

Il Bel Paese as seen from Malaysia: Language learners' stereotypical representations of Italy

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Abstract

Stereotypical representations of Italy have been widely explored from European and North American perspectives. However, few studies have been done in an Asian context. This study addresses this gap and investigates stereotypical images about Italy held by students learning Italian in a renowned public university in Malaysia. The findings revealed that the language learners held overwhelmingly positive images about Italy and the Italian people. However, these images were restricted in scope and limited to simplistic notions about the country, its culture and inhabitants. One-third of the stereotypical representations of Italy provided by the students were culinary-oriented and referred to various foods associated with the country. On the other hand, the images about Italian art and culture were less specific (only one of Italy's cultural giants—Leonardo da Vinci—was mentioned by name). The article concludes with a discussion on the pedagogical implications of the findings.

Keywords: stereotypes; stereotype favourability; Italy; Italian language learners; foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

Il Bel Paese, Italy, is recognized globally for both its classical heritage and its contemporary culture, most notably in relation to art, architecture, fashion design and cuisine. In Malaysia, one can enjoy a cup of *espresso* or *cappuccino* with a serving of *gelato* in a café; occasionally one can spot a *Ferrari* on the road. Italian fashion goods are sought after and shop windows in the upper-market shopping malls display various luxury goods from Rome and Milan. Attesting to the reverence for Italian products in Malaysia is the fact that many local brands have Italian-sounding names; and not surprisingly, they are promoted as being inspired by Italy. Undoubtedly, the word 'Italy' evokes a variety of mental pictures and images in the minds of Malaysians from all walks of life. The key question is do these images reflect the richness and diversity of contemporary Italian life, or do they merely reinforce prevailing stereotypes and cultural clichés?

The present study focuses on stereotypical representations of Italy held by students learning the Italian language in a big public university in Malaysia. Learners come to the language classroom with their own images of the target language country, culture and the speaking communities. The problem is that these images are often stereotypical. As Steele and Suozzo (1994, quoted in Allen 2004:235) have noted, "Unless students are encountering an absolutely exotic culture, they already reach the classroom with an array of stereotypes".

Stereotypes about Italy and the Italians have been explored for the most part in

European and North American contexts (Beller 2007, Casillo 2006, De Luca Braun 2003, Giorcelli 2012, Katz and Braly 1933) and few studies have been done from an Asian perspective. This study aims to address this gap. Exploring young people’s images about other countries and cultures is important because opinions that people have at a young age will influence their future worldviews (Lippmann 1925/1966, Turner 2009, Zeligs 1950). The questions this study raises are:

- (1) What are the content and the structure of the students’ stereotypical representations of Italy?
- (2) Are these representations positive or negative?
- (3) Which of the stereotypical images form cultural stereotypes?

This study approaches these questions from an applied linguistics perspective. According to Kramsch (2000), Applied Linguistics as an academic field draws on a variety of well-established disciplines including social psychology, educational psychology, literature studies and general linguistics. Therefore, a researcher stepping into the domain of Applied Linguistics finds himself or herself “at the confluence of several disciplines and at the intersection of theory and practice” (Kramsch 2000: 317). As far as the present article is concerned, research in the field of literature studies serves as a source of information on the development and the nature of stereotypes about Italy and the Italians in the European and North American cultural contexts. The academic field of social psychology with its rigorous methodology will allow the researchers to explore the stereotype content and to quantitatively assess the students’ stereotypical images of Italy.

Researchers and practitioners in the field of foreign language education have long advocated the view that culture and language must be taught simultaneously in the language classroom because the two are inseparable (Weiss 1979). This study offers some pedagogical implications based on its findings: it considers how language learners’ stereotypes about the target language country, culture and the speaking community could be employed by foreign language educators to enable the students to learn the linguistic means of expression in the target language and at the same time acquire a better understanding of the target culture values.

