

Cooperative Learning of Italian Literature in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

Keywords:

cooperative learning; Italian literature; foreign language didactics; post pandemic university

The paper analyses how cooperative learning can be used in teaching literature, specifically 19th century Italian literature. It presents the results of group activities carried out in October 2022 by students from the Faculty of Letters of the "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, with specialisation in Italian A and B. These are students attending the Italian Literature II course, taught in Italian. The participants returned to university (face-to-face didactic activities) only in the spring of 2022, in the second semester of their first year of study at a university level. They spent more than one year of high school during the Covid-19 pandemic (with online school). After having carried out a cooperative activity in the practical course that focused on the study of Italian literature, in groups of 3-4 students, they were given an anonymous questionnaire to express their views on cooperative learning of foreign languages and literatures. The questionnaire contained 7 questions in which the teacher wanted to check whether the students found cooperative learning more effective than the classical methods of learning foreign languages and literatures in the post-pandemic period and how the cooperative activity stimulated their curiosity for Italian literature, especially for reading the novel studied during the practical course.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

kooperatives Lernen; italienische Literatur; Fremdsprachendidaktik; post-pandemische Universität

Der Beitrag analysiert, wie kooperatives Lernen im Literaturunterricht eingesetzt werden kann, insbesondere in der italienischen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts. Es werden die Ergebnisse von Gruppenaktivitäten vorgestellt, die im Oktober 2022 von Studenten der Fakultät für Philologie der "Babeș-Bolyai"-Universität Cluj-Napoca mit Spezialisierung auf Italienisch A und B durchgeführt wurden. Es handelt sich um Studenten, die den Kurs Italienische Literatur II in italienischer Sprache besuchen. Die Teilnehmer kehrten erst im Frühjahr 2022, im zweiten Semester ihres ersten Studienjahres auf Universitätsebene, an die Universität zurück (Präsenzveranstaltungen). Während der Covid-19-Pandemie verbrachten sie mehr als ein Jahr in der Hochschule (mit Online-Schule). Nachdem sie in Gruppen von 3 bis 4 Studenten eine kooperative Aktivität im Praktikum durchgeführt hatten, die sich auf das Studium der italienischen Literatur konzentrierte, erhielten sie einen anonymen Fragebogen, um ihre Meinung zum kooperativen Lernen von Fremdsprachen und Literaturen zu äußern. Der Fragebogen enthielt 7 Fragen, mit denen die Lehrkraft überprüfen wollte, ob die Schüler das kooperative Lernen für effektiver hielten als die klassischen Methoden zum Erlernen von Fremdsprachen und Literaturen in der Zeit nach der Pandemie und inwieweit die kooperative Aktivität ihre Neugier auf die italienische Literatur anregte, insbesondere auf die Lektüre des Romans, der während des Praktikums untersucht wurde.

1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges faced by literature teachers in university education after the online teaching experience caused by the Covid-19 pandemic was to return to normality, i.e. to return, from a didactic point of view, to a teaching situation in which students should be able to acquire through their training the professional and transversal competences provided by the study plans. In the case of the 19th century Italian literature, course taught at the Faculty of Letters (at the "Babeș-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania), the general and specific objectives of the discipline had to be achieved through contents appropriate to the level of understanding of the new

generations of students, using classical and interactive teaching methods for the course activities and methods involving active participation and hermeneutic analysis on texts for the practical courses. So it is not only students in pre-university education who have had and need support to recover their learning losses after online school (Muste 2020), but also students at a university level. Sometimes university teachers, as indeed all teachers, have been put in a position to go beyond their basic role and contribute to the recovery of the mental and physical health and social development of students. The disruption of education systems has resulted in large numbers of students

missing out on significant knowledge that they would have normally learned in the classroom, and this was and is still visible not only in younger children but also in those attending university. Nevertheless, university students in Italian at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca were enthusiastic about returning to school, attended classes in large numbers and created strong bonds with their university teachers, who were perceived as reference points in contemporary society, not only professionally.

