

Review: Frabotta, Simona (2025). *L'analisi del materiale didattico di italiano L2/LS in prospettiva di genere*. Dykinson.

FRANCO PAULETTO

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Book review

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ABSTRACT

EN This review examines Simona Frabotta's book, *L'analisi del materiale didattico di italiano L2/LS in prospettiva di genere*, a significant contribution to foreign language teaching research bridging the gap between gender theory and the practical analysis of teaching materials. The volume provides a systematic framework for identifying and addressing gender stereotypes, androcentric models, and exclusionary content in Italian L2/FL textbooks. By exploring the interplay of linguistic forms, iconographic resources, and cultural narratives, Frabotta offers educators and researchers concrete analytical tools to foster a more inclusive and critically informed approach to language education. Ultimately, the book serves as a vital resource for promoting gender awareness and responsible practice in the development and selection of pedagogical materials.

Keywords: GENDER PERSPECTIVE, L2/FL ITALIAN TEACHING MATERIALS, LANGUAGE AND GENDER, INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH, INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY.

ES Esta reseña examina la obra de Simona Frabotta, *L'analisi del materiale didattico di italiano L2/LS in prospettiva di genere*, una contribución significativa a la investigación en la didáctica de lenguas extranjeras que tiende un puente entre la teoría de género y el análisis aplicado de materiales didácticos. El volumen proporciona un marco sistemático para la identificación y el tratamiento de estereotipos de género, modelos androcéntricos y contenidos excluyentes en manuales de italiano como L2/LE. A través del análisis de la interacción entre formas lingüísticas, recursos iconográficos y narrativas culturales, Frabotta ofrece a docentes e investigadores herramientas analíticas concretas que favorecen un enfoque más inclusivo y críticamente fundamentado en la enseñanza de lenguas. En última instancia, la obra constituye un recurso esencial para promover la conciencia de género y una práctica responsable en el diseño y la selección de materiales pedagógicos.

Palabras clave: PERSPECTIVA DE GÉNERO, MATERIALES DIDÁCTICOS PARA EL ITALIANO COMO L2/LE, LENGUA Y GÉNERO, ENFOQUE INTERSECCIONAL, DIDÁCTICA INCLUSIVA.

IT Questa recensione prende in esame il libro di Simona Frabotta, *L'analisi del materiale didattico di italiano L2/LS in prospettiva di genere*, un contributo significativo alla ricerca in didattica delle lingue straniere che colma il divario tra la teoria di genere e l'analisi pratica dei materiali didattici in commercio. Il volume fornisce un quadro teorico sistematico e strumenti pratici per identificare e affrontare gli stereotipi di genere, i modelli androcentrici e i contenuti esclusivi presenti nei libri di testo di italiano L2/LS. Esplorando l'interazione tra forme linguistiche, risorse iconografiche e narrazioni culturali, Frabotta offre a educatori e ricercatori risorse analitiche concrete per promuovere un approccio più inclusivo e criticamente informato all'educazione linguistica. In definitiva, il libro costituisce una risorsa fondamentale per promuovere la consapevolezza di genere e una pratica responsabile sia nello sviluppo, sia nella selezione dei materiali didattici.

Parole chiave: PROSPETTIVA DI GENERE, MATERIALI DIDATTICI PER L'ITALIANO L2/LS, LINGUA E GENERE, APPROCCIO INTERSEZIONALE, DIDATTICA INCLUSIVA.

1. Introduction

This review discusses Simona Frabotta's book *L'analisi del materiale didattico di italiano L2/LS in prospettiva di genere* ["The analysis of Italian L2/LS teaching materials from a gender perspective"] from the standpoint of a linguist and teacher of L2/FL Italian whose research interests include various features of commercially available teaching materials for foreign language teaching. The volume is a significant contribution to language teaching research, as it effectively links gender theory with the concrete analysis of existing teaching materials. Frabotta emphasizes the non-neutrality of language, images, and cultural content in textbooks, showing their impact on students' identity, motivation, and classroom dynamics. In this review special emphasis is placed on the pedagogical significance of Frabotta's book, which provides teachers with analytical tools to critically mediate sexist or exclusionary content while turning it into opportunities for reflection. Overall, the volume represents a useful resource for the inclusive and critically informed teaching of L2/FL Italian. This is all the more relevant when we consider that, as Frabotta states, "although research on sexism in Italian L2/LS teaching materials is growing, it is still an emerging field" (Frabotta 2025, p. 16).

