

Learning Italian in the United States and Italy

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After two trips to Italy about four or five years ago, I decided to try to learn the language, both because of its beauty (to my eye and ear) and as an exercise for my aging brain.

Unable to fit a traditional university language course into my work schedule, I started with grammar texts. I had heard of language software, such as Fluenz and Rosetta Stone, but these were unfamiliar to me and rather expensive. I was accustomed to grammar texts after 13 years of French in elementary and high school (1960s through mid-1970s), wherein I was taught by the Grammar Translation Method.

Eventually, I entered the 21st century and searched the internet for language CDs, finding the Pimsleur method (<https://www.pimsleur.com>, see Choe – this volume). I purchased their four levels of Italian language CDs comprising 120 30-minute lessons. In general, Pimsleur uses repetition and formulaic expressions as teaching tools. You are told what to say in English (sometimes in Italian) and you repeat the phrase in Italian during a pause. The lessons are all conversations between 2-3 people about everyday activities such as traveling, ordering in a restaurant, and conducting business.

The Pimsleur method has its benefits and drawbacks. Aspects of the repeated phrases and formulaic expressions proved valuable. For example, Italian articles and adjectives have to agree in number and gender with nouns, so learning a phrase as a unit by repeating it over and over cements the phrase in one's memory. For example, the English sentence *I took a long walk* translated into Italian is *ho fatto una lunga passeggiata* (*a walk* is feminine in Italian). After all the repetition, I never say *ho fatto un lungo passeggiata*, and my articulation feels automatic and fluent. Moreover, the repetition transitions the phrases to long-term memory. The range of topics introduced in Pimsleur is an additional benefit. Individuals generally relate to some conversational topics more than others, and such relevancy and personalization is important. Perhaps I remember *ho fatto una lunga passeggiata* not only because of the repetition but because I take long walks daily.

One drawback is that Pimsleur occasionally introduces antonyms together. For example, Pimsleur introduced *sotto* (below) and *sopra* (above) at the same time in the context of opening a bank account and signing documents – *fermi qui sotto* (sign here at the bottom) and *fermi qui sopra*



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(sign here at the top). I kept confusing them and had to make up a mnemonic to keep them distinct (*sotto* has a *t* while *sopra* has a *p* and *t* is “below” *p* in the alphabet). Unfortunately, I had to think of the mnemonic before I could respond, resulting in reduced automaticity. I still struggle with this now.

As of October of 2016 I am on my third pass through the four levels, and I think the Pimsleur method would work pretty well for certain individuals, such as those moving to Italy to start a new job.

Along with Pimsleur, I purchased a textbook called *Prego*, which was recommended to me by my tutor. The topics are interesting, the readings are chosen well, and it typically supplies a CD, although my used copy did not come with a CD and I now regret not buying a new book. Besides the value of listening input, a good CD offers native speaker pronunciation to the learner. *Prego* would probably be useful in a classroom context because it also requires students to frequently engage in conversation, though I, as a solo learner, now have to play both roles in one conversation! Since I am not studying Italian in a classroom, it is easy to look at a conversation practice exercise, say, “Nah, I don’t want to do that”, and move on to something else. In a classroom, I would simply do the practice as part of the class and benefit from the reinforcement. Further, I don’t receive feedback on answers to exercises in the textbook or on the accuracy of grammar or pronunciation as I would receive in the classroom.

When I entered the MA TESOL program at Hawai'i Pacific University in January of 2013, I wanted to use Italian to satisfy my foreign language requirement. This gave me added motivation to learn Italian. In the summer of the same year, I traveled to Italy for a third time with the purpose of taking an Italian language course at Scuola Il Sasso in the small hill town of Montepulciano in Tuscany. I tested into the second-lowest proficiency level (their levels are based on the Common European Framework) and spent two weeks there “immersed” in Italian. I had only just recently learned about immersion language teaching in my MA TESOL program, but I could see the benefit of only being allowed to speak Italian in class, being pushed to produce the language, working in a context, and hearing Italian in town.