2. Literature review

2.1 Images and stereotypes: Origins of the concepts

The concepts of ‘image’, ‘imagery’ and ‘imagination’ have excited the minds of philosophers, scholars and researchers for many centuries. Philosophical discussions about these concepts date back to Plato and Aristotle (van Riel and Destrée 2009). Nowadays researchers describe mental images as “representations of objects in our mind” and recognize them as important tools for human cognition (Gardini, Cornoldi and De Beni 2006:41).

Stereotypes occupy a special place among mental images. The word ‘stereotype’ comes from combining the Greek words *stereo-s* (“solid”) and *typos* (“a model”). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991), the original meaning of the word ‘stereotype’ in the English language referred to a solid metal

plate used for printing. It has also acquired a figurative meaning of “something continued or constantly repeated without change” (Oxford English Dictionary 1991:651). The etymology and the usage of the word ‘stereotype’ highlight the connotation of rigidity, permanence, repetition and inflexibility.

The concept of ‘stereotype’ was brought to the social sciences disciplines by American journalist Walter Lippmann (1922/1965:3) who described stereotypes as “pictures in our heads”. The author devoted a considerable part of his book *Public Opinion* to a discussion on the origin, nature and functions of stereotypes. He proposed that stereotypes are culturally bound. As he wrote:

In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture (Lippmann 1922/1965: 55).

Lippmann (1922/1965) did not view stereotypes as negative or false notions about the world. Rather, he described them as an essential cognitive device that helps people to cope with a barrage of new information in an efficient way. Importantly, Lippmann recognized that stereotypes are evaluative in nature and that they are “highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them” (Lippmann 1922/1965:64). Since the publication of Lippmann’s book stereotypes have become a major research topic in social psychology. According to Schneider (2005), more than 5,000 empirical studies on stereotypes were published in the past seven decades. In social psychology, stereotypes are viewed as positive or negative beliefs about representatives of other social, cultural, ethnic or gender groups; these beliefs can be accurate or false and they can be held by separate individuals or shared by a group of people.

Scholarly investigations of stereotypes have not been limited to the field of social psychology. The topic has been explored in a wide range of academic disciplines including the social sciences (Bar-Tal 1997), literature and culture studies (Beller and Leerssen 2007), media studies (De Luca Braun 2003), applied linguistics and foreign language education (Allen 2004, Byram and Kramsch 2008, Nikitina and Furuoka 2013, Schulz and Haerle 1995). In the field of applied linguistics, the researchers have mostly focused on stereotype content, which includes language learners’ images about the target language country, culture and the speaking community. However, there has been a lack of studies that focused on the learners of the Italian language and that attempted to quantitatively assess favourability of the images of the target country held by the students. The present study addresses these gaps in the available research literature.

2.2 Stereotypical images about Italy and the Italians

There is no shortage of stereotypical representations of Italy, which prompted Casillo (2006) to describe the country as “The Empire of Stereotypes”. The most ubiquitous and dominant representations of Italy concern its ancient Roman heritage, the predominance of the Catholic religion, the Italian people’s love of arts and their musicality, and the spectacular beauty of the landscape. These

stereotypes originated in the diaries of various European travellers in the country and in the writings of authors, such as De Staël, Stendhal, Byron and Taine, who situated many of their plots in Italy (Beller 2007, Giorcelli 2012).

Of the stereotypes promulgated in these literary works some are positive while others have negative connotations (Beller 2007). One of the most persistent—and positive—images is that of the rural idyll inherent to the country. Italy with its generous sunshine, spectacular landscapes, an epicurean easy-going lifestyle as perceived by the authors and travellers was seen as the place of refuge from a dull everyday reality and suffocating social etiquette. To darken the bright picture, and to cast a shadow over the rural bliss, the writers and travellers sprinkled their descriptions of Italy with images of poverty and spiced it with “the lurking presence of banditry and organized crime” (Beller 2007:198). As to the people who inhabited the land, Giorcelli (2012:219–220) argued that, on the positive side, the foreign visitors “tended to see Mediterraneans as exotic and enticing”; on the negative side, “they tended also to perceive them as Orientals in the derogatory sense argued by Edward Said: that is, as irrational, superstitious, deceitful, and ultimately dangerous”.

