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TEACHING ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: TRADITION AND NEW PERSPECTIVES

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0. Introduction
In this essay on Italian as a foreign language, I intend to discuss two themes. First, I want to show how the tradition of Italian L2 has grown so far as the result of its increasing interest both as a language of culture and as a world language. Second, I want to prove that some approaches, particularly problem-based learning, can help to cope with problem scenarios in teaching and learning it. The two Parts in which the essay has been divided constitute an organic discussion on methodological considerations on the teaching of Italian as L2.

In Part 1, I shall outline a brief profile of Italian as a second language teaching in the last 20 years, and, then, I shall elucidate methods and approaches chosen for its teaching, analysing publications on this matter and focusing on the methodology adopted. Then, I shall discuss the issues aroused from teaching Italian L2. Yet I shall explore the difficulties the learners encounter when studying a foreign language, the learning mechanisms and strategies they possess and enact, and the possible tools to eliminate learners’ dishomogeneities. I want also to demonstrate in which ways the levels of language competence and the learning strategies can be recognized and improved through error analysis and the comprehension of students’ interlanguage.

Part 2 is instead dedicated to problem-based learning issues. Here I shall argue that problem-based learning can become another possible approach for teaching Italian as a foreign language, above all to solve problem scenarios indicated by students who encounter difficulties in learning specific aspects of Italian language.

This study takes into account the research I started at the Royal Holloway College of London in 2002 which I am still carrying on at the University of Aarhus in Denmark where I am currently teaching Italian L2.
PART 1: TRADITION

1. Brief outline of teaching Italian as a foreign language

Italian as a foreign language is a rather recent subject. Since the threshold levels set up by Galli de’ Paratesi (1981), an Italian methodological tradition started, although “lo studio dell’italiano all’estero abbia tardato a costituirsi come capitolo a sé nella linguistica italiana”1 (Bettoni 1986:129). Today, abroad, Italian as a foreign language is taught both at school and at university. Moreover, in Italy, Italian L2 research deals with language acquisition of immigrants, too. In this study, however, I shall discuss only issues about research on Italian taught abroad.

As a matter of fact, research on this field has confirmed a well-established tradition due to several factors. If we reflect why Italian is studied all over the world, the most common answer which has been given is because it is a language of great culture (Sobrero 2003:456).

At the beginning of the Eighties, notional-functional methods and communicative approaches were introduced. Later on there was the revival of grammar, not taught in a normative way but keeping in mind the theoretic contributions of sociolinguistic, textual linguistics and semantics. At the same time the interest and the demand of Italian as a foreign language, as well as the methodology of teaching it, grew and consequently a varied and update publications of didactic materials flourished.

In recent years attention has shift from macrolinguistics to microlinguistics to qualify theories and techniques of applied linguistics and integrate them into Italian L2 methodology (Bettoni 1996).

1 “The study of Italian abroad came late as part of Italian linguistics”.
The study and research of Italian as a foreign language have consolidated in the last years and a proof is the ample publications of didactic materials. On end some texts will be examined to define which educational issues have arisen from them and which methodological orientations have been followed.

To begin with, the *Større Italiensk Grammatik* (1990) by Svend Bach-Jørgen Schmidt Jensen is a grammar book for Danish students which describes Italian language through an update structural method. The texts *Contesti italiani* (1992) by M.Picchiassi-G.Zaganalli and *Crescendo!* (1995) by Francesca Italiano – Irene Marchegiani Jones adopt a thematic approach to learn grammar and structures through texts. The books published by Edilingua, *Video Italiano* (1998) by Cepellaro A and *Ascolto* (1998) by Marin T constitute a didactic series on the development of the four skills, these two books also contain useful material and exercises for the development of receptive skills. The *Grammatica essenziale della lingua italiana* by Mezzadri M. (2000) is not a normative type of grammar but aims at supporting its learning. The textbook *Rete!* by Balboni-Mezzadri “is a multisyllabus course in which a structural-grammatical, a lexical, a four skill method, a situational method, and a phonetic-cultural one interact altogether” (Balboni-Mezzadri 2001). From this picture, paraphrasing Bettoni (1986), we can evince that the teaching of Italian as a foreign language is still characterized by heterogeneity, multiplicity and variability.

