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Teaching mixed-ability groups at tertiary level: The case of Italian

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ABSTRACT

Teaching languages to mixed-ability groups of learners is quite common in post-secondary University courses, particularly in the case of Italian. This is due to such factors as the widespread teaching of Italian at primary and secondary level, and the very diverse degrees of exposure to Italian and/or Dialect of the background learner. In such situations it is of paramount importance that the students perceive the learning environment as responding to their linguistic needs.

This article presents a classroom-based research study of a group of post-secondary learners of Italian at the University of Sydney. It explores some major issues related to their linguistic diversity and discusses the pedagogical intervention that was put in place to respond to their needs. The article focuses upon the establishment of a positive and collaborative learning environment and the adoption of a flexible curriculum as two crucial factors that contribute to promote students' positive attitudes and to turn the composite nature of the group from an issue to an asset. Furthermore it aims to inform classroom practices of colleagues involved in similar instructional settings.

INTRODUCTION

In the Australian education system, teaching languages to groups of learners of different language abilities has so far been viewed as a concern pertaining to primary and especially secondary schools. More specifically, in the case of languages other than English (LOTEs), the debate has often concerned the co-existence within the same course of 'background' learners vs learners of Anglo-Celtic or other ethnic backgrounds, which often disregards the degree of competence in the home language of the former (cf. [Clyne et al. 1997](#)).

The issue of teaching mixed-ability groups is particularly crucial in the case of Italian for the following reasons, among others: (i) compared to other LOTEs, as a result of its multifaceted image (cf. [Lo Bianco 2001](#)) Italian is studied by learners

from a wider range of backgrounds beside Italian; (ii) as Italian migration to Australia has now reached the third generation, Italian background learners display extremely diverse degrees of exposure to Italian and/or Dialect in their home environment (cf. the typology of the “ethnic background learner” in Clyne et al. 1997: 8); and (iii) the widespread teaching of Italian in primary schools exacerbates the composite nature of classes of Italian, particularly at junior secondary level.

While teaching learners of mixed language abilities is of great concern to large numbers of Italian secondary teachers, this article aims to show how the issue also affects language teaching in post-secondary courses at tertiary level. Although learning Italian formally in the institutional context of secondary school contributes to level out some of the background differences, post-secondary learners of Italian at the University level are often very mixed in terms of language competence. This poses a number of challenges to the lecturer, who has to ensure that students coming from very different language learning experiences perceive the learning environment as responding to their linguistic needs and suitable to their varying levels of language competence. A crucial issue then is to prevent the composite nature of the groups from becoming a source of high levels of anxiety, a factor that has repeatedly been associated with learners’ negative attitudes and consequently low ability and willingness to learn (e.g. [Clément et al. 1994](#); [Horwitz et al. 1986](#); [MacIntyre & Gardner 1991a, 1991b, 1994](#); [Oxford 1999](#)).¹

This article presents a classroom-based study that focuses upon a group of post-secondary students of Italian at Sydney University who displayed a great diversity in language competence. This diversity goes beyond the distinction between Italian vs non-Italian background learners, and is found also among students of Italian background. The article explores some major issues related to the highly composite nature of this group of learners and discusses the pedagogical intervention that was put in place to respond to students’ varied needs. More specifically, the article focuses upon (i) the establishment of a positive and collaborative environment among learners and between teacher and learners; and (ii) the adoption of a flexible curriculum catering for a variety of needs and skills. As shown by the end-of-year evaluation, these elements contributed to promote students’ positive attitudes towards the learning environment, and thus to turn the composite nature of the group from an issue to an asset.

THE CONTEXT

This study was conducted within the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Sydney, with a group of first-year students attending the advanced courses.

First year advanced courses are directed at students who have either completed Higher School Certificate (HSC) Italian at the highest levels² or have equivalent language competence, as assessed by the Department. Native and quasi-native speakers of Italian are also enrolled in these courses. While their language competence would allow them to be admitted to second year, it is a policy of the Department to require that all students—with very few exceptions—complete a foundation year, in order to assess their overall academic preparation. Courses are

semester-long and the majority of students complete both semesters. They have two distinct sections: language (3 hours/week) and culture (2 hours/week).

The data presented here have been collected from a wide range of sources and are both quantitative and qualitative. The registration forms that students are required to complete within the Department give information about learners' demographic and academic characteristics and expectations about the courses. Various types of language outputs (class tests, written tasks and compositions) and observation throughout the year by the teacher-researcher provide evidence of the linguistic diversity of the group. End-of-course evaluation questionnaires and end-of-year interviews with seven students yield insight into the final outcomes of the courses and learners' attitudes towards the learning environment.

A PROFILE OF LEARNERS

The data presented in this first section of the article highlight learners' diversity in demographic and academic background, language learning experience and language competence. Two other issues emerge from this section: (i) language competence cuts across the Italian vs non-Italian background distinction; and (ii) the majority of learners show a similar type of motivation in choosing to study Italian at University.

