The Benefits of Young Adult Literature in the Italian Language Class

Introduction

Research carried out over a twenty-year span has pointed to the existence of a correlation between student choice and a growing interest in reading, even with low-achieving readers (among others, Guthrie and Anderson; Allington and McGill-Franzen; Guthrie et al., "Reading"; Gordon; Guthrie et al., "Motivation"; also see Bennett). This means considering student choice as an important parameter when making decisions about the type of text selections/books to include in a language class. Concerning the specific issue of student choice, recent research provides evidence that YAL occupies a central role, "fiction being the favourite pick" (Koss and Teale 563) in the lives of teenagers. Specific YAL awards have been introduced, YAL has "become one of the most dynamic and influential segments of American publishing" (Cart n.p.), and even "new YA imprints specifically for more mature teen readers have appeared" (Koss and Teale 563). The YALSA *White Paper* closes a recent report stating that "young adult literature . . . is an indispensable part of public and school library collections, . . . essential to healthy youth development and the corollary development of healthy communities in which both youth and libraries can thrive" (n.p.). These data are crucial when statistics indicate a significant drop in general reading proficiency levels (NAEP 2015), and the connections between the inability to read proficiently and the likelihood (and high social costs) of dropping out (AECFR 2010) are widely understood.

1. Possible Reasons for the Success of YAL

YAL seems to offer itself as a sort of panacea that can help fight the current decline in reading proficiency levels if properly appropriated and used in class. This section will try to explain the reasons for the success of this genre with the young adult reading public in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon and exploit its educational potential to the full.

A glance at the general topics of most YAL books (Table 1: the data refers to the US market[1]) could probably explain the reason for this preference:

Subject matter	**Number (percentage)**
Finding themselves	50 (85%)
Searching for answers/secrets	20 (34%)
Finding identity/hiding self	20 (34%)
Dealing with loss	20 (34%)
Friendship	31 (53%)
Family	30 (51%)
Coming of age	16 (27%)
Bullying	21 (36%)
Moving	20 (34%)
Relationships	19 (32%)
Abuse	12 (20%)
Illness/mental issue	15 (25%)

Table 1: from Koss and Teale 567

It is easy to argue, with Shannon C. Henderson and Connie Buskist, that "[t]hese books are rife with themes that adolescents find engaging" (231). In a still very interesting 1991 paper, Els Andringa[2] identifies three dimensions of literature (cognitive, emotional, and social). It is easy to see that YAL particularly focuses on the "emotional dimension, containing the aspects of emotional engagement, identification, affective response" (Andringa 157); it "allows teens to play with their identities in a safe and controlled manner, and to explore who they want to be in this ever-changing world" (Koss and Teale 569). Through such emotional involvement, YAL also provides students with a powerful medium for promoting the comprehension processes necessary for skillful reading. Moreover, because the themes and content are so relevant and interesting to adolescents, YAL may help stimulate discussions during which teachers can both model what skillful readers do and scaffold students' own construction of comprehension processes. The goal is not merely to deepen students' understandings of the current text, but to provide opportunities whereby the learners internalize the reading/comprehension processes so they are able to apply them when reading independently (Henderson and Buskist 237). Hence, it makes sense to back these authors' contention that

"[t]eachers who understand the role motivation and reading volume plays in increasing students' reading achievement, strive to include YAL in their classroom curriculum" (231).

2. Aspects of YAL Relevant to Language Learning

In the present section evidence will be provided of how YAL literature can be, in the Italian class[3], an excellent workshop to motivate students to learn the *italiano dell'uso medio* and the ability to negotiate and renegotiate identities in an age when positive self-representation is a crucial skill. The extract presented below in Table 2 shows how writers like Aldo Nove, Niccolò Ammaniti, Enrico Brizzi, and others (whom many would probably be reticent to classify as YAL authors[4]) strategically use spoken language in their books as "a conscious choice coherent with their themes, almost always based on juvenile motifs and written with the structural rhythms often associated with rock music or TV channel surfing" (Covito 311).

