

Television programmes as a resource for teaching Italian

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Abstract:

The island of Malta offers an ideal setting to investigate the extent to which the linguistic input from the media may be significant in second language (L2) acquisition. Although Italian is not spoken in Malta, many individuals are exposed to this language via the media as Italian television programmes are popular on the island. In this article the extent to which Italian may be acquired via the media is discussed by taking into account research carried out among guided and spontaneous learners of Italian L2. Despite the unidirectional nature of television and the absence of the possibility to interact and negotiate so as to modify or simplify the L2 input, results show that L2 input from Italian television programmes in Malta may help to learn the language, even in the case of learners who have never undergone formal instruction in the L2. This, inevitably, has repercussions on the teaching of Italian as illustrated in the concluding section of this paper.

1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition, learning¹ a language spontaneously, that is without going through the normal schooling process, has normally been associated

Endnotes

¹ A terminological distinction is often made between the terms *acquisition* and *learning*. This distinction, proposed in the works of Krashen (1981), normally refers to the fact that whereas a

with the case of immigrant-workers². In order to have access to better living conditions, these immigrants learn the language of the country in which they choose to live after being exposed to it informally or naturally³. Although they may not learn the L2 to perfection, they often reach a satisfactory level, which enables them to communicate with native speakers.

However, there is also another form of spontaneous acquisition which is often not accounted for and which so far has been investigated only very marginally⁴. This is the case of L2 acquisition after receiving linguistic input directly from the media. In fact, though in most circumstances one is exposed exclusively to one's mother tongue (L1) through the media, there are many instances whereby viewers are exposed to programmes in a L2. This occurs in many countries in the Mediterranean in which Italian television and radio channels are received and in which there is also access to newspapers, magazines and other written texts in Italian, besides all the material available through the Internet. Consequently, as illustrated by Simone (1992) and Giordano (1997), in countries such as Albania, Greece and Slovenia, in large areas of North Africa and also in Malta, Italian media, particularly television channels, are widely received and are highly popular among viewers. This has created a situation in which Italian is being acquired via the media. The extent of this acquisition has been studied in Malta over the last few years, and both aspects regarding the comprehension and the active production of Italian L2 after exposure to the language via the media have been considered (Brincat, 1992 b & c, 1998; Camilleri / Caruana, 1991; Mintoff, 1994; Caruana 1996, 2000, 2001 & 2003).

2. Background

language is *acquired* in non-formal settings, that is spontaneously or naturally, a language is *learnt* 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 paper is concerned, I will use the terms interchangeably and synonymously.

² As in the case of the '*Progetto di Pavia*' studies (Bernini/Giacalone Ramat, 1990; Giacalone Ramat, 1993) on immigrants in Italy.

³ Formal or guided learners of a L2 learn the language in a structured context, that is by means of formal instruction. Natural or spontaneous learners learn the L2 in a context in which formal instruction is not present.

⁴ For example, Ellis (1994) only mentions the contribution of the media in the acquisition of a L2 when referring to Larsen-Freeman (1983). In the Mediterranean area, apart from in Malta, no scientific study has yet been carried out on the role of the Italian media and its contribution to the acquisition of the language.

Though the Maltese society may be defined as bilingual, the linguistic situation on the island is more complex than this definition may suggest and Italian, despite not being spoken regularly within the Maltese society, also has a significant role. In fact, Italian television channels received in Malta are popular amongst practically all age groups. This popularity reached a peak in the Seventies and in the Eighties, when, apart from the national television station (Television Malta) only Italian television channels could be received locally. The programmes transmitted by the Italian stations (especially those of the state-run network RAI and the private network Mediaset) were indeed so popular at the time that Secondary school teachers used to notice that many students were quite fluent in the language even prior to the start of the guided learning process, which normally begins at 11 years of age. Over the past ten years this situation has undergone rapid developments due to the introduction of cable television⁵ and subsequently satellite television. These innovations have greatly increased the amount of television channels which are potentially available in Malta and which transmit programmes in various languages. Furthermore, after the introduction of pluralism in television in 1993, a number of Maltese private television channels have started their transmissions, offering viewers a wide variety of programmes both in Maltese and in English. Consequently the viewership of programmes in these two languages has increased at the expense of Italian⁶. To a lesser extent than television, Italian music, radio channels, books, magazines and newspapers, have also played a significant role in rendering Italian more widespread in Malta.

