

MAKING L2 ITALIAN CLASSES INCLUSIVE IN NORTH AMERICA: ACTIVITIES AND SUGGESTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, educational entities have been implementing new policies to work against discrimination towards members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Some strategies include allowing students to indicate their preferred names and state their chosen pronouns. Additionally, more institutions have created Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committees to guarantee adherence to the newly implemented procedures. Following these guidelines can be challenging when teaching an Italian course since this language has a gender-binary structure. Furthermore, implicit biases embedded in Italian could promote cultural aspects that are not inclusive.

A primary goal for instructors in North America is to provide an inclusive classroom for students of various backgrounds. Many colleges and universities have a template for educators to include in their syllabi to guarantee the existence of such a safe environment³. As a part of these new policies, many North American universities provide workshops and training that help educators create in-person or online learning spaces that are equitable and caring. After participating in some such seminars held by the University of Toronto's Teaching Assistants' Training Program (TATP), we explored the possibility of making our Italian classes more inclusive. We aimed to create courses that would take equity beyond the syllabus statements and the dynamics in the classroom and include topics and course materials that would actively involve the students in such discussions. During the past four years, we have been promoting this teaching philosophy. We have been invited to hold workshops for professional associations and university educators interested in exploring these topics with their students. Preliminary observations were reported in a paper presented at the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in November 2020⁴.

In this article, we will discuss the different aspects that could be considered when planning an inclusive Italian course, such as strategies to use in the syllabus and the classroom. We will illustrate some teaching materials and activities we used in our workshops to share with teachers who want to employ similar content in their course design.

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³ A commonly-used statement, taken from the University of Iowa's College of Education, reads, «Respect for Diversity: It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture.» <https://education.uiowa.edu/syllabus-checklist>

⁴ Referring to Sara Galli's paper (2022).

2. SYLLABUS AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

When creating a course, the initial step is designing the syllabus. It involves two crucial components: the language used in it and the materials chosen as teaching content. For a syllabus written in Italian, there are strategies we could employ to render its text inclusive, e.g., using collective nouns, impersonal and passive forms, and relative pronouns (Galli, 2022). Furthermore, we should design our inclusive syllabi conscious of adopting strategies that will be present both in teaching and student-teacher interactions.

Once we start communicating with our class, we could make students feel welcome to express themselves through small gestures such as stating our correct pronouns in English and Italian. Setting this example for them can be done in the first e-mail and during the first session of the term while doing the introductions. That, however, does not mean that students should be forced to do so, as some may feel uncomfortable. It is essential to implicitly let students know they are welcome to share certain personal information about themselves and how they prefer to be addressed. It is the right of individuals to establish their identity and be referred to by the name and pronouns they desire⁵.

Italian pronouns, however, are not as accommodating as their English counterparts, given the gender-binary system of the language. Therefore, another consideration can be using the attendance list. Instead of asking students to write their official first and last name – i.e., their name according to their identity documents – ask them to write their ‘nome proprio’⁶, the name the student chooses to be called. This information is beneficial if the university has not provided a way for the person to indicate their chosen name on their institutional profile. In this case, asking for the student number can help identify them in the system when inserting grades or other administrative work requiring access to the individual’s university profile.

In written communications sent to everyone in the class, the teacher could avoid the agreement with the plural masculine when addressing the students. To do this, we could change the ending of nouns and their modifiers with symbols – such as -* or -ø – or letters not typically found in the final position – e.g., -u or -y – to remove the grammatical gender. These strategies, proposed by some language experts and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, are not without defects, as most do not provide pronunciation clues and work primarily in writing. Furthermore, the lack of a phonetic value or phonological rules makes them incompatible with automated text-to-speech machines, an essential tool for the blind community⁷. It must be noted that teaching students to substitute endings with symbols is not meant to replace the grammar of Italian, mainly because they are not a solution to the issue of inclusive writing.