The paper addresses a number of issues related to the teaching of Italian language and literature to native-speakers Romanian and Hungarian students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters of “Babes-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca, officially registered as students in Italian A and B (class 2021-2024). It is specifically focused on the practical course Italian Literature II, a compulsory course for all the undergraduates of the Italian section, taught in Italian, which discusses the classic 19th century Italian authors Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), Carlo Collodi (1826-1890) - author of the famous novel *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, - and Giovanni Verga (1840-1922). Among the professional competences foreseen by the curriculum of this course we could list the analysis and presentation of literary phenomena in the context of Italian culture, the understanding of the relationships and influences between literary and critical categories, as well as the relationships between the different current methodologies, the understanding of the interdependencies between text and fictional world, the ability to analyse and distinguish the specific characteristics of the novel as a literary genre, to exemplify in detail the subjects dealt with and to associate them to the text, the ability to analyse a literary text using the concepts and methods of modern criticism; the ability to use critical language and concepts, but also to understand the applicability of interdisciplinary methods to literary criticism. Among the transversal competences we mention the use of the components of the field of language and literature in full accordance with professional ethics, team relations; interpersonal communication and assumption of specific roles; organisation of an individual project of continuous training; fulfilment of training objectives through information activities, team projects and participation in institutional programmes of personal and professional development.

In the first weeks after returning to university, it was evident the need for a new idea of school, which could be able to respond to the changes brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, an education that would facilitate the cognitive development of university students, develop their intellectual capacities and help them to form themselves as individuals, perfectly integrated in a society that has profoundly changed in recent years. The young participants in this course were born between 2001 and 2003 and have attended two years of online schooling (final year of high school and first year of university).

The main problem encountered after returning at the university, in physical classrooms, was the students' difficulty in reading the compulsory bibliography of the course. One of the tools we used to remedy this problem was and is cooperative learning, an extremely useful learning modality after the long period of isolation imposed by the pandemic. It is well known that Cooperative Learning emphasizes the cooperative mode over the competitive and individualistic mode of learning. It is a method that seems to provide not only excellent academic results at university level (Millis 2010), but also necessary educational objectives in a post-pandemic society.

Cooperative Learning is a well known method in Romania, with different approaches, from *Learning together* (D.W. Johnson and F.P. Johnson 1991), to *Student Team Learning* (R. Slavin 1992), to *Structural Approach of Cooperative Learning* (Kagan 1994), to *Group investigation* (Shlomo Sharan 1994), to *Complex Instruction* (Cohen 1999), to *Collaborative Approach* present in the United Kingdom (Cowie, Smith, Boulton & Laver, 1994) and in Australia (Green & Reid, 1990). All *Cooperative Learning* theorists (D.W. Johnson, R.T. Johnson, Holubec, Kagan etc.) have stressed the importance of introducing cooperative learning in schools given the benefits of this type of learning: positive interpersonal interaction, face-to-face interaction, learning and use of social skills, individual and group responsibility, review and continuous improvement of teamwork (Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996: 24), etc. Mario Comoglio gives an essential definition of this type of learning: a “totality of classroom management techniques in which students work in small groups on a learning activity and receive evaluations based on the results obtained” (Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996: 24). In the specific case of the students in Italian from Cluj-Napoca, we were interested in helping them go through the bibliography of the practical course. First

of all we wanted them to read the compulsory bibliography that would allow them to achieve the objectives of the subject. If the general objective of the course is to form an overview of the literary period studied, among the specific objectives we mention the illustration of the essential elements of Italian Romanticism and *Verismo* in relation to European literature; the illustration of the critical and literary reception of the authors studied, including their presence in Romanian culture; the identification of elements of intertextuality. Concerning the practical course, the objective is to critically interpret a literary text of great complexity, in Italian, on the basis of the concepts and methods studied.

The bibliography for the practical course contains the works of the authors studied (Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*; Alessandro Manzoni, *I Promessi sposi*; Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio*; Giuseppe Verga, *I Malavoglia*, as well as the novels *Fantasticheria*, *Rosso Malpelo*, *Cavalleria rusticana*). Auxiliary teaching tools to help the students were available in physical and digital format and made available by the teacher at the beginning of the course. These are mainly anthologies and histories of Italian literature (Santagata, Carotti, Casadei, & Tavoni, 2006; Guglielmino, & Grosser, 1987; Ferroni, 1995). A compulsory critical bibliography containing relevant works to the understanding of the literature studied (Blasucci, 2001; Luporini, 1980; Caretti, 1976; Asor Rosa, 1995; Russo, 1919) has also been provided, as well as an optional bibliography (Santagata, 1994; Dolfi, 2009; Raimondi, 1975; Marcheschi, 1990; Marcheschi, 2016; Luperini, 1981).

