one program, this study sought to compare and contrast across programs in order to construct a more comprehensive picture of what takes place in the cultural domain. Furthermore, this cross-case analysis was situated in some of the largest and best-known institutions located in Midwest of the U.S. as well as some of the largest existing Italian language programs. In addition, the study was conducted in the aftermath of the publication of the most recent (1999) national standards for foreign language education, thus allowing for a timely exploration of the impact of those standards on instructional practices as they relate to cultural competence, a key component of the new standards. Along these lines, one of the study’s central findings—that the three programs paid little if any meaningful attention to the standards in the domain of cultural competence—is of considerable
importance as the foreign language field continues to strive to implement the standards in substantive and appropriate ways. Finally, studies of language programs have traditionally been quantitative in nature. The use of a qualitative methodology in this case allowed for a closer look at the inner workings of the programs involved and thus enriched our understanding of them.

It is hoped that the illustration of the culturally-related situation found in the individual programs and across the three Italian programs investigated may provide useful data for future program assessment purposes and for documenting the status of culture and cultural competence since the publication of the Standards (1999). The findings may also assist K-12 foreign language teacher education programs in terms of ensuring better preparation of teachers to link the standards and their teaching related to cultural competence. To summarize, this study was designed and intended to benefit a number of stakeholders: a) educational law makers; a) institutions providing foreign language courses; b) educators and governmental institutions involved with and studying the impact of National Standards for foreign language learning; c) pre-and in-service teacher education programs; d) learners of Italian. To one degree or another, its findings offer valuable input for each of those groups. In addition, due to its transferability it may provide useful information for programs teaching other languages, all of which are charged with the same responsibility to implement the National Standards regarding cultural competence.
References


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APPENDIX A: Introductory statement

Dr.______

My name is Alessia Colarossi presently an ABD, PhD Candidate in Foreign Language Education at The Ohio State University. My reason for contacting you is to ask permission to conduct my dissertation research entitled: “Teaching Cultural Competence: A Qualitative Study of the Role of Culture in Undergraduate Italian Foreign Language Programs in the United States”. The Principal Investigator of this study is Dr. Alan Hirvela, a faculty member in the College of Education at The Ohio State University. The primary participants of this study will be Italian language directors responsible for the elementary level. Please allow me to briefly inform you about the scope of this study. This research project specifically focuses on the role of culture in the Italian language program, specifically how the program, at the elementary level, defines and operationalizes culture competence. The study will include a questionnaire, one interview, three classroom observations, document analysis/review, and member checks. My hope is to conduct on-site visits in October and November on dates most convenient for you. The on-site visits to the five different institutions purposefully selected, will consist of 3 days and two nights. Anonymity and privacy issues will be fully respected for the accomplishment of this study. The data collected will remain locked at all times and accessed only by the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator. Upon completion of the study, all the data collected will be erased and/or shredded. Pseudonyms will be used when/if needed instead of real names of institutions, programs, and Directors. Participation is voluntary, and informants can refuse to answer questions, and withdraw without penalty.

If thus far you believe that The Italian Language program director in your Department will be interested in collaborating in this study, please provide me with his/her name and telephone number. Do not hesitate to forward this request to the Italian language director if that seems appropriate. Please let me know at this point if additional clarification is needed.

Thank you for your time. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Alessia Colarossi
APPENDIX B: Permission for research

Example of approval from Chairs

Thank you for sending the detailed information about your research proposal and about the work that you want to do in the Department of French and Italian. I am happy to give you permission to conduct the research that you described in that document and would ask that you coordinate your research with Professor [name removed]. We ask all those who conduct research in the Department to provide us with a summary of the research results. Best of luck with your dissertation.
APPENDIX C: Consent form

IRB Protocol Number: 2007E0545

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Teaching Cultural Competence: A Qualitative Study of the Role of Culture in Undergraduate Italian Foreign Language Programs in the United States

Researcher: Alan Hirvela

Sponsor:

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:

This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the role of culture in undergraduate Italian foreign language programs in the U.S. This study will explore and describe how Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level define and operationalize the notion of cultural competence; what aspects of cultural competence the Italian undergraduate programs at the elementary level emphasize; in what ways these programs attempt to teach cultural competence, and to what extent, if any, the curricula of Italian programs are aligned with the National Standards for Foreign Language Education (1999) regarding culture and cultural competence.

Procedures/Tasks:

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire (time needed: about 45 minutes), to be available for one interview (time needed: about 1 hour), member checks (data collected will be checked by you for accuracy), and to grant permission to the
researcher to observe three classes at the elementary level for the purpose of taking notes exclusively about the role of culture and culture competence so to triangulate the study. Neither instructors nor students will be considered and/or mentioned in the observations’ notes taken by the researcher. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience, audio-taped and transcribed.

