

**TILTM 2022****Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication****OPERA LIBRETTO AS A METHODOLOGICAL RESOURCE AT A  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE LESSON**

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**Abstract**

The article deals with the inclusion of the great musical heritage of Italy in the Italian language course. The relevance of the article is explained by the fact that classical opera works, in Italian “opera lirica”, are used extremely rarely in the course of foreign language classes. The explanation is evident: listening to classical music requires a certain preparation of didactic materials. However, the resort to operas seems to be very important due to a number of factors. Firstly, it creates an aesthetic attitude to reality, carries unique and unrepeatable spiritual wealth, emotional richness, a huge energy potential, and secondly, it has an educational, developing impact on the process of forming esthesis, ideas, humanitarian knowledge, which, in turn, contributes to the building of a comprehensively educated personality with rich inner world. Also, since the music industry is tremendously evolving and the development of the youngsters' artistic preferences is under constant mostly negative influence of mass media and communication, the formation of musical preferences results in consumption of dubious musical compositions, which can satisfy undemanding tastes due to ease of perception (plain melody, dance rhythm, superficiality of texts etc.). The authors consider the main practical aspects of training: the stages of working with an opera libretto, the requirements for methodological material, give examples of an opera repertoire that meets the indicated requirements and give pragmatic recommendations. The importance of this work in the formation of moral models of students' behavior is noted.

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## **1. Introduction**

Why do students choose to learn Italian? What purpose do they pursue learning Italian, which does not have as wide practical application as English does, for example? Paolo Balboni (1994), one of the founders of the Department of Methodology at the University of Siena, reflects on these questions in his book "Didattica dell'italiano a stranieri". In his opinion, the Italian language can be useful in terms of education, or rather self-education and self-development, since the study of the Italian language is inextricably linked with the history of art, literature and, of course, with music. Therefore, it seems quite relevant and logical to include the great musical heritage of Italy in the Italian language course (Kaskova, 2012). In this article there will be discussed the inclusion of Italian classical opera in the educational process.

## **2. Problem Statement**

According to Duci (2014), Minor and Bryusova (2000), in the contemporary context music performs diverse functions, for instance, it plays a pivotal role in development of the youngsters' artistic preferences. Moreover, musical work is a vivid expression of public emotions and sentiments. Also, musical piece dominates the other art forms since it captures attention, touches upon the heartstrings and transforms into area of interests.

However, since the music industry is tremendously evolving and the development of the youngsters' artistic preferences is under constant mostly negative influence of mass media and communication, the formation of musical preferences results in consumption of dubious musical compositions, which can satisfy undemanding tastes due to ease of perception (plain melody, dance rhythm, superficiality of texts etc.). According to (Drobot, 2017; Drobot, 2019; Minor & Bryusova, 2000), the possibilities of a young person aged 18-20 are so varied (given a new digital era of state-of-the-art communication applications which the 21st century provides) that one's thoughts and feelings are significantly downgraded to the satisfaction of needs basic, general degradation of performance, narrowed horizons to daily routine, the discrepancy between personal views and generally accepted behavior models should be considered as a crime against human nature (personality). Bryusova, a music scholar and teacher who has contributed a lot of valuable information to the theory and practice of musical education, shares this point of view, pointing out that art in the education system should be primarily a method of education.

## **3. Research Questions**

Nowadays, it should be noted that classical opera works, in Italian "opera lirica", are used extremely rarely in the course of foreign language classes, since listening to classical music requires a certain preparation of didactic materials, the organization of the process itself, as well as the equipment of the classroom. According to Elukhina (1991) and Duci (2014), among other things, a greater concentration of attention of listeners, the tension of their hearing apparatus, the ability of storing and processing information are necessary.

However, we consider it important to draw foreign language teachers' attention to such an art form as music for the following reasons. Firstly, it creates an aesthetic attitude to reality, carries unique and unrepeatable spiritual wealth, emotional richness, a huge energy potential, and secondly, it has an educational, developing impact on the process of forming esthesis, ideas, humanitarian knowledge, which, in turn, contributes to the building of a comprehensively educated personality with rich inner world. At the same time, listening to music activates such brain structures in which emotional and mental processing of information takes place - an associative field, analytical mechanisms. Thirdly, the playback of a recording is one of the most productive methods of memorizing specific linguistic constructions. Such phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the listening process involves both brain hemispheres. In relation to experience of (Drobot, 2017; Drobot, 2019; Kaskova, 2012; Minor & Bryusova, 2000), the mentioned activity contributes significantly to the storage of the studied material and its pace of playback.