Stereotypes about Italy have evolved over several centuries. As a result, they are highly resistant to change and some images have become so ubiquitous that they appear in various types of narratives. For example, Italy has been portrayed in geography textbooks as a country that is “poor, rural and beset by problems of emigration” (King 1992:153) even though the present-day reality no longer corresponds to such representations. More recent but equally persistent stereotypes concern the differences—real as well as imagined—between the country’s North and South (Gribaudo 1997). Even the auto-images, or the images that the Italian people have about their country and themselves, concern for the most part socio-economic and cultural differences between the North and the South (Beller 2007, King 1992).

It should be noted that the mass media and popular culture disseminate these outdated, one-sided and often distorted images of Italy and its people. For example, as Beller (2007) observed, an easy-going life style, the lush landscapes, the great historical artifacts and the medieval cities are among the most ubiquitous tropes in British novels and movies about Italy. De Luca Braun (2003:2) identified such images as “passionate, sensual, violent, exotic and deeply familial” among the most persistent stereotypes about the Italians in American cinematography. Furthermore, referring to the findings from a study by the Italic Institute of America, De Luca Braun maintains that nearly three-quarters of Hollywood-made movies between 1928 and 2000 portray the Italians and the Italian Americans in a negative light. The important implication for the current study is that the popular representations of Italy promoted in the works of fiction and in Hollywood movies can be the only sources of information about the target language country, culture and native speakers, especially in contexts where robust direct contacts between the language learners’ own culture and the target culture are lacking or non-existent.

2.3 Stereotypes about Italy and the Italians held by young people

One of the earliest academic explorations of the images that young people have about other nations and ethnic groups, including stereotypes about Italy and the Italians, was conducted by Katz and Braly (1933). In that seminal study, 100 Princeton university students were each given a list of 84 adjectives relating to personal character and traits of various national and ethnic groups. The students were asked to select the traits that they considered as the most characteristic of each nation under study. Among the positive traits that the respondents assigned to the Italians were: ‘artistic’, ‘impulsive’, ‘passionate’, ‘quick tempered’, ‘musical’, ‘imaginative’ and ‘very religious’. The negative characteristics included ‘lazy’ and ‘unreliable’. Katz and Braly (1933:285) concluded that the “Italians received the common characterization of the hot-blooded Latin peoples: artistic, impulsive, quick-tempered, passionate, musical and imaginative”.

Zeligs (1950) conducted two surveys, in 1931 and 1944, on the concepts and the stereotypes that 12-year old American children had about other countries, including Italy. She employed a free-response method where the participants were asked to write their own images of various nations. The researcher then separated the images about each nation into positive, negative and neutral. As the findings revealed, the most tenacious positive image that had been mentioned in both surveys referred to the Italian people’s love for spaghetti. This was followed by the references to the Italians’ love for the arts and music, e.g., ‘(they) love art’, ‘(they) love music’. The respondents consistently described the Italian people as hardworking. They also demonstrated the awareness that Italy had produced some of the world’s greatest artists, composers and musicians (e.g., ‘famous sculptors, arts, wood carvers’). Among the negative images that appeared in both surveys were references to the political situation in Italy (e.g., ‘dictator’) while the neutral images concerned some historical and geographical facts (e.g., ‘the Pope’, ‘a Latin country’, ‘boot-shaped contour’).

A rare study on stereotypes about Italy among young Asians was conducted by Basabe (1966). The respondents, who were Sophia University students in Tokyo, Japan, each received a list of 54 adjectives describing people qualities. They were asked to select several items that they thought would aptly describe each of the 18 nations selected by the researcher. The 229 students who provided the characteristics of the Italian people had selected the following descriptors: ‘cheerful’, ‘musical’, ‘passionate’, ‘optimistic’, ‘talkative’, ‘pleasure loving’ and ‘artistic’. The results revealed that the Japanese students had overwhelmingly positive images of the Italian people. Moreover, some of the Italian people’s characteristics selected by the Japanese students (e.g., ‘artistic’, ‘musical’ and ‘passionate’) were similar to the descriptors provided by the American respondents in the studies by Katz and Braly (1933) and Zeligs (1950).