3. Learning a language through television

Many researchers are rather skeptical about the degree of accuracy that can be acquired in language learning in the absence of a guided and structured learning process:

⁵ In 1991, a private cable television provider company was awarded a 15-year license to this service in Malta and Gozo. Currently this service is available in around 70% of Maltese households.

⁶ Data from the Public Broadcasting Authority (Malta) surveys show a steady decline in the percentage of viewers of Italian television channel. In 1996 more than 40% of television viewers watched these channels regularly but this percentage has declined to approximately 15% in 2002.

There is no doubt that L2 learners can achieve considerable success in contexts where they are simply exposed to meaningful naturalistic input. However, such input alone does not necessarily lead learners to high degrees of accuracy or high levels of development in the L2.

(White et al.,1991:416)

By its very nature L2 input received via television is unidirectional, and therefore it is non-interactive. In most cases it also not simplified or unmodified both as far speech-rate and syntactic complexity are concerned. The absence of the possibility to interact in the L2, which favours the process of L2 acquisition⁷, puts the learner in a position in which he/she has to deal with L2 input, which at least initially, may be incomprehensible to him/her and which he/she cannot seek to clarify by means of negotiation.

The only means at his/her disposal would be to ask a person who is more competent in the L2 and who is exposed to the same input to explain what is being said - however, this interaction seldom occurs in the L2, but in the individuals' L1. Gass (1997) takes these issues into account and states that:

... television learning without an aid in associating meaning and structure is not sufficient for language learning. Some assistance needs to be given to children in order for them to begin to crack the code of the language being learned.

(Gass, 1997:55)

However, in contrast with the implications of the above considerations, in Malta many children who follow television programmes regularly, acquire a good level of competence in Italian. A parallel situation is occurring in Italy itself, when Albanian refugees reach the Italian shores. Despite their dire social and economic conditions, a number of them speak Italian correctly, even though their formal studies of the

⁷ Pica, Young & Doughty (1987) and Ellis, Tanaka & Yamazaki (1994) argue that negotiation and modified input are highly important in the acquisition of a L2. In this respect, reference may be also be made to Gass / Varonis (1985), as well as to various studies cited in Ellis (1994:267-280) and in Pallotti (1998:173-184).

language may have been very limited. Even in this case it is assumed that their knowledge of the language is a result of their constant exposure to television programmes in Italian, which are very popular in Albania:

As television has undoubtedly shown over the past week, the Albanians, practically without exception, speak Italian almost perfectly, at times so perfectly that we would like to hear it spoken in this way by our students, if not by all our compatriots.

(Simone, 1997:68, *my translation*)

3. Research carried out locally

3.1 Research on the comprehension of Italian L2

The initial research project in order to study the effects of the media on the learning of Italian in Malta was coordinated by Professor Joseph M. Brincat who assigned a series of dissertations at undergraduate and at Masters level on this topic. Subjects involved in this research were both Primary and Secondary school students. Television programmes, in most cases based on a form of ‘recited speech’ (*parlato-recitato*)⁸, were recorded and transcribed in order to select the headwords and sentences that formed the corpus of the study. Some of the programmes that were selected were originally in English and were therefore dubbed into Italian⁹ in order to

⁸ Brincat (1992b, 1992c) as well as Diadori (1994) both draw on Nencioni (1983) to outline the differences which exist in the language transmitted by means of television, namely:

- (i). “Actual speech” (*parlato-parlato*) such as the language of talk-show guests or that of people interviewed in the streets.
- (ii). “Recited speech” (*parlato-recitato*) such as the language of actors who would have memorised a script.
- (iii). “Written speech” (*parlato-scritto*) such as the language of journalists reading the news, or the language used in many advertisements.

For further details one may refer to Brincat (1992b:516-518), (1992c:276-281) and Diadori (1994:12-17)

⁹ Pavesi (1994) and Brincat (2000) illustrate how complex, idiomatic phrases in English are translated in a straightforward manner into Italian, as the translated form must fit in with the time allocated to the scene which is being shown to the viewer. Furthermore, dubbing neutralizes forms of dialect and regional traits that are normally found in colloquial Italian.

be screened on Italian television. Subjects were asked either to translate orally words and sentences into their L1, or else to explain the meaning of the said words and sentences¹⁰, always by using their L1¹¹.

