Sustaining Content to Sustain Discourse: An SCLT/I Approach to Transitioning into Literature-based Courses through a Study of the Petrarchan Sonnet

1. Bridging the Gaps

In 2016, I began collaborating with university professors on pedagogical projects involving content-based instruction. Our goal was to establish a more fluid transition from the secondary level to the literature-focused college Italian major. According to the professors I interviewed, most incoming freshmen initially place into introductory level L2 courses even after finishing a four to six-year secondary school program. When considering that high school students receive approximately 700 hours of instruction in a six-year program, they should test into college courses well above the introductory level. This lack of proficiency is problematic for university language departments as students are often unable to acquire the academic language and extended discourse competence needed for literature courses; the two years of beginner and intermediate language classes offered at most universities are not sufficient in terms of contact hours (Dupuy 206). Furthermore, 100- and 200-level classes often prioritize practical, personal, and informal language use while eschewing the formal register of the L2 needed in literature courses (Kern, "Reconciling" 20). Maintaining and increasing enrollment in language major programs means addressing the *preparation gap* at the secondary level.

Since 2009, I have been my students' only Italian teacher in grades 9-12. In 2017, I made significant changes to the program by placing a more rigorous focus on literature, history, and the visual arts. As part of the initiative, I introduced a semester-long study of the Petrarchan sonnet into the final year of the program and, since then, a markedly increased number of students have entered directly into 300-level literature-based courses at their universities. Poetry, in combination with a curated focus on literacy, and oral and written output, has facilitated the transition from the intermediate level to literature-based coursework.

Output is the expression of meaning bearing language, both oral and written, and the extent of its influence on language acquisition has been heavily disputed by SLA researchers. A widely accepted opinion is that learners cannot acquire language through input alone because "when one hears language, one can often

interpret the meaning without the use of syntax . . . This is not the case with language production or output, because one is forced to put the words into some order" (Gass et al. 356). During the 1970s and early 1980s, renowned SLA expert Merrill Swain, along with Wallace Lambert, Sharon Lapkin, and Richard Tucker, conducted the research on elementary and middle school French immersion students that would form the basis of Swain's Output Hypothesis. During their evaluations, Swain and her colleagues noticed that the learners in the studies did not speak as much in their L2 French classes as they did during their L1 English courses despite years of immersion. Furthermore, the researchers observed that "the teachers did not 'push' the students to [communicate] in a manner that was grammatically accurate or sociolinguistically appropriate" and thus concluded that while comprehensible input may be sufficient in terms of L2 learners' ability to communicate by "'getting one's message across,'" it did not increase their capability of conveying these messages "'precisely, coherently, or appropriately'" ("Output Hypothesis" 472-473). To use Bill VanPatten's words, Swain believes that asking learners to produce output encourages them to move beyond focusing primarily on the content of L2 communicative acts and become more sensitive to *how* that information is conveyed (69). Put another way, learners will begin to focus on form and structure *in addition* to meaning when output is stressed. In fact, as VanPatten and Onur Uludag point out, Swain posits that "by being pushed to make output, learners move from semantic processing to syntactic processing, thus enriching their grammatical systems" (45). In my opinion, output also has what I would call a "processing encouragement" function; students are forced to pay attention and process input or risk exclusion from classroom tasks and interactions.

   Swain's research has many practical implications for instructors looking to prepare students for literature classes; we must create an environment that encourages learners to use language productively and accurately so that they may cultivate the native-like proficiency necessary for advancement. When novice and intermediate level instructors design curriculum, oral communication is usually a central goal. However, if we want students to move beyond roughly conveying meaning, communication must be more closely tied to *literacy*. In fact, literacy expert Richard Kern calls communication the "macro principle" of literacy asserting that "the aims of teaching face-to-

face communication and developing learners' ability to read, write, and think critically about texts are not incompatible goals but, in fact, mutually interdependent" ("Reconciling" 20, *Literacy* 45). Kern argues that foreign language teachers should develop curriculum that supports "reflective communication" by addressing four complementary literacy goals: 1. meaningful immersion in written texts; 2. instructor support in reading and writing L2 texts; 3. textual analysis training; 4. guidance on how to "transform meanings into new representations" ("Reconciling" 22). Our study of the Petrarchan sonnet corresponded to all of Kern's literacy objectives, and, following his models, I embedded these concepts into the curriculum starting in Level 1.