2. Coping with levels of competence

Placement tests are useful to establish learners’ levels of language competence and language knowledge degrees, as well as to indicate which didactic strategies to follow. But establishing the levels of competence does not explain in what way learners’ language acquisition and learning processes occur. Nevertheless, an advantageous procedure to understand how learners acquire a foreign language is to analyse the errors they make and the interlanguage they use. In this way we can set up effective plans in
order to compensate and make uniform the levels of language competence.

3. How to overcome dis-homogeneities of learning

Krashen in 1982 explained how learners activate learning and acquisition processes. Since then, interesting researches in the field of foreign languages acquisition have been brought forward. When we tackle this topic, one question is common: in which way learners learn a foreign language? Ellis suggests an approach which discovers “what learners actually do ... when try to learn an L2”. This approach takes into account learners’ production and analyses its changes in time. In other words, during the first phase of research, some formal aspects of the language are selected, as grammatical elements, and, later, learning is controlled.

3.1 Learners’ learning strategies

When approaching the study of a foreign language, learners already possess cognitive learning mechanisms and communicative strategies which help them to understand it, and particularly the former let them elicit information, while the latter make them activate an effective use of the foreign language knowledge. For example:

a) cognitive mechanism

\[\text{gatta} \quad \text{gatte}\]

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2 “Krashen believes that learning through explicit grammar rules, introduced by the teacher, memorized and put into practice by the learner, and acquisition, that is, the subconscious interiorization of structures that the learner applies automatically, are two different and separated types of knowledge and that learning is not to become acquisition, but it can be put into practice only in situations in which the learner remembers the rules studied”, Anna Giacalone Ramat, *Educazione Linguistica: Seconda Lingua* in M.Mioni Alberto-Cortellazzo (a cura di), p.485.

pasta  paste

b) communicative strategy
galleria d’arte/pinacoteca  luogo di quadri  (Ellis 2003)

In case  a)  the learner applies the rule of the plural of feminine nouns, since the majority of Italian nouns make the plural adding the ending  e  to the root of the word as in  gatt-a, gatt-e  and  past-a, past-e. Whereas in case  b)  the learner can express the same concept of  galleria d’arte  with  luogo di quadri, which has the same meaning, inducting it from his background knowledge.

3.2 Errors and error analysis

Analysing some errors made by Danish students, I have noticed that one of the most common errors regards the agreement between subject and verb. For example:

   a) Giorgio e Maria  era andato  al cinema.

The correct form is:

Giorgio e Maria  erano andati  al cinema.

A second frequent type of error takes place when they produce a sentence which is close in form to that one of the foreign language, as in the following example:

   b) Andai  alla Villa Borghese.

While the ‘preposizione semplice’  a  has to be used.

3.2.1 Error or mistake?
A distinction should be made between error and mistake, the former reflects the lack of knowledge, and it occurs because the learner does not know the correct form of the language; while the latter shows a temporary lack of knowledge, due to the inability of putting into practice what he still knows (Ellis 2003:17).

In case a), apparently, it seems the learner knows the agreement rule between subject and verb, but if he is asked to find out the error and succeeds in doing that, it means that he knows the plural form of the verb erano, and therefore this can be considered as a mistake.

3.2.2 Description of errors

There are various ways to describe errors. One is to order them by verbal categories, another consists in identifying general ways through which learners produce sentences not adequate to the foreign language. The most common ones are omission, wrong information, order not correct, ipergeneralization, and transfer (Ellis 2003:18).

3.3 Foreign language learning mechanisms

New studies have been carried out on grammar structures acquisition, which have emphasised that the learner does not acquire rules as the sum of those he has studied, but as the consequences of subsequent phases of learning. It has been noticed that learners acquire a grammar structure gradually, proceeding through transitory phases. For instance, if we analyse the verb dare, we can order the phases of the ‘imperfetto’ (past tense) acquisition in the following way:

1 do
2 davo
3 darevo (wrong)
4 davevo (wrong)
5 davo
As we can observe from this example, the learner knows the form of the present of the indicative, *do*, he learns the form of the ‘imperfetto’, *davo*, but it seems to forget it when he uses *darevo* and *davevo*, and only later he gives the correct form *davo*. This phenomenon has been defined as U-learning, meaning that, after the first phase of progress in learning, that is, he is able to conjugate it in the first two cases, then he fails and he goes back to the initial level of knowledge (Ellis 2003: 23). It has been demonstrated that the learner’s language varies in any phase of the learning processes according to the linguistic context. Free variations occur as well, that is, the learner recognizes a structure known later in the sequence of learning. But let analyse the following sentence produced by some Danish students:

**Il giornalista parlava con una ragazza da un liceo.**

The correct sentence is:

Il giornalista parlava con una ragazza di un liceo.