Results of these studies reveal that the influence of Italian media, and most notably of television programmes, is indeed very far-reaching. In fact even subjects who were attending Primary school (5 to 11 year-olds) and who had never learnt Italian formally were capable of translating a number of words and sentences presented to them¹². In Secondary schools the most noteworthy result was that no statistically significant differences were registered in the performances of a group of students who were studying Italian and another group of students who had opted to study other languages, such as French or German¹³. The above considerations lead to the conclusion that in many cases Italian is comprehended well once there is a regular exposure to it through the media.

3.2 Research on learners' speaking abilities in Italian L2

Once it has been ascertained that many students in local schools can understand Italian after being exposed to it for a number of years via television the next step under investigation has been whether students in our schools who do not learn Italian formally are also capable of speaking the language and the extent to which this factor is related to the input they receive in it. Caruana (2003) carried out research on this aspect - results will be outlined after giving a broad description of this study in the following section of this paper.

¹⁰ The Ragazzini / Biagi (1995) bilingual dictionary was used to establish the criteria in order to judge whether a word or sentence was explained or translated correctly or incorrectly. As for translations into Maltese, since no recent Italian-Maltese bilingual dictionary is available, Aquilina's (1987) Maltese-English dictionary was referred to. Often it was necessary for the interviewer to intervene and ask the subject to clarify his/her translation or explanation. In such cases, if it was clear that the candidate could associate the given word with its semantic field then the subject was judged as having explained or translated the said word correctly. The fact that subjects might have faced difficulties related to the translation process (Newmark, 1984) was also taken into account.

¹¹ The subjects were told to translate or explain the given words and sentences in the best way they could, using either Maltese or English (or both languages simultaneously) freely. In most cases subjects used their mother tongue, but of course, many cases of code-switching and code-mixing were also registered, as one may expect in the bilingual Maltese context in which the studies were held.

¹² Caruana/Camilleri (1991) and Quattromani/Seychell (1991).

¹³ Caruana (1996).

3.2.1 Objectives

The objectives of the research of Caruana (2003) are twofold:

1. To compare the oral abilities of guided and spontaneous learners of Italian L2 from a linguistic point of view, in particular by taking into account their use of Italian verbs.
2. To verify whether a relationship exists between subjects' exposure to Italian via television and their competence of verbs in the L2.

3.2.2 Subjects and settings

The study is based on a collection of data from 27 guided learners of Italian and from 34 students who had never studied Italian formally. The latter group of subjects are spontaneous learners of Italian, since to varying degrees, they have had the possibility to be exposed to the language via the media or otherwise, for example by means of contacts with Italian tourists. These subjects were attending Form 4 (14-15 years old) in local Junior Lyceums¹⁴ at the time of the data collection and were selected after a process of sub-sampling. Initially, a questionnaire was distributed to 363 Form 4 students and by means of the sub-sampling exercise certain factors, which could cause confounding of results, were controlled. Thus, the subjects chosen to provide the linguistic data for the research were all attending Junior Lyceums, they were of the same age, had Maltese as their L1, had never been to Italy, had no Italian relatives and were studying one other language at school, besides Maltese and English¹⁵. In this manner the two variables of the study – guided or spontaneous learning of Italian and different amounts of input from the media – could be investigated.

3.2.3 Measures and Procedures

¹⁴ Schools attended by students who pass the 11+ examination, equivalent to grammar schools in Britain.

¹⁵ In Malta students are given the option of studying up to two other languages, besides Maltese and English.

A brief interview was first held with the subjects. The data collected from the interview was not analysed for linguistic purposes, as the sole objective of this interview was to put the students at ease and to encourage them to speak in Italian. This is an essential feature when linguistic data are collected, as it is necessary to evaluate the subjects' competence of the L2 as opposed to their performance, therefore it is necessary to give time to subjects to speak in the L2 before initiating the process of collecting the data which will be analysed as part of the study.

After this interview, the subjects were individually shown an abridged version (approximately 20 minutes long) of the film 'Modern Times' of Charlie Chaplin and were asked to narrate the proceedings in Italian. This version of the film has been set up purposely by the European Science Foundation as a tool in order to study narrative accounts in second languages, as illustrated in Klein/Perdue (1992). The film is also divided into three sections. After watching the first section the subjects are asked to narrate the proceedings and are helped by the interviewer, whenever necessary. After viewing the second and third sections respectively the subjects are asked to narrate the story and the interviewer does not intervene at any instance of this narration.