There is no doubt that listening is a challenging kind of speech activity stated by (Elukhina, 1991; Duci, 2014). The difficulty of learning a foreign language consists of developing such students' skills as audio perception and its central processing and application in different communication conditions as explained by (Leontyev, 2001a, 2001b; Leontyev, 2014).

Tutorial listening is placed to act as a learning tool in order to serve as a way of demonstrating language material, to produce strong auditory images of language units, and to create an essential prerequisite for mastering oral speech, the formation and development of communicative listening skills. In our opinion, the more diverse the listening material is, the easier and faster the student adapts to the perception of speech in the target language. Therefore, it is highly necessary to resort to truly authentic records in the course of practical classes. The application and adaptation of opera works in the educational process complements the traditional list of genres of audio texts.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The reason why operatic masterpieces are used so rarely in the course of practical classes of foreign languages is evident and it can be explained by the apparent difficulty of arias audio perception. Let us consider the identified common difficulties in the perception of audio text in a foreign language (Elukhina, 1991).

##### 1. Linguistic challenges caused by the nature of the language material.

###### a) Phonetic:

- boundary blurring between sounds inside a word as well as between words in an utterance;
- lack of reduction;
- elision.

###### b) Grammar:

- discrepancy in the syntactic construction of the phrase;
- irregular or unconventional word order;
- long syntactic sentences;
- homonymic forms of the verb.

###### c) Lexical:

- the presence of homonyms and homophones;

- the presence of words similar in sound, especially paronyms.
2. Linguistic challenges caused by the substance of speech.
    - students' general weak erudition;
    - lack of cultural background knowledge;
    - insights into the facts related to the domestic history, local way of life, culture of the country of the target language, the so-called realities, which may be unknown to students;
    - presence or absence of a detailed plot, its dynamism;
    - new vocabulary: idioms, colloquial expressions, the existence of several storylines in parallel which can distract the listener's attention and slows down general understanding.
  3. Linguistic challenges caused by the way of presentation and interpretation.
    - features of speech timbre;
    - features of articulation.

Undoubtedly, elision, word order violation in a sentence, absence of the pronoun-subject, as well as certain lexical and grammatical difficulties of the Italian language, complicate the work.

## 5. Research Methods

However, any aria is words set to music. Therefore, in the educational process, the system of working with an opera or an excerpt of musical composition will be in many respects similar to the system of working with a literary text.

Thuswise, we assume the following steps:

1. Preparatory stage, which comprises information about the musical work history, the plot, the historical context, including the information about the composer and performers based on the video sequence;
2. Listening step, which embraces three phases:
  - a) listening of the entire passage in order to have a general overview;
  - b) listening of a passage based on the text or the text with gaps (every 5th or 7th word, endings, prepositions, verbs, etc.);
  - c) test listening with error correction activity.
3. Analytical step, which consists of the comprehensive analysis of a poetic text, analysis of linguistic and stylistic features, immersion in the passage, acquaintance with the characters;
4. Final step is focused on creating the correlation of musical imagery with the musical arrangement (melody, rhythm, musical genre, instruments) and performance (vocal data and the manner of presenting the song by the performer), as well as, if desired, the group performance in the audience.

It is worth noting once again that opera fragments listening presents certain difficulties for unprepared listeners, who are linguistic students, for that reason musical excerpts chosen for listening at the initial stage must meet the following requirements:

1. short recordings (1.5 - 2 minutes);
2. intelligible and comprehensible material format;
3. language material corresponding to students' level and taking into account active vocabulary;
4. simple syntactic structures;

#### 5. the video sequence and the use of visual aids as a must.

The best example that meets the above criteria is the so-called opera hits. For example: the duke's song "La donna è mobile ..." from D. Verdi's opera "Rigoletto" or "Duetto buffo di due gatti" by D. Rossini. For students who have mastered the *passato prossimo*, we can offer the aria of the gypsies "Siamo zingarelle ..." from D. Verdi's opera "La Traviata" and "Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo ..." for those who have studied the *futuro semplice*.

The operatic repertoire of the Baroque era, which is the pride of the Neapolitan musical school, remains undervalued, still untouched and unpractised during the lessons. We are talking, first of all, about the masterpiece of the first half of the 18th century, L. Vinci's opera "Artaserse". For example, Mandane's aria "Conservati fedele ...", which consists of 7 lines only, is suitable for drilling the forms of *imperativo diretto*. Another example taken from the same opera is Artaxerxes' aria "Deh respirar lasciatemi..." or Arbace's aria "L'onda dal mar divisa...". The greatest advantage of the above-mentioned musical works is their volume - 7-8 lines of poetic rhyming text, which is easy to remember. At the same time, the aria is an extremely valuable linguistic and audio work, replete with copious vocabulary, diverse or repetitive grammatical structures, figurative expressions, literary tropes, stylistic devices, etc. It should be noted that the peculiarity of performance inherent in the Baroque era - arias are performed up to 5 repetitions, which, obviously, promotes perception and memorization.