In higher-level language courses, we came across more students who wanted to incorporate inclusive writing in their communications, presumably because of a higher confidence level in producing Italian texts. Therefore, we had to be prepared to answer more challenging questions in these classes, such as “What would be the neutral pronoun in Italian?” and “How do I make grammatical agreements correctly when using non-standard pronouns?” Picking a pronoun is particularly challenging for non-binary students who speak genderless languages natively, in which inclusive language is a less

⁵ <https://www.dvc.edu/san-ramon/faculty/pdfs/Equitizing%20your%20Class%20Handout.pdf>.

⁶ We recommend using ‘nome proprio’ instead of ‘nome scelto’ (or ‘nome preferito’) because we were told by some non-binary individuals that ‘nome scelto’ sounds more like a stage or artistic name, as opposed to being the name that truly represents the person.

⁷ In one of our workshops, we had a blind student who brought up to our attention the fact that many of the ‘alternate endings’ are not accessibility-friendly as they are not programmable into the automated speech machines.

complicated matter. In English, for example, instead of “She (or he) is tall,” it is correct to say, “They are tall,” using “they” as a singular, non-binary subject pronoun.

Furthermore, some English speakers have come up with new pronouns which have gained recognition and are being used on forms such as job applications:

Table 1. *Individuals can choose from a list of pronouns when applying for an opportunity at Scotiabank in Canada*

| HE/SHE | HIM/HER | HIS/HER | HIS/HERS | HIMSELF/HERSELF |
|--------|---------|---------|----------|-----------------|
| zie | zim | zir | zis | zieself |
| sie | hir | hir | hirs | hirsself |
| ey | em | eir | eirs | eirself |
| ve | ver | vis | vers | verself |
| tEy | ter | tem | ters | terself |
| e | em | eir | eirs | emself |

So far, ‘lɔi’ seems to be the only Italian novel pronoun some individuals have used on various social media platforms⁸. Some others prefer the pronoun ‘loro’, but the latter still requires agreement with one of the two grammatical genders. So, suppose the student chooses ‘loro’ as the subject pronoun to refer to a single person. In that case, they will have to replace the final vowels of the nouns and adjectives referring to the same individual to deprive words of their grammatical gender. Suppose the instructor wants to teach the students that strategy. In that case, it is vital to provide specific guidelines, including the fact that these are helpful tools for people who need them to go beyond the two-gender system of Italian when expressing themselves; therefore, they are not approaches every person seeks. Lastly, those who use them must be consistent in their communications – e.g., maintaining gender neutrality and using the same symbol (or replacement vowel) throughout the writing.

As an alternative, there is yet a better approach to overcoming the binary structure of Italian. We discussed grammatical limitations in inclusive writing in our 2021 interview with the Italian trans writer and activist Porpora Marcasciano since we noticed she does not limit herself to a specific gender in autoreferential passages in her book “*AntoloGaid*” (2015). For example, in one paragraph, she refers to herself using the feminine form, and in the next one, she uses the masculine (Marcasciano, 2015). During the interview, she confirmed that she kept the language as neutral as possible. In our opinion, such flexibility in switching between the two genders to refer to one particular individual is a good solution for people who are gender nonbinary. Furthermore, communicating in this manner is functional both in written and oral speech as it does not violate any phonomorphological rules of Italian.

3. MATERIALS

Choosing suitable materials to make our classes inclusive is an essential passage that will enrich our courses and give the instructor a chance to highlight the relevance of the discussion regarding gender in contemporary Italian society. Although some textbooks

⁸ For more information regarding the personal pronoun ‘lɔi’ and the use of the schwa in Italian, we recommend reading Vera Gheno’s article *Schwa: storia, motivi e obiettivi di una proposta* found at https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/Schwa/4_Gheno.html.

now include reflections on this topic, we still need a grammar manual that uses neutral language or incorporates it in its explanations.