The foundation upon which I built my entire program is the desire to aid students in successfully drawing closer to the types of natural, detailed, and *accurate* L2 exchanges characteristic of near-native speakers. In service of this goal, I emphasize formal presentations followed by informal student-led interactions. Beginning in the first year, students give 2-3 minute memorized oral presentations once every quarter; the time requirements increase as the years progress. In preparation, students produce the written text of the oral presentation which is then corrected and revised *in class* to avoid the temptation of web-based translation sites. Writing often serves to help clearly define one's ideas and its very act brings clarity, organization, and depth to ideas that were previously underdeveloped (Kern, *Literacy* 49). In addition, Kern notes that writing out a presentation before giving it orally allows learners to "deal in a concrete way with the transition from speaking in brief utterances to producing extended, connected discourse" ("Advanced Foreign Language Learning" 4).

Colleagues have questioned my formal presentation requirements believing that they are time consuming and that students should be able to "just talk" without relying on formal preparation. I attribute this skepticism to the prevalence of the functional style of communicative language teaching (CLT) that dominates most novice and intermediate level classes, a methodology that has received harsh criticism from applied linguists who view it as "shortsighted" due to its "focus on functional oral language use [which] encourages surface-level comprehension of information without any kind of critical or analytical component" (Paesani 43). While students may be able to produce autonomous, spontaneous communication at the sentence level through a

functional CLT approach, extended discourse competence will remain elusive without a focus on literacy, textual analysis, and written preparation of complex oral presentations using authentic L2 sources.

When my students present, they do so with the aid of slides that contain only images but no written text. The memorization requirement has two learning objectives. First, students master the content that they will present and become "experts" on their mini topics. This heightened confidence through expertise reinforces autonomous, spontaneous communication skills while promoting the development of extended discourse competence. Second, students practice the accurate linguistic forms that both help them move toward native-like speech and galvanize the peer-driven Q&A sessions that follow each presentation. Presenters are graded on the quality, length, detail, and number of their questions and responses; from early on, they learn to ask questions that both generate and show evidence of critical thinking skills. By the end of the second year, the class can sustain discussions after each presentation that often exceed 20 minutes. I limit my role to recasting, rephrasing difficult exchanges, and facilitating the recall of prior knowledge so that students quickly learn to rely on each other by working together to produce meaningful, extensive output.

I spend most of the 9th grade year exploring narration with my students. Our studies include: 1. personal narratives (both "cradle to present day" and small moments); 2. fairy tales; 3. *novelle,* and 4. myths. Literary texts offer rich input and expose students to many styles of discourse while also providing content that allows them to engage in contemplative peer-to-peer discussions (Barrette et al. 217). I begin with narration in the early years because it is the style of literature my students know best in their L1. By starting with the familiar, I am better able to lead them into the realm of the unfamiliar when we later study poetry. As part of my research for this paper, I asked my 9th grade students to reflect on their experiences as part of their student-centered learning community. Prior to the reflection, they had just written and presented two large projects: the composition of an original fairy tale for which they had to select an Italian proverb as its moral, and an interview with someone from their grandparents' generation. The goals of both projects were to: 1. gain a deeper understanding of narrative techniques; 2. provide focus on form opportunities centered on the use of the *passato prossimo* and the *imperfetto*, and

3. make stylistic decisions based on the narrative's genre. Many learners reported presenting to be one of their favorite activities because they enjoy the supportive peer-to-peer exchange. They also said that fielding questions from classmates is often more challenging and rewarding than interacting with instructors because they feel more comfortable taking linguistics risks.

Oral language production is vital to the learning process because it aids students in identifying knowledge gaps and encourages them to seek further information about their L2 (Swain, "Inseparability" 200). However, to achieve extended discourse competence, students must also be exposed to knowledge gaps during the written discourse planning stage so that they may "become more aware of the linguistic, rhetorical, and cognitive options available to them" (Kern, *Literacy* 61). In my experience, these L2 lacunae are especially salient, and learners feel motivated to fill them, when there is an intense desire to forge social connections in the classroom community.