Here we notice the learners know how to conjugate the ‘imperfetto’, giving *parlava*. They studied assuredly such a structure after the preposition *di*. One reason why they make this error is because Danish prepositional system differs from Italian one, and this can be ascribed as an interlanguage phenomenon.

Another phenomenon is the so called ‘fossilization’, which appears when the learner stops progressing, and this is as if the learner stopped learning.

### 3.3.1 Interlanguage

Interlanguage is a linguistic system that each learner elaborates when he studies a foreign language. He constructs this system taking into account the mother tongue. Psychological and linguistic aspects have been observed related to interlanguage.
As concerns psychological aspects, during the passage from L1 to L2 three types of language transfer occur: **negative**, that is to say, when the error in the foreign language is due to the interference of the mother tongue; **positive**, when the rule of the mother tongue is found in the foreign language, too; a third type of mother tongue transfer consists in the hyper use of some L1 forms which are inadequate in the foreign language⁴. In relation to this topic, I have observed a case of negative transfer in Danish learners of Italian:

La gente mangia le vitamine.

The learners have translated the verb *spise* (eat), as *mangia*, without considering that in this context, the verb *mangiare* has a different connotation. Instead, the verb *rende*, *prendere* (infinitive), in this case is much more adequate.

When dealing with linguistic aspects, relative clauses have been investigated, and it has been observed that some languages as Chinese and Japanese do not contain this type of sentences and as a consequence the learners are not keen on learning them.

Observing some linguistic aspects of Italian studied by Danish students, I have noticed that a similar effect concerns Italian definite articles. Danish language does not make any gender distinction with articles, and spelling remains the same. For example:

a) **manden** (*l’uomo*, the man) or **kvinden** (the woman),  
b) **en mand** (*un uomo*, a man) or **en kvinde** (a woman).

And therefore, in Italian, learners do not recognise the rule which distinguishes the masculine and feminine genders of these articles, and so the following errors are encountered:

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PART 2: NEW PERSPECTIVES

4. An overview of problem-based learning (PBL)

This section is devoted to exemplify the main aspects of PBL, that is, principles, PBL curriculum, conception of knowledge, enabling knowledge discovery, disjunction and transition, models.

4.1 Principles of PBL

This approach to learning was first experimented for medical students in the 1980s by HS Barrows who together with RH Tamblyn claimed that PBL is not a memory-based approach, but it enables students to develop problem-based skills, team work in order to examine through problem situations their gaps of knowledge (Savin-Baden, 2003:14). Besides, PBL helps students to ‘make sense’ for themselves and it teaches students how to learn (Savin-Baden, 2003:15).

More and more, this philosophy of learning is estimated when coping with problem scenarios in higher education. But, why has problem-based learning become so popular? One reason of its popularity is because PBL has brought new ideas and insights to understand learning processes in cases of problematic situations and at the same time it has enriched and improved the solutions for such cases. Yet this approach to learning has developed its own literature and tradition, demonstrating to be effective, too.

But “Why is problem-based a challenge?” and “Why does the idea of problem-based learning evoke remarkably strong, even vehement, reactions?” (Margetson in Boud and Feletti, 1997:37). To answer these questions Margetson replies that “A host of reasons for reactions to
problem-based learning may be identified— for example, dislike...of claimed benefits; anxiety that the outcomes of problem-based learning will not be very tangible; a disruption of habitual and comfortable patterns of work; and, more widely, a general fear of change” (Margetson in Boud and Feletti, 1997:37).

