

I.V.C.: Investigate, Visualize, Codify—the Italian Virtual Class Method

by Raggi-Moore & Ristaino

In 2004, the Italian Studies program faculty at Emory University felt they were between a rock and a hard place. They wanted to teach a constructivist, culturally driven course, but found that the textbooks available on the market did not integrate language through culture. If introduced at all, culture was taught on a particular day or chapter section, and grammar learning was presented in isolated segments, separated from and unrelated to cultural materials, essentially reducing culture to trivia. More disappointing was the lack of authenticity in the presentation of culture: a series of disconnected topics, without any continuous thematic, chronological, or disciplinary framework, leading inevitably to misinterpretation and stereotyping as themes were introduced out of context. Furthermore, this type of class contrasted unfavorably when students compared it to other college courses. Wishing to change the value perception of the course content from tool to discipline, Emory's Italian Program director, Judy Raggi Moore, began noting how students in full immersion studies in Italy learned the language, particularly those who started with little to no language background. What coping skills did they instinctively draw upon?

Emory's Italian Studies program has a long-standing and unique intensive summer study abroad program in Italy. Over the course of the six-week journey through 3,000 years of history and across regional geopolitical realities, students learn about Italian culture through an authentic cultural lens. All studied topics—artistic expression, literature, religion, regional traditions, and social mores—are examined within the framework of a continuous cultural narrative, thus deeply experienced by the students. For the past fifteen years, Judy Raggi Moore has been capturing authentic, unorchestrated cultural content of the trip, conducting interviews in every region of

Italy, and taking thousands of photographs. Sensing the pedagogical potential of this visual databank, Raggi Moore envisioned how the summer program could be translated into a complete organizational narrative that supported a constructivist methodology for language acquisition. Ideally the students at home would benefit from the same cultural context and language learning curve experienced by the students on the program in Italy.

Judy Raggi Moore and colleague, Christine Ristaino, along with faculty, students, and technology specialists at Emory, processed hours of cultural content, creating theme-linked units and developing an interactive on-line program that has become an essential part of the textbook students engage with to learn Italian at Emory. After creating a website to house the on-line materials (www.italianvirtualclass.com), Raggi Moore, with pedagogical and structural contributions from Ristaino, wrote a supporting textbook that interfaces with the on-line portion of the text. Sustaining the on-line and written program, Raggi Moore and Ristaino brought to life an intricate pedagogical method that was inductively structured and culturally based. Through studying the footage and codifying the approach, Ristaino learned it, while Raggi Moore finally put into practice a teaching method she had instinctively utilized for over twenty-five years. The textbook, on-line interface, and pedagogy that resulted from hours of discussion, writing, evaluating, testing, and editing, became the Italian Virtual Class (IVC), also known as the Investigate - Visualize - Codify, method for teachers of languages.

Although at Emory University IVC materials are specific to Italian, the pedagogy behind the approach is not limited to Italian. The IVC method provides a tested framework with a structure that can be populated by authentic reading and listening materials from any language. With the IVC method students acquire language naturally, not because they have been asked to memorize a language structure, but as the result of a communicative need to accomplish the

language tasks set out before them. The method elicits and builds upon what students already know and allows them to construct and co-construct content meaning during language acquisition, both on an individual level and as a larger community of engaged learners. As it is a natural process to continuously build, take apart, reorganize, and re-build knowledge, adding to and revising information to fit new understandings and paradigms, the IVC method for second language acquisition is ideal for all ages and language levels.

Imagining their flight has just arrived at an Italian airport and their adventure in Italy is about to begin, IVC students are required from day one to speak in full sentences only in the target language, using hand gestures, vocabulary, and words similar to those they have already learned in first language acquisition to fill in the gaps. Student frustration with not being able to communicate well quickly leads to finding creative ways to transmit the message by transcending the confinement of language structures, mirroring the process used by students abroad. Only afterward are students asked to analyze how and why they were successful in communicating their needs and ideas. Surprisingly, vocabulary regarding language is one of the first topics students master comfortably. When referring to rules, grammar, idiomatic expressions, and paradigms, IVC method students must talk about them in the target language through the lens of the authentic and unedited cultural materials of which these constructions are an integral part. Students create their own paradigms based on how they understand language and prior knowledge of given linguistic structures. They are encouraged to devise mediums that best enhance their own learning, thereby relying on their learning styles to help them engage with the materials and make them their own.

When negotiating meaning in new texts, students are guided to rely on the meta-language of the visual, much as they would with a painting. Working collaboratively, they participate in a

series of text visualizations: where is the word in the sentence? How does it relate to other words? What happens to the content, context, and cultural codes identified within the text if the word, phrase or construction is moved or removed, pulled out and examined up close? Can students find visual patterns associated with a construction? Visualizations become a powerful strategy to locate and see grammatical and cultural information that is often hidden within a text. Student navigators, quickly becoming familiar with effective visualization tools, begin to take charge of their second-language learning and in the process come to know their own language better.