2. Sustained-Content Language Teaching/Instruction (SCLT/I)

Most high school foreign language programs organize their curricula according to thematic units. Each year, learners study between six and ten units that focus on the language and vocabulary associated with specific themes and are asked to perform activities within the context of each theme. This technique exposes students to a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical forms but does not provide the linguistic depth needed for success in a literature course as much of the work is focused on grammatical practice at the sentence level. When texts are used, they are usually examined for surface level comprehension and mined for examples of the forms being studied. Because the themes change so often, learners cannot benefit from the textual and discursive redundancies that occur when a single theme is built upon over an extended period.

One possible solution to this preparation gap lies in a subset of content-based instruction called sustained-content language teaching/instruction (SCLT/I), a form of instruction which focuses on a *single* theme over the length of a course while still maintaining language acquisition as a primary goal. SCLT/I offers "greater depth of treatment of the subject matter" while remaining accessible to students "at somewhat lower proficiency levels" (Bingham Wesche 11). My students readily adapted to SCLT/I because they were eager

to infuse the language with a profundity that leads to deep interpersonal connections. Adolescents "often find in that second language . . . an outlet for all kinds of dreams and aspirations that they don't find in their own language" (Kramsch and Gerhards 75). However, the instructor must cultivate this new channel of expression by providing multi-layered, content-rich texts that introduce the complex arguments, feelings, and ideas that both inspire and *require* students to produce the high-level oral and written output that leads to extended discourse competence. Furthermore, and most importantly, the texts must be linguistically complex and cognitively engaging while remaining *manageable*. For this reason, I turned to the 14-line Petrarchan sonnet. The Petrarchan sonnet contains 14 hendecasyllabic verses broken up into two quatrains which make up an octave. The octave follows a fixed ABBA ABBA rhyme scheme and is thematically separated from the second half of the work by *la volta*, a change in theme which occurs at the beginning of the ninth line. The second half of the work is made up of two tercets and follows varying rhyme schemes such as CDC DCD. The Petrarchan sonnet's complexity can sustain a semester's worth of study while its conciseness facilitates *replication* by students at the intermediate level.

According to Harold Bloom, "The work of great poetry is to aid *us* to become free artists of ourselves . . . the art of reading poetry is an authentic training in the augmentation of consciousness" (29). Poetry not only creates the conditions for heightened consciousness but also places "demands on imaginative and affective engagement that, unlike the memorization of irregular verbs, vocabulary lists, and plot summaries, involves risk-taking" (Cranston 954-55). In other words, reading, writing, and discussing poetry is a highly engaging form of cognitive training that promotes linguistic growth through risk-taking. In preparation, students must first be given access points that teach them *how* to read poetry as this skill is often underdeveloped in L1. In my experience, students are most willing to engage in cognitive and linguistic risk-taking when they feel anchored by simple methods, most often in the form of steps.

During the first semester of the 2018-2019 school year, as part of several initiatives involving the use of art in the classroom, I developed a 10-step method of art criticism based on Edmund Burke Feldman's 4-step method which involves: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgement. The second semester was dedicated

to the Petrarchan sonnet and included works by: Petrarch, Cecco Angiolieri, Bonagiunta Orbicciani, Vittoria Colonna, Tullia d'Aragona, Veronica Gambara, and Gaspara Stampa. One of my students, Emily Andriello, suggested creating a 10-step methodology for analyzing the sonnets similar to the one we used for art criticism. Many of my most effective methods are student-revised, if not student-generated, because they are insiders in the learning experience. Utilizing feedback from our class, we crafted the Paciaroni/Andriello 10-Step Method of Sonnet Analysis. The method, outlined below, is comprised of three phases—examination, analysis, and interpretation.

