

# An Approach of Familiarizing Foreign Students with Italian Language and Culture

Pirolava Zerrarova

Vysoka Skola Ekonomická v  
Praze, Prague, Czech Republic  
E-mail: [z.piroslava-cr@outlook.com](mailto:z.piroslava-cr@outlook.com)

## Abstract

*The teaching of a foreign language comprises of a teacher introducing the students to a number of complex linguistic and didactic notions. Teaching methods vary not only from school to school, but from teacher to teacher. This work aims to outline a method of teaching Italian as a foreign language to two sets of college students of levels beginner and upper- intermediate through the application of games. Besides the basics of morphology, syntax and vocabulary, the student is introduced to the Italian "world" and all its specifics. Art, culture and the Italian way of life are to be expanded upon through the median of games, videos, literature or written articles.*

**Keywords:** education, second language, methodology, games.

## Introduction

Students who want to learn Italian and any other foreign language in general, may view learning from linguistic, morphologic and grammatical points of view. Teachers, however, know that it is not just a matter of such rules of vocabulary and grammar. A teacher must analyze the methods, approach and techniques involved in language teaching and question the exact meaning of knowing a language, knowing Italian as a cultural and linguistic whole after defining the two

main objectives: communicative competence and expertise in meta-communication. To become more than competent in a second language, the student needs various examples of model parts of speech and language such as can be found for example in conversations and films. (Bettoni, 2005, p.22).

Language is part of a culture, meaning that it therefore belongs within particular nations that speak similarly, possess shared customs and behavioral, religious and moral norms. "Culture is everything that surrounds us and how we live; culture unites a certain group of people and distinguishes them from others<sup>2</sup>. Culture identifies itself... with a wide variety of artefacts, learned behavioural patterns, and symbols which, in the course of human evolution, have grown into 'heavenly wings' that allow us to penetrate into realms that remain closed to other species of animals."(Soukup, 2005, p.13). So the teaching of a foreign language should include topics that somewhat comprise the varying aspects of a country or a nation: its language, history, geography, political system, economic and social culture, art (cinema, painting and design, literature, sculpture, music) and the everyday way of life. All this presents a set of inputs that allow students to orientate themselves in situational and sociolinguistic contexts (Bettoni, 2005, p.23). This article is dedicated to the teaching of Italian as a foreign language to beginners. The students' behaviour is governed by three elements: duty, need and enjoyment (Balboni, 2002, p.38). The duty involves the short-term memory and its capacity for retaining information. The need is related to reason and consciousness but has an inherent limit: when the students gain the impression that their need is satisfied, the impulse to continue studying is lost. The pleasure is however the most important element because it involves the right, and only part of the left, hemisphere of the brain which produces a powerful drive. We should base teaching on pleasure in order to satisfy the expectations of the student and their need to learn (Balboni, 2002, p.38).

### Level A0 - A1

According to European language levels - Self Assessment Grid, the level reached should be the following:

	Listening	Reading	Spoken interaction	Spoken production	Writing
--	-----------	---------	--------------------	-------------------	---------

A1	I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and my immediate surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posterior in catalogues.	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repertoire phrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and the people I know.	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.
----	---	---	--	--	---

Source: <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/resources/european-language-levels-cefr>

With the aid of the Italian Language Manual (Pospíšilová-Ferrarová-Ferrarová, 2008 p.iii) students learn the basics of Italian: the verbs to be, to have, first, second and third conjugations, irregular, modal and reflexive verbs, tonic and atonic personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and the rules of prepositions and adverbs. The vocabulary is adapted towards the themes of leisure, family and general descriptions of people and situations in order to be able to converse easily with a native speaker

### **Geography, history, politics and culture**

A teacher brings a geopolitical map and asks students which cities, regions or mountain ranges they may know. From this meager knowledge, the teacher goes on to explain how Italy is divided into its respective regions and their capitals. He then presents the most important Italian cities from various perspectives: political (Rome), economic (Milan), cultural (Venice and Florence) or population density (Naples). The history of the Italian state is therefore related in Italian through brief passages to a foreign audience. In so doing, it clearly illustrates the point that Italy passed from monarchy to republic after World War II and indicates what the parliamentary institutions of the Republic are (Parliament, Government, President of the Republic).

Culture is another issue that we face during a semester. Hugely significant figures in literature such as Dante, Petrarch and Machiavelli, as well as painters (Michelangelo, Caravaggio) musicians (Verdi, Puccini) and sculptors (Cernini, Bellini) may be cited. Best known to university students of Italian cinemas are directors like Federico Fellini, Sergio Leone or Roberto Benigni.