IVC pedagogy is truly a constructivist method of teaching. Utilizing a chronologically and geographically sequenced layering of cultural content, students continuously revisit the materials previously encountered, each time at a deeper level. Learners are never asked to comprehend a new concept, reading, video clip, website, work of art, or expression all at once. Instead, a carefully guided revisiting of the cultural content—in exploration of various linguistic objectives—is strategically conducted by the teacher, allowing students to face each listening exercise or page of complex, authentic materials at manageable levels, one step at a time. Instructors are therefore trained facilitators who take students through a revisiting process that brings them to deeper, long-lasting learning. As a result of the IVC program, students are taught about the language, culture, and people of a host country. Perhaps most importantly, though, they learn how to learn this information.

So how do IVC teachers accomplish all this? Firstly, authentic cultural materials are rich and plentiful. They are based on a real trip to Italy having as their academic objective the study of Italian cultural development from the Etruscans and Greeks to the present day. Thus, students come to rely on a predictable historical logic behind the sequence of written materials.

Furthermore, students often see their peers on-site in the photos, videos, interviews, slice-of-life clips, and descriptions. Authentic materials, garnered during past and present summer study abroad trips, provide continuously updated visual cultural content, which accompanied by a skillfully related text, provide the necessary fabric needed to learn a language through culture. Never is cultural content compromised while learning grammar because the class does not step away from authentic materials while learning about the structures that are tied to them.

The following are the steps of the IVC process through which instructors guide their students when examining new grammatical or cultural content via video clips or cultural readings. It is important to note that for languages other than Italian, which cannot tap into Italian Virtual Class materials, the web provides a vast wealth and range of readings and listening segments and is a great starting point for gathering materials to utilize in this process.

1) **RECOGNITION:** Every reading and listening comprehension section is approached first on the level of recognition—what does the student already know? Are there any words or phrases that are familiar because they resemble English or another learned language in some way? The first time this exercise is conducted in class, the students are delighted to discover that they are not approaching a new language unprepared. Even if they have never seen the language before, they are shown that they already know a considerable amount about language-learning and language-building. Drawing on their experience with first language acquisition they quickly learn to apply already acquired language patterns to help them decipher new ones, thus rapidly decoding and understanding the new language.

2) **CURIOSITY:** When students return to a reading, interview, or dialogue a second time, they listen or read for a very different reason. Their second task is to go deeper into the material and listen for words or phrases that pique their curiosity, that urge them to delve deeper into meaning. At this point, classrooms fill with discussion about those elements that most engage the students. They are asked what makes them curious about the passage, to hypothesize on meaning, to determine which students already understand a word or phrase and can provide assistance, to negotiate what jumps out from the text. Guiding and assisting, instructors learn about their students—what makes them tick; what excites and engages them; what stands out for them? Instructors can now see the language from the students' point of view and devise different strategies to help them facilitate meaning. On their part the students begin rapidly to understand more about the reading and are consequently emboldened to further the investigation.

3) **HYPOTHESIZE MEANING:** At any point in the process, instructors may stop and ask students what they now understand about the reading or video clip. What meaning has been revealed as

a result of familiar and similar words? What has been learned from curiosities about the video? What do students hypothesize the segment to be about?

4) **KEY WORDS:** The next task students undertake is to listen or search for key words, that is, words that can create a broader understanding of the passage. A longer reading offers the opportunity for small group work. Each group examines a paragraph and discusses the words that are key to understanding it. With listening segments, students must jot down words that seem important in cracking the meaning code of the conversation or oral response. Instructors collect these key words on a list on the board. Speaking only in the target language, using hand gestures, familiar and similar words, or even their own drawings or artwork, students explain why, in their opinions, they chose a word as key to understanding the larger context. They quickly become masters of this task, explaining meaning utilizing all of their resources. Confidence in their ability to express themselves continues to increase.

5) **HYPOTHESIZE MEANING - ROUND TWO:** This is a good time to revisit hypotheses and delve deeper into meaning. Was new meaning revealed through the discussion of key words? Instructors can add to a growing description on the board, referring back to it often, and revising it when new knowledge makes itself know.

6) **EXPLORATION:** From a focus on overall meaning, the focus now shifts to exploring words, their relationship to cultural subtleties, and their function within a sentence. Early on in the course, students are trained to visualize a written passage, interview response, or dialogue and label or underline in different colors the different parts of speech. Consequently from the start they learn to identify and recognize grammatical constructions and word functions. Students must compile lists of constructions that fit into familiar grammar paradigms, ones they have already learned. They categorize these lists in ways that fit their perception of the paradigms, based on prior learning, learning styles, and how they have grown to understand the construction's function in relation to language and culture.