Paciaroni/Andriello 10-Step Method of Sonnet Analysis[3]

EXAMINATION STEPS

	Activity	Procedures and Objectives
Step 1 (Instructor-led)	• Chi è/era lo scrittore? • Qual è stata la sua formazione? • Fa/faceva parte di un particolare movimento letterario?	• Students receive background information. • The responses to these three questions provide input. • This input allows students to enter into a manageable dialogue (output) in subsequent phases.
Step 2	Leggete il primo verso. Secondo voi, di che cosa tratta la poesia?	• Students make simple predictions based on the first verse. • The class is on alert; they are now tasked with the mission of supporting or disproving the proposed hypotheses.

After the warm-up discussion, we read the poem together. Because the sonnets are not in modern Italian, I find it helpful to put the original text next to a paraphrase in modern Italian and read both.

ANALYSIS STEPS

	Activity	Procedures and Objectives
Step 3	Guardate la prima quartina. Qual è una parola che potreste utilizzare per descriverla?	• Learners organically acquire new vocabulary and sharpen their analytical skills because they are asked to choose *only one* word.
Step 4	Guardate la seconda quartina. Qual è una parola che potreste utilizzare per descriverla?	• When sharing their words, students must give textual support for their choice. • Students systematically learn to target keywords that convey emotion, furthering L2 growth and stimulating metacognitive development.
Step 5	Fate una domanda all'ottava.	• Students comfortably express both curiosity and confusion when they ask questions directly to the sonnet, not the teacher or their peers. • The class learns to identify the unifying theme presented in the octave.
Step 6	Guardate la prima terzina. Qual è una parola che potreste utilizzare per descriverla?	• Students pay closer attention to *la volta;* they can now contrast words chosen for the second half of the poem with those selected for the first.
Step 7	Guardate la seconda terzina. Qual è una parola che potreste utilizzare per descriverla?	• Learners demonstrate comprehension by both supporting their choices with textual evidence and defending their opinions against those of their classmates.
Step 8	Fate una domanda alle due terzine.	• Learners improve their questioning techniques while generating spontaneous, community-building, collaborative dialogues.

The analysis phase demands a substantial amount of output on the part of the student, but the 10-step format provides valuable consistency. Paul D. Toth and Kara Moranski state that "as certain linguistic tools become frequently associated with particular acts of meaning-making, an ever-growing amount of familiar language can be utilized automatically and without conscious effort," an assertion based on the work of psycholinguist N.C. Ellis (78). Over time, following the 10-step method frees up the components of students' working memory associated with poetry analysis, allowing for L2 development in other areas. In addition, the method encourages students to comfortably express both curiosity and confusion when they ask questions directly to the sonnet, not the teacher or their peers, thereby promoting "an environment that is at once provocative and safe" (Cranston 955). For example, in reaction to

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Tullia d'Aragona's "Qual vaga Filomela che fuggita," one learner posed the question, "*La gabbia rappresenta l'amore?*" and later reflected that her inquiry could help to teach a life lesson about how love should not feel like a cage.

INTERPRETATION STEPS

	Activity	Procedures and Objectives
Step 9	Con i vostri compagni, fate un riassunto di tutto il sonetto in due frasi.	• Students keep their statements concise so that they may practice word economy and reflect on exactly what they want to say with precision and accuracy.
Step 10	Qual è il messaggio centrale della poesia? Ditelo in una frase che contiene meno di 10 parole.	• This reflective piece promotes growth by removing the crutch of relying on simplistic introductory-level words.

During all three phases, students delighted in exploring the full expanse of human emotions in their L2, from *euforia* to *depressione*. As noted by David Hanauer, "learning a language is a significant, potentially life-changing, event [. . .] that involves the whole human being, beyond just intellectual abilities" (105). Evidence of students' emerging wisdom can be found in their responses to Petrarch's *Benedetto sia 'l giorno*, which included: 1. "*Certe cose valgono la sofferenza*." 2. "*Non esistono emozioni positive senza emozioni negative*." 3. "*Non puoi scappare dall'amore!*" The 10-step method puts the *whole* student, who is ever-evolving in emotional complexity, at the center of the learning process. Poetry can be intimidating for students because, in contrast to narrative, they must acquire a different skill set in order to unpack the message and engage with the text. The 10-step method gave them an entry point into manageable L2 literature while promoting the linguistic, cognitive, and analytical development that leads to extended discourse competence. Once students gained an understanding of how to interpret and discuss the sonnets of well-known medieval and Renaissance poets, they applied their skills to the crafting of original works, an exercise that further enriched their L2 development by requiring them to create new representations of meaning.

