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ORIGINAL AND DUBBED TELECINEMATIC INPUT AND ITALIAN L2 ACQUISITION IN MALTA

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of audiovisual media in everyday life is pervasive and constantly growing, owing to the wide circulation of films, television series and TV shows. Nowadays, an extensive range of audiovisual products is available both at local and international level. In many countries, viewers regularly access telecinematic products in a second language (L2) via subtitled translations, whereas films and programmes in several different languages are easily available worldwide through the Internet, DVDs, satellite and digital TV. In addition to being a source of entertainment, audiovisual products can thus also become precious resources to promote literacy, multilingualism and foreign language learning (Kothari, *et al.* 2008; Díaz Cintas 2008).

Audiovisual (AV) input potentially offers many advantages for second language acquisition (SLA) (Pavesi 2012). Although not allowing for crucial aspects of canonical bidirectional NS-NNS exchanges, telecinematic dialogue is a virtually unlimited source of valuable input and positive evidence, which is the “most obviously necessary requirement for learning” (Gass 2003: 226). In audiovisual contexts, SLA can be fostered by feelings of media immersion (Green *et al.* 2004; Wissmath, 2009:117), which makes learners more readily receptive towards L2 input. Similarly, learners-viewers are stimulated to focus on the storyline and characterisation as opposed to language *per se*, in a process that has been acknowledged to trigger foreign language processing (Van Patten 2007, 2011) and incidental learning. While they are immersed and involved in the story, learners focus on the unfolding of the plot and on the meaning of film dialogue: they focus less on linguistic forms as they engage with meaning. This is also favoured by the contex-

tualisation of dialogues and interactions in a semiotically rich multimodal environment (Pavesi & Perego 2008)¹. The multimodality of audiovisual input and its contextualisation in a visual setting favour its memorisation among learners, as predicted by the Dual Coding theory (Paivio 1971) and by the theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer 2003; see also Talaván 2011; d'Ydewalle 2002; Danan 2004). Furthermore, the multimodality of telecinematic input enhances sound segmentation and speech comprehension, both of which have been shown to benefit from the availability of visual cues during exposure to input and their matching with auditory information (Sueyoshi & Hardison 2005; Hardison 2011).

In the light of these considerations, it comes as no surprise that research has addressed the learning of second and foreign languages via audiovisual input, both in the past and more recently (e.g. Baetens Beardsmore 1984; Baetens Beardsmore & van Beeck 1984; Vanderplank 2010). A considerable amount of experimental evidence is now available showing the usefulness of subtitled audiovisual products in fostering second language acquisition (reviews can be found in Danan 2004; Vanderplank 2010; Ghia 2012). Subtitled input has been proved to enhance listening comprehension and L2 writing as well as vocabulary acquisition and syntax development in a variety of experimental and naturalistic conditions (e.g. Koolstra & Beentjes 1999; d'Ydewalle 2002; Danan 2004; Verspoor, De Bot & van Rein 2011; Ghia 2012). Substantially less, however, has been published on unsubtitled telecinematic input coming from films and regular television programmes (Pavesi 2012). This is indeed quite unexpected as evidence of the effectiveness of unmodified television input in SLA can be gathered from several European and extra-European countries.

In this paper we present a study based on L2 input from films, carried out in a specific context – Malta – where access to Italian means of communication, especially television, is widespread (Brincat 2011:370-381; Caruana 2009 & 2012). This setting has been selected because, although Italian is widely available through the media, it is not used in Malta as a spoken medium for communicative purposes, as the context languages of the island are Maltese and English. In the Mediterranean area, a few studies have been carried out to investigate the acquisition of Italian following exposure to television input in Malta as well as in Albania (Ademi & Bulija 2008; Ademi et al. 2010). Moreover, in some North African countries knowledge of Italian has also benefitted from TV exposure (Simone 1992; Giordano 1997). Similarly, in some Mediterranean post-colonial settings, TV input is also available in ex-colonial languages (even more so since the increase of satellite TV channels) and this input may contribute to maintain-

ing these languages, such as in the case of French in Algeria and Tunisia. In the latter case Chouikha (2007) reports on how the proliferation of satellite TV in the Maghreb region has increased the popularity of channels that transmit in Arabic, especially during the recent social and political turmoil in the region. French TV channels, however, are reportedly also followed extensively as confirmed by Sayahi (2011), who states that “we can assume that exposure to the French language through education and different media continues to sustain the access that the increasingly more educated Tunisian society has to French” (Sayahi 2011:130).

Fewer studies have focused on the specific contribution of dubbed audiovisual products vis-à-vis original, non-translated products as sources of L2 input. This is in spite of the fact that in so-called “dubbing countries”, television channels broadcast numerous imported programmes dubbed for new target audiences (cfr. Antonini 2008: 135). These dubbed programmes are also accessed by L2 users receiving the same channels from abroad, with some L2 learners reportedly preferring them over non-translated, original productions in the L2 (Bencini 1997). Although some hypotheses on the role of dubbed input as an aid to spontaneous acquisition of Italian have been put forward (Brincat 2000 and Caruana 2003:69), the consequences for SLA have not been empirically examined to any significant extent so far. Hence, the present study sets out to explore the sociolinguistic and acquisitional role of Italian television in Malta today, as well as investigate the effects of both original and dubbed audiovisual input in Italian SLA. In addition to being a country where learners traditionally experience extensive access to Italian media, Malta is also the context where the first investigations on the role of television on spontaneous, out-of-school SLA were undertaken (Brincat 1992).

The paper is organised as follows: section 2 addresses the issue of Italian in Malta by briefly discussing the historical, sociolinguistic and acquisitional background for the research study on the acquisition of L2 Italian via audiovisual input. Section 3 presents the rationale, aims and methodology of the study, including a description of subjects, methods and tasks. The study is based on different methods of data collection, involving a comparative intervention and the administration of pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. In section 4 the results of the investigation are analysed, starting with the initial questionnaire (section 4.1.), moving to the comparative intervention (section 4.2.) and ending with the post-intervention questionnaire (section 4.3.). Findings and their implications are discussed in Section 5.