3.1. *Reading Materials*

Alma Sabatini started the research on sexism in the Italian language more than thirty-five years ago, in 1986. This linguistic matter rose to prominence after the letter written by the former president of the deputy chamber, Laura Boldrini. The missive, tweeted by Deputy Boldrini herself in 2015, pointed out the necessity of aligning the Italian Parliament's language with the institutional, professional, and social roles covered by women in contemporary society. Since then, many journalists, scholars, and members of the public active on social media have been expressing opinions and contributing to a discussion that has not yet found a solution.

The abundance of online materials requires attention when picking content as didactic resources, particularly for sensitive subjects like inclusive language. Also, we selected readings based on the decision to utilize free and accessible realia in our classroom to give our students a chance to glimpse contemporary Italian society. That is why we decided not to use Sabatini's manual, given the sufficient number of more recent research and publications and the fact that her manual is frequently quoted in research on linguistic disparity.

One of the first published resources is the 2009 booklet by the European Parliament, which focuses on suggestions and strategies to update its language guidelines⁹. In seventeen pages, this handbook explains the importance of neutral language and parliamentary directives. It also provides many examples that can be useful when talking about inclusive language in class¹⁰.

A second source is the manual published by the Italian female journalists' association, GiULiA, entitled *Donne, grammatica e media*¹¹, presented at the Italian chamber of deputies in July 2014 and written by the scholar Cecilia Robustelli. This booklet is handy because it contains examples from major Italian newspaper headlines and articles and some grammatical schemes that can be used as teaching material. Furthermore, on the last pages, there is an extensive catalog that includes an alphabetical list of Italian job titles, both with masculine and feminine declensions, which can be inserted into the appendices of textbooks.

The third and last reading we included in our presentation refers to the schwa. In the past few years, it has been the central point of discussions and debates regarding approaches to writing inclusively. Usually, as a part of our conference talks, we reference Vera Gheno's article *Schwa: storia, motivi e obiettivi di una proposta*, published by Treccani. We then illustrate different cases in which this phoneme has been employed or discussed, like the petition drafted by some scholars¹² to illustrate the fundamental connection between language and society.

⁹ The booklet can be freely downloaded here

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/187102/GNL_Guidelines_IT-original.pdf.

¹⁰ Another interesting free booklet produced by the Italian Agenzia delle Entrate in 202. The manual entitled "*Linee guida per l'uso di un linguaggio rispettoso delle differenze di genere*" contains many examples and strategies and an interesting preface written by Claudio Marazzini which was at that moment the president of Accademia della Crusca. The text is available here:

https://www.agenziaentrate.gov.it/portale/documents/20143/1742359/Linee_guida_linguaggio_genero_2020.pdf/0327598d-9607-4929-ceae-a3760b081ab4.

¹¹ The booklet has been widely published and is easy to find. We suggest using Cecilia Robustelli's profile on academia.edu https://www.academia.edu/7493636/Donne_Grammatica_e_Media.

¹² <https://www.change.org/p/lo-schwa-%C9%99-no-grazie-pro-lingua-nostra>.

3.2. Teaching Materials

As we stated at the beginning of this section, there still needs to be more teaching material that respects inclusive language policies. Unfortunately, we still encounter textbooks that use the masculine form as neutral or do not allow strategies or symbols for genderless writing. Also, we noticed that many manuals do not consider the reality of today's society, where some individuals do not identify themselves following the traditional binary categorization. Therefore, we created some teaching material for our workshops and classes that instructors can add to every Italian course following simple principles.

The first one is assumed to refrain from forcing students to identify necessarily with a conventional binary system. When we need to explain or verify the use of adjectives, e.g., the qualifying ones, we can decide to use objects in our examples instead of people since Italian is a gendered language. In this way, we will not create confusion by overlapping the notion of grammatical gender with the gender expression of individuals. This method can be adopted to explain classifiers and teach tenses that require agreement, e.g., the 'passato prossimo'.

A second change to implement in Italian teaching materials is using examples that reflect reality nowadays. That means, instead of being given for granted that a person named Mario will decide to use singular masculine pronouns, we should insert in our examples the case in which Mario could identify themselves as a nonbinary individual. To do so, we must introduce writing strategies to our students to help them complete the assignment. Here are some examples that we used:

Mario is a cisgender heterosexual man (m. sing.)

