

The media and their impact on the acquisition¹ of Italian in Malta

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Introduction

In Malta many people are regularly exposed to the Italian language via the media and this seems to be enough to justify the fact that it is taken for granted that in Malta Italian is understood well. This is also reflected by the declining figures of students in local Junior Lyceums who study Italian from Form 1. In fact many students in these schools start studying Italian, if they ever study the language, in Form 3 rather than in Form 1. Some students even sit for the SEC examination of Italian without ever having studied the subject at school. Some of these students sit for this examination after attending private lessons or evening classes for a few months, whereas others sit for the examination relying exclusively on the competence that they may have obtained after watching Italian television programmes for many years and after being exposed to the language through other means of communication².

At times it is the Junior Lyceum students themselves who opt freely not to study Italian formally at an early stage of their Secondary schooling. In other cases it seems that parents exercise their influence on their children by encouraging them to study French or German in Form 1 and eventually to opt for Italian in Form 3 - “*it-Taljan taghxlux minn Form 1, dak taqbdum mit-televisin!*” (“do not choose Italian at Form 1 level, you’ll pick it up from television!”) and other similar statements are frequently heard and though they rarely seem to be based on any theoretical insight or on any knowledge regarding language teaching and learning, they cannot go unnoticed.

These and other such considerations were the triggers which in the early 90s motivated a group of B.Ed.(Hons) students, amongst whom myself, to start exploring the issues regarding the language of the Italian media, that is the *linguistic input* that Maltese students receive from the media. It was evident then, as it is now, that the presence of the Italian media had breathed new life into a language, the active use of which in Malta had declined during the first decades of this century. Consequently, it is highly relevant to investigate the extent and the impact of this linguistic input on the individuals who are exposed to it.

that Italian television programmes are popular amongst Maltese schoolchildren, although the popularity of these programmes has declined significantly in recent years, mainly because of the popularity gained by local private channels. Furthermore, results confirm that over the last decade the media have undoubtedly enhanced the comprehension of Italian amongst local students. In fact, tests carried out in the above mentioned studies carried out by B.Ed.(Hons.) students, show that many students in local Primary state and church schools comprehend words and short phrases from Italian television programmes. Furthermore, students in Junior Lyceums who do not study Italian at school or elsewhere are also capable of understanding such words and phrases. In particular, a clear relationship emerged between the students’ competence of Italian and the amount of exposure to the language via television. In this respect it is clear that students who watch television regularly (that is for more than an hour daily) comprehend a larger amount of words and phrases in Italian than their counterparts who watch Italian television less regularly.

These results indicate that regular exposure to Italian may enable our students to acquire a certain degree of competence in the language. Since in most cases the media are unidirectional and any form of interaction between the viewer and the person providing the linguistic input normally does not normally occur, one may assume that the contribution of the media as far as language acquisition is concerned is limited to comprehension skills. A further drawback concerning the acquisition of Italian lies in the fact that in Malta very few people have the opportunity to speak regularly in Italian. However, the results of a recent study which I carried out (Caruana, 2000), have shown that in some cases regular exposure to Italian television programmes may lead to a high degree of competence in the language and that this competence is not necessarily limited to comprehension skills, as after many years of watching Italian television programmes regularly some Maltese students who have never learnt the language formally manage to speak Italian very well.

In this study I collected oral and written data from two groups of Form 4 Junior Lyceum students. None of the students included in the groups had ever had the opportunity to speak Italian regularly. One group consisted of students who had been learning Italian at school since Form 1 and were therefore exposed to the language in formal settings. The other group



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The results of our research

By means of these studies we confirmed

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consisted of students who had never learnt Italian at school or elsewhere. In this group there were a number of students who watched Italian television programmes regularly. Most of these students were capable of narrating a story in Italian³ orally and also of completing correctly a number of written sentences in Italian, just as their counterparts who learn Italian at school were capable of doing. Furthermore, the students who watch Italian television programmes very frequently (more than three hours daily) have a well developed grammatical system in Italian and, for example, they use the verbs correctly and are also capable of formulating complex sentences despite the absence of formal instruction in the language.

The implications of our results for the teaching of Italian in Malta

In the light of the above information it may be natural to pose a series of questions regarding the role of teachers of Italian in Malta. If as stated above, many Maltese students have learnt and are still learning Italian through the television programmes they follow, what is the use of learning Italian at school? What attitude should teachers of Italian have when confronted with such results? Isn't it disheartening to hear that students who do not learn the language formally at times perform just as well as the students who do? I believe that the results of the above-mentioned studies should represent a challenge to the teachers and that they should provide food for thought for the following reasons:

Firstly, one could ask oneself whether the use of Italian within the classroom is much too grammatically oriented and therefore distances

itself from the varieties of the language that one may be exposed to via the media. The media, especially television programmes, ought to become part and parcel of the curriculum and are not to be used on rare occasions as if they were an item one pulls out of a cupboard in order to carry out a lesson which is more stimulating than the ones carried out regularly. I do not mean to say that grammar and reading ought to be replaced by television programmes, but that it is high time that teachers be given the opportunity on the one hand and take initiative on the other in order to teach Italian in a stimulating manner taking into consideration the fact that his/her students can learn Italian effectively by means of regular exposure to the language via the media.

