Reimagining Tombola: A Cross-Cultural Experience for Italian Teaching

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Short summary:

I have designed a mini-course of Italian as a second/foreign language that I will be holding online in December 2025, based on the Italian game called Tombola[4].

The goal is to:

- promote Italian language practice by activating multiple competences and activities (Council of Europe, 2020);
- introduce students to a traditional Neapolitan game, Tombola;
  - have them play — knowingly — the variant of Tombola created by tourism and the bourgeoisie, but in the way in which my family and I play it, that is to say without money, but rather by promoting interpersonal and intercultural exchange instead;
- talk about tradition, tourism, play, irony and other topics.

Your constraints plus the who and what of your teaching context

Context (Where do you work? What kind of institution? What is your role? etc.)	I am a freelance, certified teacher of Italian as a second/foreign language. I run my own individual business and work in various contexts. I work with private students, employees of companies and other entities. My classes are online, mostly one-on-one or even in pairs.
Students (goals, wants, needs, knowledge, skills, hobbies, hates, worries)	My students are of different nationalities and are between 18 and 75 years old. Some live in Italy, some live abroad. They have very different levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 of the CEFR). I can definitely say that there are these advantages: - my students love Italy and the Italian language; - they are motivated and open to different stimuli; and these disadvantages: - they are very busy, they have little free time at their disposal (because of work, family, etc.).
How much freedom do you have? (What can you do? What can't you do? Why? Who do you need to ask? What will they say?)	In my main work context, the one where I am my own boss, from a certain point of view I have enormous freedom because I don't have to ask anyone's permission because I decide what I do. Obviously, however, there are some limitations: - my students obviously have to want to sign up for the activities I offer, they don't have to; - many students live abroad, so, if I want to engage them, my activities must be online.

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[4] For informational purposes, Bingo is a game very similar to Tombola.

	• I have to be able to combine everyone's day and time preferences, and their time zones; • To act in complete fairness, I must keep in mind the limitations imposed by the copyright of the games I plan to use in my courses. While academic discussions and training often overlook copyright in game-based language teaching due to its complexity and legal variations across countries, I believe it is crucial for each teacher to consider their specific work context and determine if and how a particular game can be used in compliance with copyright regulations.
Language (goals) (the goals of your course or curriculum, what you must teach, what you want to teach, what students need to know, etc.)	I, as a teacher, have a lot of flexibility in deciding course content and objectives. All students definitely want to improve language skills, mainly the oral ones. They also wish to learn more about Italian culture and society. To avoid the constant risk of banality and superficiality, my goal is to do a 360-degree work on Italian language, culture, society, and to inspire to embrace the complexity of the world.
Other	I generally don't particularly like games that focus exclusively on randomness, such as Tombola. However, Tombola — like so many other similar games — can be a very thought-provoking game, when placed in an educational framework that keeps in mind the endless possibilities that arise from the language in the game, the language around the game, and the language inspired by the game, as deHaan, Poole and York show and suggest (York et al., 2021; and see also deHaan, 2019) or, said in other words, from the words in the object (the game), the words in classrooms, and the words in the world (deHaan & York, 2025). I also realize that my family plays Tombola in a peculiar way, so it is also about sharing an absolutely personal experience, and in my opinion it is a valuable thing for a teacher to do. In fact, to be more precise, with the students we will play a variation of Tombola —used by my family, in which we don't play for money — which is based on a version of Tombola that I thought was the authentic one and instead I recently found out with great surprise — by reading the studies of Alessandra Broccolini (Broccolini, 2005, 2006) —that it is a sort of "bourgeois touristsfied" version, which is, in turn, based on the original, authentic Neapolitan version. The idea of this mini-course stems from a desire to introduce my students scattered around the world, of different nationalities and levels of Italian, to each other. Every now and then, in Rome, I organize group outings (museum exhibitions, concerts, dinners) and my students really appreciate it. I like the idea of connecting people. I manage to organize two meetings a year, but I would like to do it more often. As for online, however, I have never organized group events. But once one of my students who lives abroad said to me, "Petra, why don't you connect all your students scattered around the world online? It would be great for us!" This has remained a very interesting stimulus for me, which I plan to put into practice with the activity I propose here.