2.4 Addressing country stereotypes in the language classroom

Our search of literature revealed a lack of studies on stereotypes about the target language country held by learners of the Italian language. The available literature

mostly addresses issues concerning the ways of introducing and teaching culture in the language classroom (Ciccarelli 1996, Kaulfers and Lembi 1942, Musumeci and Aski 2010, Skubikowski 1985, Weiss 1979). In the earlier studies the researchers (e.g., Kaulfers and Lembi 1942) promoted pedagogical approaches to teaching Italian that allow embedding various information and facts about the target language country in grammar exercises. The more recent studies tend to place a greater emphasis on incorporating information about the target language culture into the language curriculum and on teaching culture in more holistic ways (e.g., Ciccarelli 1996, Musumeci and Aski 2010).

Some researchers pointed out a lack of available teaching materials that promote a global exploration of Italian culture. For example, Skubikowski (1985) argued that the authors of the Italian language textbooks aspire to appeal to as wide an audience of language learners as possible. As a result, culture-related content in the language textbooks tends to disregard cultural polymorphism inherent in the target language country and often endorses the familiar stereotypical images of Italy. This includes such cultural clichés as “Spaghetti dinners have been popular since the time of Marco Polo”; “All Italians like ice cream”; “In Naples we find not only famous Neapolitan food—spaghetti and pizza have their origins here—but also music and sumptuous feasts” (Skubikowski 1985:36). Moreover, some materials presented in the culture sections of the textbooks plant or reinforce in the minds of the learners various regional stereotypes about Italy (e.g., “The Neapolitans are quite different from the inhabitants of other Italian cities”).

Educational researchers recognize that language instructors play an important role in deepening the learners’ cultural knowledge about the target language country, in promoting the students’ critical thinking and in dispelling their stereotypical notions about the surrounding world and people (Byram and Kramersch 2008, Ciccarelli 1996, Musumeci and Aski 2010, Schulz and Haerle 1995, Skubikowski 1985). Byram and Kramersch (2008) distinguished three kinds of stereotypes that language teachers usually encounter in the classroom. Firstly, some stereotypes are rooted in the linguistic categories and cognitive models of the target language culture. These images define the nation’s “whole worldview” (Byram and Kramersch 2008:32). For example, ‘self-reliance’ and ‘success’ are important linguistic—as well as cultural—categories in a society that puts a high premium on individualism. Secondly, some stereotypes are monolithic characterizations of the whole people (e.g., ‘the Americans are industrious’, ‘the Japanese are hardworking’). Thirdly, there are stereotypes that serve as the *lieu de mémoire* for the target language culture. As the researchers explained:

These are essentialized representations of collective national memory in the form of sayings (e.g., “*Ordnung muß sein*”), clearly recognizable icons used by commercial advertisements or tourist publicity (“*Brandenburger Tor*”, “*Oktoberfest*”, “*BMW*”, “*solide deutsche Wertarbeit*”, or political slogans... Everyone recognizes them, even though one might not believe in them nor refer to them oneself. (Byram and Kramersch 2008:32).

These culture-rich linguistic structures could be an effective pedagogical tool for teaching the target culture in the language classroom.

3. Educational context and participants in the study

The Italian language is only taught at two of Malaysia’s public universities. In the University of Malaya, where this study was conducted, Italian as a general course is offered at the beginner Levels 1, 2 and 3.

At the time of the data collection, 35 students were enrolled in the Italian language program at Level 1. Thirty-four students ($n=34$) participated in this study. Their ages ranged between 20 and 25. The students majored in a variety of academic disciplines such as business, economics, engineering, medicine and theatre studies.

4. Method

4.1 Data collection

The data were collected during the Italian language classes. The students were each given a form with several questions and instructions. First of all, the respondents were asked to list images or mental pictures that come to their mind when they hear the words ‘Italy’ and ‘Italian’. They could provide any number of images in the form of short phrases or separate words. Secondly, the students were instructed to indicate their personal attitude to the images they had written using a rating scale from -2 (for the most negative images) to $+2$ (for the most positive images). Finally, the respondents were asked to provide some personal details, such as gender, age and university major.