The data provided by the subjects was recorded and eventually transcribed in order to be analysed.

3.2.4 *Results*

Out of the 34 spontaneous learners included in the study, 26 subjects were capable of giving an articulate narration in Italian and 16 of these subjects have a well-developed interlanguage, which can be considered to be at an intermediate or advanced level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 1996)¹⁶. On the other hand amongst the 27 guided learners only one did not narrate the film in Italian. Among this group of learners 17 subjects have a highly developed interlanguage. Therefore, for all intents and purposes, the competence in Italian verbs shown by the group of spontaneous learners who are capable of narrating in Italian

¹⁶ These levels described in the publication of the Council of Europe (1996) stipulate that individuals at intermediate level are capable of comprehending well the L2 as well as speaking fluently enough to be able to communicate with a native speaker. Individuals at advanced level are considered to have an almost native-like competence of the language.

does not differ from that of the group of guided learners, as may be seen in table 1 and table 2. Amongst the 52 guided and spontaneous learners who narrated the story, no statistically significant differences were registered as far as the amount of exposure to Italian via television programmes is concerned¹⁷. Therefore, guided learners, despite the fact that they learn Italian formally, do not necessarily obtain more input from television than spontaneous learners.

In tables 1 and 2 the narrative accounts of the 52 students who narrated 'Modern Times' in Italian L2 have been classified according to their use of the present, the *passato prossimo* (non-durative past) and the *imperfetto* (durative past) tenses of the indicative mode. The acquisition of these tenses provides the basis of the L2 as they enable an individual to express himself/herself correctly in Italian. Once the aspectual distinction between *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto*¹⁸ is internalized one may be considered to have acquired a highly important feature of the L2, as illustrated by means of the acquisitional sequences for Italian L2 verbs (Giacalone Ramat/Bernini, 1990; Banfi, 1993; Giacalone Ramat, 1993; Bernini, 1994).

By following these considerations the subjects' have been classified in three groups, as may be seen in tables 1 and 2. Subjects who use correctly the present tense, the *passato prossimo* and the *imperfetto* are considered to be subjects who have a highly developed interlanguage, subjects who use the present tense correctly but show uncertainty in the aspectual distinction (that is, the distinction between the two past tenses) are considered to have reached the threshold level¹⁹ in the L2, whereas subjects who show a general uncertainty in the use of the *passato prossimo* and who are unable to make the aspectual distinction are considered to be below the threshold level.

¹⁷ Italian television viewership among the 52 subjects who provided the narration is distributed as follows: 8 spontaneous learners and 10 guided learners watch Italian TV programmes for less than one hour daily, 9 spontaneous learners and 10 guided learners watch Italian TV programmes for one to three hours daily and 9 spontaneous learners and 6 guided learners watch Italian TV programmes for more than three hours daily. ($\chi^2 = 0.875$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.646$).

¹⁸ The *passato prossimo* tense is a present perfect form (e.g. *io ho parlato* - I have talked), whereas the *imperfetto* is a past continuous form (e.g. *io parlavo* - I was talking/I used to talk).

¹⁹ The 'threshold level' (Council of Europe, 1996) is reached when one is capable of using the L2 autonomously in a communicative context and when one can use the language in order to express basic social and personal functions.

The group of spontaneous learners provided narrative accounts that were indeed very similar to those provided by the guided learners, confirming the fact that once a certain competence in the L2 is attained, being a guided or spontaneous learners does not affect the way the L2 is used in informal situations (Giacalone Ramat, 1993). This is also confirmed by the fact that, as shown in figure 1, when the evaluation of the use of verb tenses by the two groups is compared, no statistically significant differences emerge.

On the other hand, as illustrated in figure 2, statistically significant relationships are registered between exposure to Italian via television and the level of narrative accounts provided. The subjects who follow Italian television regularly, particularly the ones who have watched Italian TV since when they were attending Primary school, are those who provided the most linguistically coherent and native-like narrations. Out of the 52 subjects who provided the linguistic data, 18 have watched Italian television programmes for less than one hour daily over the past years²⁰, 19 have watched between one and three hours daily, whereas 15 subjects have watched more than three hours daily. The most significant aspect is that out of the 18 subjects who watch less than one hour daily, 7 (39%) have a very limited knowledge of Italian verbs while at the other end of the scale, out of the 15 subjects who watch more than three hours daily, 13 subjects (87%) use the Italian verbs correctly. No significant results are registered regarding input from other media, such as radio, music and printed matter. This is largely due to the fact that the amount of input received from these sources is much less than the input the subjects receive via television.

