New Approaches to Teaching Italian Language and Culture

New Approaches to Teaching
Italian Language and Culture:
Case Studies from an International Perspective

Edited by

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In loving memory of my mother Lina and my brother Massimo.

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INTRODUCTION

EMANUELE OCCHIPINTI

The aim of this collection of essays is to fill a major gap in existing scholarship and textbooks devoted to the teaching of Italian language and culture. Although in the past there have been monographic issues of journals like *Italica*[1] devoted to some aspects of Italian pedagogy,[2] there has never been a systematic collection of essays on this topic with such a variety of contributions in a single volume.

In today's world the need to incorporate a rigorous study of foreign languages is more and more strongly felt: in schools and universities across the world it is standard for students to be expected to be proficient in at least one foreign language and also, often, to attend courses on aspects of culture and diversity. Additionally, in recent years, more and more scholars have become interested in effective language teaching methodology, and many universities are starting to hire people with specialized degrees in language pedagogy and Second Language Acquisition rather than PhDs in literature. This calls for specialized texts that can provide studies and examples of effective pedagogy of language teaching and testing that instructors and teacher trainers from different academic backgrounds can use in their classes.

In the past decade, the study of Italian has grown everywhere in the world,[3] especially in the U.S., with a 22.6% increase since 2002, and the number of students reaching 78,368 in 2006[4] (rising from 11,000 in the

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[1] *Italica* is an American journal, published four times a year with articles on Italian language, literature and linguistics.

[2] See, for example, *Italica* 77, no. 4 (2000), 78, no. 4 (2001) on some aspects of Italian pedagogy, and 83, no, 1 (2006) on teaching film and culture.

[3] For a thorough analysis of teaching methods of Italian in the world see Paolo E. Balboni and Matteo Santipolo eds., *L'italiano nel mondo. Mete e metodi dell'insegnamento dell'italiano nel mondo. Un'indagine qualitativa* (Roma: Bonacci editore, 2003).

[4] See the MLA report at http://www.mla.org/pdf/release11207_ma_feb_update.pdf See also Nelly Furman, David Goldberg, and Natalia Lusin, "Enrollments in

'60s), placing Italian as the fourth most studied foreign language after Spanish, French and German.[5]

This volume offers case studies that present a coherent and organized overview of contemporary Italian pedagogy, integrating the expertise of scholars in the fields of language methodology and language acquisition from Italy and four major countries where the study of Italian has a long tradition: Australia, Canada, Great Britain and U.S. The twenty-four essays, divided into six main parts, offer tremendous variety, and an up-to-date approach to the teaching of Italian as a foreign language or L2[6] incorporating both theoretical aspects of pedagogy and practical ones, including examples of specific syllabi.

Part I ("Curricular Innovations") explores new teaching approaches in the Italian curriculum. The five essays in this section answer the need to update curricula with innovative and stimulating activities that take into consideration the latest studies in language learning. The first chapter examines the principles of CBI (Content-based Instruction), from the history of its development, dating back to 1965 in French programs in Canada, to its use today. The chapter focuses on its implementation at The Ohio State University in order to eliminate the division between elementary courses devoted solely to the teaching of language, and more advanced ones devoted to the teaching of literature. This method allows students to progress with their natural language learning of the four skills while integrating authentic materials in all courses levels. The old and new curricula are compared and discussed with reasons for the change. In the appendix, a syllabus and a grid for oral and written assessment are provided.

The second chapter presents data from research on task-based instruction of intermediate Italian. The study follows a three-phase task: a pre-task activity in which the tasks are explained and students are exposed to authentic oral material; a during-task activity in which students actually

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Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2006," http://www.mla.org/pdf/06enrollmentsurvey_final.pdf

[5] See Mario Calabresi, "USA, la rivincita dell'italiano: è boom di corsi all'università," *La repubblica*, April 23, 2007.