Language teaching materials play a crucial role not only in the development of language skills, but also in the formation of cultural representations and social values. Until recently, gender issues have often occupied a marginal place in the analysis of Italian L2/FL textbooks. Simona Frabotta's book fills this gap by offering a systematic analysis of these teaching resources from a theoretical perspective that combines gender studies, sociolinguistics, and foreign language teaching. The book highlights how language, iconographic resources, and cultural content in textbooks can reproduce stereotypes and androcentric models under the guise of neutrality. The volume has a twofold purpose: to provide teachers and researchers with a clear theoretical framework on gender-related notions and to offer tools for the critical analysis of linguistic forms, visual representations, and cultural narratives in Italian L2/FL textbooks. From my point of view, the strength of this book is that it brings together theory and practice, promoting a reflective and inclusive approach to teaching Italian as a second/foreign language. Frabotta does a much-needed job by placing gender awareness at the center of responsible and up-to-date language education. The target audience for this volume includes authors and publishers of language textbooks; teachers of Italian as a second/foreign language; researchers in the field of foreign language teaching and gender studies.

The first chapter, "Principi teorici e metodologici per la costruzione di una prospettiva di genere [Theoretical and methodological principles for establishing a gender perspective]", lays the theoretical foundations of the book, defining "gender" and how this concept should be considered within language education. Frabotta takes us through the history of Western thought, showing how the differences between men and women have been interpreted in biological and hierarchical terms for centuries. From the thinking of Plato and Aristotle, who placed masculinity as a model of rationality and perfection, we arrive at the turning point of Simone de Beauvoir, who famously stated that "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient" (1949: 283), thus highlighting the constructed, rather than natural, nature of gender identity. The modern concept of gender was then established within the fields of Women's Studies and Gender Studies, thanks to scholars such as G. Rubin, who coined the notion of "sex/gender system" (1986), and J. W. Scott, who showed how sexual difference is socially organized (1986). Gender is therefore not a fixed category, but a dynamic, cultural, and relational construct that affects roles, behaviors, and self-perception. Frabotta then illustrates some key concepts useful for analyzing foreign language textbooks: gender identity (pp. 23–24) and expression (p. 24), gender roles (p. 24), sexual orientation (p. 25), androcentrism (pp. 25–26), sexism (pp. 26–27), and patriarchy (p. 27). All these notions create a theoretical framework that can be applied to the analysis of teaching materials. Frabotta pays special attention to gender stereotypes (pp. 27–33), which, while apparently making reality easier to understand, ultimately reduce and constrain it, promoting prejudices and inequalities. Stereotypes are formed during childhood—through games, stories, color choices, and family models—and are reinforced by school, the media, and institutions. As a result, masculinity is often associated with authority, action, and the public sphere, while femininity remains linked to emotionality, care, and domesticity. Frabotta shows how textbooks contribute to maintaining these representations by presenting images and texts that reproduce static social models. This leads to the need for critical and conscious analysis, capable of recognizing the educational (but also ideological) potential of textbooks. The author then introduces the intersectional perspective (pp. 33–38), according to which gender should not be analyzed in isolation, but in relation to other variables—such as ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, or ability—which, when combined, produce complex forms of discrimination. Only an intersectional view, the author emphasizes, allows us to read reality in a truly inclusive way (pp. 37–38). In the recurrent 'Strumenti' ('Tools') section (pp. 38–41), Frabotta presents a range of

analytical tools to identify sexism in teaching materials. The author outlines recurring strategies through which gender bias operates in textbooks, such as,

- 1) the omission or underrepresentation of women and other social groups,
- 2) the stereotypical assignment of roles – with women often relegated to subordinate roles or positions traditionally associated with the private sphere,
- 3) the derogatory attitude towards certain individuals, who are often the target of jokes, insults, or offensive comments of a misogynistic, racist, or ableist nature, and
- 4) the fragmentation or marginalization of gender-related content (e.g., “special” boxes or side sections).