Demographic and academic data

The two courses were attended overall by 27 students, with 21 students in each semester. For the purpose of this study, all 27 students are considered as one group.

The group is fairly uniform in some demographic and academic characteristics, such as:

- age: 93% are in the 17-19 age range;
- school attended: 78% come from private schools; and
- area of residence: 78% come from the Sydney metropolitan area, 11% from a regional town, 11% are International students.

Furthermore 74% of students are enrolled in the Arts Faculty.

On the other hand, the group presents itself as quite diverse in some factors that can impact on learners' language abilities, such as:

- ethnic background: 48% of students are of Italian background, 41% Anglo-Celtic, 11% of other origin; and
- University Admission Index (UAI): the majority of learners have fairly high scores, with 59% above 90, but a small minority have fairly low scores (65, 71).

Table 1 shows the demographic and academic data about each student in both courses.

Table 1: Learners' demographic and academic characteristics

Student	Back-ground	UAI	Year, Fac & Degree type
1M	Anglo-C	93	Economics
2F	Italian	79	Arts
3F	Italian	93	Social Work
4F	Sth Amer	Int'l stud	Arts
5M	Anglo-C	100	Arts/Commerce
6F	Italian	86	Arts
7M	Anglo-C	98	Arts
8F	Anglo-C	97	Arts
9M	Anglo-C	91	Arts
10F	Italian	84	Arts
11F	Italian	94	Arts
12F	Anglo-C	95	Arts
13M	Italian	97	Engineering
14F	Anglo-C	94	Arts
15F	Italian	91	Arts/Science
16F	Italian	84	Educ
17F	Italian	96	Science
18F	Italian	71	Arts
19F	Italian	93	Arts/Economics
20M	Italian	94	Arts/Education
21F	Anglo-C	94	Arts
22M	Anglo-C	65	Arts
23M	Sth Amer	Int stud	Economics
24F	Anglo-C	96	Arts/Sc
25F	Anglo-C	84	Arts
26F	French	Int'l stud	--

27F	Italian	80	Education
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Language learning experience

A major feature characterising this group of learners is the diverse ways in which they have learnt Italian. A first element contributing to this diversity is represented by the different courses of Italian that students attended at school (cf. Table 2): 37% of students have completed HSC Italian at 3 Unit level, 44% at 2 Unit level, 18% have attended other courses (e.g. in Italy or in other countries). Two other major variables that need to be considered are (i) language spoken at home, and (ii) visits to Italy. All three variables are summarised in Table 2, together with students' ethnic background.

Table 2: Learners' language learning experience

Student	Back ground	Italian course	Lg at home	Visits to Italy
1M	Anglo-C	3U	English	1 (6 wks)
2F	Italian	3U	Italian	2 visits as a child
3F	Italian	3U	Italian & Sicilian	1 (2 yrs)
4F	Sth Amer	--	Spanish	None recently
5M	Anglo-C	3U	English	2 (5 wks /4 wk course)
6F	Italian	2U	Sicilian	1 (2 wks)
7M	Anglo-C	2U	English	1 (3 mths)
8F	Anglo-C	2U	English	1 (4 wk course)
9M	Anglo-C	3U	English	None
10F	Italian	2U	Some Calabrian	1 (4 wks)
11F	Italian	3U	Neapolitan	None
12F	Anglo-C	2U	English	1 (2 mths)
13M	Italian	--	Sicilian	1 (6 wks)
14F	Anglo-C	2U	English	1 (4 wk course)
15F	Italian	2U	--	1 (4 wks)
16F	Italian	2U	Sicilian	Lived as a child
17F	Italian	3U	Italian & Sicilian	3 (up to 3 mths)
18F	Italian	2U	--	1 (4 wks)
19F	Italian	3U	Italian & Calabrian	None

20M	Italian	3U	Italian	Lived as a child; goes regularly
21F	Anglo-C	2U	English & Spanish	1 (6 wks)
22M	Anglo-C	2U	English	1-2 (not stated)
23M	Sth Amer	--	Spanish	2 (1 wk each)
24F	Anglo-C	2U	English	None
25F	Anglo-C	2UZ	English	1 (3 mths)
26F	French	Fr Bac	French	Regular visits
27F	Italian	3 U	Italian & Calabrian	None

Table 2 shows very clearly that the home language is a major element of diversity among learners. While all Anglo-Celtic students except one (21F) use only English, learners of Italian background are widely exposed to Italian and/or Dialect at home.³ However, the diversity exists also within the Italian group: 2 students declare Italian as their home language, 4 Italian and Dialect, 5 Dialect only, and 2 don't state any language.

With regard to visits to Italy, for both Italian and Anglo-Celtic students the situation varies considerably, as highlighted in Tables 3 and 4 (the 3 International students are not included).