[6] The term "Foreign Language" refers to the teaching of a foreign language in schools in a foreign environment (for example Italian taught in the U.S., Great Britain, Australia, etc.). "L2" refers to the teaching of a language spoken in the context where foreign speakers live (for example Italian taught in Italy, Canton Ticino in Switzerland and areas of Istria). See Paolo E. Balboni, *Didattica dell'italiano a stranieri* (Roma: Bonacci and Università per stranieri di Siena, 1994), 13-4.

perform the task that is recorded on video or audio; and a post-task activity in which students work on the transcripts of their activities and on grammar points introduced by the instructor. Thus, the structured input and output of the TBI model creates the basis for a more natural way to acquire fluency and improve accuracy.

The third chapter expands on the notion that the best way to learn a foreign language is to put students in contact with real-life situations. The chapter deals with an innovative and flexible approach called "Project Work" that aims at integrating the theory of the language with its practical use in every day life. The didactic methodology of Project Work was applied to a class of Erasmus[7] students of Italian L2 in an Italian University. The chapter presents data obtained from the implementation of Project Work in which students were asked to assist in organizing a conference on second language acquisition with a series of related tasks including creating and distributing brochures and planning a cultural itinerary. The advantages of such a method are manifold, since students must incorporate their linguistic knowledge with a systematic use of different grammatical structures in a cooperative way, in which they not only need to interact with each other, but also with the world outside the classroom. Role-play became an essential part of this method because this helped the learner to act in a real situation (for example, students had to make phone calls in order to ask for estimates).

Chapter Four explores the effectiveness and challenges of the "Conversation Hour Program" at The College of New Jersey in the U.S. The Conversation Hour builds on studies that show that shorter and more frequent contact with the foreign language is crucial to master what has been learned. Even though the author had to face some bureaucratic and organizational issues including, among other things, the preparation and supervision of the coordinators, in the end the experiment became a permanent reality expanding to all foreign languages taught at the College. The teaching approach was aimed to foster the five Cs (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities) recommended by ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) with activities ranging from vocabulary building to short dialogues and role-plays.

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[7] The Erasmus project was created in 1987 and is named after the famous scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam who lived and studied in many parts of Europe for the purpose of expanding his experience and knowledge. The program offers generous grants and allows students to study for a semester or an academic year in a European University, other than his/her own, and have the credits earned recognized in the home institution.

The fifth and last chapter of the first section explores linguistic structures and their relationship to L2 development. The essay discusses what stages should be followed so that grammatical structures can be acquired at the appropriate level, without teaching structures that are too advanced, in order to speed the learning process. The progression is successfully achieved with Processability Theory that allows the instructor to teach structures at the right level according to a hierarchal sequence: lemma access, category, phrasal and sentence procedures. The experiment was carried out in a primary school in Sydney, Australia, in two Italian courses for 12 weeks. At the end of the experiment, children had learned in three months what they had not learned during a previous three-year period.

Part II ("Teaching Italian with Technology") deals with the fundamental tool of technology, integrated in nearly every curriculum thanks to the availability of computers and internet connections in tech-enhanced classrooms. The chapters in this section introduce some innovative projects, through the discussion of outcomes and goals. The first chapter explores the potential of WebCT a web-based tool with hyperlinks, images and colors, with the purpose of stimulating interest and improve effective learning of Italian at the University of Birmingham, UK. The experiment proved successful by boosting students' confidence and interest thanks to a vast array of activities including discussion boards and online exercises with electronic feedback.

The second chapter discusses the development of "Azione!," a web-based program of Italian film and television segments used in the elementary and intermediate Italian language courses at Yale University. The program was designed to allow students going abroad to be more comfortable in real-life situations and teach them to "listen selectively" and "listen for specific content." The topics of the segments range from health, environment and technology, travel, and politics to growing up and the family, and the flexibility of the program facilitates its integration with any textbook. Students have the ability to expand and reinforce their knowledge with activities of increasing difficulty. Furthermore, the unabridged clips help them to become accustomed to the normal speed of the language, with exposure to various accents and regional differences.

