

The Obvious is Not Obvious.

Practical Observations from a Teacher

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Abstract

The article highlights the need for an educational approach to support the more strictly didactic aspects of teaching Italian to U.S. students in Study Abroad programs. More specifically, it reviews a number of best practices that an Italian teacher, when working with university students, might assume to be already acquired but which, in reality, must be reinforced and actively encouraged.

Keywords: Language Teaching, Italian Culture, Educational Approach, Best Practices

Most North American students we encounter in Study Abroad programs are beginners and therefore new to learning the Italian language. When approaching them, we must start with the assumption that our job as teachers is not only educational but also, I would say, educative. Studying Italian means coming into more direct contact with Italian culture through the language. As Italian language professors, we often spend more time in class with these students than our colleagues who teach other disciplines. We see them almost daily and allow them to experience Italian culture, traditions, and customs firsthand by using the language to express their needs. This is why it is essential to emphasize the educative aspect of our work; because through it, we can break down stereotypes and promote genuine Italian identity.

From my own experience, I have noticed that there are practices and habits related to learning that Italian teachers, knowing they are dealing with university students, might take for granted as they might seem obvious. However, in practice, these must be reiterated and encouraged. What are those practices? Here are a few examples:

- Bringing a notebook and pen to class
- Using a pen instead of a pencil for tests
- Taking notes and copying what the teacher writes on the board
- Copying, not photographing, everything
- Memorizing the words studied or discussed in class
- Developing one's own study method.

It is important to write, to use a pen and notebook (even a digital one) – in fact, we retain 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 50% of what we see, 70% of what we write, and 90% of what we do. Forcing students to write is also a way to stimulate them to do. Learning a foreign language is about *doing* with the language, and this doing is fundamental, but it is not obvious. It's also necessary to explain to students that learning Italian in Italy means studying it as a second language rather than a foreign language, as they might have done in their home country. As such, the techniques and methodologies applied are different. Sharing this aspect of teaching with students is important: we ask students to trust us as teachers, but that doesn't always work – so sharing techniques and methodologies is an important step in motivating them.

Another seemingly obvious point is the memorization of vocabulary, where this is not based on teacher-provided word lists, but on lists that the students create themselves: in fact, creating something to support their own study efforts is much more effective. The well-known flashcards also are a useful and important tool for students. We can refer to the work of German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus¹ who, in the second half of the 19th century, theorized the *forgetting curve*. He essentially determined how quickly we forget what we learn. The speed with which we forget things we've just read / heard / seen is surprising: after one day we remember 80% of what we studied, and after three days we're down to

1. On Hermann Ebbinghaus, see Giuseppe Vargiu, *La curva dell'oblio e la ripetizione dilazionata*, in «Sinapsicoaching», May 28, 2023 <https://sinapsicoaching.com/curva-dell-oblio/>.

60%. Fortunately, the curve follows a predictable pattern, and Ebbinghaus also figured out how to work around it. How do we retain what we've learned? Simple: review it at regular intervals, study it multiple times using effective tools.

Using flashcards is a simple and effective method for memorizing vocabulary. They can be self-made or downloaded/printed in different colors from online sources. But what's the difference between the two types? Simple (and consistent with everything discussed so far): the creative process of making the flashcards itself aids in memorizing the vocabulary. Once again, *doing* helps us learn.

Decades ago, cognitive psychology discovered that deeper processing of material leads to more secure and lasting memory. This means that any personalization of the task is beneficial and helps students learn more effectively.

Phones, computers, or tablets should not be demonized or excluded from language learning, but they also should not be considered the central tool of learning. There are many useful and fun activities one can do online, but the key message must be: students will only remember what they produce in a personal and constructive way. We could therefore conclude with a quote attributed to Aristotle: "We learn by doing."