Table 3: Visits to Italy by Italian background learners

Lived in Italy & goes regularly	1
Lived in Italy (2 yrs) recently	1
Lived in Italy as a child	2
3 visits (up to 3 months) recently	1
1 visit (2-5 weeks) recently	5
Never been to Italy	3

Table 4: Visits to Italy by Anglo-Celtic learners

	No. of students (11)
1 visit (1-3 months)	6
Attended 1-month language course	3
Never been to Italy	2

It is clear from these tables that contact with Italy is quite different for the two groups of learners in qualitative and quantitative terms. First, although overall Italian background learners have spent more time in Italy, proportionally more Anglo-Celtic students have been to Italy. Second, no Italian student has attended language courses in Italy (apart from those few who lived and attended school there). Third, some Italian background learners who went to Italy as children haven't been there recently.

Two other factors that can be part of students' language learning experiences are a third language that they may have studied, and the language teaching approach adopted in their secondary school. In this group only 9 students (33.3%) have studied another language, and 3 of these are the International students. With regard to the teaching approach, no question is asked in the registration form. Nonetheless informal discussions in class made it clear that the teaching approach varies substantially from school to school, particularly with regard to the use of Italian in class.

This great diversity in language learning experience results in a very wide range of linguistic abilities, as shown in the Section below.

Language proficiency and personal variables

Learners' language proficiency at the beginning of the course has been assessed using the framework developed by [Wylie and Ingram](#) (1995) for English as a Second Language. Each learner is given a proficiency score for the four language abilities. For the purpose of this study, I have also added a score for grammatical competence. Scores have been assigned on the basis of students' results in various entry tests and oral/aural activities done in class at the beginning of the course. Although useful in indicating the wide range of learners' linguistic abilities, these scores need to be considered with caution given that the proficiency scale was not devised especially for the particular language situation under study.

In Table 5, proficiency scores are considered in relation to some of the factors discussed above, namely, learners' background, course attended at school, language spoken at home and visits to Italy, in order to identify a possible relationship between personal variables and language levels.

Table 5: Learners' language proficiency and language learning experience

Stud	Listen.	Speak.	Read.	Writ.	Gramm.	Back ground	Italian course	Lg at home	Visits to Italy
1M	2+/3	3	3	2+/3	3+	Anglo- C	3U	English	1 (6 wks)
2F	3	2	2+	2	2	Italian	3U	Italian	2 visits as a child
3F	4+	4+	3+	3+/4	3+/4	Italian	3U	Italian & Sicilian	1 (2 yrs)
4F	4	2+	3+	2+/3	3	Sth Amer	--	Spanish	None recently
5M	2+/3	3	3	2+	3	Anglo- C	3U	English	2 (5 wks/4 wk course)

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6F	3	2	3	2	2+	Italian	2U	Some Sicilian	1 (2 wks)
7M	4	4	3+	4	4	Anglo- C	2U	English	1 (3 mths)
8F	2/2+	1+	2+/3	2+	3	Anglo- C	2U	English	1 (4 wk course)
9M	1/1+	1+	3	2	3	Anglo- C	3U	English	None
10F	2+	1+	2+	1+/2	1+/2	Italian	2U	Some Calabrian	1 (4 wks)
11F	3+	3	2+/3	2	2+	Italian	3U	Neapolitan	None
12F	2	1+	2+	2	2+	Anglo- C	2U	English	1 (2 mths)
13M	3+	2	2+	2	1+/2	Italian	--	Sicilian	1 (6 wks)
14F	2/2+	1+/2	2+	2+/3	3+	Anglo- C	2U	English	1 (4 wk course)
15F	1/1+	1	1+/2	1/1+	1+	Italian	2U	English	1 (4 wks)
16F	3+	3	3	2+/3	2+	Italian	2U	Sicilian	Lived as a child
17F	3+	3+	3+	3	3+	Italian	3U	Italian & Sicilian	3 (up to 3 mths)
18F	2	2	2	1/1+	1+/2	Italian	2U	English	1 (4 wks)
19F	3+	3	3+	2+/3	3	Italian	3U	Italian & Calabrian	None
20M	5	5	4+	4+	4+	Italian	3U	Italian	Lived as a child & goes regularly
1+11+11Anglo- C2U English1-2 (not stated)21F	3	1+/2	2/2+	1+/2	2/1+	Anglo- C	2U	Engl & Spanish	1 (6 wks)22M
23M	4	3+	3+	2+/3	3	Sth Amer	--	Spanish	2 (1 wk each)
24F	3	2+	3	3	3+	Anglo- C	2U	English	None
25F	1+/2	1+	1+/2	1/1+	1+/2	Anglo- C	2UZ	English	1 (3 mths)
26F	4+	4	4	4/4+	5	French	Fr Bac	French	Regular visits
27F	3	2+	2+	2+	2	Italian	3 U	Italian & Calabrian	None

A first observation regarding Table 5 is that proficiency scores confirm a very wide range of language abilities across learners, as shown e.g. by the scores of 3F vs the scores of 15F or 22M. (Cf. also the Appendix with excerpts of students' compositions that illustrate the varying linguistic competence across learners).