> Pietro si tolse la maglietta, si sfilò i pantaloncini e, in mutande, si gettò nell'acqua . . .
> «Stronzo! Vaffanculo! Mi hai fatto morire di paura! Ho pensato…» . . .
> «Cosa?» . . .
> «Mi ami?»
> Pausa.
> «Sì.» . . .
> «Allora facciamolo…» . . .
> «Quando?»
> «Dopodomani. Quanto sei scemo! Ora, adesso. . . . Non mi dire che l'hai fatto. Non è che, senza dirlo a nessuno, lo hai fatto con quel mostro della Marrese?»
> «L'avrai fatto tu con la Marrese…» protestò Pietro.
> «Sì, sono lesbica e non te l'ho mai detto. Amo la Marrese.»

Table 2: Ammaniti, *Ti prendo e ti porto via* 419-22

It is easy to see how this text could potentially be very attractive for a young reader in terms of the themes addressed: it looks exactly like the type of text that could be used to spur students to read outside the academic context. Moreover, it easily lends itself to use in language activities aimed at raising awareness of diaphasic

and diastratic variation. Register and style variation is *the* focus reflecting on characters' spoken interaction, and in its original versions, Ammaniti's books offer many interesting samples of *italiano dell'uso medio*, a notion introduced by Francesco Sabatini "to mark the continuity between some of the most common forms of spoken Italian used throughout Italy" (Tosi 59), sometimes also referred to as *italiano parlato nazionale*.[5]

One may object that dialogues created for narrative purposes do not have the quality of sufficient authenticity to make them didactically exploitable for language-learning/teaching purposes. However, the pressing requirements of an age characterized by increasing demands for self-styling have blurred the boundaries between authentic and performed language. Indeed, there is growing evidence that speech design is not limited to certain forms of speaking (or writing) only but is a general characteristic of human language. Ron Scollon had clearly seen, before the turn of the century, that identities are always "constructed in part as a spectacle or pose for the observation of others" (124). More recently, Nikolas Coupland has stretched this observation to highlight the similarities between 'styling' and 'stylizing': "'everyday talk' is taking on qualities of performance and reflexivity that we would formerly have associated with mass-media rather than interpersonal domains" (*Style* 28).

We are all constantly 'selling' and self-promoting ourselves to the public, molding our public image in a way we believe most advantageous for us, sharing our personal narratives so as to control or influence somehow what others think and know about us (see, for example, Di Martino, *Celebrity Accents*). By allowing access to the specific form of fictive orality just hinted at above, books such as Ammaniti's raise awareness of individual processes of identity construction and management, carried out through picking and mixing from the linguistic and expressive 'routines' adopted by specific social groups on certain occasions in order to facilitate interaction. Therefore, their pedagogical potential is enormous: students might well be encouraged to look at the characters whose stories these books tell as 'real' individuals creating various representations of themselves in relation to others through their language choices (Di Martino, "When the Same Book", "Literary Fiction"). Moreover, while reading their interactions and the stylistic repertoires characterizing each of them, students may also be invited to respond to them and even re-use them (or choose not to

make use of them) in novel situations, thus constructing ever-evolving personas for themselves.

Indeed, since "[t]he informal, colloquial registers are increasingly perceived as 'the right models'" (Tosi 59), merely exposing students to them in YAL is an asset in itself. However, it is certainly desirable to also explicitly focus their attention on the author's choice of specific varieties to tell their characters' stories, for example creating *ad hoc* handouts. A possible example, specifically designed for work on another book by Ammaniti, *Come Dio comanda* (196-98) is presented below in Table 3. It singles out the main elements identified in Alberto A. Sobrero ("Varietà linguistiche") and Michele A. Cortelazzo ("Il parlato giovanile") as characteristics of the language of youngsters:

A basis of colloquial, informal Italian	A dialectal layer	A layer of traditional, long-lasting jargon	A layer of innovative jargon	A layer coming from the language of adverts, mass-media and music	A layer made up of contributions from other languages, mostly English
Figure di merda, Mi rompono i coglioni, Beccata		*In para, Il Merda, Porta sfiga, Stava rollando un'altra canna*	*Sei fuori, Non me li inculerei di striscio, Facciamoci il cannino della buonanotte*		*Piercing*
		Sono troppo cotta, Questa ce la facciamo seria			

Table 3: from Di Martino, "Youth Jargon" 182

The activity described can also help students to become aware of the use of taboo words, generally related to the sexual sphere, which is typical of youth speech, together with the "need" to

be verbally ostentatious. It shows how pornolalia and coprolalia, in particular, are a significant part of this age group's language and are often used to affirm individual identity. Students should be able to recognize this register in the second and foreign language(s) that they study both in order to judge the way people approach them in those languages, and to be discouraged from adopting a distorted view and inappropriate use in real situations (see also Andersson and Trudgill; Dewaele).