Mario è (tall) ____ > Mario è alto

Lucia is a gender non-binary person

Lucia è (tall) ____ > Lucia è alto/a, alt* or alta

4. CLASS ACTIVITIES

This section illustrates some activities we have used during our workshops. They can be introduced in Italian courses to ensure the adherence of the course to DEI guidelines. While presenting some practice questions, we will indicate the suggested level of Italian knowledge for each of them, citing the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), goals, and necessary materials. Students can perform all the activities online and in class if not otherwise indicated.

4.1. Feminine and masculine: The hidden bias

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Levels | A1/A2 |
| Goals | The activity aims to help students reflect on the hidden cultural bias between masculine and feminine forms and how it is embedded in the Italian language. |
| Material(s) | Board |
| Educational Level(s) | K-12/College/University |
| Social Form(s) | In group/ Peer activity |

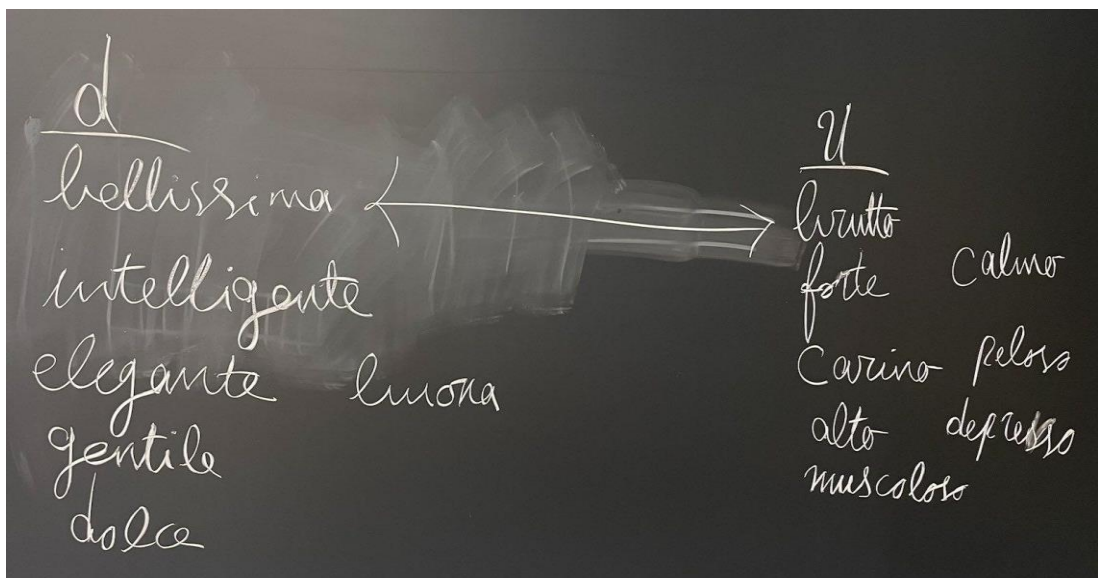
Instructors can use this activity to introduce the concept to the students in Italian and English classes, e.g., in a linguistic course. It is straightforward to set up and present to students; every time we utilized it, it generated a fruitful discussion.

After dividing the board into two parts, the teacher will write on one side the word ‘donna’ and on the other side the word ‘uomo’. Then, students will be asked to write or say adjectives they would spontaneously use or have heard associated with each of the abovementioned nouns. Every time we proposed this exercise, we noticed that some adjectives, particularly those that refer to physical appearance, will be perceived as feminine. Meanwhile, others – e.g., ‘forte’ – are generally associated with the masculine. After completing the board, the teacher will ask the students to reflect on the responses. We recommend starting with the positive qualities that will make reflecting on the negative ones easier. We then asked if they could identify any pattern, if the adjectives have something in common, or if one particular adjective could not represent both categories. In an activity like this, we should avoid asking why they put a characteristic under a specific noun to avoid appearing judgmental towards the students. The conclusion we reached at the end of this assignment is that the bias against feminine forms is not rooted in the language but in the culture.