2. Problem statement

Our study aims to investigate the effects of cooperative learning at the university level, with applications to the study of foreign languages and literatures, particularly 19th century Italian language and literature. As mentioned above, the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic were numerous also in university learning, and one of the main problems after returning to university, face to face, was to find effective solutions for the cognitive development of university students after the long period of isolation, for the development of specific, professional and transversal skills, of the subjects taught, but also for the recovery of social skills.

3. Research hypothesis

The first research hypothesis of the study is: “Second year students, native speakers of Romanian or Hungarian, majoring in Italian Language and Literature, will have a positive attitude towards cooperative learning carried out in the Italian Literature II course, taught face-to-face in the academic year 2022/2023, exclusively in Italian, after more than one year of online school”.

The second research hypothesis of the study is: “Cooperative learning will stimulate the curiosity of the same students to read the whole novel studied in class and to interpret it critically”.

In the following we will show the sample of respondents of the present study. Even though the students enrolled in the Italian Language and Literature section in the academic year 2021/2022 were 39, the sample on which the study was carried out in the academic year 2022/2023 is a group of 16 students, students who participated in the practical Italian Literature II course when the questionnaire was distributed. The subject Italian Literature II involves 56 hours of study distributed in 28 hours of lecture and 28 hours of practical course per semester, i.e. two hours of lecture and two hours of practical course. Even if we will describe below also a series of general observations related to the present research carried out during the lecture, we underline that the research methodology used in the present study involves the description of a case study, a random encounter lasting two hours of practical course: in the first hour students carried out traditional seminar activities on the topic of the study, in the second hour cooperative activities. Afterwards they were given a questionnaire with open and closed questions, which will be discussed in the chapter Research findings.

The 16 students who attended the class were mostly born in 2002 (10 students), others were born in 2001 (6 students). They study Italian language and literature in combination with various other languages taught at the Faculty of Letters of “Babeș-Bolyai” University: with English (6), Norwegian (2), Hungarian (1), Korean (3), Finnish (1), Romanian (1), French (1), at beginner or advanced level. One of the participants was an Erasmus student from France who could not complete the questionnaire (she does not know Romanian, language of the questionnaire). So the number of valid questionnaires was 15. I remind readers that the students surveyed have only been back in college (physical classroom) during the spring of

2022, in the second semester of their first year of university, and spent more than a year of high school online because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the following we will present a sample of the content of the practical course. We will describe the content, the topic and the objectives of the practical course, in relation to the general objectives of Italian Literature II. We will also describe how the experiment was carried out.

At the first course meetings of Italian Literature II (October 2022) we discussed Verga's novel *I Malavoglia* (2 hours of class and 2 hours of practical course per week), focusing on the themes addressed by Giovanni Verga, in close connection with literary criticism, and we have particularly explored the defeat theme, present in the entire prose of the Italian author, a prose in which there are a considerable number of characters for whom "life is only an illusion, a disappointment, a defeat or death" (Asor Rosa, 1997: 495). We explained to those who attended the course the relationship between French Naturalism and Italian Verismo, Verga's life, author's ideological and cultural maturation, themes as the "law of the strongest" and of "the vanquished", Verga's pessimism, the "ideal of the oyster" and the "religion of the family" in the choral novel *I Malavoglia*. The students who attend the lecture and the practical course do not usually ask questions about the contents taught weekly or about the course bibliography. This silence can be interpreted as a lack of interest (yet they were in the room, attending the class, although attendance is not compulsory) or as an inability to elaborate on the content transmitted. Another explanation is their limited knowledge of Italian. At the professor's insistence they state that there are no questions because the course content is clear.

In the practical course we have taken up the information about Verga's short stories - in particular *Fantasticheria* considered as a poetic manifest, but also *Rosso Malpelo* in which we have dealt with the theme of the relationship between consciousness and action. We also discussed the mythical dimension of the exclusions and Verga's linguistic solutions, in particular the choral techniques. We checked in the practical course whether the novel *I Malavoglia*, analysed during the meeting, had been read by the students. We found out that the students which attended the lecture on 19 October 2022 (22 people) didn't read the novel analysed (with four exceptions: two students had read the novel in Italian long time

before and two had read it in an English translation). Students were kindly asked to read the novel in order to be able to understand the papers and speeches of their colleagues in the practical course. They were told that the Romanian translation of Verga's novel and short stories was available in the lending section of the Faculty of Letters library (Verga, 1955; Verga, 1983; Verga, 1964; Verga, 1959), in the same building where the practical course was held. The professor also showed them the websites where they could find the novel online (free on www.liberliber.it and in audiobook format on you tube).