4.2 Data organization and analysis

First of all the data were organized for further analysis. Each form collected from the students was assigned a sequence number. The images provided by each respondent as well as the favourability ratings of the images were typed *ad verbatim*. To answer research question 1, we performed content analysis where open-coding technique was employed to organize the data into several clusters containing “similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns” (Julien 2008: 120, Ryan and Bernard 2003). The images that had been mentioned more than once were grouped together into clusters. These clusters were assigned labels based on the words they contained (e.g., ‘pizza’, ‘Rome’, ‘classic’, ‘good looking people’). The idiosyncratic images or the images mentioned only once were grouped under the label ‘Others’. In order to distinguish the structure of the language learners’ stereotypes about Italy, we grouped the clusters of the stereotypical images about Italy into larger categories and assigned an appropriate label to each category (e.g., ‘Food’, ‘People’, ‘Geography and landscape’, etc.). For example, the category labelled ‘Food’ contained the cluster ‘pizza’, ‘spaghetti’, ‘pasta’, ‘good food’, etc.

To answer research question 2 and to assess favourability of the students’ stereotypes about Italy, we used the ratings that the respondents had assigned to each individual image. To calculate the favourability or mean valence of the groups of images we divided the sum total of the ratings given to all the images in

a particular category by the number of images this category contained. The formula can be expressed as:

$$MV_j = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{F_j} V_{ji}}{f_j}$$

where MV_j is the mean valence value of a group of stereotypical images about Italy; V_{ji} is the valence rating given to image j by student i ; f_j is the number of times the image j was mentioned. To give an example, the image “fashion” was mentioned 6 times ($f_j=6$); each time it received a favourability rating. Using the formula above, the mean valence (MV) value of the image “fashion” was calculated at 1.67. All calculations were done using computer software.

In order to answer research question 3 and to distinguish cultural stereotypes among the images about Italy we performed a frequency analysis. In the field of social psychology researchers use this method in order to determine images that are shared by a group of people; such images are considered as cultural or consensual stereotypes. First of all, a researcher establishes a degree of consensus or a cut-off point to decide which of the images could be considered as a cultural stereotype. The present study uses the 10 percent value as the benchmark to determine the cultural stereotypes about Italy. This means that the images mentioned by 10 percent or four of the participants ($p=4$) are considered as the cultural stereotypes about Italy. These cultural stereotypes help to identify collective representations about the target language country as opposed to the images that are held on an individual level and that are not shared among the peers.

5. Findings

The students provided 259 ($f=259$) images about Italy and the Italians. The shortest list contained 3 entries while the longest one had 19 images. The images mentioned more than once were grouped together. These groups were then assigned labels based on the words or descriptors they contained (e.g., ‘pasta’, ‘beautiful people’). Thirty-eight clusters containing 2 or more similar images or descriptors were identified in the course of the content analysis (see Table 1). There were fifty-one ($f=51$) idiosyncratic images, which were placed in the group ‘Others’. Some of the images in this group were language-related (e.g., “the language I am learning now”, “*ciao*”); however they could not form a cluster due to their great divergence and a lack of consistent patterns. In order to assess favourability of the stereotypical representations we calculated the mean valence (MV) value for each cluster of images. The findings from these steps of the analysis are reported in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, the students had multifarious images about Italy. They made references to various foods and drinks (e.g., ‘pizza’, ‘coffee’, ‘cheese’); to the Italian people (e.g., ‘good looking men’, ‘romantic people’); to famous Italian

cities (‘Venice’, ‘Rome’); to fashion, music, movies, sport, lifestyle and so on.