These mechanisms do not act in isolation but intersect to construct partial and hierarchical worldviews that reinforce traditional gender roles and limit the diversity of social identities represented in educational discourse. In the last section of the chapter (“Raccomandazioni istituzionali e iniziative editoriali” [‘Institutional recommendations and publishing initiatives’]; pp. 41–50), Frabotta reviews the main institutional and editorial responses to gender inequality in education. Drawing on feminist pedagogy, the subsection outlines national and international initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in textbooks, including the 1979 UNESCO guidelines¹ (ONU, 1979), the Beijing Conference (ONU, 1995), and the international *Polite* Project (AIE, 1999). Special emphasis is placed on A. Sabatini's pioneering work on sexist language in Italian, drawing on her *Raccomandazioni per un uso non sessista della lingua italiana* (1986), which highlighted the androcentric structure of Italian and introduced the concept of grammatical asymmetries. Overall, in chapter 1 Frabotta argues that textbooks are not neutral mirrors of society, but powerful cultural tools that can either reproduce or challenge gender hierarchies, emphasizing the responsibility of publishers, institutions, and educators to promote inclusive and non-discriminatory materials.

The second chapter, “La lingua italiana [‘The Italian language’]”, addresses the relationship between language and gender, showing how the Italian language reflects and reproduces sexist inequalities: borrowing Irigaray's words (1991), Frabotta sustains that language is never neutral (p. 51). Starting from the aforementioned pioneering work of A. Sabatini (1986), the author describes the grammatical and semantic asymmetries that characterize the Italian linguistic system. Among the former are the use of the masculine as an over-extended gender (the so called ‘maschile sovraesteso’ or ‘generico’) and resistance to the adoption of professional feminine forms (such as ‘sindaca’ or ‘ministra’); among the latter are the semantic differences that certain pairs of terms take on depending on gender (e.g. “uomo leggero” vs. “donna leggera”, p. 62). Far from being neutral, language acts as an ideological tool and contributes to the construction of thought. The author points out how linguistic sexism, even when unintentional, limits the representation of women and non-binary identities, influencing the perception of learners. Frabotta examines the main proposals for a more inclusive language that have been advanced so far: among them, the double use of genders (“compagni e compagne”, “compagni/e”, “compagni.e”, pp. 67–68); a strategy called *degendering*, which consists of adopting terms and linguistic expressions that ensure gender neutrality or leave gender unspecified (“il gruppo”, “la comunità studentesca” etc.); syntactic rephrasing, which allows for the avoidance of explicit references to the identity of the person performing the action (i.e., “il testo va letto” instead of “gli studenti devono leggere il testo”); and the adoption of graphic symbols such as the asterisk or the schwa, which aim to overcome the rigidity of binarism (pp. 67–71). While acknowledging that the issue is far from resolved, the author highlights its educational and symbolic value. This is followed by a review of studies on linguistic sexism in L2/FL Italian textbooks (pp. 73–81), which reveal the persistence of discriminatory forms, ranging from the prevalence of male figures in dialogues and examples, to the limited presence of female roles in high-level professions, ending with the invisibility of gender minorities. The chapter closes with the ‘Strumenti’ section of the chapter (pp. 82–90), which again offers tools for the linguistic analysis of textbooks² (observation grids, guiding questions, etc.) and references to institutional guidelines (such as the recommendations of the Italian Department of

¹ “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women”, New York, December 18, 1979; available at the following link: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

² 1. La distribuzione di aggettivi maschili e femminili; 2. La visibilità delle donne nei ruoli lavorativi; 3. Rompere con gli stereotipi anche nella lingua; 4. Evitare strategie inadeguate di femminilizzazione; 5. Nominare al femminile; 6. La regola del femminile dei sostantivi professionali; 7. Integrare strategie di visibilità o neutralizzazione del genere; 8. Attenzione alle dissimmetrie semantiche; 9. Caratteristiche personali non discriminanti; 10. Nuove forme di inclusività.

Education, University and Research, MIUR³, or the *Accademia della Crusca*). The aim is to provide teachers with concrete criteria for a more informed and inclusive choice of materials.