Secondly, one must take into consideration that our results imply that in the classroom of Italian, even before the very first lesson in the subject, there may be unequal conditions amongst the pupils as far as their linguistic competence is concerned. In fact, some students may have been exposed to Italian via the media regularly as from an early age whereas others may have not. Thus, it is important for teachers to obtain information regarding his/her students' degree of exposure to the language by asking them whether they watch Italian television programmes or whether they listen to Italian music or whether they read in Italian at home.

Thirdly, one must keep in mind the fact that one of the greatest difficulties encountered by language teachers is the fact that language learning is always characterised by individual differences. That is to say that whereas some students grasp a language easily others do not. Consequently, while it has been proved that there is a significant relationship between the amount of exposure to Italian via the media and the acquisition of the language, there is no direct equation which states that a certain amount of exposure will ensure that the language will be learnt because people learn languages in different ways even if they are exposed to it for the same amount of time and under the same conditions. Any teacher with a minimum of experience of language teaching is bound to confirm that some students grasp grammatical concepts easily but often encounter difficulties when speaking the language, whereas others learn how to speak the language fluently but encounter many difficulties when asked to carry out grammatical exercises. In such cases it is the language teacher who is called to bridge the gaps in order to help the student face his/her shortcomings.

Finally, it is also necessary to point out that the media may help one understand Italian and in some cases they may also provide the necessary input in order to learn how to speak Italian. However, the media can only offer very limited assistance as far as written skills are concerned and only learning the language formally can normally develop these skills.





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Looking ahead

As I pointed out earlier one must also take into consideration the fact that whereas in the past television was almost completely the domain of programmes in Italian nowadays most people in Malta receive many channels which transmit in English and in other languages besides a number of local private channels which transmit both in Maltese and in English. Therefore, if up to ten years ago it was not surprising that even our Primary school children would understand Italian well and possibly also speak the language, the situation today is undergoing rapid changes. It is beyond doubt that Italian via the media is losing popularity and the long-term effects of this situation are yet to be studied. The teacher of Italian in Malta is immersed in a highly dynamic situation that offers new challenges as time goes by. In this respect, he/she still has the opportunity to encourage his/her students to be exposed to Italian via the media and to offer a rich and varied linguistic input within the classroom setting so as to give the opportunity to his/her students to listen to the language regularly and to use what they listen to in order to interact in Italian. It is also important to note that technological progress has rendered the media more interactive. As stated earlier, television offers few opportunity for interaction to take place, but this not the case of the Internet or of computer programmes available on CD-ROM which are highly interactive and which offer the learner to be immersed in a process of autonomous learning. Though I am frilly aware of the difficulties teachers may have in order to access these tools it is necessary to point out that language teaching is heading towards this direction and that the use of the means of

communication within the classroom can help students to gain more competence in Italian.

Concluding remarks

The presence of the Italian media clearly puts the language in an advantageous position when compared to other languages, such as German or French, which are taught in local schools. It is also beyond doubt, that, while acknowledging the fact that the degree of spontaneous acquisition via television varies between one student and another, many Maltese students develop refined aural comprehensive skills at a very young age even before initiating the process of formal learning of Italian. Also, exposure to the language via the media is a useful reinforcement tool both for students who are still learning the language and for those who have completed their formal schooling years.

Notes

¹A terminological distinction is often made between the terms *acquisition* and *learning*. This distinction, originally proposed in the works of Krashen (1981), normally refers to the fact that whereas a language is *acquired* in non-formal settings, that is spontaneously or naturally, a language is *learned* when formal instruction is present, for example at school. The distinction may be considered to be useful when the two processes are to be treated separately as in the case of the field of language teaching or methodology. For other intents and purposes *acquisition* and *learning* overlap to the extent that they often cannot be kept apart, therefore as far as this article is concerned, unless specified otherwise, I will use the terms interchangeably and synonymously.

² Although one may be exposed to Italian through various means of communication such as radio channels, reading material and music, it is beyond doubt that the medium that has the greatest linguistic impact is television.

³ These students were shown an abridged version of the mute film *Modern Times* of Charlie Chaplin. They were then asked to narrate what they had seen in Italian. These narrations were recorded and the data provided the basis for the linguistic analysis I carried out in my research.

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