In order to bring the Italian world closer to the student, a teacher recommends reading a book by a writer of contemporary Italian. The book is written in the students’ native language and at the end of the course they are required to write a summary of the book rather than just a comment, and typically they include whether they enjoyed the novel or not and why. It’s important that the writer is contemporary, even living, because the style of writing and thought and the situations arising are of those today. The world of literature is simplified, fun and interesting from an intercultural perspective.

Grammatical and cultural ideas are accompanied by a series of games that encourage student interaction and communication.

**Role-plays:**

Greetings, introductions, and the basic gist of a conversation

**Games:**

*Who Am I?*

One student thinks of a famous person from the world of theatre, sport or film (possibly Italian). The others ask questions but the student can only answer *yes* or *no*. The winner is the first person to guess correctly.

*Italian names of people, animals, objects and cities*

One student begins to recite the alphabet in almost inaudible voice, a class member then says when to stop and that current letter is the one used to list the following:

Names of people, objects, cities, colors, celebrities, animals, fruit etc.

On a basic level, the game is simplified by writing names of people, objects, geographical locations (physical or political), adjectives, flora-fauna and Italian celebrities, the student gets 10 points for each such item that is valid in Italian, whereas only 5 points for an item written in the student’s mother tongue. For example, if an English student writes down the name of the city of Milano as Milan, then 5 points are obtained.

Name	Object	Geographical	Adjective	Famous Person
Monica	mela	Milano	mitico	Mastroianni

***Hangman***

A student is invited to the front of the class, thinks up a sentence and then puts dashes ( ) on the board each one representing the sentence’s respective letters. The other students then take turns calling out parts of the alphabet in Italian thus trying to fill in the missing gaps. If a called-out letter is not part of the original sentence, the design of a hanged man is drawn part by part. The

student who guesses the sentence before the design is complete wins the game or the class loses if the man on the board is finally hanged.

### ***Chinese whispers or broken telephone***

A student whispers a sentence in Italian into the ear of an adjacent classmate, and it continues in this manner as the sentence is passed onto each consecutive student. It is then entertaining to hear what version of the sentence the final student recites, and most probably this is not the same thing as what was originally said by the first student.

The use of video: its relevance and how to further elaborate on it.

Nowadays, the use of video or multimedia educational materials is important. Television, the Internet and advertising are integral parts of people's lives and the surrounding culture greatly affecting the way we think and communicate. The teacher should therefore take full advantage of any opportunity to introduce foreign students to the spoken language and simple ways of conveying information.

### ***Scenes from films and their re-enactment***

One practical game that may take place in the classroom is the re-enactment of a scene from a film, a short dialogue that students could act out in pairs, and then later adapt to fit the students' own culture (a meeting with someone, a request for information, or a dialogue between parents and children). Students in an intercultural environment which offers them the possibility of learning a foreign language are presented with the task of identifying cultural differences and adapting them to their own world.

### ***Understanding situations from gesticulation and expressions***

Italians have a very elaborate system of gesticulation in which there are several gestures to express dissent, joy, sadness, shyness, fear, aggression etc. The presentation of a scene from a film, for example, a monologue or a dialogue between strangers in the street without sound aids the students in understanding the situation. By the gesticulations and expressions of the actors, students can guess if the scene is sad, serious, or funny and what the character is may be considering.

Such scenes can be taken from YouTube and may be advertisements or sketch shows in Italian. Even features films may be shown, but not in their entirety.

### ***Songs***

Songs are chosen by the teacher according to the students' level of proficiency. Children for

example should preferably be introduced to ones with simple, well articulated sentences. Initially, listening comprehension is important thereby questioning the ability of students to understand the words and context, and then following on there could be singing in order to enhance students' phonetics. Example songs could include: Ci vuole un fiore, Il cocodrillo come fa, 44 gatti, etc.

### ***The press***

The press is the most effective source of information in the world. There are bulletins of all kinds ranging from political to economic, and from weather to entertainment. The teacher selects news items that should be of interest to the class. To alleviate the task as well as to familiarise foreign students somewhat with the world of Italian entertainment and television, the teacher chooses lighter items, for example celebrity gossip. Students tend to find such news items entertaining due to the less serious nature of the topic and the language used.

### **Level A2 - B1**

According to European language guidelines - Self Assessment Grid, the level reached should be the following:

	Listening	Reading	Spoken interaction	Spoken production	Writing
A2	I can understand phrases and high frequency vocabulary related to most areas of immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local knowledge, employment). I can catch the main meanings of short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple every day material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information regarding familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation ongoing myself.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms topics like my family and others, living conditions, my educational background and my presenter most recent job.	I can write short, simple notes and messages. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.