7) **CO-CONSTRUCTION AND VERIFICATION:** The next stage is new construction; for example, the exploration of present tense verbs. Students are asked to listen or search for verbs in the present tense and create their own lists. They are then required to group the verbs based on patterns they have identified. Students devise their own paradigms based on their knowledge of the grammar form, their learning styles, and prior understanding of the target language's culture and language components. Illustrating student-suggested paradigms on the board, slight differences are evidenced and discussed, but the overall concepts become obvious to all. Through collective verification, students come to understand that despite differences in approach, relying on our own learning lens and knowledge bank is a valid method for deciphering the language puzzle.

8) **FORM:** After eliciting the construction, it is necessary to focus on form with a number of exercises that reinforce the newly learned concept. These exercises draw from the reading or video piece and allow students to practice what they have learned, while focusing on the form within the broader cultural context. Fill-in the blanks, sentence manipulation, search and retrieval exercises, and matching challenges are all fair game. The focus is on reinforcement, not so much on creativity.

9) **ANALYSIS:** At this point, students are asked to go back to the original reading or video clip to view the construction in its natural setting. How does the new structure fit into the larger picture? Often they complete a sentence analysis, where students pull phrases from the reading or listening comprehension and analyze the function of each word of the phrase. This allows them to see how the construction they have studied fits into a larger word picture: the paragraph or the full text.

10) **VOCABULARY:** Throughout this whole process, students make vocabulary lists of the new words they learn, creating their personalized course dictionary that they reference often. They make word trees, where they pull a word from the cultural content and diagram out from that

word, adding forms of the word and related words to the tree in order to understand significant vocabulary at more profound levels. At this point in the process it is rewarding to stop, look, and recognize just how many new words students have acquired during this whole process.

11) **DICTATIONS**: Short dictation exercises, pulled from the authentic materials, challenges students to apply their word discovery strategies to new aural comprehension materials. Emboldened by the results thus far achieved, students create word “tapestries” that contain holes. Sharing the results allow for comparisons and discussions of meaning. Often times instructors refer students to the original passage to check their work. Next, students confer in smaller groups regarding listening and pronunciation strategies.

12) **COMPREHENSION**: Students have been immersed in the language throughout the acquisition process with cultural content as the guide. They have been learning new words, constructions, and definitions, and they have added this new information to their knowledge banks. Instructors have only asked them to do one thing at a time, so they have never felt pressured to understand everything at once—just understand one piece of the puzzle at each moment and that is enough. But now they are ready to answer listening or reading comprehension questions because they are so familiar with the material they are able to answer questions with very little trouble. They are always amazed at how easy it is to answer cultural questions at this point and also very proud of themselves.

13) **EXTENSION**: Students are sent out into the world to use what they’ve learned. Through guided web research, they are able to locate information about cultural topics relating to the reading. By now their vocabulary is strong, they feel comfortable and knowledgeable regarding the material, and they are ready to be set free to explore. Assignments for web research often guide them to a specific site with follow-up questions or an activity to complete. Sometimes they are asked to find images or short videos related to cultural topics of the reading or listening pieces to share with the class. Other times they are asked to further investigate the Italian music, architecture, literature, history, or art they encountered in their authentic reading or listening exercise. Some tasks involve problem-based learning techniques, where they are asked to resolve a problem abroad: fill out a form on-line and send it to the teacher, research hotel rates, museum prices, train schedules, admission requirements. Students also further investigate their own related topics and share their discoveries about personal interests with the class and instructors.

The sequence just described can be applied to any type of investigation. Verb paradigms can be replaced by research and co-construction of noun forms, cultural rules and norms, literature analysis, art or music appreciation, or idiomatic expressions. Anything that can be co-constructed can fit into this sequence. The method is intuitive and effective, enjoyable and rewarding. Cultural information is not separated from grammar, nor is grammar taught in a vacuum, devoid of its natural cultural context, and thus not only is learning enjoyable, more importantly, it is relevant and meaningful.

Emory University has been using this system since 2004. We are always amazed at what our students can do at the end of the first week, the first month, the first semester, their first year. Our learners are able to decipher meaning from the language because we give them the keys to effective language-learning. They are never overwhelmed by complex reading or listening exercises because from their first day in the IVC class, they are guided through pages of continuous narrative and lengthy, unedited interviews. Students are taken by the unfolding cultural content and rapidly negotiate language in order to learn thus becoming quickly comfortable in finding meaning regardless of length of original text. Consequently they have no fear and embrace full-speed the next challenge. Having learned everything through the context of culture, they can talk on any topic—art, architecture, philosophy, history, science, music, grammar, social mores—in Italy and in their own communities. By respecting the natural rhythms of language learning within its cultural context, we have created a highly successful community of learners and instructors. Needless to say, early satisfaction leads to deeper and more enthusiastic engagement, not only on the part of the students, but also within the broader community of colleagues at Emory and at partner universities. IVC offers its partner schools, at both the high school and college levels, an entire language-learning system already in place, rich with meaning and cultural content, and filled with possibility.