Age, Media and Second Language Acquisition of Italian in Malta

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Abstract: The effects of age and media on the acquisition or learning of Italian in Malta are investigated in this article, following previous research which had confirmed the beneficial impact of TV viewing in relation to the development of L2 competences in Italian. The rapid decline of exposure to Italian media in Malta has motivated the research behind this article, which confirms the advantages of frequent and copious exposure to media in Italian, particularly when exposure begins in childhood.
Keywords: second language acquisition; early onset;L2 media exposure.

Introduction

Over the centuries several languages have been spoken on the Maltese islands starting from Arabic, in particular vernacular Arabic, which was the dominating language in Malta between 870 BC to 1090 AD. Following the Arab rule, Malta was under Norman rule, a period during which Latin and Italo-Romance varieties started to become widespread. Several years after the Norman rule, Malta was colonised by the British Empire between 1800 and 1964, when the English language was introduced to the islands and officialised, together with Maltese. Today, Maltese is the first language of 97% of the population, with 60% declaring to be fluent both in English and in Maltese (Council of Europe, 2015, pp.11-14). Even though results may be influenced by the high number of non-Maltese citizens currently residing in Malta. More recent data (NSO, 2023) show that English and Maltese are understood by 90% of the population and Italian by 62% of it.

Despite its bilingual status, the linguistic situation in Malta is becoming rather complex, particularly in light of a growing international population and the

increasing importance of the Italian language, which was particularly prominent in the early 1960s, when the first Italian TV channel was broadcasted in Malta. At that time, Italian TV programmes became widely accessible in Malta and they reached their peak popularity between the 1970s and the early 1990s, when the introduction of cable TV and the advent of the Internet made English the preferred language for media consumption. Until today, this language remains the first choice among younger generations who prefer accessing the media primarily in English, leading thus to the decline of Italian as the language of international media in Malta. Recent statistics confirm that viewership of Italian television has been decreasing exponentially, going from a share of over 50% during the 1990s to less than 17% in 2016 (Broadcasting Authority, 2023). However, the increasing number of Italians settling in Malta provides opportunities for interactions between Maltese and Italians, with English and Italian being the preferred languages for communication (Caruana, 2023).

Given the importance that the Italian language and culture have had and continue having in Malta, this article aims to investigate the impact that exposure to Italian and Italian media have on the acquisition of it as a second language (L2) in Malta.

Literature Review

The role of L2 media and exposure to it in second language acquisition has always sparked interest amongst researchers who have often focused on exposure to traditional L2 audiovisual input received from television or radio. Findings revealed that watching television in the L2 increases learners' word knowledge, as in little time there are frequent encounters with low frequency words and phrasal verbs (Webb and Rodgers, 2009; Alshumrani, 2023) and learners are provided with a large amount of authentic spoken L2 input (Webb, 2015). Similar studies also investigated and highlighted the benefits of subtitles in original or dubbed movies, which contribute to increased word gains and learning outcomes (Kuppens, 2010; Peters and Webb, 2018). Despite the advantages that exposure to L2 media can have on the acquisition of a second language, researchers agree that better proficiency in the L2 is achieved when L2 exposure is frequent and regular (Bialystok, 2011; Ashcroft et al., 2018), but above all when onset of exposure takes place early in life (Sakellariou, 2022).

Since the rapid technological advancements of our times have made access to L2 input even easier through the Internet, more recent studies have also

included exposure to less traditional L2 media in their investigation, such as interacting on social media platforms, using chatbots, texting and/or playing video-games. Results indicate that exposure to all types of L2 media (including VR games, music, podcasts, chatting, etc.) is beneficial to the acquisition of a second language, as even in cases where learning gains were not significant, no detrimental effects were observed (Jahrani et al., 2023).

According to a study conducted by Liu (2017), text-based interactions on Facebook between non-native speakers can help learners negotiate language and generate linguistic complexity in an environment that may be perceived as less threatening than face-to-face interaction.

In a research carried out by Kohnke (2023), it was found that chatbots can help students to observe and correct language-related errors, learn from feedback and modify their language output. Moreover, in another recent study by Aldukhayel (2023), results reveal that reading comments to videos on YouTube after listening or watching the content can benefit listening comprehension, as comments allow learners to spend more time engaging with the overall content of the videos.

Research carried out in Malta confirms the benefits of an early, regular and copious exposure to the L2 through the media, even in cases where the L2 audiovisual input is unidirectional (e.g. television or radio). As a matter of fact, irrespective of the type of L2 input received (guided, spontaneous or both), findings indicate that Maltese speakers of Italian have a commendable level of Italian comprehension and production which is often attributed to the consistent and substantial audiovisual input received during childhood or early adolescence, further confirming the importance of an early onset of exposure to the L2 (Caruana, 2003; Caruana,2021; Cordova, 2023).