Results therefore confirm that 14-15 year-old guided and spontaneous learners who watch Italian television programmes regularly use Italian verbs correctly and, as confirmed by further linguistic analyses included in Caruana (2003), they are also capable of using both coordinate and subordinate clauses in their speech and they do not necessarily code-switch between Italian and Maltese or English. However, one must emphasize the fact that out of a group of 34 spontaneous learners there were 8

²⁰ By means of the questionnaire students were each asked how often they have watched Italian TV programmes over the past 5 years, ranging from the final years when they were attending Primary school to the present day. An average was then drawn in order to quantify the results in terms of the three categories (less than one hour, between one and three hours, more than three hours) illustrated in section 3.2.4 and shown in figure 2.

subjects who could not narrate in Italian, whereas this number is only limited to one student in the group of guided learners. These 8 spontaneous learners all have had a very limited input in Italian L2 from television and therefore did not have the necessary competence to narrate the film. On the other hand practically all the guided learners provided the narration confirming that formal instruction in the L2 at least provides the students with the fundamental concepts of the language, thereby allowing students to narrate in Italian even in cases when input from the media may be very limited.

3.2.5 Discussion of results

The above results are to be interpreted in the light of a series of considerations. The first consideration is of a linguistic nature. Many students in Malta are helped by their linguistic competence in Maltese and English – in both cases, but especially in the case of Maltese, their familiarity with words and expressions which are etymologically related to Romance languages help them form the necessary basis on which they build their competence in Italian L2. Further linguistic considerations, including the typological proximity between Italian and English and a number of similarities between the syntactic structure of Maltese and Italian offer further support to students learning Italian locally.

The second consideration is based on the fact that the geographical proximity and the historical ties between Malta and Italy are undoubtedly elements that contribute to rendering Italian widespread in Malta. It is beyond doubt that in many cases the exposure to Italian culture, sport, gastronomy, means of communication and way-of-life in general, precede the stage in which the language starts being acquired formally. Therefore many students watch programmes on Italian television irrespectively as to whether or not they are learning the language at school.

The third consideration, on which the concluding section of this paper will focus, regards schooling and the approach used to teach Italian in Malta. Up to some years ago the approach used to teach Italian at school was very traditional to the extent that

students learning the language used to be aware of the fact that the language used in the Italian classroom was indeed very different to that to which they were exposed to via the media. This is evident from the words of a number of students interviewed by Caruana (2003). In the following extract from an interview (I = interviewer; S = subject) a Form 4 student who speaks rather fluently in Italian, despite several instances of code-switching, states that he/she only obtained a mark of 39% in the Italian half-yearly examination²¹:

I: parli bene tu in italiano... non è vero quello che mi hai detto prima ...no?

S: eh... imma ... because ... perché io ho solo 39 in italiano.

I: nell'esame cioè?

S: ... e [e ... nell'esame.

I: perché non hai studiato?

S: non ho fatto niente.

I: che vuol dire non hai fatto niente?

S: studiare ... niente.

I: non hai studiato ... e la prossima volta studierai un po' di più?

S: non c'è ... perché il pitazzo è vuoto.

I: che vuol dire il quaderno è vuoto?

S: solo qualche avverbio u ... ci sono cinque passati ... un pagina su tutte ... e non c'è molto da studiare.

I: è colpa dell'insegnante?

S: quasi ... ci sono ci sono ... xi trapassato prossimo eh passato remoto ... futuro ukoll ... due facciate su una.

²¹ Translation:

I: you speak well in Italian ... what you told me previously is not true, no?

S: eh, but... because I only obtained 39 in Italian.

I: in the exam, you mean?

S: yes, in the exam.

I: because you did not study?

S: I did nothing.

I: what do you mean when you say you did nothing?

S: to study... nothing.

I: you did not study ... and will you study a little bit more next time?

S: there isn't... because the copybook is empty.

I: what do you mean, the copybook is empty?

S: only some adverbs and ... there are about five pasts (tenses)... a page on all of them...and there isn't much to study.

I: is it the teacher's fault?

S: almost... there are ... some are some past tenses... future too... two pages on one of them.

I: it's too little... that is.

S: there isn't much because you can't study the composition.

I: e troppo poco... cioè.