To avoid the constant risk of banality and superficiality, my goal is to do a 360-degree work on Italian language, culture, society, and to inspire to embrace the complexity of the world.

How do you create SPACE in the methods, materials and mediation of your teaching and learning playground?

🙋 feel free to play around with the table format, or write things in paragraphs or media instead

Safe: learning from failure, inclusive, competence, supportive	
Methods 🧱	The design of my mini-course is informed by task-based language teaching (TBLT). The game session will be preceded by various pre-play activities, which are particularly helpful for A1-level students whose mother tongue is very different from Italian. These activities will ensure that students feel confident and relaxed during the game session. Despite the game's simplicity, it requires knowledge of the rules and careful attention to the drawing of numbers, which can be challenging for non-native Italian speakers. Due to students' limited free time and time zone constraints, pre-play activities will be completed asynchronously, with my periodic check-ups and my constant availability to help. There is no assessment or grading phase for this mini-course.
Materials 📝	I created and adapted materials to suit different levels: some activities are more complex for high level students, some others are simpler for beginner level students. Furthermore, when playing Tombola with my family, we traditionally include consolation prizes for participants who do not win. This practice will also be implemented during the Tombola activity with students.
Mediation 👩‍🏫	To ensure maximum participation, I select a day and time that accommodates all students, taking into careful consideration the diverse geographical locations and varying time zones of learners. I intend to facilitate a multi-layered mediation process: given the probable participation of two A1-level Japanese students, I will invite a former C2-level Japanese student. Her advanced language skills would enable her to mediate complex content, such as the history of Neapolitan Tombola and the symbolism on the game board, for the A1-level students. Although students are adults, they will be provided with advance notice regarding the infrequent sexual content present in the original Neapolitan Tombola, to mitigate any potential cultural discomfort.
Participation: society, community, choice, self-direction, culture	
Methods 🧱	I propose pair activities (described in Agency → Methods and in The teaching and learning, as high definition as you can share) in the pre-play phase to prepare for the game and to allow students to become acquainted with each other before the event.
Materials 📝	In the game session we will play an Italian adaptation of a Neapolitan game, Tombola, and reflect on its transformations over time and space and how it relates to the society in which we

	live.
Mediation 👩🏻‍💼	My goal is to create a small community of students of Italian scattered around the world. Each student will contribute two prizes to a prize pool, and I will encourage the students to create prizes that reflect their own cultures. I plan to invite a Neapolitan friend as a guest because they can share first-hand experiences and provide a local perspective that I cannot.
Agency: autonomy, freedom, dialogue, interaction	
Methods 🧱	I decided that, in addition to doing activities with pragmatic focus based on already constructed sentences, students will be asked to think about any other phrases or expressions they plan to use, taking inspiration from the model proposed by York (2019, 2020). The prize pool for the competition is entirely student-driven. Participants are encouraged to contribute items that are meaningful for them and that they believe would be desirable rewards for their peers. Intermediate and advanced students independently choose, from the list of Smorfia* images, the figures they want to explore and delve into, with the goal of preparing a presentation to be given during the game session, when the number associated with the chosen figure is drawn. *In the Neapolitan Tombola, the 90 numbers are associated with certain figures from the so-called Smorfia. The Smorfia is a large table of symbolic numerological correspondences. It is based on the belief in the symbolic meaning of numbers. For example, number 5 is the hand, number 18 is the blood, 90 is the fear.
Materials 📝	Each student must provide two prizes to create the prize pool. They can create whatever they want: recipes, tutorials, songs, poems, photographs, stories. They can use their native language, along with Italian. All awards should be able to be sent digitally, to facilitate exchange between countries. So, once again, the prizes, as already pointed out, do not consist of money. As Mark L.W. Johnson said during the symposium, it is a kind of IOU turning into digital multimedia composing.
Mediation 👩🏻‍💼	I support students in the prize creation phase. I add prizes myself, and I invite students to be creative and bring in new ideas, and I accompany them in revising their prize proposal.
Critical: challenge, reflective, interdisciplinary, purposeful	
Methods 🧱	In the post-play phase, after my presentation on the anthropological aspects of Tombola, I facilitate a post-play discussion where I ask questions to the students, taking inspiration from the focus on the importance of asking questions described by Jonathan deHaan (deHaan, 2020). These questions are designed to encourage reflection on cultural, social, and psychological themes.
Materials 📝	I discovered, much to my surprise, very interesting things that I had previously ignored about the game of Neapolitan Tombola, thanks to two studies (Broccolini, 2005, 2006) and a book (Liccardo, 2019) I found while doing some research. Liccardo's book will be referred to intermediate and advanced students to do their research on the figures of the Smorfia. And to ensure an insightful discussion during the post-play phase, I have created a presentation based on Broccolini's research findings. The presentation provides a framework for focusing on themes like tradition, tourism, play, and irony through structured discussion and exchange of observations.