With higher level students, this activity can be expanded by asking the class to look up the adjectives in Italian dictionaries, read the definitions, and reflect on them, e.g., it is interesting to notice that notwithstanding ‘forte’ is a neutral gender adjective, it includes only examples related to masculine nouns¹³.

Meanwhile, those who want to deepen the discussion through a social lens can use the video of Paola Cortellesi, who hosted the David di Donatello ceremony in 2018 and gave an inspirational and exciting speech about the Italian androcentric perspective using the list included in Stefano Bartezzaghi’s book “*Non se ne può più*” (2012) on the semantic difference between feminine and masculine forms.

Image 1. Here is an example of the adjectives students thought of spontaneously during this activity



¹³ For example, in the Garzanti dictionary, we can find «uno studente forte in italiano, è il cantante più forte» although it could include feminine examples as well that could help students understand the neutrality of this term https://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_italiano/F/forte_1.shtml?refresh_ce

4.2. *The invisible feminine*

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Levels | B1/B2 |
| Goals | The activity has the goal to help students reflect on the bias between male and female job titles |
| Material(s) | Electronic device with internet access to the following websites https://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario_italiano/ https://www.garzantilinguistica.it/ https://www.grandidizionari.it/dizionario_italiano.aspx https://dizionario.internazionale.it/ https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ |
| Educational Level(s) | K-12/College/University |
| Social Form(s) | Individual/Group activity |

This exercise can be added to the Italian course syllabus when discussing the vocabulary regarding job titles. We can introduce it using material and realia illustrated before, e.g., newspaper headlines or the GiULiA booklet. We can use this subject to review the Italian grammar rules regarding masculine and feminine forms. This activity will require a higher level of Italian since we will use monolingual dictionaries. Hence, the students should be able to read the definition autonomously.

After dividing the class into small groups, we assigned each of them a feminine job title that they must look up on the dictionaries recommended by Accademia della Crusca. For example, we can ask students to look up ‘ministra,’ ‘ingegnera,’ ‘meccanica,’ ‘segretaria,’ and ‘maestra’¹⁴. Each unit will then have to report to the class by replying to the following questions:

- Avete trovato la parola?
- Ci sono dizionari che non includono la parola?
- Perché secondo te la parola non è presente?
- C’è qualche definizione che hai trovato interessante?
- Ci sono differenze con il titolo professionale al maschile?

The results we got, and the reflection generated by this exercise, helped our students understand the cultural bias towards feminine job titles. To deepen the subject, it can be used as a departure point for reflecting on the historical female roles, their evolution, and the changes in the family dynamic in Italian society. Also, the activity can be translated into a more visual reflection, just asking students to look up the words on search engines using the “image” filter and reflect on the differences between the searched term(s) and shown results.

¹⁴ We want to acknowledge that the key words we have been using during these years are constantly changing e.g., when we started it was very rare to encounter the lemma ‘ministra’ in Italian dictionaries, meanwhile nowadays it is very common, that is why we recommend verifying them before proposing the assignment.

4.3. *Rewriting Italian Texts*

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Levels | B2/C1 |
| Goals | The activity has the goal to help students reflect on possible strategies to write in a neutral form |
| Material(s) | Computer/Paper sheet |
| Educational Level(s) | K-12/College/University |
| Social Form(s) | Individual/Group activity |

This assignment requires a higher level of knowledge of Italian. Students must be familiar with complex syntactic structures like impersonal and passive forms, grammatical elements, e.g., relative pronouns, and the mastery of Italian vocabulary, including collective nouns.

To introduce the activity, we usually illustrate some of the most common strategies used in recent years to achieve a neutral language, e.g., *, ə, a/o¹⁵. Then, we give them simple sentences to transform into a neutral form, working together to illustrate which tactics can be helpful.