"Confronti" is the name of an innovative project, and topic of the third chapter of this section, developed cooperatively among the University of Padova, the University of Pennsylvania and Middlebury College in the U.S., and based on the *Cultura* French Project created at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The goal of integrating culture into the curriculum is achieved through a common website and communication

tools like Skype and webcams. Using these tools, students across the ocean can take advantage of their particular expertise to discuss topics such as stereotypes, family, school, private and public spaces, regionalism, immigration and emigration. In this context, students are responsible for discovering differences and similarities while the instructor takes the role of facilitator. The advantages are many: enthusiastic involvement, the opportunity to understand a different culture while reflecting on one's own, and closer connections with students from a different country.

The last chapter on technology is devoted to research at the University of Montréal in Canada on the use of iPods and podcasting to learn Italian. Like with every technological tool, some challenges are present, but there are numerous advantages to using a tool that the majority of young people own: thanks to its small size and large memory, the iPod can be used to store hours of audio and video materials that accommodate many learning styles. Students can listen not only to songs, but also to recorded lessons and authentic language material, allowing them to learn in a quiet environment. Instructors can offer more content to advanced and motivated students and students with learning disabilities.

The four chapters of **Part III ("Teaching Italian Translation")** explore the challenges of teaching translation courses. Translation has gone through various phases: from being appreciated to being regarded as an old fashioned and ineffective method for language teaching. Today, many language experts consider the exercise of translation not only useful but also fundamental for improving students' reading and writing skills as well as their cross-cultural awareness, and some argue that it can be considered a "fifth linguistic ability." Chapter Ten describes the challenges surrounding a collaborative online learning course at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland, where students were faced with changes in the course structure over a period of three years, and analyzes the outcomes and drawbacks.

Chapter Eleven focuses on how translation can benefit the learning of Italian and how translation techniques can in fact help learners to achieve a high level of expertise, contributing to "metalinguistic reflection," broadening vocabulary and helping students to analyze cultural differences, develop "textual competence" and master more sophisticated stages of the learning process.

Chapter Twelve expands on the benefits of translation, presenting a case study of teaching methodology used in seminars for undergraduates to hone their translation skills in their final year of a three-year degree course in "Civiltà e Lingue Straniere Moderne" at the University of Parma. The seminars are geared towards students who translate from Italian into

English, and train students through readings of an array of texts from literary to technical, scientific, political, and legal. Chapter Thirteen is a "hands on" example of how to help students analyze specialized language, in this case legal and journalistic, with its unique use of technical, lexical and morphosyntactic terms. This, of course, bears some problems since English is not the students' native language, and the risk of misinterpretations or poor translation is very high. The methodology proposed helps students in the process of decoding and encoding thanks to some techniques that are analyzed in detail, such as "cloze method" to strengthen grammatical structures; "multiple choice" and "error correction" exercises to facilitate students' critical thinking; and "back translation" to help students notice discrepancies.

    Part IV ("Teaching Italian Culture") is devoted to examples on how to effectively teach Italian culture in every foreign language curriculum. As Swiderski points out,

> Whatever presence culture may have in the language classroom, those who enter the classroom expect culture. They have explicit expectations, expressed perhaps as a wish to learn about the ways and lives of the people who speak the language to be learned, or as a need to know how to behave and how not to behave while among these people. Students expect to receive this information, and teachers expect to teach it. This is the outright cultural act of language teaching/learning set within the cultural environment of the classroom.[8]

    The five essays consider how Italian culture is taught in the States, and provide some useful examples on how to improve its effectiveness. "Visual literacy" (introduced in chapter fourteen) is a skill to develop in order to decode images. The same skill can be applied to film—a medium that employs visual and cultural messages—and chapter twenty-one introduces "visual thinking," or the ability to facilitate the analysis and description of a film before its interpretation, as an important skill in the teaching of film. Students must therefore be encouraged to think critically, and should be able to "read" an image through a series of exercises, which the author describes in detail. Students should then be able to make hypotheses and recognize similarities and differences between the two cultures. In the end, students may, for example, come to the conclusion that when the same object is used at different times in different cultures, it

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[8] Richard M. Swiderski, *Teaching Language, Learning Culture* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 19.

may become two completely different objects, even if these objects have the same semantic definition.