Mediation 👩‍🏫	In the post-play phase, I will foster a critical analysis of Tombola, encouraging participants to delve deeper and uncover the cultural richness and historical significance that lie beneath its seemingly simple exterior. Through guided discussions, we will explore the game's symbolism, its role in social interactions and cultural values.
Experiences: relatedness, identity, relevant, meaningful	
Methods 🧱	Eliminating the prize money fosters a richer environment for interpersonal and intercultural exchange among students. This change encourages participants to engage with each other on a deeper level, sharing perspectives and experiences without the pressure of vying for a monetary reward.
Materials 📝	The prizes that students bring to the game session are intrinsically linked to their personal lives and cultural backgrounds. This includes sharing their favorite recipes, which can offer a glimpse into their family traditions and cultural heritage. They might also share their favorite songs, which can reveal their personal tastes and interests, as well as aspects of their identity. Additionally, students may share stories that are relevant to them, providing insight into their experiences, values, and beliefs. These shared items and stories foster a sense of community within the classroom, creating a space where students feel comfortable sharing their unique perspectives and learning from one another.
Mediation 👩‍🏫	Despite being a Roman, I propose a variation of a Neapolitan game. During the creation of this mini-course, I did some research that revealed a significant divergence between the version I have always played and the original Neapolitan version, a discovery I found rather surprising and interesting. I will introduce my students to the version with which I am familiar, while acknowledging its deviation from the original and sharing the historical context of the latter, including my surprising discoveries. In the post-play phase, we will engage in a reflective discussion about similar games within the students' respective cultures, noting potential similarities and differences.

The teaching and learning, as high definition as you can share

What we do (teaching and learning)	What is the result (learning/outcomes/actions)

Pre-play in asynchronous mode, with my periodic check-ups and my constant availability to help

I prepared simple flashcards to revise the numbers in Italian and also a listening comprehension activity — more similar to the actual game session — in which I draw out numbers aloud for students to recognize.
I have summarized in written form the rules of the game, with examples accompanied by pictures. I will probably also attach a YouTube video with the explanation made by another person, or I will make a video myself.

I created the cartelle (the cards with the 15 numbers) of the Tombola myself, with a simple layout, using text and emojis.

I created some activities to make a pragmatic focus before the game session, taking inspiration from York (2019, 2020). I wrote down some sentences that the students will have to match and group to the function (for example: "È uscito il 23?" → ask for confirmation if a number has already come out; "Mannaggia! Oggi sono proprio sfortunato/a!" → express frustration) and, in addition, the students will be asked to create, write, and add any other phrases that they find useful and would like to use.

Creation of prizes.

Pre-play in asynchronous mode, with my periodic check-ups and my constant availability to help

By knowing the rules and by mastering the numbers in Italian, students will be able to participate to the game session with awareness and enthusiasm.

No copyright issues arise at the time I create my materials.

Ease in communicative participation during the game session. Students will easily express happiness, frustration, requests for clarification and repetition of numbers, etc. They will do things in Italian during the game session.