2. L2 ITALIAN IN MALTA

Contact between Italy and Malta, due to the geographical proximity of the two countries and to strong socio-cultural relationships, has led to a regular presence of Italian on the island. Historically, Italian was the language of the elite upper class, but it lost this status during the British colonial period (1800-1964) when this role was taken by English (Hull 1993; Brincat 2011: 267-342). After a certain decline of the language in the years preceding and following the Second World War, Italian made a significant comeback in Malta. The main reason that led to this revival was undoubtedly related to Italian television programmes through which the language started entering Maltese households. Watching Italian programmes on TV, as well as dubbed Italian versions of originally Anglophone films or teleserials, was common practice on the island. The popularity of Italian television channels reached its peak in Malta in the Seventies and in the Eighties, when, apart from a single national television station, a large number of state-run and private Italian television channels used to be received in analogue mode. This had a significant impact on the language in schools: its popularity soared and teachers observed that many students were fluent in Italian even before they started to learn the language at school, at 11 years of age.

Research carried out in Malta in the past twenty years, of which comprehensive summaries are included in Brincat (1992, 1998 and 2011: 375-381) and in Caruana (2003 and 2012), provides clear evidence that in Malta many individuals can both comprehend and speak Italian after having followed Italian television programmes, including films, for a number of years. These studies show that primary school children (6-11 year-olds) in Malta, who had not yet started learning Italian at school, could translate into their L1 words and short phrases frequently used in spoken contemporary Italian². The relation between TV exposure and competence in Italian was also investigated with adults of various ages (Brincat 2011: 375-6). Again, in most cases competence in the language was found to be related to the amount of input from television programmes. Subsequently, Caruana (2003) examined whether 14-15 year-old informal learners, who were regularly exposed to Italian via television but had no schooling in it, had the ability to speak the language. Results indicated that those subjects who watched Italian TV from a young age could communicate effectively in the language: they possessed native-like use of the basic verb tenses of Italian, were capable of constructing target-like complex sentences and exhibited the same acquisitional sequences evidenced in spontaneous Italian SLA (Giacalone Ramat 2003).

The impact of television input on Italian SLA is also somewhat corroborated by the fact that recent changes in Maltese media, which have led to a

considerable decrease in exposure to this language, have also been accompanied by an evident decline in the competence in this language (Caruana 2009 & 2012). The decrease in exposure is mainly also due to technological developments which today have led to a much wider offer of television programmes and to the availability of other means of entertainment through Internet. Italian is therefore no longer the undisputed language of television and of films as English is now the preferred medium. However, a recent study carried out by Calleja (2012) confirms that though fewer Maltese schoolchildren watch Italian TV programmes when compared to the past, those who do so regularly are still capable of communicating orally in Italian and their use of Italian verbs does not differ from that of students who study the language at school. Moreover, Italian is still very much associated to TV viewing as other forms of information and entertainment available through other means, including the Internet, are accessed in English. Attaining a high level of competence in Italian, therefore, is still very much related to whether one is exposed to it via television as this creates a “full immersion-like” situation which is almost impossible to replicate when the language is acquired solely through formal schooling. It must be stated that most of the studies referred to above were held among Maltese Secondary school students, whose age ranged from 11-15, as their subjects. As shall be outlined below, this age range is younger than the one of the subjects included in this research.

3. RATIONALE, AIMS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Owing to its specific sociolinguistic situation, Malta is an ideal setting to further investigate the impact that telecinematic input can have on the learning of L2 Italian. Moving from previous research on the topic, the current study sets out to explore to what extent advanced post-secondary school learners of Italian in Malta are exposed to the language via films and television nowadays, and what learning benefits they can derive from exposure to film input.

The study has a twofold purpose: first of all, it aims to provide an overview of these learners’ general attitudes towards and experience of the Italian media. As a general trend, and also on the basis of the results of the studies cited above, we could expect advanced learners of Italian, who are furthering their studies in the language, to have been exposed regularly to Italian via television, possibly from a very young age. Secondly, the study aims to investigate the specific impact of L2 cinematographic audiovisual input on learners’ immediate retention of L2 traits, focussing on the development of lexical and pragmatic competence in L2 Italian as a result of

exposure to original and dubbed film language³. The underlying hypothesis is that exposure to films in L2 Italian, both in their original versions and dubbed into the target language, can foster L2 competence and motivate students to further their study of the language.

The study targeted Maltese advanced learners of Italian as an L2. More specifically, the participants' age ranged from 16 to 17 years old when the data were collected. They attended a post-secondary institution in Malta, where they were following an advanced course in Italian in two different classes of the same level. These students had already studied Italian for five years in Maltese Secondary schools and exhibit a B2/C1 level of competence (Council of Europe 1996).

In the first phase of the study a questionnaire (Appendix 1) was distributed to the subjects by means of which information was obtained regarding their exposure to Italian as well as input in the language received through other sources (e.g. contact with Italian friends or relatives, travelling to Italy, etc.). This questionnaire was given to 110 subjects, namely the whole cohort of advanced students in the aforementioned institution, and was completed by 89 (80.9%) of them. For practical reasons, the subsequent phase, focussing on testing the immediate acquisition of lexical and pragmatic competence in L2 Italian as a result of exposure to film input, was carried out on a sub-sample of two classes from the same school in Malta. The subjects included in this sub-sample were required to view five films in Italian, screened during school hours, over a period of four months (see below). This sub-sample presented characteristics which were representative of the total sample to which the questionnaire was distributed and included 57 subjects; since 21 students did not view any of the films⁴, this part of the study is based on 36 subjects.

The study had a quasi-experimental, comparison group design (see Mackey & Gass, 2005 for terminology), since it involved the comparison between two corresponding experimental groups. Over the experimental period, 19 subjects in one class (group E1) watched five British and American films dubbed into Italian, while simultaneously 17 learners in another class (group E2) were exposed to five original Italian films during the same time span. The number of students ranged from 25 to 34 at each screening (see Table 1 below). The comparative intervention aimed to assess whether the two dialogue varieties, i.e. original and dubbed, can be both beneficial to advanced L2 learners. It is to be underlined that the students undergoing the intervention were also attending a course in Italian, as explained above. Therefore, input was not just limited to film viewing, but was also present through formal instruction in the language, as well as through other potential incidental sources (e.g. watching Italian TV at home).