Chapters Fifteen and Nineteen discuss two cultural courses developed and taught in two different American universities. Chapter Fifteen analyzes a fifth-semester culture course ("Women in Italy 1930s-2000s: history, sociology, law, anthropology, cinema, dance and songs") taught at Wellesley College. The interdisciplinary nature of the course makes it a model for cultural courses that incorporate a variety of visual media such as films, documentaries, dance shows, interviews, political posters, militant slogans and murals, etc. Through guided discussions and oral presentations that include visual tools, students are engaged in thinking critically and "visually." The same concepts are applied in the cultural course examined in chapter nineteen, taught at the University of Washington: an interdisciplinary survey of Italian culture from the pre-Roman era to the contemporary time. The purpose of this course is to develop a cultural awareness focusing on historical, political and religious facts and their enormous impact on the artistic and literary world.

"Intercultural competence" (chapter sixteen) is another fundamental skill that students should develop in order to experience a reality different from their own when they travel abroad. When abroad, students experience a dynamic process including three different steps: stress, adaptation and growth. The case study presents some tools that instructors can use to prepare students for the new experience, with the support of data from a two-month summer program of Columbia University students who visited Venice. A website was created in order to provide useful information about the host country and Ca'Foscari University. Also, pre-departure meetings tested students' attitudes and expectations. In Venice, students were matched with "cultural partners" for support and exchange of experiences. Through a series of "social communication" activities students were able to discuss with their teachers and cultural partners their expectations, fears and surprises. Keeping a journal in which they registered their perspectives while experiencing this different reality further enabled students to confront their fears and develop an intercultural awareness.

As we have seen, integrating culture into the curriculum is not as easy as it can initially seem, especially when instructors need to assess students' cultural competence. In chapter seventeen, a third-year Italian culture course is analyzed, and assessment suggestions are offered employing a combination of formats to ensure that students' grasp of the materials covered in class is assimilated.

The "IVC, Chiavi di lettura" project (chapter eighteen), developed at Emory University in the U.S., takes a step forward in implementing the Modern Languages Association suggestion to integrate culture with the teaching of language and literature. Culture is presented in order to learn the language, and students are asked to make comparisons and connections through art, politics, religion and theater, among other disciplines. Indeed, this authentic and interdisciplinary cultural material provides the context in which grammatical rules are embedded and acquired in an intuitive manner. In this way, the process of grammatical teaching occurs in a passive mode and students can think about formal rules in a later phase. The advantage of this method is that the learner's process mimics first language acquisition in a dynamic and natural way.

Part V ("Teaching Italian Culture Through Film") and **Part VI ("Teaching Italian Culture Through Songs")** are concerned with how to successfully integrate culture with two of the most effective media: films and songs, and how these media can be used to teach cultural competency. Chapter Twenty is a case study of a curriculum change at Macquarie University in Sydney, which integrated films into all levels of Italian courses. The essay explores some of the most up-to-date and frequently used film manuals, and it analyzes the effectiveness of some activities and assessments of proficiency, such as plot summaries, film reviews, short answer quizzes, letters, research projects and oral presentations. The aim of the study is to see how students responded to this curriculum change, and to support the integration of movies into language teaching. The author ultimately makes the case that love stories, quests, coming of age films, and films where the main characters are children, teenagers or young adults were most effective.

Chapter Twenty-two is a detailed analysis of two movies, *La finestra di fronte* (*Facing Windows*) and *Una giornata particolare* (*A Special Day*) that, because of their thematic similarities and depictions of particular moments in Italian history (Fascism and the Holocaust) can be used to explain the historical background of certain events and how these events shaped Italian political developments. Films in this case help students to contextualize what they learn and images help them to better remember historical facts.

The last two chapters take into consideration how songs can be used both to integrate culture and grammar into the curriculum (while trying to overcome the existing dichotomy between "big C" culture thought of as Art, Literature and Opera and "small c" culture seen in the popular culture that is an integral part of students' lives) and to strengthen students' listening and comprehension abilities.