Although these reactions, PBL is an approach which fulfills the demands requested in higher education for key skills\(^5\) and to perform rather than to think and do (Savin-Baden, 2003:15). Yet she underlines that “Problem-based learning offers opportunities for students to learn in teams, develop presentation skills, learn negotiation abilities and develop research skills and many other abilities” (Savin-Baden, 2003:15).

As concerns the teacher’s role, the teacher plays a different role than in traditional lessons. He decides what content knowledge, skills, and attitudes a problem should help students develop. He guides students through the problem of answering PBL questions without providing any answer. He stays behind the stage guiding students through it, and evaluating their performance. He has a different role in each stage of PBL. He develops the problem and fits it into the curriculum. Then, he guides the students through the problem. Finally he evaluates students’ performance. In the different phases of PBL, the teacher also plays the roles of facilitator and evaluator. He judges the results and adjusts the problems if they are too easy or too difficult, and during the learning process he monitors continuously the students helping the weaker with useful suggestions (Delisle 1997:14-16).

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\(^5\) Skills such as working with others, problem-solving and improving personal learning and performance that it is expected students will require for the world of work.
4.2 PBL Curriculum

I agree with Coles (in Boud and Feletti, 1997) when he argues that “problem-based learning is not the only way to arrange a curriculum to promote the kind of learning in professional education, and it might not even be the best way to do it” (313). But, it is more and more contemplated as an effective approach and more often the comments on its results are positive. For example, Ross (in Boud and Feletti, 1997) considering that “Barrows...defined problem-based learning as: the learning which results from the process of working towards the understanding of, or resolution of, a problem” gives the following definition of PBL curricula: “Problem-based curricula, then, are those designed to facilitate such learning...problem-based curricula are ones where students work on problems as (part of) the course” (28-29).

In higher education many curricula are subject-based, that is, they focus on content and subjects. Instead, a PBL curriculum focuses its content around problem scenarios rather than subjects or disciplines and it is, basically, a student-centred approach, flexible and encouraging diversity (Savin-Baden, 2003:3-4). Besides, both liberal education⁶ and operational curricula⁷ are encompassed by problem-based learning that “can help develop in students the capacities to be able to operate effectively in society, whilst simultaneously giving opportunities to have unrestricted access to knowledge” (Savin-Baden, 2003: 4-5).

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⁶ That is “where students are encouraged to have virtually unrestricted access to knowledge and that knowledge is to be valued for its own sake”, in Savin-Baden, Maggi, Problem-based Learning in Higher Education: Untold Stories (Philadelphia, Pa: Open University Press, 2000), pp. 4-5.

⁷ That is “curricula that focus on what students are able to do”, ibidem, p.4.
A PBL curriculum also has a multidimensional nature and takes into account both the environment and previous experiences of students and staff (Savin-Baden 2003).

The application of a PBL curriculum fulfills two purposes: first, it will provide students with a method to become capable in a set of competences; second, to use problem-based as the method of choice, because it is particularly suitable to support the conditions that influence effective adult learning (Savin-Baden 2003).

4.3 Conception of knowledge

In citing Boud, Savin-Baden (2003) specifies that a main characteristic of PBL is “a focus on the processes of knowledge acquisition rather than the products of such processes (15). Coles (in Boud and Felletti: 1997) argues that deep processing does not facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and remembering consists in ‘multiple routes of access’ (315). Instead, PBL conception of knowledge is radically different from that of subject-based learning: ‘the difference can be seen in the notion of expertise…to be an expert is to know a lot of content; if it is to have covered much in one’s learning; typically, one has great deal of propositional knowledge…Especially in professional areas ‘knowing how…(to do something)’ is also important. None the less, the often overwhelming tendency in subject-based knowledge is to concentrate on content” (Cf Margetson in Boud and Felletti, 1997: 38). Yet PBL “ makes active use of students’ existing knowledge…The knowledge which is valued in problem-based learning is that which can be used in context rather than that which justifies the structure of particular disciplines” (Ross in Boud and Felletti, 1997:16). Moreover, PBL aims at acquiring content and at gaining propositional knowledge not in an abstract way, but for what they are needed (Margetson in Boud and Felletti, 1997: 38). Finally, it makes students reflect on the way ‘they learn’ and develop skills useful for their future jobs.
The remarks above point out that PBL proposes a new conception of knowledge, guiding and allowing students to discover it.