S: non c'è molto perché il composizione non si studia²².

Over the past years efforts have been made to make the teaching of the language more functional in nature in order to put emphasis on the communicative aspects of the language, but problems still exist in this respect.

The results of the above mentioned research show that Italian may indeed be acquired after exposure to the media but then again in this case there is no mathematical formula which states that after a number of hours, days and months of exposure to the language via television one will learn Italian. In other words, input via the media, has a varied influence on the individuals who receive it. As a result we are faced with two realities: on the one hand there is the schooling reality which though striving to present Italian in a communicative context often cannot avoid the artificiality of the situation, not to mention the pressure created by examinations and tests. On the other hand we have the reality of the media which though presenting the language in an enriching and enticing context does not have a uniform effect on the individuals who receive it. The former normally emphasis a structured approach in which great importance is given to the written and reading abilities, the latter is more haphazard and functional, more effective and long-lasting, but omits completely the written medium and only favours the speaking ability after long-term exposure as it relies solely on watching, listening and understanding. The role of the teacher of Italian is to take account of the above two realities and to structure a learning programme in which a constant interchange between them is the rule.

4. Using the media to teach Italian²³

The activities to be carried out in class, being student-centred by nature, are to take into account the students' knowledge of Italian and their exposure to the language. Since, as stated above, this varies greatly between the students, during the first weeks of teaching it may be useful to adopt a short questionnaire which students are to fill in.

²² The conversation takes place in Italian, but the subject uses the following terms in Maltese: 'imma', because; 'e [e]', yes (colloquial); 'pitazzo' from 'pitazz', copybook; 'xi', some; 'ukoll', also.

²³ Texts which deal in detail with the use of television in the classroom of Italian include Diadori (1994), Branduardi / Moro (1997) and Bosc / Malandra (2000).

Consequently the teacher will start obtaining a picture of the individuals he/she has in class, of their background regarding Italian L2. He/she will thereby be in a better position in order to address their needs.

Once clear objectives have been set, lessons are to be based on an '*unità didattica*' which centres around the presentation and analysis of a selected text or selected texts. The scheme of work is to focus on the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing as in the case of the one presented in the appendix. This scheme of work is based on the television programme 'Sarabanda' screened on the private channel Italia Uno as this programme, a musical quiz, is highly popular amongst Maltese students. The text used in class does not necessarily have to be a printed text but can also be selected from a television or radio programme or from an Internet site. However, it is always useful to present a short transcription of such texts on which the students are to work.

The teaching-learning process in Italian L2, illustrated in a number of publications (Balboni 1994 & 2001; Ciliberti, 1994; De Marco, 2000; Bettoni 2001; Eynaud 2002; Favaro, 2002), follows a series of stages. The first stage is the *motivazione* stage, which focuses mainly on the presentation of the text. This is to be followed by the *globalità* stage, which involves working on the text, and by the *analisi* and *sintesi* stages during which formal aspects of the language can be introduced and reinforced. This model is also used by Eynaud (2002), who selects a number of texts from films in Italian in order to create a series of activities which are conducive to language learning.

The main advantage of using the media in order to teach Italian, as illustrated by means of various tasks in Bosc/Malandra (2000), is that various aspects regarding verbal and non-verbal communication can be included in the lesson by exploiting the visual elements which may be seen on the screen. The input is provided by native speakers and can be more attractive than that included in written texts. Besides, one of the most important language abilities, that is the listening and comprehending ability (Beretta / Gatti, 1999), can be taught in a stimulating context. This is in line with the aspects of the communicative approach of language teaching as emphasis is to be put on the aural and oral skills and not solely on reading and writing. Finally, one may

add that texts selected from the media are much more up-to-date than those presented from text books and that in Malta it is also possible to assign homework from the media as a follow up to the lesson held in class. Work may also be assigned by asking students to carry out tasks from the Internet (Mezzadri, 2001), however in such cases the collaboration of parents is recommended.

5. Conclusion

Results of research carried out over the past years confirm the importance of the presence of Italian television in Malta and its effective linguistic role. In Malta Italian may be learnt after being exposed to the L2 solely via the media. This shows that the media deserve more consideration than they have been given in the field of second language acquisition and that the general opinion that television does not lead to language acquisition ought to be revised.