Chapter Twenty-three demonstrates how music can be beneficial to language learners because it stimulates parts of the brain conducive to learning a foreign language. Its utility is based on the assumption (studies by Alfred Tomatis are mentioned) that every language has a different frequency and that the contact with frequencies other than the ones of our own language can lead to better production of different sounds. The course illustrated in this chapter, taught in Italy to Erasmus students, was centered on main topics, with songs used as an introduction to different cultural realities. The preview and follow-up activities—key-word listening, dictations, use of rhymes and phonetic symbols, rewriting texts and role-playing to cite just a few—proved very useful for a general understanding of Italian culture and the reinforcement of grammatical rules, increasing students' attention and performance.

Finally, the last chapter shows how songs can form the basis of an entire course on language and culture. The purpose of the course ("Italian Freaks and Punks: History of Italian Culture and Civilization from 1950s to 2005 retold by Protest Songs") is twofold: using "protest songs" is useful for familiarizing students with some possibly unknown yet critical moments in Italian history of the last fifty years, such as differences between dialect and standard language, economic and cultural development, students and workers protesting for better living conditions, and feminism. The songs are also used for reviewing difficult grammatical rules pertaining to the subjunctive, conditional, imperative with pronouns, passato prossimo/imperfect.

The chapters of this book, despite their differences, share the enduring theme that the teaching of language and culture should be a natural process, with a holistic exchange between teachers and students. To quote Stephen D. Krashen, "We teach language best when we use it for what it was designed for: communication."[9] After much progress and many changes in the theory of language teaching in past few decades, Krashen's words from 1981 still represent a valid assumption that illustrates one, if not the main, goal of this collection.

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[9] Stephen D. Krashen, *Second Language Acquisition and Second language Learning* (http://www.sdkrashen.com/SL_Acquisition_and_Learning/index.html), 11.

PART I:

CURRICULAR INNOVATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

ELIMINATING THE "GAP" THROUGH CURRICULAR INNOVATION

JANICE M. ASKI AND HEATHER WEBB

Introduction

The dilemma that has plagued Italian programs and has been discussed repeatedly at roundtable discussions at national conferences is how to bridge the 'gap' between elementary language courses and intermediate/advanced content (usually literature) courses. The key to the solution must be related to two erroneous assumptions that curricula with this gap make about L2 acquisition: 1) an L2 can be acquired after one or two years of classroom language study and 2) students cannot take content courses until they have mastered the language. In this traditional curriculum most learners are unlikely to succeed, since, as SLA research has demonstrated, a foreign language cannot usually be mastered after such a brief period of classroom study. Moreover, since language courses typically employ a communicative approach and therefore focus on interpersonal communication, students are ill-prepared for the discourse of academic content courses.[1] The ensuing frustration has been identified as a major source of attrition between the lower-level language courses that satisfy the language requirement and enrollments in the major.[2]

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[1] James Cummins, *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy* (Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 1984). James Cummins, "Language Proficiency, Bilingualism, and Academic Achievement," in *The Multicultural Classroom: Readings for Content-Area Teachers*, ed. P. Richard-Amato & M. A. Snow (New York: Longman, 1992), 16-26.

[2] Beatrice C. Dupuy, "Content-Based Instruction: Can it Help Ease the Transition from Beginning to Advanced Foreign Language Classes?" *Foreign Language Annals* 33, no. 2 (2000): 205-23. Diane Musumeci, "Language and Linguistics in the Italian Curriculum," *Italica* 73, no. 4 (1996): 493-507.

In the Italian program at The Ohio State University (OSU) this artificial division between language and content instruction has been eliminated by adopting Content-Based Instruction (CBI), in which the study of language is integrated into courses that focus on content, such as history, film, and literature. While CBI can be adopted in a variety of ways and degrees, at OSU we have adapted all post-elementary courses to the CBI model, and courses that focus exclusively on language, such as "Grammar and Conversation" and "Grammar and Composition," no longer exist. By the same token, there are no courses that focus exclusively on content; faculty teach content while attending to students' developing language skills in every course. In this way, the study of language continues uninterrupted throughout the undergraduate program.