However very few students started reading the novels in order to understand the lectures. Our teaching experience from previous years suggests that many students wait for the exam session in order to read the bibliography, but in this case the number of students that didn't read the novel was much higher than in previous years (before the online school). The teacher's major concern was that at this rate they would not be able to achieve the minimum performance standards and would not be able to take their exams.

To help them we used a group exercise on October 26th, 2022, which we carried out during a practical course meeting (a meeting which lasted two hours). During the first hour, students listened to two seminar presentations (individual research works) in which two students spoke about: *I Malavoglia, the objective and impersonal narrative. Verga's linguistic solutions - the chorality*, and *I Malavoglia: the denial of progress and history, the mythical dimension of the excluded*. The presentations followed standard methods (oral presentation and power point with oral presentation). We observed a lack of interest of the students on colleagues's analyse, fatigue, sleepiness, inability to interact with colleagues who prepared their research. There were no questions, neither for the colleagues who presented, nor for the professor who explained the different polemics related to Verga's style (Giacomo Devoto, Leo Spitzer and Asor Rosa's theses).

During the second hour the teacher proposed them a handout with an excerpt from chapter XI of the novel (Verga, 1985: 226-227). We propose here a small fragment of the excerpt in English translation: "*But from that time forth he thought of nothing but the easy, wandering life other fellows led; and in the evening, not to hear all that idle chatter, he stood by the door with his shoulders against the wall, watching the*

people pass, and meditating on his hard fate; at least one was resting against the fatigues of to-morrow, when must begin again over and over the same thing, like Cousin Mosca's ass, that when they brought the collar reached out his neck to have it put on. "We're all asses!" he muttered; "that's what we are—asses! beasts of burden." (...) "You are afraid of work, are afraid of poverty; I, who have neither your youth nor your strength, fear them not. 'The good pilot is known in the storm.' You are afraid of having to work for your bread, that is what ails you! When my father, rest his soul, left me the Provvidenza and five mouths to feed, I was younger than you are now, and I was not afraid; and I have done my duty without grumbling; and I do it still, and I pray God to help me to do it as long as I live, as your father did, and your brother Luca, blessed be their souls! who feared not to go and die where duty led them". (Giovanni Verga, *House by the medlar-tree*, translated by Mary A. Craig 1890).

The teacher explained the students that the fragment represents an exchange between two points of view, the points of view of two heroes defeated by the struggle for progress, who nevertheless enter the world of myth (Asor Rosa, 1997: 549). We also clarified Vitiello Masiello's vision of the novel (1987: 44-45). We delineated the struggle for survival which is a universal law in the novel and for the Malavoglia family, a family who has different ideas and feelings from those of the dominant community, even if their perspective is that of the "vanquished", of a bunch of losers, historically and ontologically. We focused on the literary criticism where one can understand that these characters help the reader to go further, to understand, through the myth of these defeated heroes, "the whole tragedy of the historical process and of human development" (Masiello, 1987: 44-45).

In the cooperative learning exercise, the 16 students who attended the seminar were divided into groups of 3-4 and the teacher assigned them the task: some groups were chosen to support the point of view of master 'Ntoni, the patriarch of the family and his values, as shown in the fragment read in class, others to support the point of view of the young nephew 'Ntoni.

The working atmosphere was radically different during the second hour, the students were animated, they discussed, they searched for unknown words in Italian with the help of online resources, they discussed among themselves with great passion and interest. One by one, through their research work and

their presentations, the two portraits of the characters took shape. The students delegated a representative of their own free will to present the results of the group's research, but they supported it by respectfully adding some essential considerations. They also collaborated in presenting the characters and the whole class benefited from the work of their colleagues.

Padron 'Ntoni (or master 'Ntoni) appeared as a supporter of patriarchal values, the students noted that he speaks a popular language, that he resorts to proverbs and compares human life to that of animals, that he is representative of an immobile, repetitive culture, that he has a clear worldview: for him the social condition cannot be changed. The economic and symbolic centre of the patriarchal family is the home, and the family's mission is not to bring about improvements, eventual progress, but to protect the family from accidents, illness, social events that could destroy it. Master 'Ntoni' worldview is based on the ethic of home, work and duty that guarantees the survival and respect of the community, rather than on self-interest.