The scores in Table 5 also show that individual learners can display high discrepancies in proficiency levels across language abilities and grammatical competence. This is clearly the case e.g. with 9M, who has low aural/oral abilities but good reading and grammatical skills, or, conversely, with 13M, with good aural/oral skills but low grammatical competence. However, discrepancy among the various abilities tend to decrease at the higher proficiency levels, as in the case of e.g. 7M or 20M.

With regard to the relationship with the language learning variables, Table 5 shows that, on the whole, Italian students seem to be more “functionally oriented”, and Anglo-Celtic students more “structurally oriented” (cf. Clyne et al. 1997: 60), with few exceptions (e.g. 21F). In fact, Italian background students display higher scores for aural/oral abilities (e.g. 3F, 11F, 19F, 20M) but also the lowest scores for grammatical competence (e.g. 10F, 13M, 15F, 18F). On the contrary, Anglo-Celtic students display high scores for grammar (e.g. 1M, 5M, 7M), but low scores particularly in speaking (e.g. 8F, 9M, 22M, 25F).

However, other factors can intervene to modify this correspondence between ethnic background and orientation towards language learning. For example, in the case of 1M, 5M and 7M of Anglo-Celtic background, the combined effect of visits to Italy and language instruction contribute to high proficiency levels across all language abilities. Conversely, students of Italian background without exposure to Italian and/or Dialect at home and little contact with Italy display low proficiency levels in most language abilities, as in the case of 15F and 18F.

For the Italian background students, the highest levels of proficiency are reached when exposure to Italian and Dialect at home is coupled with recent/frequent/long visits to Italy, as in the case of 3F and 17F. However, in the absence of contact with Italy, use of Italian and Dialect at home coupled with instruction at the highest level (3U) can help the students to reach good proficiency levels in all abilities, as in the case of 19F. Also, exposure to Dialect at home without instruction can be a good predictor of proficiency especially in aural skills, as in the case of 13M.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the wide range of linguistic abilities existing in the group may become a major source of anxiety. In particular, it may threaten the weaker learners in their ‘self-esteem’ and ‘self-confidence’ (cf. Allright and Bailey 1991: 178; Clément et al. 1994; [Dörnyei](#) 2001: 131). More importantly, it may discourage them from participating actively in class and from taking ‘risks’, thus effectively reducing their opportunities to improve language learning.

Motivation and expectations

In the registration forms completed at the beginning of the course, students were asked to state their reasons for choosing to study Italian at the University and their expectations from the course (Table 6).

Table 6: Learners’ motivation and linguistic expectations from the course

Student	Back	Reasons for studying Italian	Expectations from the course

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	ground		
1M	Anglo-C	Nice country	Gain confidence in oral skills
2F	Italian	Italian background	Improve writing skills
3F	Italian	Enjoys every aspect of It lg & culture	Learn more abt It grammar & culture
4F	Sth Amer	Born in Italy, wants to learn	Improve lg skills in general
5M	Anglo-C	Like the lg, culture, people	Improve overall knowledge
6F	Italian	Improve, particularly speaking skills	Improve, particularly speaking skills
7M	Anglo-C	Improve Italian	Improve written & spoken It, knowl of It hist & cult
8F	Anglo-C	Use it in future career & travel	Ab to hold a conversation & read a newspaper
9M	Anglo-C	--	Ab to take It to much higher level
10F	Italian	For own self & family background	To improve, more confident in speaking
11F	Italian	It seems an interesting course	To become fluent & confident
12F	Anglo-C	Interest	Ab to communicate at a more sophisticated level (grammar, vocab)
13M	Italian	Learn proper Italian better	Learn to speak, underst & write Italian better
14F	Anglo-C	Beautiful language & country	Speak fluently & confidently
15F	Italian	Enjoys it & likes learning lgs	To revise & bulk out knowledge of lg & culture
16F	Italian	To improve	More confidence with speaking & grammar
17F	Italian	To improve	To improve
18F	Italian	Family background	Learn lg well & confid in speak & writ
19F	Italian	Family background, interest in lg & culture	Further knowledge of It lg & culture
20M	Italian	Learn more about lit & lg	Improve grammar & speaking skills
21F	Anglo-C	Likes the lg & culture	Improve writ, grammar, listen & speak
22M	Anglo-C	To learn	Further education in the lg
23M	Sth Amer	--	--
24F	Anglo-C	Loves foreign lgs	Basta 'divertimento?'
25F	Anglo-C	Love of language & country	Ab to speak & write more fluently