This essay begins with a brief introduction to CBI. First, the history of the development of this model and its current manifestations in the United States are outlined, then the principles of CBI and the research supporting its effectiveness in foreign language education are examined. This is followed by a case study of the changes implemented in the Italian program at OSU. A comparison of the old, traditional curriculum and the new CBI curriculum is accompanied by a discussion of the reasons for the change and the organization of the program. After describing the program that is in place, this essay concludes by exploring the challenges of curricular revision from a traditional language program to CBI, and describing how the faculty at OSU collectively confronted and are overcoming these challenges.

A brief introduction to Content Based Instruction

Dueñas[3] states that integrating language and content is not a novel pedagogical approach in the field of general education, but it is a relative newcomer to second/foreign language teaching. Using content to learn both language and subject matter originated in Canada circa 1965 in immersion programs that were developed for English speakers learning French, Canada's other official language. CBI appeared on the language teaching scene in the late 1980s and gained popularity in the 1990s.[4] For

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[3] Maria Dueñas, "The Whats, Whys, Hows and Whos of Content-Based Instruction in Second/Foreign Language Education," *International Journal of English Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004): 73-96.

[4] For the distant origins of CBI, see Diane Musumeci, *Breaking Tradition: An Exploration of the Historical Relationship between Theory and Practice in Second Language Teaching* (San Francisco: McGraw Hill, 1997). She traces the principles that characterize CBI to three educators of the 15th-17th centuries who were

many years integrating language and content remained primarily an ESL and K-12 endeavor,[5] but it is becoming increasingly popular in secondary schools and has seen explosive growth in post-secondary institutions.

Met, Brinton and Holten, and Dueñas[6] point out that the term "content-based instruction" is commonly used to describe approaches that integrate language and content instruction, but that this term is not always used consistently. As examples, Met[7] notes that for Crandall and Tucker CBI is an approach that integrates the presentation of subject matter topics or tasks within the context of second/foreign language teaching while Curtain and Pesola limit use of the term to curriculum concepts being taught in the foreign language.[8] Moreover, the definitions of content also vary in that for some it must be academic subject matter while for others it needs to be material that is cognitively engaging but not necessarily academic.[9]

The differences among the various manifestations of CBI demonstrate the flexibility of the framework. Met[10] conceives of this flexibility in terms of a continuum of the relative role of content and language. At one extreme are total immersion programs that are primarily content driven, and at the other are language courses that frequently use content for language practice and are therefore language driven. She finds that sheltered courses, the adjunct model, and theme-based courses fall

proponents of pedagogical reform: Guarino Guarini (1374-1460), Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), and Johannes Amos Comenius (1592-1670). She suggests that their innovations were ultimately ignored as the "other" pedagogical practice of teaching Latin through memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary and translation came to be understood as the traditional approach to language teaching.
[5] Maiheng Shen Dietrich, "Integrating Content into the Language Classroom" in *Content, Tasks and Projects in the Language Classroom*, eds. R. Jourdenais and S. Springer (Monerey, CA: Monerey Institute of International Studies, 2005), 47-60.
[6] Myriam Met, "Content-Based Instruction: Defining Terms, Making Decisions" NFLC Reports. http://www.nflc.org (accessed 1/4/07). Donna Brinton and Christine Holten, "Into, Through and Beyond: A Framework to Develop Content-Based Material," *English Teaching Forum* 35 (1997): 10-25. Dueñas, "The Whats, Whys, Hows and Whos."
[7] Met, "Content-Based Instruction."
[8] Jodi Crandall and G. Richard Tucker, "Content-Based Instruction in Second and Foreign Languages" in *Foreign Language Education: Issues and Strategies*, eds. Amado Padilla, Hatford H. Fairchild and Concepcion Valadez (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 35-54. Curtain, H. A. and Carol Ann Pesola. *Languages and Children: Making the Match* (New York: Longman, 1994).
[9] See the University of Minnesota's website on CBI (http://www.carla.umn.edu/cobaltt/cbi.html) for various definitions of what qualifies as content in CBI.
[10] Met, "Content-Based Instruction."