The groups that have dealt with padron 'Ntoni's grandson, who goes by the same name, 'Ntoni, have noted that he refuses to be compared to a pack donkey. He is the only one in his family who knows the world, who travelled outside the community of the village, he is different from his family, but lost between two worlds, the patriarchal and the modern. He is a wide-eyed dreamer who wants to become rich to help his family. Even though the family ethic survives in him, he denies his grandfather's principles, his home ethic, the morality of work and his sense of duty.

To draw conclusions the teacher asked the students to sit in a circle in the classroom and choose, from the characters analysed, the one that comes closest to their own values. There were three groups of values: patriarchal, proactive, neither. Each student, individually, presented his own views. The class was divided between supporters of 'Ntoni and those who considered both views to be exaggerated, none of the students agreed with the patriarchal vision of master 'Ntoni. The students thus expressed their personal opinion on the most important themes in Verga's prose: work ethic, family theme, etc. They observed that both characters are to blame for their own destiny, but that basically both are victims of economic ignorance: master 'Ntoni refuses modern culture being anchored in the patriarchal one, while 'Ntoni is rebellious and unprejudiced, but does not understand

that the rich, too, conquer and preserve their lifestyle through work and effort (Santagata, 2006: 284).

At the end students were given an anonymous questionnaire to express their views towards cooperative learning.

4. Research findings

The questionnaire included an initial part in which it was explained to the students, simplifying the problem, that “although it is known under different names (cooperative learning, collective learning, community learning, mutual learning, team learning, group study, circulated study, etc.), collaborative learning implies cooperation (working together with someone), collaboration, i.e. active participation in carrying out an action, based on the exchange of proposals, ideas”. The questionnaire included 7 open and closed questions. As we said before, the number of valid respondents was 15.

1. **“Have you ever worked in a team with other colleagues to achieve teaching objectives? At what level? Middle school, high school, university.”** To this question, the majority of respondents (12) stated that they had worked in teams with other colleagues to achieve teaching objectives in middle and high school (80% of the respondents). It confirms that the cooperative learning is well known in Romania. The others (3 persons), having language combinations with Hungarian, French and English, stated that they were not familiar with this type of learning.

2. **“Have you ever worked in teams with other colleagues at university to learn languages?”** To this question a total of 9 respondents (60%) stated that cooperative learning was used at university for learning foreign languages, while 6 persons (40%) stated that they did not use this type of learning. Cooperative learning is widely used in the Faculty of Letters for foreign language learning, we tend to believe that the 40% of respondents who claim that this learning has not been used does not adequately reflect the reality, as we will see from the analysis of the following question

3. **“Have you carried out group projects at university to learn Italian? If yes, in which subject?”** To this question 10 students (67%) answered “no” and only 5 students (33%) acknowledged cooperative learning: 2 in culture and civilisation (13%) and 2 in Italian literature I (13%). From our direct experience and knowledge, cooperative learning methods were used in the Italian department for the generation of students who responded to our questionnaire, both in the culture and civilization course (first year, attended online) and in the Italian language and literature I course (first year of university, face-to-face, with physical presence). However students did not identify the method of

cooperative learning only from the teaching act. In order to understand what type of method the teacher applies, the student has to be explained that they are participating in a group project. We think this could be a valid explanation for the results of the questionnaire.

4. **“Do you think this type of learning is more effective than traditional methods for studying Italian?”** The majority (13), i.e. 86%, considered it a more efficient method, compared to 14% who did not. This result coincides with that of other studies dedicated to cooperative learning.

5. At the semi-opened question **“If yes, how has cooperative learning helped you to acquire specific linguistic, literary, cultural skills?”** the students could chose between a limited number of answers (**It helped you to learn more deeply. It cultivated relationships based on mutual respect. It forced you to put more effort into the learning process. It developed your communication skills. You have developed critical thinking. You have socialised. You have exchanged opinions. You have learned other opinions. You developed self-confidence.**), but also to supplement the information (with **Others**). In this case 61% of students indicated that it helped them to learn more deeply, 53% considered that it cultivated relationships based on mutual respect, and forced them to put more effort into the learning process, 69% considered that cooperative learning developed their communication skills, 62% believe that collaborative learning developed their critical thinking, 84% are satisfied that they socialised, 100% believe that the exchange of opinions helped them in acquiring course-specific skills, 84% believe that it helped them by making other opinions their own, and 61% of respondents believe that it developed their self-confidence. Some of the respondents wanted to specify at this point that cooperative learning helped them in acquiring linguistic, literary and cultural competences by “increasing attention, willingness to engage, high dynamics, accumulating and memorising notions much faster”, another believes that it is “much easier to understand a concept/some phrases, words, if they are explained to them in a non-academic context”, and another believes that “cooperative learning helped me in acquiring these competences by the fact that it is a dynamic process and I can retain aspects more easily”.