26F	French	--	--
27F	Italian	Italian origin	Improve fluency

With regard to reasons for studying Italian, it is interesting to notice that learners' replies indicate that type of motivation is fairly similar throughout the group. The 24 answers (3 students didn't give a reason) can be grouped into three main subsets, according to the words most frequently used by the students. In the first subset, 46% of the students express the desire to continue to improve in the language or interest in Italian as a subject. The key words in their answers are 'interest', 'learn' or 'improve'. In the second subset, 29% of students state that they love the language, the country or the people, using keywords such as 'love', 'like' and 'enjoy'. In the third subset, 21% students, all of Italian background, state that they want to study Italian because of their family background and/or origins. (In the other subsets the responses do not show a correspondence to ethnic background). Finally, one student mentions career prospects.

Overall then, students' answers express 'intrinsic' rather than 'extrinsic' motivation (cf. [Douglas Brown](#) 1994: 38, quoting [Deci](#) [1975]). For the students in the first subset, the intrinsic reward is of a cognitive type, while the second subset displays more affective reasons towards the target language and culture. In so far as they express 'family values', the third subset also demonstrates "an intrinsically oriented direction" (Douglas Brown 1994: 40-41). Thus, extrinsic motivation as such (e.g. career prospects) is practically absent in this group.

This general response towards intrinsic motivation, both of the cognitive and socio-cultural type, is obviously related to the fact that these learners have already studied the language for a number of years. It also indicates a considerable difference from the motivation expressed by other language learners at tertiary level, particularly beginners, who more frequently state extrinsic reasons for studying languages (e.g. [Strambi](#) 2001).

As to the expectations from the course, the majority of students (52%) state that they expect a global improvement in language proficiency. Whenever they refer to particular abilities, speaking is the one most frequently mentioned (by 60% of students), irrespective of learners' background. The other ability mentioned is writing, but by considerably fewer students (24%). On the other hand, listening and reading are hardly mentioned, nor is grammar (20%). Two observations are in order here. First, from the learners' perspective, speaking is the real indicator of competence in a second language. Second, the very marginal role given to grammar is surprising, if we consider that post-secondary language students display better metalinguistics skills compared to other University students, as a result of previous language studies (cf. [Davies](#) et al. 1997).

THE PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION

Given the composite nature of this group of learners, a major challenge is to provide a learning environment that is (i) able to reduce anxiety and foster self-esteem

among all learners, and (ii) sufficiently flexible to cater for the variety of learners' interests and ability levels.

Setting up a positive and collaborative environment

Among the environmental conditions considered relevant to promote language learning, one that is of paramount importance—particularly in a mixed-ability context—is the establishment of a friendly, non threatening and non competitive environment, where learners are at ease, feel safe to 'take the risk' to participate, and are encouraged to focus on their own progress rather than constantly measuring themselves with the others. A collaborative environment can reduce anxiety, foster self-esteem and encourage positive attitudes towards the learning environment and learner involvement (cf. Clément et al. 1994, [Dörnyei](#) 1994, 2001). In other words, it can help learners become a “cohesive and mature group” ([Dörnyei & Murphey](#) 2003: 59-60).

This section discusses some of the strategies that were successful in establishing such a positive environment, both according to students' opinions—as stated in the interviews—and my own observation throughout the courses. The strategies concern the relationships between learners as well as the relationship between learners and teacher.

Breaking out of the University isolation

Several studies acknowledge that a major problem faced by first-year University students is their sense of isolation due to lack of friends, the size of the institution and more generally the dramatic change from the familiar context of the high school (e.g. [Beasley & Pearson](#) 1999). While more and more tertiary institutions are now putting in place specific initiatives to address this issue (cf. [Peat, Dalziel & Grant](#) 2001, [Jarkey](#) in press), very little was available in the Faculty of Arts when these students attended. Therefore, from the very first lesson a major effort was made to encourage friendship among the students with the double purpose of (i) creating a supportive environment within the course; and (ii) providing a positive experience within the broader university context.

Different strategies were used to achieve this aim. Students were told explicitly about the necessity to break the initial isolation on campus and make friends, if they wanted to succeed; in the first lessons several activities were set up where students were asked to form groups and talk about themselves; they were encouraged to prepare assessment tasks in groups (e.g. the oral presentation, see below); and also to socialise outside class (cf. the “affective activities” in [Richards & Lockhart](#) 1994: 165). These encouragements were repeated throughout several lessons, and students' relationship ‘monitored’ throughout the course. Within 2-3 weeks it was obvious that every student had made at least one friend in the class. Some factors that assisted were (i) the small number of students in the group; (ii) the fact that the group met 5 hours a week, 4 of which in relatively small tutorial groups; and (iii) the break during the 2 hour lesson, which helped students socialise.