Chapter 3, “Le immagini [‘Illustrations/Pictures’]”, frames images as powerful semiotic and pedagogical tools and not just neutral decorative elements. Images actively participate in meaning-making and play a crucial role in socialization processes, including gender socialization. In language textbooks, visual elements contribute to constructing learners’ representations of society, identities, and social roles. Because images are often processed more immediately and less critically than texts, they can naturalize stereotypes and inequalities more effectively, thus reinforcing implicit norms about gender, bodies, professions, and behaviors. In my opinion, the core of the chapter is section 3.3 (pp. 97–107), where Frabotta examines quantitative and qualitative gender imbalances in textbook imagery. Women tend to be underrepresented or confined to specific domains (domestic, relational, care-related), while men are more frequently associated with public, professional, scientific, or authoritative roles. The imbalance also concerns age, visibility, and activity: male figures are more often portrayed as active agents, whereas female characters are depicted as passive, supportive, or secondary. These visual patterns contribute to legitimizing gender hierarchies and limiting learners’ own imagination regarding possible social roles. Part of the chapter is dedicated to the link between images, bodies, and identity. The female body, in particular, is often the subject of stereotyping or invisibilization: on the one hand, it is often hypersexualized, and on the other, it is marginalized or relegated to a secondary role. There is also a lack of representations of elderly bodies, disabled bodies, bodies that do not conform to aesthetic standards, as well as queer or non-binary subjects. Again, in the ‘Strumenti’ section (pp. 108–112), Frabotta offers practical resources for iconographic analysis⁴: who is represented, in what roles, how often, and in what kind of interactions. She also suggests considering color choices, spatial arrangement (for instance, the author points out that men are frequently shown in open, dynamic public spaces, while women are more often represented in closed, private spaces; p. 110), and the relationship between text and picture. The chapter closes with a list of resources and best practices for fair and pluralistic visual representation, such as inclusive publishing projects, archives of stereotype-free images, and international guidelines for gender-sensitive visual communication.

The last chapter, “Cultura e attualità [‘Culture and current affairs’]”, addresses the presence (or absence) of women in the cultural and current affairs (‘attualità’) sections of L2/FL Italian textbooks. Frabotta observes that, despite the pivotal role of culture in foreign language teaching, women are often marginalized in sections devoted to society, history, or literature. In fact, culture-related sections continue to favor male figures—writers, scientists, artists, politicians—while women appear in secondary or stereotypical roles: in Frabotta’s words, “female artists, creators and illustrious women have often been absent from events, places and even materials and documents that establish cultural value and pass it on to posterity⁵” (p. 118). The research referred to by the author highlights the existence of a clear gap in representation as a result of a long androcentric tradition that has excluded women from the spheres of cultural production and memory. Specific attention is paid to the media, which often presents female role models focused primarily on physical appearance and caregiving, rather than competence or autonomy. In pedagogical materials (pp. 125–131), this translates into texts, dialogues, and articles that reinforce oversimplified views of social reality. The findings show that women’s visibility remains quantitatively and qualitatively limited. Female figures are often treated as exceptions or confined to specific, traditionally feminized domains. When women do appear, they are frequently framed as a separate category, rather than integrated into a general cultural narrative on equal terms with men. Their works are less likely to be framed as central to the Italian literary tradition, thus reinforcing the idea of a male-centered literary canon. Again, this selective visibility limits learners’ exposure to diverse voices and perpetuates a partial and distorted image of Italian cultural heritage. Frabotta provides an analysis of the cultural models and “canons” found in textbooks, highlighting the importance of featuring prominent female figures, Italian writers and artists, as well as marginalized and migrant voices that enrich Italian culture today. As in the previous chapters, the “Strumenti” section (pp. 132–138) provides a set of

³ Acronym standing for *Ministero dell’istruzione, dell’università e della ricerca* (‘Department of Education, Universities, and Research’).

⁴ 1. La presenza e il riconoscimento; 2. La questione dell’identità; 3. Il modello corporale; 4. I ruoli di genere; 5. Rompere con le gerarchie; 6. La rappresentazione della famiglia; 7. L’ambientazione spaziale; 8. Le associazioni tra i generi e simboli.