6. **“Do you think it would be necessary, from your perspective, to use cooperative learning more often in acquiring Italian language skills?”**

At this question 13 respondents answered yes (87%), one answered that she, personally, doesn't think it is necessary and one of them answered that it is not necessary, but she would like to use cooperative learning more often because it is a more fun way of learning than the classical one. The answers to questions 5, 6 and 7 confirm the first hypothesis of our

study, i.e. students' positive attitudes towards cooperative learning in the post-pandemic period.

7. “How did the exercise in class stimulate your curiosity about Verga's novel?”

In the last item, number 7, students were asked to indicate how the exercise they did in class stimulated their curiosity for the novel *I Malavoglia* by Giovanni Verga. We numbered the questionnaires from 1 to 16. Students gave a wide variety of answers showing their positive attitude towards cooperative learning, emphasizing once again that their responses confirm the first hypothesis of our study. In order to see if also the second hypothesis of the study has been confirmed, we believe it is necessary to reproduce the students' responses.

Respondent 1: “It made me more interested in the subject, I could understand it better and I want to know more”.

Respondent 2: “It made me understand the novel better”.

Respondent 3: “The exercise stimulated my curiosity, because I heard different opinions that I want to be able to understand”.

Respondent 4: “It made me want to find out why my colleagues who have already gone through the novel had the opinions they did”.

Respondent 5: “A lot of the information shared in class about Verga's novel was already familiar to me. But it was interesting to hear the (somewhat unpredictable) perspectives of others”.

Respondent 6: “It made me curious”.

Respondent 7: “This exercise surprised me in a pleasant way because the group discussion of ideas from Verga's excerpt was diverse, requiring more detailed engagement”.

Respondent 8: “This exercise made me realise that there are several points of view, which now makes me see the novel from more perspectives”.

Respondent 9: “I saw different perspectives which deepened the characters”.

Respondent 10: “I saw a different perspective”.

Respondent 11: “I heard more opinions and points of view, and it would help me in the future to do exercises like this in order to develop critical thinking”.

Respondent 12: “By challenging the desire to understand more deeply the debated topics”.

Respondent 13: “Because communicating and debating ideas helps us to be more active, to discover more points of view and to accept or contradict them. (It keeps us motivated!)”.

Respondent 14: “The exchange of opinions is very effective as it maintains afloat all the students, everyone becomes curious about each other's opinions, which makes you want to know more about Verga's works and his way of writing”.

Respondent 15: “It was more interactive, and this way helped me to concentrate better”.

Respondent 16: (Erasmus student from France): “Working in a team allows the exchange of ideas and therefore allows the discovery of different points of view. Expressing one's own opinion on a topic related to Verga's novel allows one to adopt a different way of understanding Verga and to have a greater interest”.

As we can see, the students said the cooperative learning helped them to be more interested in the subject, to better understand it, to want to know more, to recognise different opinions, to live a pleasant learning experience because of the fact that the group discussion of ideas from Verga's excerpt was diverse, requiring more detailed engagement. Most of them pointed out the several points of view on the characters and some of them said such exercises would help them to develop critical thinking. They stated that communicating and debating ideas helped them to be more active, more motivated and more concentrated. Only one of them wanted to know more about Verga's works and his way of writing.

Regarding the second hypothesis of our study, the students stressed the fact that the more interactive in-class exercise stimulated their curiosity for the novel. They also said that they understood the subject better, without talking about its critically interpretation. We could conclude that the exercise only partly oriented them towards reading the whole novel and critically interpreting it. However, the cooperative exercise seems to have helped them to learn better and also to respect different opinions and points of view. If we discuss here the results of the proposed exercise from the perspective of the so-called *Collaborative Approach* - which emphasizes “the importance of context, interaction and group communication, highlighting the importance of the group and group cooperation for an education for peace, for the discovery of interdependence” (Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996: 44) – we must say that the effective collaboration between students organized in small groups could have helped them to better learn, but also to change their social and cultural attitudes. In the post-pandemic society, the faculty is a context that guides the interpretation, it is not just a place where some knowledge is transmitted. The classroom experiment was a way for students to learn new informations by engaging in the learning process.