Italian television channels received locally have lost the almost complete domination that they possessed throughout the Seventies and Eighties over television viewership. The role that Italian acquired in Malta throughout these years is now going through a transformation, which also carries didactic implications. In fact, in the past teachers of Italian in local schools knew that Italian television programmes were very popular amongst most of their students and therefore could rest assured that the work carried out in class would be supplemented by means of the input from the media. Nowadays, on the other hand, teachers normally face a group of mixed ability students – in class one may have students who may have been exposed to the language from an early age and therefore are likely to have a good grasp of the language, as well as other students who are totally unfamiliar with the language. This situation does not facilitate the role of the teacher who in various circumstances has to differentiate tasks and select activities in order to suit the different levels of the students.

Consequently, it is necessary to include the media in the teaching of the Italian language from the very initial stages of the learning programme. This can be done both by using short extracts from television programmes in class as well as by assigning homework that involves viewing some minutes of Italian television daily. Furthermore, by using the media one can teach a language in more creative and

stimulating manner. The possibility of using the Internet and e-mail – under adult supervision - as educational tools can overcome one of the greatest barriers that television viewing may hold in L2 acquisition, that is the fact that it does not offer the possibility to interact in the L2. By giving students clear set instructions in order to surf through a website or by helping them contact students in Italy via web-based exchanges, they can be involved actively in the learning process.

Tables and figures

Table 1 - The use of Italian verb tenses -
tenses - guided learners

subj	pres	ppr	imp	level
1	+	+	+	1
2	+	+	+	1
3	+	+	+	1
4	+	+	+	1
5	+	+	+	1
6	+	+	+	1
7	+	+	+	1
8	+	+	+	1
9	+	+	+	1
10	+	+	+	1
11	+	+	+	1
12	+	+	+	1
13	+	+	+	1
14	+	+	+	1
15	+	+	+	1
16	+	+	+	1
17	+	+	+	1
18	+	+	+ -	2
19	+	+	+ -	2
20	+	+	+ -	2
21	+	+	-	3
22	+	+	-	3
23	+	+ -	+ -	3
24	+	+ -	+ ?	3
25	+	+ ?	+ ?	3
26	+	+ ?	-	3

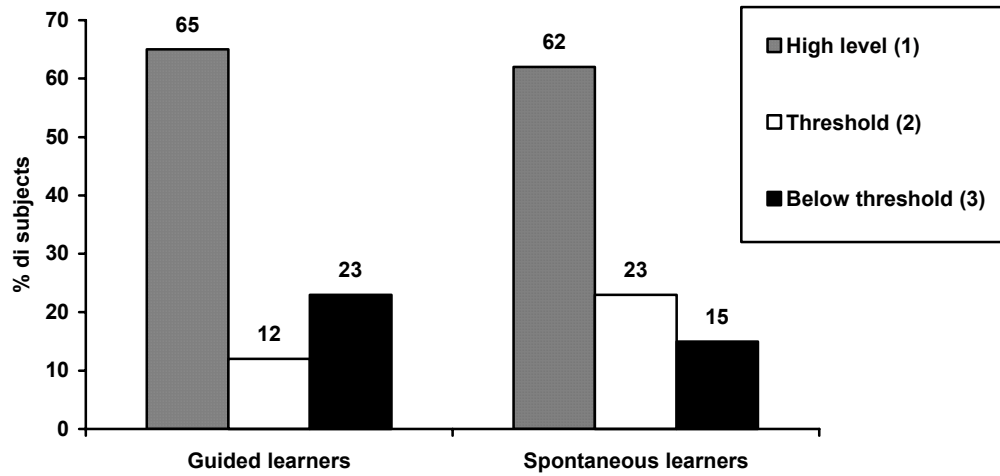
Table 2 – The use of Italian verb
spontaneous learners

sog	pres	ppr	imp	level
1	+	+	+	1
2	+	+	+	1
3	+	+	+	1
4	+	+	+	1
5	+	+	+	1
6	+	+	+	1
7	+	+	+	1
8	+	+	+	1
9	+	+	+	1
10	+	+	+	1
11	+	+	+	1
12	+	+	+	1
13	+	+	+	1
14	+	+	+	1
15	+	+	+	1
16	+	+	+	1
17	+	+	+ ?	2
18	+	+	+ -	2
19	+	+	+ -	2
20	+	+	+ -	2
21	+	+	+ -	2
22	+	+	+ -	2
23	+	+	-	3
24	+	+ -	-	3
25	+	+ ?	-	3
26	+	+ ?	-	3

Keys to read above tables: + = correct use of the verb; +? = uncertainty in the use of the verb; + - = uses the verb, but only in very limited occasions; - = does not use the verb or uses it incorrectly..