Other possible activities, aimed at having students not merely identify the varieties used in some YAL but also react to them in the form of intralinguistic translation, could involve reflection on portions of text across Italian and English in the specific case in point (Ammaniti is one of the few contemporary Italian authors to have been extensively translated into English). Table 4 presents an example of group-work based activity, which could easily be adapted for work on other portions of the same novel or on different YAL books:

GROUPWORK
1. Read the original.
2. How old are Esmeralda and Fabiana, in your opinion?
3. Do you feel they belong to a specific social class?
4. Underline the parts that you feel are not in standard Italian. What would the standard equivalents of these nonstandard words and expressions be?
5. Read the English translation.
6. Underline the expressions that you feel are not in standard English.
7. Does each non-standard Italian expression correspond to a non-standard expression in English?
8. Do the non-standard Italian expressions and the corresponding non-standard English ones show a similar level of non-standard?
9. Are Esmeralda and Fabiana the same age and social class in both texts?
10. If you were the Esmeralda and Fabiana of the original, would you speak as the Esmeralda and Fabiana of the translated text?

HOME ASSIGNMENT:
- Make the original (Italian) version more standard.

- Now make it less standard.

Table 4: abridged from Di Martino, “Pedagogical Application” 436-37

Reflection and critique on how conversational sequences travel across languages help raise awareness of linguistic and socio-cultural norms (as well as deviations) both in the students’ first languages and in their second and foreign ones. Indeed, the contrastive analysis implied in judging whether the translation of specific portions of text is effective and appropriate makes the linguistic and socio-cultural norms of the different human communities involved more explicit.

Moreover, descriptive passages in literary fiction such as this often contain clues to identify the contextual and social elements that influence the production of such interactions, thus helping to reconstruct implicit communicative situations and making the whole learning process more meaningful (and therefore didactically effective) for the student. This focus can easily involve students in meaningful communicative learning situations—a far cry from the language and learning situations to be found in most textbooks, and this is further illustrated by the extract that follows (Table 5), which also contains some dialectal elements and well differentiated uses of language by the different characters:

> «Antonio, anima santa, perché piangi?» disse la nonna andandogli incontro. «Che t’è successo, amore della nonna?» chiese, accarezzandogli la testa. «C’hai tutto l’orecchio rosso!...»
> «È stata sorema» piagnucolò Lu Purk.
> «Che t’ha fatto ’st’anima?» chiese incredula la nonna. «Perché l’hai fatto piangere?»
> «È un bugiardo e dà fastidio» disse la ragazza, colma d’astio. «Ha detto un sacco di calunnie sul conto di Teo e mio.»

Table 5: Silvia Ballestra, “La via per Berlino” 72-73

3. Aspects of YAL that Help Bridge the Gap Between Italian Language and Literature Curricula

The Italian texts presented above belong to a narrative trend commonly referred to as the "New Italian narrative." This has often been seen as one of the most outstanding products on the Italian literary scene since the 90s, therefore a page of literature that is certainly as worthy of exploration in the literature class as it is in the language class. Acclaimed by *Gruppo 63 avant-garde* writers and intellectuals for their provocative themes, innovative use of language and strong plots, young writers such as Niccolò Ammaniti, Silvia Ballestra, Daniele Brolli, Enrico Brizzi, and many others are often described as *cattivisti* or *maledettisti*. Sometimes also labelled as "cannibals," "pulp" or "third wave" writers, they share an interesting use of youth jargon and culture (Barilli; Colombo; Cordelli; Denti; Di Stefano; Guglielmi "Felicità," "Pulp"; La Porta; Piccinini; Sinibaldi), thus clearly targeting an audience of young readers. Young readers, in turn, seem to appreciate this focus on the world viewed from a young person's perspective, as attested by high sales figures. Table 6 provides one more example of the type of language/perspective to be found in "New Italian narrative" books, this time focusing on written channels of communication.

> E ci sono anche tutti i pomeriggi passati sull'erba del giardino di una certa ragazza, una mezza pirata, ad ascoltare musica e parlare e.
> Comunque no, non piange mica. E poi è un Girardengo, kazzo…
> Diobbuòno cosa fila, adesso.
> Ehi, dico, ma lo vedete?