After receiving the tasks, and after analysing the characters' world view, the students had the opportunity to bring up their own life experiences and world view that interacted with the new information in order to prepare the ground for a larger experience that would become the basis for a future learning (Reid, Forrestal & Cook, 1989: 9-11). The learning context, created through cooperation, developed the students' confidence, allowed them to express themselves through the language at their disposal, accustomed them not to be afraid of criticism, accustomed them to choose a speech appropriate to the context. The students' answers showed that for them the class was a context in which they got involved, they explored the new knowledge, then, with the help of the foreign language teacher (Mezzadri 2003), they were forced to clarify, reorganize the information, transform it for a deeper understanding of the theme. Through the oral presentation of the results of the group research and the subsequent decomposition of the group and its recomposition in different ways, the students were charged with a certain tension that led to a deeper understanding of the subject. The answers to the questionnaire at the end of the exercise allowed the students to reflect on the results achieved, trying to discover together, students and teachers, which is the ideal form not only to transmit knowledge, but also to critically understand the surrounding world (Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996: 47-49).

5. Conclusions

Aware of the fact that our research took into account a very small number of respondents, students of the Italian section of the Faculty of Letters of the "Babeș-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca, a section that has only 15 budgeted places for the A specialization, we notice however, in this case, the overwhelming number of students who were impressed by the effects of cooperative learning of Italian literature. They were able to learn a content far away in time (the 19th century literature) and far away in space (Italy). The cooperative approach brought this content close to the 2022 students, who discovered the modernity of the author studied. The students had a positive attitude towards cooperative learning carried out in the Italian Literature II practical course, so the first research hypothesis formulated at the beginning turned out to be true.

Regarding the second hypothesis of our study, even if the results obtained do not allow us to know precisely if the students will read the novel in its

entirety and interpret it critically, we can still affirm that this exercise will help them achieve the specific objectives of the subject. The students seem to be determined, at least if we take into account the results of the research, to read the novel and, we hope, the literary criticism as well. The critical interpretation of a literary text of great complexity, in Italian, based on the concepts and methods studied, is the objective of the practical course, a place where the students must develop their critical thinking with the help of didactic tools. The reason why we proposed this exercise was to help students reach the minimum performance standards necessary to pass this exam, to offer them a modern method for learning the main concepts discussed in the course, to create conditions for them to recognize them and define them correctly. The class exercise brought into discussion some of the themes and forms present in Giovanni Verga's prose, from the relationship between nature and society, to the theme of progress and the "vanquished", from myth to the theme of the family or to veristic prospectives.

Given the initial enthusiasm of the students, which is quite normal in front of new experiences, it would be perhaps interesting to regularly propose cooperative learning exercises in the practical courses and then analyze, at the end of the semester, also the exam results of this group of students. We could discuss such results in a future study in which it would be useful to track whether the students really read the main works analyzed, whether they really acquired, as a result of cooperative learning, an overall view of the field; if they are able to analyze the texts studied in correlation with the theoretical concepts and with the historical-cultural context, if their linguistic and communication competence, their logical-critical capacity, elaboration and interpretation improves thanks to collaborative learning. We could still conclude by underlining that following our study, despite the limits derived from the number of respondents, cooperative learning continues to represent a current study method effective also for university education, as evidenced by more extensive studies (Cooper & Mueck, 1989; Cooper, Robinson, & Ball, 2003; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Millis, B.J., 2002, 2005, 2006; Millis & Cottell, 1998; Albulescu & Catalano, 2022). Even if we discussed only Italian literature, cooperative learning is ideal for teaching all kind of literatures (national and international literatures), precisely because of the deep transformations that contemporary society has experienced in the post-pandemic period. Because of the global challenges of the contemporary world, the

method continues to manifest its most important characteristics that have made it (and continues to make it) one of the most effective didactic methods, through the positive interdependence and communicative competence that is established between group members, through individual and group assessment and through heterogeneous groups.

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