A list of the films selected is provided in Table 1 below, along with the successive screening dates and the number of learners who took part in each session:

Table 1. Films screened during the intervention, dates of screening and number of viewers.

| DATE OF SCREENING | FILM PAIRS | DUBBED FILM | NUMBER OF VIEWERS | FILM IN ITALIAN ORIGINAL LANGUAGE | NUMBER OF VIEWERS |
|-----------------------------|-------------|--|-------------------|---|-------------------|
| 14th /17th January 2011 | First pair | <i>Finding Forrester</i> , 2000, (Director: Gus van Sant). | 19 | <i>La Scuola</i> , 1995, (Director: Daniele Lucchetti). | 15 |
| 18th /21st February 2011 | Second pair | <i>Bend it like Beckham</i> , 2002, (Director: Gurinder Chadha). | 14 | <i>La febbre</i> , 2005, (Director: Alessandro d'Alatri). | 18 |
| 18th / 21st March 2011 | Third pair | <i>Oceans 11</i> , 2001, (Director: Steven Soderbergh). | 11 | <i>Le chiavi di casa</i> , 2004, (Director: Gianni Amelio). | 17 |
| 15th / 18th April 2011 | Fourth pair | <i>My best friend's wedding</i> , 1997, (Director: P.J. Hogan). | 10 | <i>Lezioni di cioccolato</i> , 2007, (Director: Claudio Cupellini). | 15 |
| 6th /9th May 2011 | Fifth pair | <i>The Holiday</i> , 2006, (Director: Nancy Meyers). | 13 | <i>Notte prima degli esami</i> , 2006, (Director: Fausto Brizzi) | 18 |

The main criteria used for film selection were age-appropriateness and limited sociolinguistic variation in dialogue. Films dealing with topics which were considered to be appropriate for and appealing to a teenage audience were included in the list. These comprised such themes as students' life, youth life and problems, love, friendship, and sport. Affinity of main topics was considered as a relevant criterion for matching dubbed and original films in each screening. Films whose dialogues contained a prevalence of diatopically and diastratically marked traits were avoided, and a preference was given to films generally featuring more standard varieties of Italian.

The study focused on the retention of vocabulary and pragmatically connoted expressions heard in film dialogue. Immediate retention was tested through pretest-posttest comparisons. In both groups, subjects were given task to complete immediately before and after each screening on their knowledge and use of vocabulary, collocations and pragmatically connoted expressions in L2 Italian⁵. A vocabulary task required learners to provide a definition or a translation (into Maltese or English) of words in Italian used in the film dialogues. Although this vocabulary was selected randomly from the film dialogue, cognates were avoided on the grounds that translating or explaining such terms would have been too straightforward.

ward. A following task focused on pragmatically connoted Italian expressions presented in a specific context, for which participants had to provide a translation or reformulation. Lastly, a collocation task required learners to fill the gaps in a series of sentences with the appropriate collocates in Italian. Tests were specifically constructed for each one of the films and followed the same format, as the same tasks were presented in both the pretest and the posttest.

4. RESULTS

4.1. *Initial questionnaires*

The first questionnaire was completed by 89 subjects, amongst whom 21 (23.6%) males and 68 (76.4%) females. 59 (66.3%) subjects stated that Maltese was their L1, 22 (24.7%) stated that they acquired Maltese and English simultaneously as their mother tongues whereas 4 (4.5%) subjects declared that English was their first language. Four subjects (4.5%) stated that their L1 was neither Maltese nor English. A considerable number of subjects – 73 (62%) – declared to have or have had occasions in which they used Italian during conversations outside school hours. 55 subjects (61.8%) have been to Italy, whereas 19 subjects (21.3%) have Italian relatives.

In Table 2 figures are reported regarding the number of years for which the subjects have been studying Italian at school in Malta:

Table 2. Duration of subjects' study of Italian in Malta (percentages within brackets).

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------|
| Less than 1 year | 6 (6.7) |
| Between 1 and 2 years | 3 (3.4) |
| Between 2 and 3 years | 4 (4.5) |
| Between 3 and 4 years | 10 (11.2) |
| Between 4 and 5 years | 11 (12.4) |
| More than 5 years | 55 (61.8) |
| TOTAL | 89 |

These subjects obtained a satisfactory grade in the Italian Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examination, which they sat for prior to the start of their post-secondary schooling. This examination is comparable to the Ordinary Level exams in the British school system and roughly corresponds to Threshold/B1 Level (Council of Europe, 1996).

Many subjects were exposed regularly to Italian via the media (see Tables 3 & 4). Table 3 clearly indicates that figures for these subjects,

regarding Italian TV viewership, are considerably higher than those presently registered in nation-wide surveys, which indicate an average daily 'TV reach' of around 15-20% for Italian channels (Caruana, 2009 and 2012). Furthermore, as shown in Table 4, many of the subjects had been regularly exposed to Italian in the past, that is in the years when they were attending Primary school (between ages 6-11).