Students bring digital prizes that reflect their personal lives and cultural backgrounds to the game session. These can include recipes, songs, and stories, in their native language and Italian. They may write, speak and record, draw, photograph and describe, etc. This fosters a sense of

	community and cultural exchange within the classroom. Understanding and sharing of cultural insights regarding Italian and Neapolitan culture.
Smorfia image activity for intermediate and advanced students Students choose one or two images from the Smorfia — individually, in pairs, or in groups, as they prefer — they read the explanation of the selected image, they create a summary of its meaning to share during the game session when that number/image comes up.	
During Play We play Tombola. We listen to the intermediate and advanced students' presentations. We talk, we explore, we listen, we comment, we exult, we get frustrated.	**During Play** Experience an Italian game, cross-cultural exchange and cultural insight.
Post-play Prize exchange. My cultural insight presentation on the history and the anthropological traits of Tombola. Debriefing guided by questions I have prepared, inspired by the articles I read. For example: 1. Are there any games similar to Tombola in your country? If yes, do you like to play it? Why? 2. You were able to choose the cartelle you played with. All the cartelle were numbered. Why did you choose those cartelle numbers? Do you believe in luck? What do you associate the numbers you chose with? 3. How does the experience of Tombola, both as a game and as a time of socialization and expression, make you reflect on the role of play in people's lives? What is the role of play in your life? 4. Does the "game within a game" of Tombola, with its obscene interpretations and double entendres, make you reflect on the role of transgression and humor in different cultures? In your country, are there games or traditions that use humor or	**Post-play** Discussion and awareness of traditions, touristification, play, irony and much more.

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transgression to express something? Are there topics that are considered taboo and are not addressed with humor?

5. How does the Neapolitan Tombola, with its local roots and transformations over time, make you reflect on the traditions of your country? What traditions do you consider most important in your culture and how have they changed over time?

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5 key takeaways for other teachers. Share tips, materials, etc that others can use immediately.

	Takeaway	Details
1	Connecting students with each other is a good thing.	While online education has its limitations, it also unlocks possibilities that would otherwise be unattainable, such as connecting with people across vast distances. Although fostering connections through individual classes can be challenging, it is certainly not impossible. Inspired by a student's suggestion to connect all my students worldwide online, this submission was born.
2	The teacher does not know everything and cannot know everything, but can create the conditions to achieve knowledge.	My students are often curious about the culture of other Italian regions and cities. I'm from Rome, not Naples, so I don't pretend to be an expert on Naples. However, I can facilitate our discovery of the city by researching and finding materials, and by connecting students with Neapolitans. This process of discovery is valuable and stimulating for me as well. I can also share how my family and I have adapted and played this game over the years, presenting it as a familiar variation.
3	Sharing with students what we do, how we live our traditions and how we transform them is a valuable thing.	The experience of learning about a tradition from a person is more impactful than simply reading about it online. As educators, we can offer our students a personal connection to tradition, a relatable narrative and perspective that a webpage cannot provide. We can inspire and engage students in ways that go beyond the limitations of digital information.
4	It is interesting to (re)discover the traditional games of one's own country.	The story of the game Tombola reveals something profoundly human, something with which we can likely all connect. Teachers can experience the joy of rediscovering and sharing games that originated in their own country. This is an engaging way to connect students with cultural heritage and traditional games, fostering cultural appreciation and cross-cultural understanding.
5	Removing money sometimes induces creativity.	In Italy, Tombola is traditionally played with money. However, my family and I have reimagined this tradition by eliminating the monetary aspect and replacing it with a prize pool composed of second-hand items and experiences. This shift away from a monetary focus not only fosters creativity but also carries a personal touch and reflects the unique interests and talents of the players. (A difference between how I play with my family and how I plan to play with my students: since the course I created is online, because the students are scattered

		around the world, students cannot exchange items/prizes by hand and shipping things around the world may not be convenient, so this is the reason why the prizes put into the prize pool must be in digital format (PDF,photographs, audio, video, etc. → recipes, poems, songs, stories, lessons, etc.)

> ◣◣▣ TEACHINGTIP
> The teacher does not know everything and cannot know everything,but can create the conditions to achieve knowledge.
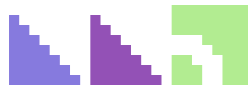
> ◣◣▣ TEACHINGTIP
> Removing money sometimes induces creativity.

On doing > on potential

Keeping in mind that «"I did X" Is a lot better than "X can be done"» (deHaan, 2024), given that the outlined proceedings pertain to a project scheduled for December 2025, I encourage all interested readers to reach out starting January 2026 for inquiries and feedback regarding "what I did" -- the course's actual outcome. My contact information is available on my LLP profile: https://llpjournal.org/2024/07/01/petra-khalil.html

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