- Gli studenti sono tutti invitati ⇒ La classe è invitata
- Gli studenti dovranno inviare i saggi ⇒ I saggi dovranno essere inviati

But also allowing them to use the abovementioned symbols:

- Cari studenti ⇒ car* student* ⇒ carə studentə

The final part of this assignment may include two components. The first is asking the students to produce a small composition using as much neutral language as possible. The second one is to rewrite an email or a small text we provide them in a neutral form.

4.4. *Reflecting on Italian inclusive language strategies*

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Levels | B2/C1 |
| Goals | The activity has the goal to help students reflect on the proposed strategies to make the Italian language neutral |
| Material(s) | Electronic device with internet access to the following websites https://italianoinclusivo.it/scrittura/ https://www.valigiablu.it/sceva-scvha-linguaggio-inclusivo/ https://www.ultimavoce.it/lo-schwa-linguaggio-inclusivo-o-neolingua/ https://www.micromega.net/schwa-problemi-limiti-cecilia-robustelli/ |
| Educational Level(s) | College/University |
| Social Form(s) | Group activity with guided discussion |

¹⁵ A proper and quite a complete list of these strategies can be found in Vera Gheno's article *Lo schwa tra fantasia e norma* <https://lafalla.cassero.it/lo-schwa-tra-fantasia-e-norma/>.

This assignment is the one that requires the highest level of knowledge of the Italian language among the activities that we usually propose since students will have to read Italian newspapers and articles by themselves.

After illustrating a list containing the most common strategies for using inclusive language, the instructor will divide the class into groups, assigning each of them an Italian article on the subject; some will favor it, and others will be against it. Following the reading, students will have to reply to the questions, which will help in generating a collective reflection:

- È possibile usare l'italiano in maniera neutrale?
- Quali sono i vantaggi e gli svantaggi di un italiano neutrale?
- Qual è la strategia che tu preferisci? Perché?
- Scrivi cinque frasi usando la tua strategia preferita e poi spiega quali sono i cambiamenti che hai dovuto fare e le difficoltà incontrate.
- Qual è secondo te il futuro del linguaggio neutrale?

Another way to guide the discussion is to divide the class into two groups, those who will have to provide arguments for the neutral language and those who will have to come up with one against it. The discussion will be in Italian, and it can also be an interactive way to review the Italian subjunctive rules.

5. CONCLUSION

We started researching this topic because we had students who would come up to us in class to ask how they could express themselves in Italian without being limited in picking one of the two grammatical genders. In the past few years, we continuously research strategies and ways to help students of different backgrounds express themselves more freely when speaking Italian. Since we began holding workshops on inclusive writing, we have encountered individuals resisting such a notion to “defend” the integrity of the Italian language. Nevertheless, the experience has been mostly positive, particularly regarding the students’ reactions. Of course, this is a work in progress, and we continue to see changes in the arguments and the strategies as we go along. For example, as more people use inclusive language online, there is now a long list of symbols and vowels that could replace the ending of nouns and their modifiers.

In the classroom, even small changes in the way we send out communications to students have shown to have an impact. For example, as a comment in the official course evaluations, one respondent reported, «[The instructor] is also very very [*sì*] respectful of our boundaries in that [they try] to omit any form of linguistic sexism where [they] can, such as addressing us by *car* student** instead of *cari studenti* (which implicitly groups everyone as a male).»

As university students take fewer courses in the humanities, particularly language courses, a curriculum that allows a more inclusive language could help attract more people as it would give them a sense of feeling welcome in the learning environment where diversity is appreciated.

Today, however, not many courses teach students to use these strategies nor allow them to explore their linguistic curiosity. We hope this article will benefit educators who want to design their courses with equity and inclusivity as a central aspect. Also, we want to show those who resist introducing such topics into their courses that making Italian classes inclusive is possible and not disruptive to more traditional teaching methodologies.

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