Table 3. Present exposure to television programmes in different languages (percentages within brackets).

| LANGUAGE | EVERY DAY | 3 OR 4 TIMES A WEEK | ONCE A WEEK | LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK | NEVER | TOTAL |
|----------|-----------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------|-------|
| Maltese | 30 (34) | 22 (25) | 17 (19.3) | 12 (13.6) | 7 (8.1) | 88 |
| English | 41 (46) | 22 (24.8) | 9 (10) | 11 (12.4) | 6 (6.8) | 89 |
| Italian | 61 (68.5) | 21 (23.6) | 4 (4.5) | 3 (3.4) | 0 | 89 |

Table 4. Past exposure to television programmes in different languages (percentages within brackets).

| LANGUAGE | EVERY DAY | 3 OR 4 TIMES A WEEK | ONCE A WEEK | LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK | NEVER | TOTAL |
|----------|-----------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------|-------|
| Maltese | 32 (36.3) | 27 (30.6) | 12 (13.7) | 12 (13.7) | 5 (5.7) | 88 |
| English | 18 (21.1) | 22 (25.9) | 19 (22.4) | 11 (13) | 15 (17.6) | 85 |
| Italian | 73 (82) | 11 (12.4) | 3 (3.4) | 2 (2.2) | 0 | 89 |

It is worth noting that these subjects' preferred language of TV is Italian, rather than English or Maltese. Presently (Table 3) a large majority (almost 70%) watches Italian television every day and more than 20% declare that they watch Italian television programmes at least three or four times a week. The figures increase when subjects were asked to report on their TV viewing in the years when they attended Primary school (Table 4). In this case the figure of those who state that they used to watch Italian TV everyday reaches 82% of the sample. Figures in the two tables also indicate a sharp increase in TV viewing in English between past and present, undoubtedly due to the proliferation of channels in this language on satellite TV which has gained popularity in Malta over the past few years. The fact that many advanced learners of Italian were exposed to the language from a very young age, even before starting to learn the language at school, confirms the expectations put forward in Section 3.

Subjects were also asked to report on the extent of their past and present daily exposure to Italian TV. Whereas for the present subjects were asked to report separately on their TV exposure during weekdays and weekends, data for the past (i.e. when they attended Primary School) were retrieved through a single question (see Appendix 1). This was decided on

the basis of the consideration that the weekday-weekend distinction would be much harder to make in relation to TV viewing habits of years gone by. As shown in table 5, daily exposure to Italian TV, both in the present and in the past, is quite extensive for a large number of subjects:

Table 5. Extent of daily exposure to Italian TV: past and present (percentages within brackets).

| | PRESENT (schooldays) | PRESENT (weekends) | AVERAGE PRESENT (schooldays + weekends) | PAST (schooldays + weekends) |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Less than 1 hour | 24 (27) | 6 (6.8) | 15 (17) | 10 (11.2) |
| Between 1 and 3 hours | 46 (51.7) | 27 (30.7) | 36.5 (41) | 34 (38.2) |
| Between 3 and 5 hours | 11 (12.3) | 32 (36.4) | 21.5 (24.4) | 27 (30.3) |
| More than 5 hours | 8 (9) | 23 (26.1) | 15.5 (17.6) | 18 (20.3) |
| Total | 89 | 88 | 88.5 ⁶ | 89 |

A slight decrease in present daily TV exposure emerges from the table above, when compared to the past: a number of subjects used to watch Italian TV for longer amounts of time (more than three hours a day) in the past than they do at present. Data therefore, by and large, confirm considerations already put forward with respect to the results presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Further to the above, as reported in Table 6, a considerable percentage of subjects also watches films in Italian (91%), which means they are regularly exposed to the type of audiovisual input that is the focus of the comparison intervention. The figures reported below indicate that film viewing in Italian is indeed more popular than all the other media included in this query:

Table 6. Exposure to Italian via other means of communication besides television (percentages within brackets).

| | YES | No | NO ANSWER |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Films | 81 (91) | 7 (7.9) | 1 (1.1) |
| Music | 69 (77.5) | 20 (22.5) | 0 |
| Radio | 19 (21.3) | 66 (74.2) | 4 (4.5) |
| Websites | 51 (57.3) | 36 (40.4) | 2 (2.3) |
| Printed magazines | 49 (55.1) | 37 (41.6) | 3 (3.3) |

The data regarding these advanced learners that emerge from the questionnaire clearly indicate that exposure to Italian extends beyond the didactic-oriented input these subjects receive during their formal lessons at school. Furthermore, as stated above, their present competence in the language also builds on regular input received before they started learning Italian in local secondary schools, at 11 years of age, as a number of them were exposed to the language even when they were very young. Finally, the number of subjects who watches films in Italian is noteworthy, especially in

the light of the considerations that will be made in the following section of this paper.

4.2. The comparison intervention

A further step in the investigation involved the exploration of learners' immediate retention of L2 expressions as related to film viewing, which was carried out through the quasi-experimental, comparison study. As outlined above (Section 3), the quasi-experimental study was based on the comparison of students' L2 competence before and after exposure and across two different experimental conditions: exposure to original Italian films and exposure to foreign films dubbed into Italian. The two different conditions were compared in order to assess their impact on the immediate retention of L2 traits. The posttests were administered immediately after exposure to each film (see Table 1 for a complete list of the films and their sequencing). For this reason, the focus of this part of the research regards immediate L2 retention (Section 3 & Appendix 2). Learners' scores were calculated for pretests and posttests and mixed-design ANOVAs were performed on test results from each film pair.

Mixed-design ANOVAs were applied to look for:

- i) any significant differences between pretest and posttest scores, i.e. a significant development over time related to exposure (within-group effect), and
- ii) any significant differences across the two experimental conditions, i.e. original and dubbed dialogue (cross-group effect).

Table 7 below shows the descriptive statistics for each film pair, reporting mean pretest and posttest scores⁷:

Table 7. Mean pretest and posttest scores for each film pair.

| FILM PAIR | DIALOGUE | MEAN PRETEST SCORE (MAX. SCORE 3) | MEAN POSTTEST SCORE (MAX. SCORE 3) |
|-----------|---------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Pair 1 | Dubbed film | 1.924 | 2.114 |
| | Original film | 1.924 | 2.146 |
| Pair 2 | Dubbed film | 2.146 | 1.817 |
| | Original film | 1.761 | 1.994 |
| Pair 3 | Dubbed film | 2.026 | 2.028 |
| | Original film | 2.462 | 2.56 |
| Pair 4 | Dubbed film | 1.824 | 1.968 |
| | Original film | 1.948 | 2.005 |
| Pair 5 | Dubbed film | 2.108 | 2.153 |
| | Original film | 1.709 | 1.862 |