	Listening	Reading	Spoken interaction	Spoken production	Writing
B1	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered at work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affair sore topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency every day or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.

Source: <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/resources/european-language-levels-cefr>

This level of language competence indicates that the students are able to express themselves in more complex situations, as well as possessing the ability to express their opinion. Certainly they have acquired a vocabulary of greater than the 2000 words which permit an understanding of most texts to at least 80% (Bettoni, 2005, p.64). The grammar is as follows: Indicative mood: present perfect, imperfect, past perfect, future, past absolute; Subjunctive mood: present and past, imperfect and past perfect; Conditional mood: present and past; Infinitive mood: past; Imperative mood: present; Participle mood: present; objective and final subordinate clauses; hypothetical periods of the first and second type (Pospíšilová-Ferrarová-Ferrarová, 2008 p.IV). The richness of such students' vocabulary enables the teacher to use original materials rather than those modified to fit the target level.

### **Games**

Games at this stage of language learning include especially role plays where groups of two or three students reproduce a typical situation connected to everyday life. The topics include shopping, a family discussion, work, politics, food, giving instructions and social and

organizational obligations found within society, the state and the family etc.

### **Categories**

At this stage, this is no longer the simple game of the lower levels, but instead the knowledge involved is far more detailed. The structure is as follows:

### **Geographically:**

Region	Capital	Other Cities	Mountain/River	Famous Person
Puglia	Bari	Lecce, Taranto	River Ofanto	Aldo Moro, politic

### **Politically**

Monarchy	Republic	President of Republic	The Prime Minister	Majority Party
1861	1946	Giorgio Napolitano	Matteo Renzi	The left: Partito Democratico

### **Culturally:**

Painter	Literature	Architecture	Cinema	Science
Pisanello	Luigi Pirandello	Renzo Piano	Pier Paolo Pasolini	Giuseppe Pisati

### ***The use of video: its relevance and how to further elaborate on it***

In class the students, after being shown a family film such as, "La vita è bella" (Life is Beautiful) by Roberto Benigni, "Benvenuti al sud" (Welcome to the South) by Luca Minieri, "Genitori e figli: Agitare bene prima dell'uso" (Parents and Children: Shake Well Before Using) and "Manuale d'amore" (Manual of Love) by Giovanni Veronesi or "Io non ho paura" (I'm not Afraid) by Gabriele Salvatores, are given the task of choosing a particular scene and acting it out. The teacher also tries to involve the class in a discussion about possible cultural differences that may exist in scenes from a chosen film and potential real life situations that may occur where the students live. For example, the major theme of the film 'Welcome to the South' is behavioral differences between the North and South of Italy. This can then be opened up into some research or discussion about the causes and effects of such behaviour or be further led into a debate about their own country (possible differences in behaviour, language use, food and dining habits, etc. that may take place in their own country)



## Conclusion

The teacher who works with an audience of adult students and academics can increase the interest of the language taught through games, a few of which have been listed above. Such games not only serve as a break from the teaching of grammar, but also as exercises in communicative enrichment – whose form depends on the actual game in question, be it that of particular concepts, phonetics or vocabulary. Games, even for students in their twenties, providing excellent form of motivation to use grammatical structures. A second reason is competitiveness, where the students compete among themselves individually or in groups and this causes them to "give more" in order to come first. This type of teaching should not however dedicate all its given time in this way to motivate a learner to language acquisition and retention (Andorno- Bosc, Ribotta, 2003, p.92).

## References

Andorno C., Bosc F., Ribotta P., 2003, *Grammatical insegnarla e impararla*, Perugia: Guerra Edizioni  
Balboni P.E., 2002, *Lesfide di Babele*, Novara: UTET  
Bettoni Camilla, 2005, *Imparare un'altra lingua*, Roma-Bari: Laterza

European language levels – Self Assessment Grid , 2014,  
<https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/resources/european-language-levels-cefr>

Pospíšilová, V., Ferrarová, M., Ferrarová E., 2008, *Učebnice současné italštiny. Díl 1 = Manuale di Italiano contemporaneo. I*. Brno: Computer Press,

Soukup, V. 2005. *Dějiny antropologie*. Praha: Nakladatelství Karolinum

Vrzalova Hejskova, M. 2013. *Diversidad lingüística, interculturalidad y estereotipos culturales*. AA.VV. Diversidad lingüística del Español. University Liberec : Liberec