Table 6: Brizzi, *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* 180-82

Brizzi's was one of the first examples of books to include youth parlance in Italian fiction. Indeed, in addition to representing a story that would appeal to most young spirits, Brizzi's use of language corresponds perfectly to the characteristics of intentionality identified by Sobrero as markers of youngsters' language ("Costanza"), which in turn correspond to some of the functions specific to youth language presented in Immacolata Tempesta: it is playful (ludic function), and it denotes social cohesion and opposition (identity function), as Table 7 shows.

An *ad hoc* handout could be designed for students to fill in while working on representative portions of the text. It may single out the markers of youth language identified by Sobrero and Tempesta, while succinctly explaining them for students to facilitate the task:

Ludic function (a sort of linguistic acrobatics expressing itself in the deformation and hybridization of the language materials which have become part of the register)	Identity function (to create a sense of belonging, reinforce internal group cohesion, as well as construct boundaries separating the specific group from other groups, particularly adults)
Kazzo, Diobbuòno	Peculiar use of the conjunction 'e' followed by a period (which normally signals the end of a sentence), to imply something whose knowledge or understanding is shared by the specific group (hence not needing any mention) but partially 'cryptic' to other groups.

Table 7: handout for work on *Jack Frusciante*

Jack Frusciante also has something of the flavor of seventies jargon. This is particularly evident in the use of the grapheme *k* for the voiceless velar occlusive in lieu of *c* or *ch* (see, for example, 'kazzo' above), which first appeared in the political graffiti of that period (Berisso). Students may be invited to respond to this seventies-flavored jargon. For example, some may want to appropriate the jargon in a similar passage oozing nostalgia for this legendary decade, which sketches a novel situation. Some others may choose not to re-use it, and opt for either parodying (rejecting) Jack Frusciante's or stylizing a personal register (ignoring the *Jack Frusciante* style), instead. This would encourage them to construct multiple personas for themselves. This written product would have to be strategically designed to involve the student in a process of authenticity construction whereby they negotiate their authenticity (Eira and Stebbins), inhabiting or rejecting "others' original,

authentic sociolinguistic behaviors and identities" (Lacoste et al. 8). Despite still being meant in linguistic terms, like the type of authenticity touched upon in the Introduction and then again in Section 2 (where authenticity is seen from the perspective of teaching/analytical validity), the concept of authenticity referred to here has to do with the awareness that all individuals are constantly being assessed "in the sense of normalized and standardized by a relevant group of speakers and from whose perspective the speakers are evaluated as being authentic" (Lacoste et al. 9), hence the need to consciously and responsibly detect and react to multiple requests of authenticity.

In practical terms, the teacher may assign a task involving the student's choice among possible alternatives for a written composition, insisting that the piece of writing to produce should sound convincing to all the individuals involved in the specific situation set and even devising a tangible recognition (in terms of assigned grade, material prizes, public praise or the like) to motivate serious effort and raise awareness of the specific task's importance. A possible example is offered below, in Table 8:

> HANDS ON!
> (1) 'Funky Days are Back Again. Write a paragraph in *Jack Frusciante* style to tell your classmates about one special moment in the life of a memorable (real or fictitious) friend'.
> (2) 'That's so 70s! Write a parody paragraph of this extract calling your teacher's attention to what you perceive to be the weaknesses of the *Jack Frusciante* style (the peculiar 'conventions' that appear to you as being overused in the book)'.
> (3) 'That's not My Style. Develop a compelling style in a piece of writing of your own which adopts and adapts from chunks of language you have heard or read to tell your classmates about one special moment in the life of a memorable (real or fictitious) friend'.

Table 8: task designed to respond to the *Jack Frusciante* style

Clearly, the focus of one such task would be on the interplay between the *Jack Frusciante* style (but it could be adapted to fit any very distinctive style) and self-representational discourse

(Coupland, “Dialect”). It would provide considerable help in raising students’ awareness that individuals do not “inherit authenticity from the social circumstances of their birth and socialization” (Coupland, “Sociolinguistic” 428); rather, they have to perform it. “Authenticity in performance” can take many different forms, ranging from the quotation of old authenticities to the parody of the latter. Involving students in tasks like these helps to demonstrate that “increasingly, authenticity needs to be earned rather than credited” (428). Tangible current examples of authenticity in performance can be found in Di Martino (*Celebrity Accents*).