4.4 Enabling knowledge discovery

A main goal of PBL is to enable knowledge discovery. For PBL knowledge discovery comprises both cognitive aspects and emotional ones. In contrast with subject-based learning, PBL considers the learner not as a passive object that should be fill in like a ‘bucket’ (Cf Popper), but as an active element of the learning process able to produce knowledge. In addition, PBL does not see knowledge discovery separated from justification and no normative guidance can be given as educational discovery is, by definition, a serendipitous process (Cf Margetson in Boud and Feletti, 1997: 42-43).

4.5 Disjunction and transition

Two things may happen in the learning process, that is, disjunction\(^8\) and transition\(^9\). The former occurs when students experience challenges to their life-world (Savin-Baden 2003: 57) and in ‘traditional’ institutions that were set up for lecture-based learning, since the environment and attitudes of staff caused a barrier to its acceptance in the face of this threat and uncertainty. While the latter comes about when students are adapting themselves to a new way of teaching and shifts in learning are necessary.

However, they can have positive results if, as Savin-Baden points out, “disjunction is not something to be seen as unhelpful and damaging,

\(^8\) A sense of fragmentation of part of, or all of the self, characterized by frustration and confusion, and a loss of sense of self, which often results in anger and the need for right answers.

\(^9\) Shifts in learner experience caused by a challenge to the person’s life-world. Transitions occur in particular areas of students’ lives, at different times and distinct ways. The notion of transition carries with it the idea of movement from one place to another and with it the necessary of taking up a new position in a different place.
but instead as dynamic in the sense that different forms of disjunction: enabling and disabling, can result in transitions in students’ lives” (Savin-Baden 2003: 87).

4.6 Models of PBL

Savi-Baden suggests five conceptual models of PBL: 1) PBL for Epistemological Competence; 2) PBL for Practical and Performative; 3) PBL for Interdisciplinary Understanding; 4) PBL for Trandisciplinary Learning; 5) PBL for Critical Contestability.

These models can offer different forms of problem-based learning and give staff and students opportunities for recognizing and valuing differences with the world of higher education (Savi-Baden, 2003: 126-127).

5. Problem-based learning in teaching Italian L2

In Part 1 I have reckoned a representative and significant range of didactic production of Italian L2. So far, the main characteristic which best describes Italian L2 language teaching tradition is heterogeneity, since the books analyzed indicate different methods and approaches to teach it. But I argue that if teaching is not effective methodology needs to be integrated with approaches which allow the teacher to find more productive and alternative solutions. In the next section I shall exemplify two problem scenarios which often occur in teaching Italian L2.

5.1 Problem scenarios

One of the most common problem scenarios I have experienced is teaching students with dissimilar language levels, that is, students with mixed abilities. Therefore, to confront this problem scenario, I argue that a problem-based approach can help the teacher to overcome it. To make clear what I want to say, it is significant to quote Delisle who states that “Problem-based learning (PBL) works
well with all students, marking its strategies ideal for heterogeneous classrooms where students with mixed abilities can pool their talents collaboratively to invent a solution. These techniques also lend themselves to an interdisciplinary orientation since answering a problem frequently requires information from several academic areas” (1997:7).

But, how can a PBL curriculum be planned? First, a model of PBL should be chosen. For example, both a practical and performative method and an interdisciplinary one may be utilized. Second, students work in teams and decide which aspects of Italian want to practice, for example, which linguistic problems they encounter in learning Italian or which skills they want to improve, for instance, listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Regards the second one, they may propose the material and the sources they believe are the most adequate to it, for example, they may present for consideration tv or radio programmes they want to listen to or to watch to (listening); books, magazines, newspapers (reading); situations and role plays they want to simulate (speaking); topics on which they want to write about (writing). During the developing of the problem, the teacher guides their choices; he also facilitates and monitors the learning process. Assessment is both formative and summative. The former is set up for feedback purposes, whilst the latter judges either group or individual work.