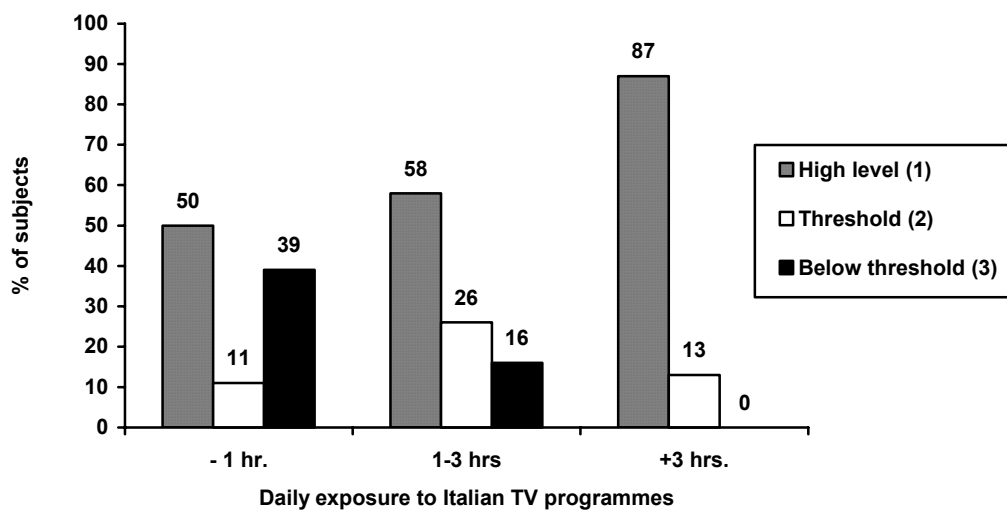
subj =subject; pres = present indicative tense; ppr = *passato prossimo*; imp = *imperfetto*; level: 1 = highly developed interlanguage, 2 = threshold level of interlanguage, 3 = below threshold level of interlanguage.

Figure 1 - Relationship between guided and spontaneous learners' competence of Italian verbs (n = 52)



$$\chi^2 = 1.43, df = 2, p = 0.489$$

Figure 2 - Relationship between subjects' competence in Italian verbs and their daily exposure to Italian TV (n = 52)



$$\chi^2 = 9.92, df = 4, p = 0.042$$

Appendix

Scheme of Work based on the introductory 5 minutes of 'Sarabanda', (TV musical quiz screened on Italia Uno, Mediaset, weekdays at 20:00 hrs.), when the presenter presents the contestants:

	Motivazione (una lezione)	Globalità (una/due lezioni)	Analisi (due/tre lezioni)	Sintesi e ritorno al testo (due/tre lezioni)
Ascolto	visionare lo spezzone iniziale del programmi in cui si presentano i concorrenti (circa 3 minuti)	riproporre lo spezzone senza l'ausilio delle immagini – (lezione d'ascolto)	fase orale degli esercizi del lavoro analitico sul testo:	a. visionare lo spezzone del programma b. domande sullo spezzone (ritorno al testo)
Parlato	breve discussione sul contenuto	uso delle forme di presentazione e di altre forme colloquiali: es. buongiorno, buonasera ... - role play	a livello morfosintattico, sintattico e lessicale (<i>includere lavoro dal libro di testo</i>) - aggettivi - professioni	c. ascoltare qualche canzone che si menziona nel programma d. attività orali e aspetti culturali
Lettura	lettura della trascrizione e di brevi brani su Enrico Papi, sul programma tv Sarabanda...		lettura delle domande del lavoro analitico	sintesi grammaticale (<i>includere lavoro dal libro di testo</i>)
Scritto		risposte alle domande del lavoro sul testo – motivazione e globalità.	rispondere alle domande e completare gli esercizi	esercizi di fissazione delle forme e delle strutture
Altre attività	elencare i programmi televisivi preferiti	indicare agli studenti da dove possono trovare informazioni sulla musica italiana	lavoro di coppia durante le attività scritte in classe	quiz in classe sulla musica italiana
Compito a casa	visionare il programma a casa	compito scritto – ricerca su Internet su un cantante italiano	visionare il programma a casa / compito scritto	stilare una breve descrizione del programma

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