Apart from a few exceptions, results from the experimental study generally show a slight increase from the pretests to the posttests. In Table 8, the ANOVA results for each film pair are summarised, isolating the effect of the variables considered: *time* (pretest-posttest difference), *dialogue* (any difference between exposure to original vs. dubbed dialogue) and the interaction between these two (any time difference from pretest to posttest related to the specific type of dialogue learners were exposed to). The relative percentage of growth from pretest to posttest is added for each film. Values marked with asterisks indicate the presence of a significant effect or an effect approaching statistical significance:

Table 8. Results from mixed-design ANOVAs: Effect of time, dialogue and their interaction, plus relative percentage of growth from pretest to posttest.⁸

| FILM PAIR | EFFECT OF THE TIME VARIABLE (WITHIN-GROUP DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRETEST AND POSTTEST) | EFFECT OF THE DIALOGUE VARIABLE (CROSS-GROUP DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ORIGINAL LANGUAGE FILM AND DUBBED CONDITION) | EFFECT OF THE TIME-DIALOGUE INTERACTION (CROSS-GROUP DIFFERENCE OVER TIME) | RELATIVE PERCENTAGE OF GROWTH FROM PRETEST TO POSTTEST |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Finding Forrester</i> – <i>La scuola</i> | $p < .005$ * $F(1,31) = 11.542$ $p < .005$ | $F(1,31) = .117$ $p = .735$ | $F(1,31) = .513$ $p = .479$ | Dubbed film: 0.07% Original film: 0.12% |
| <i>2. Bend it Like Beckham</i> – <i>La febbre</i> | $F(1,29) = .372$ $p = .547$ | $F(1,29) = .060$ $p = .808$ | * $F(1,30) = 6.748$ $p < .05$ in favour of the film in the original language | Dubbed film: -0.15% Original film: 0.09% |
| <i>Ocean's 11</i> – <i>Le chiavi di casa</i> | $F(1,26) = .494$ $p = .488$ | * $F(1,26) = 31.308$ $p < .001$ in favour of the film in the original language | $F(1,26) = .467$ $p = .500$ | Dubbed film: 0% Original film: 0.04% |
| <i>4. My Best Friend's Wedding</i> – <i>Lezioni di cioccolato</i> | $F(1,23) = 2.260$ $p = .146$ | $F(1,23) = .329$ $p = .572$ | $F(1,23) = .411$ $p = .528$ | Dubbed film: 0.08% Original film: 0.02% |
| <i>5. The Holiday</i> – <i>Notte prima degli esami</i> | $F(1,27) = 1.612$ $p = .215$ | * $F(1,27) = 4.145$ $p = .052$ in favour of the film in the original language | $F(1,27) = .409$ $p = .528$ | Dubbed film: 0.05% Original film: 0.09% |

The development over time was significant in one film pair (*Finding Forrester – La scuola*, $F(1,31) = 11.542$, $p < .005$). Looking at trends from all film pairs, a slightly higher increase was recorded among group E2 subjects (i.e. learners who watched original Italian films), with a significant difference from group E1 subjects (i.e. learners watching dubbed films into Italian) for two film pairs (*Ocean's 11 – Le chiavi di casa*; *The Holiday – Notte prima degli esami*)⁹. In one case, a significant interaction between the variables *time* and *dialogue* was documented, meaning that participants' change over time varied according to the experimental conditions to which learners had been assigned – with a greater extent of linguistic retention after exposure to original Italian films (*Bend it Like Beckham – La febbre*, $F(1,30) = 6.748$; $p < .05$)¹⁰. A subsequent linear regression was performed on the data to look for generalised trends to be extracted from results on all film pairs. The regression searched for any general effects related to *time*, *dialogue* and *film pair* (an overall difference in results related to the specificity of each film pair). Results from the linear regression are illustrated in Table 9 below (asterisks indicate the presence of statistical significance or values approaching statistical significance):

Table 9. Linear regression for variables *time*, *dialogue* and *film pair*.

| VARIABLE | β REGRESSION COEFFICIENT | T VALUE | SIGNIFICANCE LEVEL |
|---|--------------------------------|---------|--------------------|
| <i>Time</i> (2 levels, pretest and posttest) | .99 | 1.715 | * $p=.087$ |
| <i>Dialogue</i> (2 levels, original and dubbed) | .24 | .411 | $p=.681$ |
| <i>Film pair</i> (5 levels, 5 film pairs) | -.049 | -.841 | $p=.401$ |

Only the *time* variable had an impact on learners' overall performance which approached significance: exposure to film input appeared to have a slight effect on the immediate retention of features of L2 Italian among learners, independently of which dialogue condition they were exposed to (original or dubbed) or which film pair was involved. No differences were ultimately attributable to the nature of dialogue (i.e. Italian original language or dubbed into Italian) in the sample considered.

In the current comparison study, exposure to film input in Italian appeared to be slightly beneficial for the immediate retention of lexical and pragmatic traits. Ultimately, films featuring original Italian dialogue or dialogue dubbed into Italian constitute both valid sources of L2 input for advanced-level learners. Both dialogue types were useful to learners and led to immediate learning benefits, albeit to a marginal extent. As remarked before, over the course of the experimental period students also

attended regular classes in L2 Italian at school ¹¹. The films did not therefore constitute the only source of linguistic input available to learners. The statistical tests carried out, however, were designed so as to focus on film-specific lexicon and assess the immediate retention of L2 items to result from exposure.

4.3. Post-intervention questionnaires

Once the intervention phase was completed, the subjects included in the two experimental groups were given a questionnaire in order to obtain feedback on the films they had watched in the previous phase. This post-intervention questionnaire was completed by 36 subjects, of which 19 had watched the dubbed version of the films whereas 17 had watched the films in Italian original language. As indicated by the number of viewers for each film included in Table 1, one must keep in mind that a number of subjects who completed this post-intervention questionnaire had not watched all five films. This is especially evident in the case of the group of viewers who watched the dubbed versions, as a total of 19 viewers was only registered in the case of a single film.