Table 1. Stereotypes about Italy, their frequencies and favourability*

Clusters of images	Number of items (f)	Number of participants (p)	Mean valence values (MV)
<i>Pizza</i>	17	17	1.59
<i>Romantic country</i>	14	14	1.79
<i>Architecture</i>	13	13	1.69
<i>Venice</i>	13	13	1.85
<i>Spaghetti</i>	13	13	1.77
<i>Pasta</i>	11	9	1.64
<i>Music/songs</i>	10	8	1.60
<i>Good food</i>	9	9	1.89
<i>Good looking men</i>	7	6	1.43
<i>Beautiful people</i>	6	6	1.50
<i>Rome</i>	6	6	1.67
<i>Beautiful scenery</i>	6	6	2.00
<i>Fashion</i>	6	6	1.67
<i>Attractive women</i>	5	5	1.20
<i>Friendly people</i>	5	5	1.60
<i>History</i>	5	5	1.60
<i>Arts</i>	5	5	1.40
<i>Coffee</i>	5	3	1.60
<i>Painters/artists</i>	4	3	2.00
<i>Sea view</i>	4	3	1.50
<i>Bread/pastries</i>	4	3	1.75
<i>Café/restaurants</i>	4	4	2.00
<i>Relaxed life</i>	3	3	1.33
<i>Movies</i>	3	3	1.33
<i>Football</i>	3	3	1.33
<i>Beautiful</i>	3	3	2.00
<i>Classic</i>	2	2	2.00
<i>Gondola</i>	2	2	1.50
<i>Passionate people</i>	2	2	2.00
<i>People creative in cooking</i>	2	2	2.00
<i>Mafia</i>	2	2	-2.00
<i>Dance</i>	2	2	1.50
<i>Travel destination</i>	2	2	2.00
<i>Urban landscape</i>	2	2	1.50
<i>Milan</i>	2	2	2.00
<i>Vine</i>	2	2	0
<i>Chocolates</i>	2	1	2.00
<i>Cheese</i>	2	1	2.00
<i>Others</i>	51	51	1.22

*cultural stereotypes about Italy are typed in italics

The images provided by the students were overwhelmingly positive. Nine of the thirty-eight clusters of images had the highest possible mean valence value (MV=2.00). These clusters were: ‘beautiful scenery’, ‘painters/artists’, ‘café/restaurants’, ‘beautiful’, ‘classic’, ‘people creative in cooking’, ‘travel

destination’, ‘chocolates’ and ‘cheese’. Only one cluster of the images–‘mafia’– had a negative mean valence value ($MV = -2.00$).

Next we identified the cultural stereotypes about Italy, which are shown in Table 1 in the italic font. For this purpose, we calculated the number of *different* participants (p) who had supplied a certain image. If the same student gave two or more similar representations about the target language country the value of p was reduced accordingly. For example, if a participant had provided such images as ‘pasta’ and ‘linguine’, which were placed in the same group labelled ‘pasta’, we calculated p not as 2 but as 1. This approach helped to determine the cultural stereotypes about Italy or the images that are shared by the different language learners as opposed to the individual stereotypes or the images that are expressed in a variety of ways by the same student.

In order to have a clearer understanding of the structure of the students’ representations of the target language country we proceeded to organize the 38 clusters of images about Italy into bigger categories. Six such categories had transpired in the course of the analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of the students’ images about Italy*

Categories of images	Clusters
Food ($f=69$)	<i>Pizza</i> ($f=17$), <i>Spaghetti</i> ($f=13$), <i>Pasta</i> ($f=11$) <i>Good food</i> ($f=9$), <i>Coffee</i> ($f=5$), <i>Bread/pastries</i> ($f=4$) <i>Café/restaurants</i> ($f=4$), <i>Vine</i> ($f=2$), <i>Chocolates</i> ($f=2$) <i>Cheese</i> ($f=2$)
Arts, culture, history ($f=41$)	<i>Architecture</i> ($f=13$), <i>Music/songs</i> ($f=10$), <i>Art/culture</i> ($f=5$), <i>History</i> ($f=5$), <i>Painters/artists</i> ($f=4$), <i>Classic</i> ($f=2$), <i>Dance</i> ($f=2$)
Geography and landscape ($f=37$)	<i>Venice</i> ($f=13$), <i>Rome</i> ($f=6$), <i>Beautiful scenery</i> ($f=6$), <i>Sea view</i> ($f=4$), <i>Gondola</i> ($f=2$), <i>Milan</i> ($f=2$), <i>Urban landscape</i> ($f=2$), <i>Travel destination</i> ($f=2$)
People ($f=27$)	<i>Good looking men</i> ($f=7$), <i>Beautiful people</i> ($f=6$), <i>Attractive women</i> ($f=5$), <i>Friendly people</i> ($f=5$), <i>Romantic people</i> ($f=2$), <i>People creative in cooking</i> ($f=2$)
Ambience ($f=20$)	<i>Romantic country</i> ($f=4$), <i>Relaxed life</i> ($f=3$), <i>Beautiful</i> ($f=3$)
Popular culture / cultural phenomena ($f=14$)	<i>Fashion</i> ($f=6$), <i>Movies</i> ($f=3$), <i>Football</i> ($f=3$), <i>Mafia</i> ($f=2$)