At the next stage of training, one can resort to more complex musical forms, such as duet. As an example, let us consider the delightful duet of Arbace and Mandane in "Quando finisce, o dèi, la vostra crudeltà!" from act 3 of the same opera by L. Vinci.

The studying of *passato remoto* takes a rather long period of time which can be brightened up by Nemorino's aria "Una furtiva lagrima ..." from G. Donizetti's opera "L'elisir d'amore" by Gaetano Donizetti Nemorino. It must be said that after mastering this grammatical phenomenon, the list of recommended musical passages expands significantly, since it is *passato remoto* that is used as the past tense in opera librettos and presents the greatest difficulty in understanding the text of arias.

For advanced students studying the *congiuntivo presente*, we can offer Calaf's aria "Nessun dorma..." from the last act of the opera "Turandot" by G. Puccini, one of the most famous arias ... G. Puccini Calaf "Turandot". Another example is the duet of Violetta and Germont from Verdi's opera "La Traviata" Violetta Germont "La Traviata". This duet can also be used while studying indirect speech and sequence of tenses and moods.

## 6. Findings

In order to test the feasibility and effectiveness of the inclusion of operatic works in the Italian language course, experiential training was carried out within the framework of educational listening. The experiment was conducted in the spring semester among students of the Linguistics department learning Italian for the second year, which corresponds to the level A2-B1 in 2019 and 2020 as part of listening comprehension.

Before and after the experimental training, a number of surveys were conducted, in which 26 students took part: 12 students (group No. 1) in 2019, and 14 students (group No. 2) in 2020. The students were asked to evaluate the difficulty level of listening task and rate it according to a 10-point scale:

8-10 – too difficult, audio perception is challenging, the content of the given musical work is not clear;

7-5 – rather difficult, audio perception is partially successful; the content of the given musical work is quite satisfactory;

4-1 – quite good, audio perception is completely successful, the content of the given musical work is clear.

Before the experiential course, a survey of both groups showed that the biggest difficulties in listening were the phonetic and grammatical features of the Italian language, as well as new, unknown vocabulary, idioms, colloquial phrases.

It is worth noting that the experimental course resulted in significant improvement of these linguistic aspects.

It should be noted that lexical difficulties also create certain problems for audio perception. Unfortunately, the improvement of audio perception was not registered and this parameter remains insufficient. Despite the above mentioned fact, we believe that the audio work should be continued, since the proposed method does not aim at removing difficulties by simplifying the audio text, but offers a way of overcoming them.

Painstaking work on the text of the passage and on the plot of the opera, awareness of the importance of the context helps not only to remove problems when listening to unfamiliar vocabulary, but also to understand the realities, historical facts, culture of the country of the target language and, ultimately, expand the horizons of students, contribute to their personal development and growth.

However, the influence of difficulties caused by the content of speech on students' understanding was not noted - the results of the surveys have hardly changed.

It is curious to note the discrepancy in the assessment of such a parameter as "Difficulties due to the way of audio presentation." The results of group №2 are higher than those of group №1. When discussing the survey data at the end of training in group No. 2, it turned out that listening to Italian arias is easier than in the case when the performer is not native speaker. Paying tribute to L. Pavarotti's beautiful voice and vocal mastery, it should be noted that the interpretation of P. Domingo, a Spaniard by origin, (P. Domingo), according to the students, turned out to be easier to understand: his pronunciation was clearer. The comparison was based on Calaf's aria "Nessun dorma ..." from the last act of the opera "Turandot" by G. Puccini Calaf "Turandot".

This type of educational listening aroused interest among students and got a positive assessment. Students enthusiastically carried out the most difficult assignment which involves giving on-the-spot commentary or expressing their attitude to what they heard (particularly, to the issues touched upon in the passage or opera). This is the most difficult and at the same time the most valuable type of exercise, because here we are dealing with almost spontaneous speech. The Opinion Assignment prepares the student for dialogue in order to exchange assessment information.

## 7. Conclusion

The conducted survey in 2019 and 2020 encompasses students' feedback (26 students of the Linguistics Department of the Institute of Foreign Languages of RUDN University) together with own observations which resulted in drawing the following conclusions.

The authors' method of teaching a language through classical opera works in classroom helps to inspire students to love a foreign language, encourage them to develop their skills; promote not only learning vocabulary and grammar but also conquering the syllabus and being able of making a critical analysis. Playing an opera fragment helps to master the language at an unconscious level.