In their response to this questionnaire, 34 (94.4%) subjects stated that they enjoyed watching the films screened during the intervention phase. Subjects were also asked to report whether they believed that watching these films led to an improvement in their level of the L2, whether they had gained more interest in Italian films and whether it might be useful to use such materials as part of their course syllabus. Results are provided in Table 10 below:

Table 10. Subjects' response following screening of films.

| | WATCHING FILMS IMPROVES COMPETENCE IN ITALIAN L2 | WATCHING FILMS CREATES MORE INTEREST IN ITALIAN FILMS | USEFUL TO INCLUDE FILMS IN SCHOOL SYLLABUS |
|--------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Yes, very much | 8 (22.2%) | 18 (50%) | 14 (38.9%) |
| Yes, but just a little bit | 20 (55.5%) | 8 (22.2%) | 18 (50%) |
| No, I think it did not improve | 6 (16.7) | 9 (25%) | 4 (11.1%) |
| I don't know | 2 (5.6%) | 1 (2.8%) | 0 |

The replies to these queries indicate that subjects responded positively to the intervention phase and that they perceived films as serving the purpose of creating further motivation towards learning Italian. Subjects were also asked to react to five statements on the language of films by indicating their response through a five point Likert scale. The results are reported in the following table:

Table 11. Appreciation and perception of the language of film (percentages within brackets).

| | SA | A | NAND | D | SD* |
|--|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| I enjoy watching films in Italian | 22 (61.1) | 6 (16.7) | 8 (22.2) | 0 | 0 |
| I enjoy watching American/English films more when they are translated into Italian | 9 (25) | 4 (11.1) | 12 (33.3) | 8 (22.2) | 3 (8.3) |
| I enjoy watching Italian films more than American/English films | 5 (13.9) | 7 (19.4) | 14 (38.9) | 6 (16.7) | 4 (11.1) |
| When an American / English film is translated into Italian I lose interest in it | 2 (5.6) | 4 (11.1) | 12 (33.3) | 9 (25) | 9 (25) |
| Films in Italian are harder to follow than films in English | 1 (2.8) | 2 (5.6) | 5 (13.9) | 14 (38.9) | 14 (38.9) |

*SA = Strongly agree; A = Agree; NAND = Neither agree nor disagree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly disagree

Results reported in Table 11 clearly show that these subjects enjoy watching films in Italian and that many of them are not averse to watching Anglophone films dubbed into Italian. Furthermore, their advanced level of competence of Italian allows most of these subjects to follow films in the L2 without encountering problems related to comprehension. Importantly, a number of subjects (13 out of a total of 36) chose the options 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree' when asked whether they enjoy watching originally Anglophone films more when these are translated into Italian. A similar number (12 out of 36) chose the same option when asked whether they prefer watching films in Italian when compared to films in English. Overall, these replies indicate that these Maltese subjects are at ease with Italian, while at the same time confirming what had previously emerged as to their exposure to the L2 via means of mass communication.

These considerations are confirmed by the replies to an open ended question at the end of the questionnaire in which subjects were invited to add any comments regarding the films they had watched. Responses were generally positive as most of the subjects believe that receiving input through Italian films is both enjoyable and beneficial to their language competence. Some subjects, however, clearly stated that the intervention was not particularly useful, as they would have preferred having their normal lesson schedule. This may be taken to suggest that watching TV programmes and films in the L2 is best conceived as an out-of-school activity, whereas learners prefer to focus on more formal activities at school.

5. CONCLUSION

Since audiovisual media are widely available in contemporary society, they are also a precious resource to acquire foreign languages. Although recent research has explored the benefits related to exposure to subtitled

video products, less attention has been allocated to the impact of unsubtitled audiovisuals, which represent a major source of foreign language input in some countries, including those in the Mediterranean region. Similarly, no empirical research has been carried out on the effect of different types of language input that are available to learners through unsubtitled television and videos, namely original products in the foreign language or non-original products which have been dubbed into the foreign language. Along these lines, due to its specific geographical location and sociolinguistic background Malta represents an ideal context for an ongoing investigation of the impact of exposure to Italian media on L2 acquisition and the effects of exposure to both original and dubbed audiovisual input in Italian.

Despite the fact that in Malta access to media input in Italian has decreased in the recent years (Caruana 2012), it is clear from the present study that a number of students who choose to further their studies at advanced level in this language are exposed to it through television and that they also enjoy watching films in the language. In fact, it may certainly be argued that the very reason why these students achieve a high proficiency in L2 Italian is that their formal learning of the language at school has been accompanied by input from the media which has led to substantial L2 incidental learning. By following Italian TV programmes and films, often from a very young age, these Maltese subjects experience a quasi-immersion form of language acquisition which has proved to be very effective. It is important to underline that the subjects were regularly exposed to Italian via television already when they were less than 11 years old, that is before they started learning Italian at secondary school. Despite a slight decrease in their present exposure, they still attained a high level of competence in Italian thereby supporting the impact of age on implicit learning, as debated extensively in the field of language acquisition (e.g. DeKeyser 2003, 2011; Muñoz 2008).

Importantly, in addition to fostering L2 competence, media exposure may thus be posited as a motivational factor for further studying the language. Subjects who participated in this study show positive attitudes towards L2 Italian and are convinced of the usefulness of watching films in order to learn an L2 and improve one's linguistic skills. Results also provide indications that the ability to retain Italian lexis and refer to pragmatic functions increased immediately (even though slightly) after watching both original and dubbed films. Though these findings deserve further investigation, they are in line with the predictions of the Dual Coding theory (Paivio 1971) and the theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer 2003). It must also be stressed that the findings of our study regarding lexical retention and the acquisition of pragmatic functions are limited to a short term effect, since tests were carried out immediately after the films were screened. Though this aspect of language

acquisition is noteworthy and may indeed be exploited for didactic purposes, whether these features are retained over the course of time clearly also depends on exposure to further L2 input, either in implicit or explicit settings.