*cultural stereotypes about Italy are typed in italics

As Table 2 demonstrates, ‘Food’ was the largest category; it contained 11 clusters and the total of 69 images ($f=69$). The other categories were: ‘Arts, culture, history’ ($f=41$), ‘Geography and landscape’ ($f=37$), ‘People’ ($f=27$), ‘Ambience’ ($f=20$) and ‘Popular culture/cultural phenomena’ ($f=14$).

6. Discussion and pedagogical implications

The findings revealed that the students’ collective representations of Italy could

be summarized in an image of a romantic country that has good food, a rich cultural and artistic heritage, famous cities, beautiful people and exciting fashion. Several of these cultural stereotypes align with the traditional stereotypical representations of Italy that have prevailed over several centuries in various discourses in European and North American contexts. The findings also indicated that the language learners' attitudes toward the target language country, culture and people were overwhelmingly positive. 'Mafia' was the only stereotype with a negative mean valence value ($MV = -2.00$). It should be noted that despite being one of the major stereotypes about Italy promulgated in fiction and Hollywood movies (Beller 2007; De Luca Braun 2003), the image 'mafia' did not form a cultural stereotype among the Malaysian language learners.

Furthermore, the Malaysian students had very positive images about and the attitudes toward the Italians. The references concerning physical beauty and positive personal qualities of the Italian people were prominent and some of them formed cultural stereotypes (i.e., 'good looking men', 'beautiful people', 'attractive women' and 'friendly people'). Also, the respondents ascribed to the Italian people such positive traits as 'romantic', 'passionate people' and 'creative in cooking'. These findings are similar to the positive stereotypes about the Italians reported in the previous studies done by Katz and Braly (1933), Zeligs (1950) and Basabe (1966). The only essential omission among the present study's images concerns the Italian people's love for the arts and their musicality.

The findings highlight the ubiquitous nature of some stereotypical images about Italy and the Italian people and the persistence of these stereotypes over a considerable time span and in diverse socio-cultural contexts and geographical areas. Among them are the images concerning Italian cuisine, especially the references to spaghetti (cf. Zeligs 1950) and the references to musicality and various artistic talents of the Italians (Basabe 1966, Katz and Braly 1933, Zeligs 1950). Interestingly, while the Malaysian students shared many of the positive stereotypes about the Italians with the respondents in earlier studies, they did not provide any of the popular negative images about the target language speakers. This finding is not surprising because the participants in this study were taking Italian as a generic course. The fact that the students had voluntarily chosen to learn this particular foreign language indicates they might have a prior interest and a positive disposition toward the Italian language, culture and people.