The role of the teacher has greatly increased since he or she does all the preparatory work aimed at facilitating the process of listening for students. Firstly, the teacher should listen to an opera fragment in order to assess the difficulty level, then he or she ought to stress the challenging points, which is followed by making a special vocabulary of archaic or compound words, for example, and a list of particular expressions that students should pay attention to.

An important element is a warming-up and an introductory talk. It creates a context that promotes and facilitates understanding of the given audio opera fragments through establishing links with historical events, activating background knowledge, arousing interest, and therefore motivation to fulfil the tasks.

In order to increase the effectiveness of learning within the framework of educational listening, it is recommended to use video sequences, film operas. It has been established that the listening abilities are developed efficiently if various channels of information - the sound and visual - are combined simultaneously and applied in an interactive way. This method tends to facilitate the task of sounding speech perception for the learners who have the possibility to comprehend everything what has been said unlike the situation when messages have been listened to by turns as acclaimed by (Elukhina, 1991; Vygotskiy, 2005; Vygotskiy, 2019) and. The video materials are supposed to count on the visual perception of information. Video recording helps to enhance language immersion: 1) by creating a prototype of a foreign language environment; 2) by mastering communicative skills in a foreign language without the necessity of visiting the country of the target language. To sum up, the use of video materials in foreign language lessons really contributes to listening skills practice, since the presented video materials are presumed to reproduce of authentic language communication, they modulate an atmosphere of real language communication, and promote to master a foreign language due to entertaining nature of the presented materials. The learners mentioned those issues while giving feedback during the final stage of the experimental learning course.

The foregoing allows us to talk about certain requirements for the technical equipment of the classroom. This particular type of educational listening requires having a language laboratory alongside with a large screen, a project device that allows all students to watch properly the video. The majority of students (23) enjoyed such a learning method. This type of listening excited great interest, emotions and desire to continue learning in the same way next semester. The conducted research of opera works inclusion in teaching a foreign language showed the practicability and effectiveness of using the works of "opera lirica" in the framework of teaching listening. As determined by (Bakhtin, 1986; Bakhtin & Voloshinov, 2010; Bratus, 1981; Vasilyuk, 1993; Vygotskiy, 2019), this method promotes not just the formation of listening skills of a foreign speech, mastering of educational curriculum, increasing

motivation for learning, but also favours self-improvement and personal development of the young generation. After all, only 1 student out of 26 participants once listened to a live opera in a musical theatre. This fact was revealed during an introductory talk before the listening.

Specific attention should be paid to the uniqueness of Italian opera plots dated back to the 17th-19th centuries as specified by Bakhtin (1998). The story always depicts the characters in a situation of cognitive dissonance, the collision of feeling and duty, a moral crisis when making a critical decision, reaching the altitude of passions. The characters demonstrate behaviour patterns: self-sacrifice and confession ("La Traviata" by G. Verdi), royalty and friendship ("Artaserse" L. Vinci), thereby in accordance with (Galperin, 1982; Vygotskiy, 2019; Vygotskiy, 2005) participating in the formation of the listeners' ethic models.

According to (Leontyev, 1998; Leontyev, 2016), the transfer of moral code is realized not through abstract theoretical concepts, but through real characters who are looking for answers to eternal questions and are ready to share their experience with young listeners who are going through a difficult period of maturation: the age range of 18-20 years is a time of self-determination, self-identification, search for answers to pressing questions of life. As explained by Vasilyuk (1993) and Galperin (1982), in order to make the process of musical and aesthetic development productive, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the student in the educational process is not a targeted test object, but an independent learner who is practicing one's foreign language, mastering listening skills and speech fluency, thus helping to adapt the educational materials according the age range.

In addition, crucial problems solving and moral codes' transmission to the next generations (as well as questions transmission) are quite reasonably considered by many authors as the key of artistic communication and, moreover, as the key mission of art (Bakhtin, 1986; Bratus, 1981; Leontyev, 1998).

The use of "opera lirica italiana" in teaching the Italian language fully meets the requirements of modern times, when a foreign language is studied in close connection with the culture of the country. On the other hand, listening to operas in the classroom is an expansion of the communicative competence and creative abilities of students, as well as one of the most effective means of teaching a foreign language. Emotions and impressions received in the course of working on musical material become invaluable veteran experience, which is transformed into knowledge, which in turn stimulates motivation.

Language and music are kindred spirits, they both have rhythm, tone, melody, pitch, volume and pauses. Firstly, the melody is surely to serve as a memory hook. Secondly, the lyrics of the target language introduces the vocabulary used in a specific context. Moreover, Italian opera lyrics is a particular environment, a particular theme and a unique platform for learning the language. As teachers of foreign languages, we should definitely resort to this strong music-language connection to language learners' benefit.

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