The slightly higher development generally recorded among E2 learners (i.e. viewers of original films) can be accounted for by considering the specificity of the learning context in Malta. To Maltese learners, as we have underlined, both dubbed and original Italian film dialogues are equally accessible. Since original Italian films depict real cultural Italian contexts, learners might develop a more positive attitude towards them, associating them with a greater degree of realism and a faithful reproduction of actual communicative situations in Italy. As a result of this, although in dubbed language certain regional or dialectal traits are normally absent and there is a more widespread use of standard forms (Pavesi, 2005), advanced learners do not appear to react more positively to this form of audiovisual dialogue as might have been initially hypothesised. The advantages and disadvantages of both original and translated input thus appear to compensate each other and make the different types of film language equally beneficial for SLA at advanced competence levels. The high level of L2 proficiency generally showed by the Maltese participants may also account for the relatively small growth from the pretests to the posttests. The higher the performance of a sample is in the pretest, the less likely the same sample will be to grow considerably in the posttest (ceiling effect). Cases of stability (as documented, for instance, in film pair 3) are therefore likely to emerge.

The high-proficiency level of the students who took part in the intervention phase may explain both the similar results obtained with reference to the original and dubbed nature of the film dialogue. This, of course, does not exclude the hypothesis that if lower-proficiency learners are considered, different trends might be recorded. It is in fact possible that less advanced learners will take greater advantage of the standardisation and normalisation traits typical of dubbed language and, by starting from a lower competence level, will exhibit greater space for improvement when exposed to audiovisual input.

In conclusion, this study confirms findings of previous research carried out in Malta on the importance of audiovisual media in Italian L2 learning. In this case, however, since participants are advanced learners of the language, we focussed on their ability to follow full-length films in Italian and on whether diverse forms of telecinematic input could yield different results in tasks carried out after each screening. The marginal differences that emerged between the groups indicate that once learners have developed a sound competence in the L2, different types of input do not necessarily have a highly significant effect on vocabulary retention and pragmatically connoted tasks and that both original film dialogue and dubbed dialogue are

understood comprehensively by these learners. Moreover, learners showed a considerable interest in telecinematic input, exposure to which has proved to be a valuable means to motivate them in their Italian L2 acquisition and to develop positive attitudes towards this language.

Keywords: Telecinematic input, Second Language Acquisition, L2 Italian, dubbing, original audiovisual dialogue

SUMMARY

Research on Italian L2 acquisition in Malta is extensive and has demonstrated the benefits of language learning through audiovisual media. For this study we collected data regarding exposure to telecinematic input from advanced learners of Italian in Malta. Results reveal that this input plays a relevant role in the acquisition of Italian and that it also motivated the subjects to learn the language and foster positive attitudes towards it. During the course of this study these advanced learners also watched five films in Italian over a period of four months. Through an analysis of results based on a quasi-experimental comparison group design, considerations are put forward regarding the efficacy of original and dubbed language forms on tasks involving vocabulary retention and pragmatically connoted expressions.

NOTE

¹ On the semiotic complexity and richness of telecinematic contexts see Bubel 2008, Freddi & Pavesi 2009, Piazza et al. 2011.

² Items were selected based on the reference corpus of spoken Italian *Lessico di frequenza dell'italiano parlato (LIP)* (De Mauro et al. 1993).

³ Learners' immediate retention of L2 traits refers to the retention of linguistic items and patterns which may directly follow exposure to input. The information which is retained is stored in short-term memory, in a process that differs from long-term storage, or delayed retention (cfr. Doughty 2003). Owing to the short exposure time the intervention entailed, it is no aim of ours to assess long-term L2 development in the current study.

⁴ Some of these students dropped out of the school during the year.

⁵ See Zannetti (2012) and a sample pretest in Appendix 2 for a more detailed description of the tasks.

⁶ This is a decimal number as it represents an average amount: 89 subjects responded to the question on their present TV viewing habits during schooldays, whereas 88 responded to the same question regarding weekends.

⁷ Scores have been normalised to 1 per each of the three tasks, i.e. vocabulary, pragmatics, and collocations, so that the maximum score for each pre- and posttest is 3.

⁸ Outliers were removed from Pairs 1, 2 and 5 since they deviated from the mean by more than two standard deviations.

⁹ Note that in one of the cases, i.e. film pair 3, a null increase in the dubbed dialogue group is registered. Learners' mean performance rate remained stable from pretest to posttest.

¹⁰ The trend relates to the fact that an actual decrease from the pretests to the posttests was generally recorded in the dubbed dialogue group.

¹¹ In addition to this, one must also take into account all the potential contexts of additional incidental exposure to Italian input, e.g. access to Italian television programmes and other media, songs, contact with native Italian speakers, etc. (see section 3).

APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire distributed to subjects prior to screening of films

1. Name: _____

2. Class: _____

3. Date of Birth: _____

4. Sex: **Tick (✓) ONE row**

| | |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Male</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Female</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

5. Which was/were the **FIRST** language/s that you learnt to speak?

Tick (✓) ONE row

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>English</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Maltese</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>English and Maltese together</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Other</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

6. Besides Maltese and English, **did ever study or are you studying** (at school, private lessons, evening classes) any of the following languages?

Tick (✓) ONE column for each language.

If there is a language you are studying or that you have studied which is not included in the list, please include it in the space provided in the last two rows.

| <i>Language</i> | <i>Studied/ Studying</i> | <i>Never studied</i> |
|-----------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>French</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>German</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Italian</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Spanish</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

7. Presently, how often do you follow programmes on TV in the following languages?

Tick (✓) ONE column for each language.

If there is a language in which you follow TV programmes, which is not included in the list, please include it in the space provided in the last two rows.

| Language | Every day | About 3 or 4 times a week | Once a week | Less than once a week | Never |
|----------|-----------|---------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Maltese | | | | | |
| English | | | | | |
| Italian | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

8. Presently, how much time do you spend every day watching ITALIAN TV programmes during schooldays?

Only tick (✓) ONE row.

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Less than 1 hour | |
| Between 1 and 3 hours | |
| Between 3 and 5 hours | |
| More than 5 hours | |

9. Presently, how much time do you spend every day watching ITALIAN TV programmes during holidays or weekends?

Only tick (✓) ONE row.