Use of cooperative learning

In a multilevel context cooperative language learning seems particularly appropriate given that (i) it reduces levels of anxiety; (ii) it contributes to create a 'community of learners' as students collaborate towards common goals; and (iii) it is intrinsically motivating, as it promotes focus on learning and self-improvement by giving students the possibility of making choices in the activities in which they are involved (Douglas Brown 1994: 44).

In these courses, pair and group work was used extensively from the very beginning. Although cooperative learning may not suit all learners and/or learning situations (cf. [Dörnyei](#) 1997), in this group even the students who came from rather individually focused learning environments seemed to adjust rather easily to the cooperative work mode. In an evaluation done in Week 4, 35% of students specifically mentioned working in group as one of the best things of the course. Students interviewed at the end of the year indicated that group work continued outside the classroom, for example, with students meeting to revise and prepare for class tests. They also specifically commented on the following benefits of cooperative learning in this setting: (i) from an academic and cognitive perspective, more advanced learners provided valuable input and feedback to less proficient speakers, as “it was good to have one better person—but not over the top—in the group with two that are not so good”; (ii) from an interpersonal point of view, it helped make new friends “because the teacher tried to rotate the groups so that everybody became friends”, or because it reinforced strong bonds of friendship that continued outside the classroom; (iii) from an affective perspective, it contributed to a non-competitive environment, which reduced anxiety, fostered positive attitudes and sustained motivation; and (iv) from a broader social point of view, it provided opportunities to develop social skills that are needed in work situations.

Favouring intercultural exchanges

Being in a class of Italian with many people of Italian origin was a novelty for some students, which could be at once fascinating and threatening. However, knowledge of Italy was not a prerogative of Italian background students, as shown by the data above on visits to Italy. Furthermore, students of Italian origin had their own Italo-Australian culture, which to an extent is different from the culture of contemporary Italy.

In order to favour intercultural exchanges among students of Italian and non-Italian backgrounds (cf. [Crozet & Liddicoat](#) 1997), the course material that was chosen had strong cultural content and explored aspects of Italian—as well as Italo-Australian—culture, society and history. The course followed to an extent the principles of ‘content learning’ (Douglas Brown 1994: 82) and the target language was used as a medium to convey information that was of interest and relevance to the students, rather than being solely an object of study. This also offered the more advanced students the opportunity to be exposed to fairly challenging linguistic materials. From the cultural point of view, this material stimulated multiple fruitful exchanges: non-Italian students learnt about Italians in Australia and in Italy; Italian and non-Italian students with extensive contacts with Italy learnt about Italo-Australian culture; and Italo-Australian students learnt about differences between their

own background and Italy itself. This is how a non-Italian student interviewed at the end of the course summarised his experience: "... seeing some of these Italian faces was a bit intimidating...but it was more of a challenge, I really liked it, getting to talk to them about their culture, I loved this cultural interaction."

Presenting the teacher as a 'mediator'

In dealing with mixed-ability groups, a major task for the teacher is to facilitate the relationship among learners by taking on the role of a linguistic mediator.

Given the different aural/oral abilities of this group of learners, one area where mediation is required is the use of Italian as the language of instruction. While there is the need to establish Italian as the main language of interaction, it is essential not to discourage those students who have had very limited exposure to it. For them, following a lesson entirely conducted in Italian and speaking in Italian in front of the class can be quite daunting. Therefore, although Italian is used constantly as the language of instruction, in order to ensure comprehension my speech is particularly rich in the kinds of modifications that have been identified in the literature as facilitating comprehension in native-non native speaker exchanges (cf. [Chaudron 1988](#)), e.g. paraphrasing, reformulations and checks for comprehension. Furthermore, given the high levels of anxiety that oral production can cause, different expectations are set for different students: while the more fluent speakers are expected to use Italian consistently, others are encouraged to use it initially only in a pair or group situation and only gradually in front of the whole group.

In the evaluation conducted in Week 4, four students referred to the continuous use of Italian in class as an element that they particularly liked about the course and two explicitly referred to the fact that their listening skills were improving. For one student, the best thing about the course was "sentire all'italiano per due ore senza un parole dell'inglese" (*sic*) ('to listen to Italian for two hours without a word of English'). In the final questionnaire, according to one student, "Having the whole course in Italian was fantastic; it gave me a lot of confidence, before I thought that listening was not one of my strong points".

Other strategies of linguistic mediation relate to the image that the teacher projects of herself. I often present myself as a language learner and refer to my experience as a (longtime) user of English as a second language, who still struggles with the complexities of the English language. This has the purpose of making learners reflect upon their own learning process and of increasing their confidence in their abilities by showing them that (i) language learning—and learning more generally—is a life-long enterprise; and (ii) Italians learning English face as many difficulties as students do in learning Italian. With specific regard to the Italian background students who have more exposure to Dialect than Italian, I attempt to increase their confidence by stressing knowledge of my Dialect—and my pride in it—, and by adopting a contrastive approach whereby they can build on their Dialect knowledge to improve their Italian.