Further possible activities may involve reflection on portions of text across Italian and English along the lines of the group-work based activities presented above in Table 4. By encouraging students to read YAL in different languages in a collaborative manner teachers may gain a greater knowledge of young people, their tastes and their worlds, and this may in turn reflect on their capacity to both guide them towards “real” literature and provide them with the tools to approach it. Romano Luperini contends that, from an emphasis on too much analysis, teachers have probably now moved on to a “sink or swim” experience into which students are thrown with no preparation at all. On the contrary, the pleasure of reading is a laborious, arduous conquest (*Il professore*). Starting out from texts that the students are more likely to find entertaining while at the same time approaching them with the linguist’s (and literary scholar’s) “serious” tools, teachers of different subjects working in teams may find a third way to successfully re-familiarize students with the literary text *tout court* (Law; Khdhir and Hasan; Schrijvers et al.; Chiariello).

4. Further Advantages of YAL in Terms of Motivation, Communicative and Cultural Learning

It is worth considering that when introducing books that reflect students’ actual (or aspired) lifestyles, and/or their way of speaking into the language/literature curriculum, teachers are responding to the classical principle of “teaching, moving, and delighting” (*docere*, *movere*, *delectare*, Augustine of Hippo, qtd. in Long). Moreover, in terms of the meaningfulness and attractiveness of authenticity for readers of all ages, teachers cannot deny that these texts are authentic because, in addition to not being written for language teaching purposes (Jordan), they are clearly designed for native speakers (Harmer) and they are written in a language close to

everyday spoken language. In particular, focusing on teenagers, it is worth considering that, as Danesi suggests, young people are curious to get to know how their peers speak as well as to learn how to express "coolness" in a foreign language.

This, in turn, stands in perfect agreement with a view of education as participation (Sfard) and acquisition aiming to favor the learners' pursuit of membership of certain communities or, when referring more specifically to the field of (second) language learning, with a view of education "not as the acquisition of a new set of grammatical, lexical and phonological forms but as a struggle of concrete, socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the symbolically mediated lifeworld (see Habermas) of another culture" (Pavlenko and Lantolf 155). Such a view foregrounds "issues of affiliation and belonging" (156) and focuses on first-person narratives, underlining the intrinsic value of narrative as a tool for both identity construction and integration. As Hall affirms, it also

> potentially returns literature to a central role as texts through which language learners can explore who they are and who they are not, and who they might be becoming as they participate in this new language. Language learning is seen as the development of new ideas and personality, rather than acquisition of a set of new labels for familiar objects or at most of new syntactic rules. (148)

Since learners are exposed not to "input," but to "affordances," "from which they select those that best fit their experience" (Kramsch, "How Can We Tell" 7), literature certainly offers the best repertoire of affordances meant as "action possibilities" latent in the environment (Gibson).

Teachers are often worried by the fact that learners, particularly foreign language learners, may misunderstand great works and therefore misinterpret them. Kramsch argues, instead, that this cultural estrangement, "the moment of rupture or disjuncture between interlocutors' assumptions and expectations" (Kramsch, "The Cultural Component" 89) should in fact be welcome: "It is precisely those moments of discrepancy between the culturally intended reader and the culturally foreign reader that the language teacher should value the most" (Kramsch, *Context* 28). As Hall effectively sums up, "[t]he traditional classroom . . . taught . . .

that the 'experts'' views were more valid than those of the learner . . . But a classroom informed by ideas of discourse and dialogue encourages and explores and values alternative perspectives and experiences" (152).

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ENDNOTES

[1] The sample considered by Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale consisted of a total of 59 titles that were chosen as representative out of a corpus of 370 YA books (both fiction and nonfiction) published in English between 1999 and 2005.
[2] Andringa and Schreier is also an interesting read.
[3] For a recent report on YAL on the Italian market, see Gotti. See also the many interviews published on the website *La letteratura e noi*, edited by Romano Luperini.
[4] Marchetta ("I libri"), however, lists Ammaniti among the writers whose books we fear, but that schools should encourage students to read anyway. Also see Marchetta ("Vi svelo").
[5] *Italiano dell'uso medio* identifies "the common ground occupied by the most ambitious norms of the national language used by the 'lower' classes and the less formal use of Italian increasingly adopted by the better educated in ordinary everyday communication" (Tosi 59).

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