Another frequent problem scenario dwells in teaching grammar methodology. As a matter of fact, grammar teaching methodology may differ from country to country and even from higher education institution to higher education institution. Therefore, this second problem scenario may occur when students go about the study of grammar at university. If the students already know Italian grammar, the new learning experience may result in a negative attitude of the students, since the new methodology does not meet their expectations. This shift may cause disjunction as the methodology adopted diverges from the previous one they were used to. This could turn out as well in a negative transition. And to manage transition means “that students develop the complexity skills
(Robertson, 1998) that higher education and society at large seem to require. Complexity skills are the advanced skills which go beyond key skills and subject skills in qualification framework, such as the capacity to work in complex and ambiguous context and to solve and manage problems in ways that transcend conventional lines of thinking” (Savin-Baden, 2003: 100). In fact, many students go to university with the conception that grammar should be learnt mainly in a normative way and this view “leads them to assume that learning comprises rote memorization of facts” (Savin-Baden, 2003: 93). Here I interpret ‘facts’ as rules. Rules describe the form of language, and to learn rules also means to activate cognitive mechanisms. Students often ask for memorize rules thorough normative and repetitive exercises. In tackling with this problem scenario, problem-based learning favours learner’s autonomy, self-direction and group work and develops ‘constructed knowledge’ which is related to the context in which it occurs and is applied, and that students see themselves as creators of knowledge (Savi-Baden, 2003:30).

But let make some concrete examples and reflect on them. In this second problem scenario I reckon advanced Danish students of Italian L2 who I examined during some grammar lessons. As Danish punctuation and syntax differs from Italian ones, they encounter difficulties in writing in Italian and they often ask for grammar explanations of rules and exemplification exercises. Working out this problem scenario, these students may indicate that they like to practice especially the uses of the comma and the subjunctive in Italian. They also suggest a plan to develop this problem. To work on this problem, an Italian L2 teacher would ask students to collect examples from written texts where these two aspects of grammar are encountered. The teacher would also inform them where to find the material they need, for example, libraries, books, newspapers, internet sites. Then, first, in teams, they may collect lists both of uses of the comma and of the subjunctive in formal and informal Italian, and in old and modern Italian. And finally they discuss the data they have found in plenary sessions. Continuously the teacher guides and
monitors them. As in the previous problem scenario, assessment is either formative or summative, the former is made during the development of the problem scenario, whereas the latter consists in a formal exam on the mentioned grammar aspects.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, in this essay I have showed how Italian L2 teaching tradition has become a reality in the panorama of modern foreign languages, especially Spanish, French, German, and others, where English acts by now as a lingua franca. This tradition has also consolidated an autonomous teaching methodology. Apart from English, Italian L2 is actually in competition with such languages since their survival in higher education depends on the number of students each foreign language is able to enroll. I have also argued that Italian L2 and its teaching methodology may improve if in some circumstances it reckons PBL to solve some students’ learning problems. This means to adopt a flexible methodology which contemplates students’ mutable needs let alone the demands of today’s world and market, and obviously higher education expectations. To do so, the teacher of Italian L2 must consider new perspectives of teaching as the demands are more complex and specific than in the past.

Therefore, as I argued in Part 2, the teacher of Italian L2 should reflect on results of researches in the learning field of L2, as well. And the future of Italian as L2 depends not only on the interest in it as a language of great culture, but also on the capacity to teach Italian L2 in an update way, in the sense that teachers must demonstrate adequate methodologies to cope with students’ current needs and demands. In fact, I have encouraged the use of PBL to make the teacher ready to provide students with update educational tools and abilities essential in a globalized world where people are quickly adapting themselves to works where complexity skills and new competences are necessary in order to meet the requirements of a changeable labour market. Foreign language traditional methodology
is not always adequate to meet them. And, although the theoretic principles of epistemology, pedagogy, psychology and other educational sciences give prompt hints to understand learning processes, more should be investigated and researched in this educational field. In addition, the foreign language teacher is involved in the continuous transformations of society and bears both professional and psychological pressures that go beyond his epistemological role of educator. Besides, government policies in higher education too affect his role and identity, therefore I believe that the challenges he faces concern more and more the capacity of understanding the views of a globalized human being which are reflected in the learners’ perceptions of the reality and which are clearly more complex than those of the past. Nowadays, the perspectives of looking at the world are changed and the teacher cannot ignore this.

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