Adopting a flexible curriculum

The overall approach to this course can be considered communicative according to the five principles set by [Nunan](#) (1991). In line with his principles, the course (i) gradually takes learners to communicate in Italian; (ii) uses authentic texts; and (iii) provides opportunities for learners to focus on their learning process. Furthermore, the oral presentation (see below) enhances learners' personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning (Nunan's fourth principle); and language learning is linked to language activation outside the classroom, by frequently bringing to students' attention the several opportunities to practise Italian offered by the rich Italian-speaking context of Sydney (Nunan's fifth principle).

Within this overall framework, the challenge is to provide a learning environment that is sufficiently flexible to cater for the learners' different needs and abilities, while ensuring that all students have the necessary skills to select learning opportunities that maximise their potential. Therefore, structured and flexible aspects of the curriculum need to be well balanced, as guidance is needed on the path to autonomy, particularly in the case of first-year students who are not yet used to taking control of their own learning. In the curriculum of these courses of Italian elements of flexibility can be found in the general structure of the program, in some of its contents and in the assessment criteria.

From the very beginning students were given the instruments to plan their work for the semester in the form of detailed handouts with unit-by-unit program of the course, deadlines for longer pieces of work and homework requirements. In the second semester course an email was also sent to the group at the end of each lesson summarising its contents and outlining the work for the following week. In this way, students have the possibility to be in control of their own learning. For first-year students this is often a major challenge, as this more flexible system marks a drastic change from the rigid high school routine where teachers set work and monitor performance on a daily basis. In the end-of-year evaluation questionnaires, several students implicitly admitted the difficulty of taking on responsibility for their own learning and acknowledged the progress made in their planning from first to second semester.

With regard to the curriculum, learners were offered some control over parts of its contents. In particular students had total control for the oral presentation, an assessment component that consists of a talk in Italian to present to the class. The choice of both the general organisation of this task (e.g. individual or in group) and of its specific topic was left entirely to the students. Also, assessment guidelines for this task were developed together with the class in the first few lessons, thus increasing the sense of 'ownership' that students felt towards this component of the course.

Although some students admitted that the presentation generated some anxiety, overall it was quite a successful component, according to end-of-year evaluation questionnaires. The key elements for its success were (i) the collaborative mode that the majority of students decided to adopt, which helped both linguistically and affectively; and (ii) the topics chosen, as many groups talked about personal interests, therefore giving the classmates and myself the opportunity to find out more about the

mix of personalities that made up the group. Thus, the oral presentation contributed greatly to sustain motivation in the course.

Flexibility was used also in the assessment system adopted for the course. In assessing some components of the course (e.g. the speaking ability in the oral presentation), the different starting levels of competence are taken into account, so that what is rewarded is not just the ultimate level of achievement but also learners' effort and progress. Furthermore, the assessment includes a balanced breakdown of aural/oral and written components and grammatical competence, so as not to disadvantage students coming from different learning experiences. Overall, great importance is placed on the effort shown by learners in taking control of their learning and improving in their weaker areas. In this way, students are encouraged to focus on their own process of learning rather than to measure their performance against more competent students in the group. This has the effect of increasing learners' confidence and minimising their anxiety, as shown in the following excerpt from the end-of-year interviews:

I was very nervous about the oral presentation, as I thought that it was geared more for native speakers. Then I realised that this would be taken into account if you did your best and you spoke all in Italian. And what counted was more that you have prepared your speech and if you are not reading your speech and you have checked the words, that's more than being able to speak perfectly because I can't I still can't roll my rs.

Final evaluation and conclusion

What do students' final evaluation tell us about the courses? How did they perceive the learning environment and the curriculum in relation to their learning process? How motivated were they at the end of the year to continue learning Italian? Table 7 summarises the replies to the end-of-year questionnaire, which was filled by 81% of the students.

Table 7: Results of end of year questionnaires

Stud interaction	Class atmosphere	Expectations	Ling needs	Things learnt	Will continue
helped	jovial non competitive	yes	yes	grammar tenses vocab cult/his	yes
helped	good	yes	not much	past tenses subjunctive	yes
strong bonds	jovial enjoyed	yes	yes	forms of grammar	yes
Groupwork good	good	yes	yes	grammar	can't
good participation	fun type atmosph	yes	yes	grammar articles	yes
helped	good comfortable	yes	yes	grammar culture	probably
helped	bit too strict	yes	not much	fixed up some errors	yes

helped	helped	yes	yes	new tenses	yes
helped	helped	yes	yes	verbs	probably
should be more use of It	Students not serious enough	yes	yes	writing	yes
helped	good	yes	yes	tenses vocab	yes
friendly but some people talk too much	helped	yes	yes	grammar film	
		yes			
		yes			
		yes			
		yes			
		--		grammar	probably