3. *La volta*: The Passage from Reader to Author

We began our SCLT/I-based sonnet course by applying the 10-step method to the works of: Petrarch, Cecco Angiolieri, and Bonagiunta Orbicciani. While the discussions were student-centered, they were teacher-led. After that, in order to conduct a focus on the *passato remoto*, learners completed group research projects in which they had to tell the class about the colorful lives of Renaissance poetesses: Vittoria Colonna, Tullia d'Aragona, Veronica Gambara, and Gaspara Stampa. After each presentation, the groups led a 10-step analysis of one of their subject's works. Their classmates, now more adept at sonnet analysis, had already read and interpreted the poems for homework following the 10-step method. The students generated some very lively L2 discussions because they were captivated by the poems' powerful images, like eyes crying so much that they lose their ability to see. In addition, they considered themselves activists seeking further recognition for female writers' contributions to the Italian literary canon.

After the exploration of the poetesses, each learner was given the task of choosing a sonnet from another group, treating it as if it were a *proposta*, and then writing an original *risposta* following the same rhyme scheme, as dictated by tradition. When the sonnets were presented to the class on slides, each line was accompanied by the image of a painting currently on view, in order to facilitate comprehension and spiral back to our SCLT/I-based study of art from the first semester. Many students chose to craft a *risposta* that included advice for the chosen poetess; a solution that evidenced both successful textual analysis and the ability to create new representations of meaning, two characteristics of reflective communication. Before each presentation, students analyzed their classmate's original sonnet for homework following the 10-step method. This at home analysis served as an informal means of discourse planning which contributed to the fluidity, depth, and length of the learners' in-class interactions.

Il mio cuore sofferente è tuo totalmente.

Simonet, Enrique. *Autopsy*. 1890, Museo de Málaga.

Allontanati da lui e le cose belle possono accadere.

Vermeer, Johannes. *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*. 1662, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Stelle, le ho viste cadere,

Tawney, Lenore. *Box of Falling Stars*. 1984, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Come possiamo chiamarlo amore?

Botticelli, Sandro. *La nascita di Venere*. 1485, Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, Firenze.

Fig. 1. Verses from students' original Petrarchan sonnets accompanied by famous works of art.

The class appreciated the unique experience of being able to analyze a poem together in the presence of the author and delighted in posing questions to him/her about the work. The discussions of original works were also a turning point in terms of literary analysis because having the author present allowed learners to truly grasp the separation between the *io lirico* and the poet. At the end of the semester, I was surprised to learn that most of the students wrote their sonnets with the 10 steps in mind. They wanted to ensure that their poems were accessible to their classmates so that they would enjoy reading and discussing the new works as much they appreciated engaging with those of the Renaissance poetesses. Just as effective oral communication and literacy skills are interdependent, so are written communication and textual analysis skills. Each student author held a discussion that lasted the full 42-minute class period with very little intervention on my part. Students' interactions showed high-level critical thinking skills and were autonomous, spontaneous, and *extensive*. Later that year, many of them contacted me from college to say that they had placed into 300-level literature courses.

4. Closing Remarks
At the start of the second semester, I told my class that I was going to teach them to love poetry and was met with groans and eye rolls. Despite their initial diffidence, our study of the sonnets was a resounding favorite among the students, a personal victory in terms of linguistic and content learning objectives. In my opinion, the key to the course's success lies in the nature of SCLT/I. In fact, I believe

that there is a direct correlation between *sustained* content study and the ability to *sustain* discourse. Because we were able to study manageable material over an extended period, I was able to allocate sufficient time to all four of Kern's literacy goals. To satisfy the meaningful immersion requirement, we learned about the lives of the poets and studied the periods, literary movements, and political climates during which they wrote. The 10-step method helped to provide instructor support and textual analysis training. These first three elements combined effectively with our project-based learning framework thereby aiding students in making new literary representations. Finally, the brevity of the literature made it highly accessible and *understandable.* The combination of these aspects translated into a solid foundation of extended discourse competence upon which students continue to build in college.