I learned that immersion is relative. Montepulciano is a tourist town, and most of the shopkeepers and vendors spoke at least some English, making it easy for me to slide back into comfortable English outside the school’s walls. However, the shopkeepers all know of the language school, constantly encounter students practicing their Italian, and are very patient. Knowing this made it easier. Though it was still intimidating, it was less so than in a small village which never saw tourists and contained no English speakers. I know I would have learned more in the small village, as I would have been pushed by necessity. In hindsight, I would have benefited from living with a host family in Montepulciano rather than alone in an apartment.

I started slowly trying to speak at establishments in town using simple greetings and expressions of thanks (*buon giorno, ciao, grazie*) and progressed to ordering common items in Italian coffee shops and restaurants (*un cappuccino, per favore* – a cappuccino, please). We also went places together as students, and I could listen to more advanced students speak and try to imitate them. Listening to the townspeople speak was difficult because of their rate of speech. As any language learner knows, once you hear a word you don’t know you fixate on it and promptly lose the rest of what the speaker says. I would be lucky to catch one or two words. What a difference from practicing with a textbook when I have all the time in the world! A textbook feels safe, is within

my comfort zone, and can be closed any time I get tired or frustrated. Not so when one is forced to navigate daily life in a foreign language.

As I have proceeded through the MA TESOL program, learning more and more about second language acquisition, I have often seen myself reflected as a language learner in various theories. For example, I find that certain grammatical forms are too difficult at one point. Then, months, weeks, or even days later, they seem much easier, and I wonder why I ever saw them as challenging. I know now from my MA TESOL course readings that I was not yet ready to learn them; I had not yet reached that developmental stage in my interlanguage. Just as my course books say, my interlanguage evolves (sometimes devolves...) constantly along a continuum.

When I did my student teaching at Hawai'i Literacy in Honolulu, I saw my students struggle with English in a way reminiscent of my struggles in Italian. My Chinese students might say sentences such as **He is wearing a blue dress* (referring to a woman) or **I no go out last night* but write these sentences correctly. With less time to plan an utterance, students accessed their "old" rule (that of their native language, or L1), which was faster than accessing the "new" rule (that of English, the L2). With time to plan, such as when writing, students could access the new rule. This systematic variability dependent on time availability is also apparent in my interlanguage; I do exactly the same thing.

The major frustration to my learning is the lack of live listening and speaking practice. I can get some contrived listening practice with Pimsleur and News in Slow Italian, but it is not the same as the "real thing." Although having a tutor is great, I need daily listening and speaking practice, and neither my tutor nor I am available every day. My tutor charges \$40 per hour and lives 30 minutes away by car, resulting in a large investment of time and money. Besides the frustration, using books, websites, and CDs is, quite frankly, boring. It has been a challenge to stay motivated. For someone who really wants to learn a language but happens to be in an EFL environment, "going it alone" is not effective.

In closing, my experience learning Italian as a second language informs my teaching in many important ways. First, repetition, repetition, repetition! There's only so much that can be done by a CD or a book to make repetition fun or interesting. In contrast, often-used phrases and expressions can be revisited in a classroom using different activities to keep students motivated. The key to automaticity and fluency in a new language is repetition, especially in a variety of contexts. Second, daily language study and vocabulary building is vital. My lack of vocabulary is the major limiting factor for all four skills (my dictionary is so worn!). Third, relevancy and personalization are important. Topics have to be relevant to students, and the more personalization the better. When a teacher knows about her students she can personalize materials and activities, which greatly helps motivate students to learn. Students tend to learn and remember what they want to say.

The best method? Immersion.

Hmmm...I think I'll go teach English in Italy!

About the author:

Anne Wheelock received her MA TESOL from Hawai'i Pacific University in December 2016. After a career in pharmacy and teaching pharmacology, anatomy and chemistry, she is in transition to her new profession as a language teacher.