

English, “or Something Like It”

Walter De Marco (August 27, 2008)



Italian students of all ages and areas of specialization are required to study English as a second language. But are they actually learning to speak and/or write in the language of world commerce and communication? A number of interviews with Italian teachers and students depict a rather grim reality.



Rimini, on Italy’s famous Adriatic Riviera, for decades has been a popular destination for vacationers from across Italy and the rest of Europe. While sitting in one of the city's many beach-front snack bars one afternoon, I witnessed an entertaining attempt by a small group of Italian teenage boys to strike an acquaintance with two attractive female tourists who did not speak Italian.

After a brief consultation among them, one of the boys bravely turned to the two girls and asked “Do you want to have dinner without us?”

The girls understood that the boys were attempting to invite them, and asked them a few questions, but the unlucky boys did not know how to handle a conversation in English, so the chat was quickly aborted.

In spite of the Italian government’s move to expand the teaching of the language to all levels and streams of education, most youngsters are still unable to speak or write in English, even at a basic and informal level. The only exceptions are those who take additional English courses at a private school, or spend some time living in an English-speaking country, but these are luxuries that not everyone can afford.

Determined to find out if Italian high-school students think they know the language, I joined a forum on a social networking website in Italy, and the youth that I interviewed admitted to having serious problems with the language of world communication. Most students said that they would be unable to handle a simple conversation, such as making a hotel reservation or reporting the loss of a passport to foreign authorities in English.

With some relief, I learned that a high-school student from Pisa actually managed to ask for information in English when she was in an emergency situation.

“I was in an airport and was almost late for my flight home. I talked fast and effortlessly, which had never happened before,” says the student.

Teachers also say that the public-school system is not preparing the students to use English in real-life situations.

“Foreign languages in Italy are taught badly, and students do not learn much in the few hours of language instruction they have,” Says Loredana Campoli, a 37-year-old school teacher living in Rome.

“Three hours per week are insufficient. Only the language-training secondary schools (licei linguistici) allow for satisfactory results, but their programs are completely different – they have language labs, student-exchange programs, intensive language training and so on,” she says.

With such limited exposure to the use of English in a real-life setting, both in and out of the classroom, it is no wonder that Italian high school, and even university graduates end up with very poor writing and oral skills in English, says Campoli.

From the sixth grade to the last year of grade school, students at most public schools are required to



take three hours of English instruction per week, which is arguably too little to build their oral and writing skills.

The lessons focus mainly on reading comprehension and grammar, with little or no emphasis on writing or conversation. Further, English classes are taught by local teachers who are not required to have received language training in an English-speaking country, thus students are rarely exposed to authentic English-language communication.

Younger students, from primary school to the fifth grade, also study English for two or more hours per week, whereas until the 1990's they were not required to. But these changes have not helped boost the students' knowledge of the language.

The teachers use the same methods that were used in previous decades, with equally poor results, so the parents who can afford it are compensating for the shortcomings of the public-school system with private English courses or tutoring.

“School programs have changed to expand the study of international languages, yet students know the languages less than they did before,” says Rome's school teacher Campoli.

“On the other hand, now there are more and more private schools such as The British Council and Trinity College, with very good programs, so they prepare the students well. The best method remains going abroad to learn a foreign language, at least for [us] Italians,” she says.

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