⁵ “le artiste, le creatrici e le donne illustri sono state spesso assenti dagli eventi, dai luoghi e anche dai materiali e documenti che sanciscono il valore culturale e lo trasmettono alla posterità”.

analytical indicators⁶ designed to help teachers and material developers critically evaluate cultural content in textbooks from a gender perspective. These indicators include questions about the presence of women in positions of prestige, references to women as experts, the treatment of data broken down by gender, and the inclusion of topics relevant to women's rights and gender issues. The tools aim to translate theoretical awareness into practical criteria for analyzing and reviewing teaching materials.

Simona Frabotta's book is an original and much needed resource for us teachers of L2/FL Italian. In my opinion, the book stands out as an authoritative reference in the field of studies on L2/FL Italian thanks to its solid theoretical framework and clear exposition. In the four chapters that make up the volume, the author outlines a coherent approach from the theoretical framework (chapter 1) to its linguistic (chapter 2), visual (chapter 3), and cultural (chapter 4) applications. The aim is to train teachers, authors and publishers to critically look at teaching materials, recognizing that every linguistic, iconographic, and cultural choice is not neutral but contributes to shaping a particular worldview. The book's primary strength resides in its ability to translate the gender perspective into concrete analytical tools that can be applied to the linguistic, iconographic, and cultural content of any textbook. Particularly noteworthy is the emphasis placed on intersectionality and the active role of teachers as critical mediators of teaching materials. The significance of Frabotta's proposal is all the greater, in that it acts as an incentive for publishers and authors of L2/FL Italian textbooks to be more mindful and sensitive to the complexity of Italian society. They should, in fact, strive to portray it as realistically as possible, not least with regard to gender issues. On a critical level, the almost exclusive focus on traditional textbooks may appear biased, given the growing importance of digital and multimodal resources in language teaching (and beyond). Furthermore, adopting the proposed perspective requires the acquisition of skills and sensibilities that not all educational contexts guarantee. On a minor note, the book could have benefited from a final proofread to weed out the few – yet avoidable – typos that the reader comes across. Overall, however, the volume offers a high-profile contribution that will hopefully have an impact on both research and teaching practices.

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⁶ 1. La presenza femminile; 2. Uno sguardo trasversale; 3. La dimensione storica; 4. La varietà nei settori culturali; 5. La caratterizzazione di uomini e donne; 6. Il riconoscimento dei contributi femminili; 7. La prospettiva inclusiva; 8. La considerazione della letteratura femminile; 9. L'autorialità femminile e plurale; 10. La presenza delle donne in ambiti di prestigio; 11. Narrazioni di genere nei testi di attualità; 12. Il trattamento delle questioni di genere.

Franco Pauletto, Universidad Complutense de Madrid
 franpaul@ucm.es

- EN** | **Franco Pauletto** holds a PhD in Linguistics from Stockholm University (2017), where he conducted research in the departments of Romance and Classical Studies, Linguistics, and Teaching and Learning. He is currently a lecturer in the Department of Romance, French and Italian and Translation Studies at the Complutense University of Madrid. His research focuses on the acquisition of Italian as a second language and on various pragmatic phenomena that characterize oral interaction within the theoretical and methodological framework of conversation analysis.
- ES** | **Franco Pauletto** es doctor en lingüística por la Universidad de Estocolmo (2017), donde realizó actividades de investigación en los departamentos de Estudios Románicos y Clásicos, de lingüística y de didáctica y aprendizaje. Actualmente es profesor ayudante doctor en el Departamento de Estudios Románicos, Franceses, Italianos y Traducción de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Su investigación versa sobre la adquisición de italiano como segunda lengua y sobre diversos fenómenos pragmáticos que caracterizan la interacción oral, dentro del marco teórico y metodológico del análisis de la conversación.
- IT** | **Franco Pauletto** ha conseguito il dottorato in linguistica presso l'Università di Stoccolma (2017), dove ha svolto attività di ricerca nei dipartimenti di studi romanzi e classici, di linguistica e di didattica e apprendimento. Attualmente lavora presso il dipartimento di studi romanzi, francesi, italiani e sulla traduzione dell'Università Complutense di Madrid. La sua ricerca verte sull'acquisizione dell'italiano come seconda lingua e su diversi fenomeni pragmatici che caratterizzano l'interazione orale, nell'ambito del quadro teorico e metodologico dell'analisi della conversazione.