**Duration:**

The data will be collected during Autumn Quarter 2007, and the visit paid by the researcher to each institution will be of totally three days and two nights. The analysis of the data will be throughout Winter Quarter 2007.

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are no foreseeable risks to you for participating in this study. There are no direct material benefits to you from taking part at this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The data collected will remain locked at all times and accessed only by the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator. Upon completion of the study, all the data collected will be erased and/or shredded. Pseudonyms will be used when/if needed instead of real names of institutions’ programs, and Directors.

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

**Incentives:**

You will not be paid to participate in this study.
**Participant Rights:**

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

**Contacts and Questions:**

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Alessia Colarossi at the following email address: colarossi.2@osu.edu, or phone number 614-XXX-XXXX.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
APPENDIX D: Questionnaire

Questionnaire
Thank you for participating in this research study. The questionnaire is meant for research purposes only. The information you provide here will remain confidential.

Demographics of instructors/faculty at the elementary level
Questions 1-6: Please provide the appropriate number of individuals teaching at the elementary level.

1. Status.

   GTA (Graduate teaching associate)____
   Professors___
   Lectures____
   Other (please specify)____

2. Gender.

   Female____
   Male____

3. Average age

   Less than 30____
   31-40____
   41-50____
   Over 51____
4. Ethnicity
   Native American____
   White____
   Latino____
   African American____
   Asian____
   Other (please specify)____

5. First language
   English____
   Italian ____
   Spanish____
   French____
   Other____

6. Second language
   English____
   Italian ____
   Spanish____
   French____
   Other____

   Education and preparation/experience of instructors

7. In the hiring process how important is to possess some kind of cultural competence? Please comment

Questions 8-20 please check and/or comment.

185
8. Which percentage of instructors at the elementary levels holds a Master Degree and/or PhD in Italian?

100%____
75%____
50%____
25%____
Less than 25%___

9. Are instructors assessed for cultural competence in Italian?

Yes___
No___
9a. If Yes, how? Please comment.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

10. At the present time how would you rate the cultural competence of the teaching force at the elementary level?

Very poor____
Poor___
Good___
Very good____
Excellent____

About the program and the teaching culture

11. Does the Department offer any kind of training for teaching Italian culture and acquire culture competence?

Yes___
No___
11a. If Yes, through what resource? (i.e. workshops, video-conferencing, Italian scholars’ lectures/visits, availability of authentic material from different sources) Please comment.

12. What pedagogical approaches and materials are used to teach culture at the elementary level?

13. What does the program do to provide students at the elementary level with cultural competence for everyday communication in Italian?

14. To what extent have you considered the ACTFL Standards in revising the program’s decisions/choices related to the teaching of culture?

15. How do you feel about the practicability of the ACTFL Standards?

16. Which cultural products* of Italy (i.e. literature, history, cuisine, fashion) are included at the elementary level?

17. How are the perspectives* of Italian culture (i.e. such as attitudes, values and ideas) illustrated in the elementary classroom?
18. How are the practices* of Italian culture demonstrated in the classroom?

19. What evaluation tools are used to assess the students’ cultural competence outcome?

20. How do these evaluation tools prepare students to be culturally competent in Italian?

*Please refer to the following excerpts from “Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st century” (1999) if needed:

**Standard 2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of Italian culture.**

This standard focuses on patterns of social interactions that reflect the attitudes, values, and traditions of Italians (p.293).

**Standard 2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and the perspectives of Italian culture.**

This standard focuses on the cultural products of Italy (language, literature, art, music, architecture, fashion, cuisine, sports, educational system) and how they relate to the perspectives (attitudes, values, ideas) of Italians (p.294).
APPENDIX E: Interview questions

The following open-ended questions will be included in establishing rapport with informants:

Would you please tell me about your background (education and experience) in Italian language and culture?

How long have you been working as a Language Director in this institution?

Interview questions

Using your fullest insight please answer the following questions:

1. Is there a definition of culture promoted and operationalized by this program?

2. How much importance is given to culture teaching at the elementary level?

3. Is there an understanding of cultural competence at the elementary level?

4. How much importance is given to cultural competence at the elementary level?

5. Focusing exclusively on culture, does the curriculum at the elementary level reflect the contemporary Italian society?

6. How do the instructors/program challenge students’ existing stereotypes or generalizations pertaining to Italian culture?

7. Is the curriculum aligned with National Standards for Foreign Language Learning regarding culture?

8. Can you provide 1 or 2 examples of how the undergraduate program at the elementary level attempts to incorporate the National Standards into Italian teaching?
9. How the evaluation tools used at the elementary level assess students’ cultural competence?