In the final year of their L2 high school education, young people are learning not only how to speak about their thoughts and emotions but also how to reflect on what they are thinking and feeling with greater depth. One student told me that before taking this class, she did not understand the degree to which it was possible to express oneself in just 14 lines. She said that she was better able to map out her inner emotional world with each line and each verse that she read, wrote, discussed, and analyzed. The fixed form also fostered a self-motivated quest to find new words, and, as a result, vocabulary like *introspettivo, appassionato, strazio*, and *bramare* organically wove itself into daily classroom parlance.

In addition to learning to better categorize existing feelings, students relished exploring emotions about which they are curious but have not yet experienced. One such example is their reaction to the fifth verse of Gaspara Stampa's "Dura è la stella mia," in which the *io lirico* laments "Odio chi m'ama ed amo chi mi sprezza." Many of my students have yet to feel true heartbreak, but most are familiar with the first pangs of love and welcome any opportunity to discuss all of its mysteries and nuances. Love of the unrequired variety takes the top rank on the list of compelling arguments and has been an invaluable motivator in terms of language acquisition. Students hunger to speak about themselves and their peers on a micro level, but poetry gives them an entry point into macro-conversations about the human condition so that they can contextualize their individual experiences.

After years of experimenting with and developing my praxis and methods, the most valuable takeaway has been a true

understanding of the L2 growth opportunities provided when deep, meaningful, and heavily nuanced student-generated interactions are the foundation of classroom culture. Daily life, which is comprised of hopes, goals, fantasies, love stories, disappointments, heartbreaks, and uncertainties is not only the stuff of great conversations but also great literature. The sonnets are the perfect introduction to a lifelong appreciation of L2 literature because their study facilitates discussion of all the previously mentioned themes while limiting the amount of text to be analyzed by the intermediate L2 learner.

Many language programs and instructors emphasize the usefulness and practicality of a given L2 but rarely foreground its beauty (Kramsch and Gerhards 77). Poetry is not only captivating and accessible, it is *beautiful*. As Keats reminds us in the first line of *Endymion*, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." At the end of the 2018-2019 academic year, the students in this course presented some of our work on art and poetry at a school board meeting. Afterwards, we took questions from the audience. One community member asked, "How many of you plan to study Italian in college?" Every hand went up. Poetry, it seems, has been instrumental in ensuring that my students are well on their way to enjoying Italian *forever* thanks to those 14 magical lines.

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ENDNOTES

1. In this paper, "intermediate" refers to course placement, and is not an assessment of ability which adheres to ACTFL's definition.
2. All references to extended discourse competence are aligned with Richard Kern's definition of the term. ACTFL defines extended discourse competence as characteristic of the superior level of language proficiency; Kern uses the term to describe a learner's ability to navigate, think critically about, and sometimes produce, longer spoken and written texts while also considering meaning, genre, style, or intertextuality. Extended discourse competence, as defined by Kern, can be found in learners whose linguistic ability is assessed as below ACTFL's superior level (Kern, "Question about Extended Discourse Competence").
3. English Translation of the Paciaroni/Andriello 10-Step Method of Poetry Analysis:

    1. Who is/was the writer? What was the writer's artistic formation? Is/was the writer part of a particular literary movement?

    2. Read the first verse. In your opinion, what will the poem be about?

3. Look at the first quatrain. What is one word you could use to describe it – give a reason.

4. Look at the second quatrain. What is one word you could use to describe it – give a reason.

5. Ask a question to the octave – group of 8 lines.

6. Look at the first tercet. What is one word you could use to describe it – give a reason.

7. Look at the second tercet. What is one word you could use to describe it – give a reason.

8. Ask a question to the two tercets.

9. With your partners, summarize the sonnet in 2 sentences.

10. What is the central idea of the poem? Communicate the central idea in a sentence that has less than 10 words.

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