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Less than 1 hour | |
| Between 1 and 3 hours | |
| Between 3 and 5 hours | |
| More than 5 hours | |

10. When you were in Primary school, how often do you follow programmes on TV in the following languages?

Tick (✓) ONE column for each language.

If there is a language in which you follow TV programmes, which is not included in the list, please include it in the space provided in the last two rows.

| Language | Every day | About 3 or 4 times a week | Once a week | Less than once a week | Never |
|----------|-----------|---------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Maltese | | | | | |
| English | | | | | |
| Italian | | | | | |
| | | | | | |

11. How much time did you use to spend watching ITALIAN TV every day when you were at Primary school?

Only tick (✓) ONE row.

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| <i>Less than 1 hour</i> | |
| <i>Between 1 and 3 hours</i> | |
| <i>Between 3 and 5 hours</i> | |
| <i>More than 5 hours</i> | |

12. Presently, which is your favourite ITALIAN TV programme?

13. Presently, which is the ITALIAN TV channel that you follow most frequently?

14. Presently, do you do any of the following?

Tick (✓) ONE column for each option.

If there is a language in which you follow TV programmes, which is not included in the list, please include it in the space provided in the last two rows.

| | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> |
|---|------------|-----------|
| <i>Watch films in Italian</i> | | |
| <i>Listen to Italian music</i> | | |
| <i>Listen to Italian radio channels</i> | | |
| <i>Access online sites in Italian</i> | | |
| <i>Read magazines in Italian</i> | | |

15. Besides any text books in Italian that you may use at school, presently, how often do you read in ITALIAN during schooldays?

Only tick (✓) ONE row.

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Every day</i> | |
| <i>About 3 to 4 times a week</i> | |
| <i>Once a week</i> | |
| <i>Less than once a week</i> | |
| <i>Never</i> | |

16. Do or did you ever have the opportunity to SPEAK in Italian, not including the times you may have used the language at school, during private lessons or at evening classes?

Tick (✓) ONE row

| | |
|------------|--|
| <i>Yes</i> | |
| <i>No</i> | |

17. Do you have Italian relatives?

Tick (✓) ONE row

| | |
|-----|--|
| Yes | |
| No | |

18. If you did **SPEAK in Italian** in the PAST, always excluding the times you may have used the language during Italian lessons, for **how long** did you have the opportunity to **SPEAK in Italian REGULARLY?**

Only tick (✓) ONE row.

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| For not more than 1 month | |
| For a few months | |
| For about 1 year | |
| For more than 1 year | |

19. In which **circumstances** do/did you have the opportunity to **SPEAK in Italian?**

You may tick (✓) AS MANY rows as necessary. If there is any circumstance in which you SPEAK/SPOKE in ITALIAN, which is not included in the list, please include it in the space provided in the last two rows.

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| With friends or family members | |
| As a tourist guide | |
| Working in hotels/restaurants | |
| | |
| | |

20. For **how long** have you been studying or have you studied Italian?

Tick (✓) ONE row

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Less than 1 year | |
| Between 1 and 2 years | |
| Between 2 and 3 years | |
| Between 3 and 4 years | |
| Between 4 and 5 years | |
| More than 5 years | |

21. Have you ever been to Italy?

Tick (✓) ONE row

| | |
|-----|--|
| Yes | |
| No | |

22. If you have been to Italy, please write how many times you have been there and, more or less, how much time you spent there IN ALL ?

APPENDIX 2 – EXAMPLE OF TASKS COMPLETED BY SUBJECTS

Nome: _____

Classe: _____

Bend it like Beckham

TASK A: Traduci, in inglese o in maltese, le seguenti espressioni. Se hai difficoltà nella traduzione puoi anche spiegarne il significato inserendole in un contesto comunicativo:

Translate, in English or in Maltese, the following expressions. If you find it difficult to translate them you may also explain their meaning by placing them within a communicative context:

e.g. *biglietto* = ticket / biljett

OPPURE: Comprare un biglietto per vedere una partita allo stadio

1. fermata _____
2. fuorigioco _____
3. petto _____
4. potenziale _____
5. cavolo _____
6. peccato _____
7. saliera _____
8. occhiata _____
9. reclutatore _____
10. allenatore _____
11. dappertutto _____
12. provino _____
13. teppista _____
14. colpa _____
15. sudare _____
16. sfottere _____
17. spronare _____
18. fuoriclasse _____
19. tifoseria _____
20. fiero _____

TASK B: Spiega, in inglese o in maltese, il significato delle espressioni sottolineate nelle frasi seguenti:

Explain, in English or in Maltese, the meaning of the underlined parts in the sentences below.

e.g. *Se Maometto non va alla montagna...* - An expression meaning that one must do his/her utmost to take initiative to reach his/her goals

1. Formate due gruppi, tre per ogni gruppo! Muoversi!

2. Jess, spero che insegnerai a mia figlia un po' delle vostre tradizioni, ivi compreso il rispetto per i genitori anziani.

3. Paula, perché non la pianti? Sei un vero tormento!

TASK C: Completa le frasi seguenti inserendo nello spazio la parola che ritieni opportuna:

Complete the following sentences with the appropriate word for each blank space:

e.g. *Jules offre a Jess di allenarsi con una vera squadra femminile.*

1. Un oggetto o una moda molto in voga durante un certo periodo sono detti essere all' _____ grido.
2. Se i tuoi genitori scelgono in anticipo il tuo/la tua sposo/a, significa che hanno organizzato un matrimonio _____.
3. Di solito si dice che un ragazzo proveniente da una famiglia ricca è un buon _____ per un eventuale matrimonio.
4. Se un ragazzo non si presenta a scuola senza avvisare né i genitori né gli insegnanti ha _____ la scuola.
5. Quando sono particolarmente arrabbiato con un mio amico e non gli rivolgo la parola, gli sto tenendo il _____.
6. Jess potrebbe essere una giovane _____ del calcio internazionale.

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