The results revealed that the images about Italy were predominantly of a culinary nature as 69 out of the total 208 images retained for the analysis were related to food. These findings support the proposition that language learners' stereotypes about the target language country tend to be limited to simplistic and shallow notions (Nikitina and Furuoka 2013, Schulz and Haerle 1995, Vande Berg 1990). The findings of this study also highlight some important omissions in the students' images about Italy. For example, the stereotypical images provided by the participants in this study did not include references to such important country-related aspects as the economy, religion or politics, though such images were reported in the study conducted by Zeligs (1950) who used a similar to the present study open-response approach to solicit the data. Furthermore, despite the

fact that there were a total of 41 images related to the art, culture and history of Italy only one cultural giant—Leonardo da Vinci—was mentioned by name. These findings do not necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge on the part of the students about some important country-related aspects because the question posed to the respondents sought to obtain their images rather than their knowledge about Italy. However, a fact that some important images in the context of Italian culture and reality do not come readily to the students' mind indicates the need to address these specific country-related aspects in the language classroom. This would demand the careful consideration and design of the cultural component of the language program.

The importance of teaching culture in the language classroom has been recognized by many researchers and language educators who agree that the foreign language program conceptualization must include the cultural component (Byram and Kramsch 2008, Musumeci and Aski 2010, Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel 2010). The definitions of culture in the fields of applied linguistics and foreign language education retain such central elements of the construct as “behaviors, artifacts, ideas and values” (Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel 2010:38). Academic and professional literatures offer various strategies and approaches to teaching culture in the language classroom (see Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel 2010). In the context of teaching the Italian language researchers have stressed that even at the elementary level of the language program the learners “need to be introduced to the sights and sounds of Italy, some of its most salient history and geography, while, simultaneously, reflecting a modern, twenty-first century view of Italian life” (Antenos-Conforti and Colussi-Arthur 2007:8–9).

There is no ‘one fits all’ pedagogical approach to teaching culture. Besides, when deciding on suitable pedagogical approaches to teaching culture the language educators need to take into consideration various specific features of the educational context, the curriculum requirement as well as the learning needs of the students. However, there are some approaches that could be adapted and work effectively in various educational settings. To begin with, the language educators might find it useful to explore the content of the learners' stereotypical images about the target language country. This information could be used in the classroom discussions with the students about the nature and origin of the country stereotypes. In the case of Italy, there is an abundant supply of mass media reports, works of fiction and popular culture sources, such as motion pictures, that could help elucidate the origins and the persistence of some monolithic and ubiquitous representations of the country. Also, investigating the contents of the students' stereotypes may help language instructor to identify the areas where the gaps in the students' cultural awareness or knowledge are especially wide. The teacher can then decide on suitable didactic tools aimed at enhancing the learners' cultural competence (e.g., initiating semester-long group projects on particular areas of the target culture, conducting class presentations about the target culture, holding group discussions with or among the students, etc.).

Secondly, it is vital to introduce to the students the emic perspectives on the

target culture. To do this, Byram and Kramersch (2008) suggested that the language instructors link the teaching of linguistic features to introducing important cultural and cognitive categories embedded in the language. This way the learners would acquire not only linguistic knowledge (i.e., the dictionary meaning of the words and phrases) but they would also get a chance to understand social and cultural values embedded in the language. For example, the learners of Italian could gain valuable insights into the target culture if they are introduced to a variety of meanings, nuances and implications infused in such expressions as *il bel paese* (“the beautiful country”); *la bella figura* (literally “the beautiful figure”); *Mezzogiorno* (literally “midday; noon”); *la dolce vita* (literally “the sweet life”); *Quattrocento* (literally “four hundred”), to mention just a few. Furthermore, sayings and proverbs as “essentialized representations of collective national memory” (Byram and Kramersch 2008:32) can be used by language educators to teach grammatical rules and to unveil the collective consciousness of the people. Ciccarelli (1996) has demonstrated how the teaching of linguistic structures can be placed in historical and cultural contexts through the use of such sayings and proverbs as *toccare ferro* (literally “to touch iron”, English equivalent is the idiom “touch wood”) or *Non mettere il carro davanti ai buoi* (literally “Do not put the carriage ahead of the oxen”).

In conclusion, investigating language learners’ stereotypes about the target language country, culture and the speaking community can be an enlightening and rewarding experience for both the language educators and the language learners because these images can serve as a stepping stone to a better understanding of the target culture and language.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions. We wish to express our sincere gratitude to John Mark Storey for his help with proofreading this article. The authors alone are responsible for any shortcomings or errors that may remain.

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