Overall, students' perceptions of the course were quite positive. With regard to the learning environment, most students (70%) agreed that student interactions helped their learning. They liked the general class atmosphere, which they found "jovial", "good", and thought that it supported their learning. As one student said during the interview:

No one didn't like each other, nothing like that, and no one really cared if you weren't really answering questions well, I don't think but at the same time it was quite nerve racking to talk in front of everybody especially since there were some people that knew exactly what they were talking about and didn't even have to think about it ... it was good everyone pretty much helped each other over the year and my written results gave me confidence to speak.

However, for a small number of students the atmosphere by the end had become even 'too' friendly, to the point of sometimes hindering the work. My own observation confirms these comments, in that occasionally a few students tended to talk too much and dominate the class. Upon reflection, this calls for some adjustments to the overall approach, where a friendly and supportive atmosphere needs to be balanced with more control over classroom dynamics, for example through better structuring of pair and group work.

With regard to the curriculum, it seems that the diversity of abilities—both in the top and in the lower part of the linguistic continuum—has been catered for successfully, as all students except one believed that the course responded to their expectations and the majority (82%) agreed that it responded to their linguistic needs. Furthermore, students asserted that they learnt "a lot" (41%), "enough or a lot" (12%), or "enough" (41%). Some of those who wrote "enough" added that they could have

worked more. Finally, the majority of respondents (71%) stated with certainty that they intend to continue studying Italian at the University.

Looking more closely at students' perceptions (Table 7), we note that, although the course includes a wide range of activities targeting all language abilities, the majority of students (75%) refer to "grammar", "tenses" or "verbs" as to what they have learnt. This perception of the predominance of grammar on the one hand doesn't account for the amount of time spent on other abilities, in particular reading or writing; on the other, it appears to contradict students' replies regarding linguistic expectations at the beginning (Table 6) and at the end of the course (Table 7). While it could be argued that the course raised students' awareness regarding the role of grammar in language learning, nonetheless this perception calls for more effort on my part in presenting grammar more as a means, e.g. towards improving reading ability.

To conclude, it appears that the approach chosen was quite successful in a mixed-ability setting, in that it catered for the diverse linguistic abilities of the students and sustained their motivation. In spite of the limited nature of the data, this study confirms the importance of creating a supportive environment conducive to language learning, particularly in the case of composite groups of learners, as amply maintained in the literature. It also highlights the need for flexibility in both the curriculum and the assessment in order to provide learning opportunities that maximise the potential of all students. At the same time, it demonstrates the need to balance flexibility with a degree of teacher's control as a way towards developing learners' autonomy, particularly in the case of first-year University students.

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NOTES

1 In this study I refer to the ‘debilitative’—rather than ‘facilitative’—kind of anxiety (cf. [Allwright & Bailey](#) 1991: 172), indicating a stressful situation for the learners, which impairs their ability to learn.

2 At the time of this study, in NSW students could take the following courses of HSC Italian: 2UZ (now called ‘Beginners’), with 2 years of study in the last two years of secondary school; 2Units (now called ‘Continuers’) and 3Units (now called ‘Extension’) for students who studied Italian throughout the entire secondary school. Students taking 3Unit Italian generally completed about one third more hours of tuition than 2Unit students.

3 In the Italian context Dialects are not social or geographical varieties of the national language but separate languages.

APPENDIX

Excerpts from students' compositions

(1)

L'Italia è un paese molto affascinante, ci sono molto posti bellissime da vedere. Per i discendenti degli emigrati questi posti hanno anche legami familiare. Queste discendenti capace vogliono conoscere la madrepatria di suoi genitori e nonni. Hanno la possibilità di conoscere dove sono cresciuti, dove abitavano, dove andavano a scuola, dove lavoravano e anche dove giocavano da bambini. Ci sono tanti aspetti che possono attirare le discendenti, l'Italia è un paese favoloso.

(2)

Gentile sig. Preside,

Prendo posizione alla sua iniziativa. Sono d'accordo che le donne non devono andare a scuola vestite da un modo che mostrano troppo. La scuola è un posto che i studenti devono insegnarsi non un posto che si indossano minigonne.

(3)

Cara Signora,

In una situazione come quella che affronta Lei, farei un paio di "esamini" per pulire la mente. E' facilissimo diventare confuso pensando a una decisione così grande.

(4)

Nonostante l'aumento della disoccupazione che continua tuttora e la fragilità della sua economia, l'Italia è divenuta una meta agognata. Non sono soli i discendenti degli italiani che cercano di acquistare la cittadinanza italiana. Stranieri che non sono di origine italiana per niente vanno in Italia in cerca di una vita migliore.

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