Given the important role that exposure to L2 media has on second language acquisition of Italian in Malta, this article aims to delve deeper into the effects of Italian L2 audiovisual input on Italian proficiency levels in Malta, especially in light of the decreasing exposure to this language among younger generations and the increasing number of Italian nationals who have been recently settling on the Maltese islands.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research, data was obtained from a previous study carried out by Cordova (2023) aimed at investigating the effects of age, input

and media on the acquisition of Italian as a second language in Malta. In Cordova (2023), the analysis was restricted to 80 participants who were split into four different age groups and who were asked to take part in three different research tasks. In line with previous literature carried out in Malta (Caruana 2003), findings revealed that both biological age and input were not significant factors that could account for high proficiency levels in Italian L2; on the other hand, an early onset of exposure to the language and to L2 media was the most significant factor that could explain the commendable level of Italian proficiency that Maltese people have in Malta. For this reason, this article aims to investigate the effects that an early onset of exposure to the L2 and exposure to various types of media in the L2 have on second language acquisition of Italian in Malta, by taking into account all the 376 responses to Cordova's (2023) questionnaire which could not be included in the previous study [1]. The questionnaire was aimed at collecting information about the participants' lives, educational background, exposure to Italian media in the past and at present and they were also asked to self-assess their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in Italian, Maltese and English in the final section of the questionnaire. The data was collected between February and April 2022, for which ethical clearance was sought, approved and granted by the University of Malta.

Participants

A total of 376 Maltese nationals completed the questionnaire: 74.7% (281/376) were females and 24.5% (92/276) were males. The respondents were split into four main age groups (20-30, 31-40, 41-50 and 51-80) as their distribution was fairly – although not entirely – homogeneous: 27.4% (103/376) belonged to age group 20-30, 20.5% (77/376) belonged to the 31-40 age group, 27.6% (104/376) formed part of the 41-50 age group and 24.5% (92/376) were aged 51 and over, with the oldest participant being 80 years old. Females consistently outnumbered males, making up for over 70% of the participants in each age group.

Results

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was devised to collect information about the participants' lives and educational background, but also to collect information about their L2 media habits in Italian, both in the past and at present.

Languages spoken

With regard to the first languages that the respondents learned to speak at home, 48.1% (181/376) grew up speaking Maltese and 28% (105/36) learned to speak both Maltese and English as their first languages. Only 12.8% of participants (8/376) were raised speaking English at home. The majority of participants belonging to the 31-40, 41-50 and 51+ age groups grew up speaking Maltese only; on the other hand, the majority of the 20-30 age group grew up speaking both English and Maltese at home.

Similarly, participants were asked about the languages that they currently speak at home with parents and siblings. Results show that 74.4% (280/376) of participants across the four age groups use Maltese to speak with parents and 67.5% (254/376) of them also use Maltese to communicate with siblings. English and Maltese are used by less than 20% of the respondents and English only by less than 10%.

These results seem to corroborate the fact that the role of English in Malta has been acquiring more and more importance among the younger generations, especially since the advent of the Internet and the introduction of cable TV in the early 1990s. However, results also indicate that Maltese is widely used and understood by the Maltese population, at least, among family members.

Educational background

When investigating the participants' educational background, one question was aimed at investigating the language(s) that participants studied in the past or are studying at present. Italian and French were the most popular languages in the past, with 68% (257/376) of respondents who studied French and 86% (323/376) of them who studied Italian. For both languages, around 60% of participants started learning them in Form 1, at around 11 years of age. On the other hand, the two main languages that the participants are studying at present are Spanish and Italian.

Respondents were asked how well they understand and speak the languages they study or studied in the past. According to the answers provided by the participants, French is understood well by 23.4% (88/376) of them and 13.2% (27/376) declared being able to communicate fairly well in the language. Similarly, Spanish is understood by 14.6% (55/376) of participants and 7.1% (27/376) claimed to be able to communicate in this language. With regard to

Italian, the proportions are much higher, as 71% (267/376) and 53.4% (201/376) of participants declared being able to understand and speak Italian in a fluent manner.

In addition to that, participants were asked about the context in which they learned Italian and across all age groups, the vast majority reported learning Italian in formal settings (47% or 177/376) or through a mix of formal learning and spontaneous acquisition via exposure to the L2 (37% or 138/376). In both cases, participants who were exposed to Italian in educational settings reported having studied Italian for a minimum of four up to more than five years and that the main reason for learning Italian was either because they love the Italian language and culture or because they had already been exposed to Italian via television before starting formal education. Interestingly, the proportion of participants who had already been exposed to Italian media via television prior to starting learning the language at school is higher among the two older age groups, namely the 41-50 and 51+ age groups.

These results show the important influence that Italian has had and continues to have in Malta, as its role as the most popular foreign language studied formally at school remains stable and the L2 competence in Italian seems to be fairly high among the respondents.

Exposure to L2 media

One of the main purposes of the questionnaire was to delve deeper into the Italian media habits of the respondents and the first question was aimed at understanding how frequently Maltese, English and Italian television programmes are followed on a weekly basis. Results show that English television programmes enjoy by far the largest audience, with over 85% of the youngest age group and over 70% of the three older age groups following English programmes at least three days a week. Maltese TV programmes, despite being less popular compared to the English ones, are mostly followed by the two older age groups (41-50 and 51+) for a minimum of three times a week. The situation is similar for Italian television programmes, as over 50% of the participants belonging to the 20-30 and 31-40 age groups rarely or never follow Italian television programmes during the week. On the other hand, whereas 45% of the 41-50 age group rarely or never watch Italian television at present, 30% of them do so regularly or on a daily basis. Finally, amongst the participants aged 51 and over, 33% rarely or never follow Italian television programmes, but 44.5% do so daily. The majority of respondents' across the

four age groups (41.7% or 157/376) showed a preference for Italian TV shows and around 20% of them (65/376) for cartoons.

In the past, however, Italian television programmes were followed by a higher number of participants across all age groups, but particularly by the 31-40 and 41-50 age groups, as 66.2% (51/77) and 77.8% (81/104) respectively, used to watch Italian television programmes for a minimum of three hours a week, up to more than five when they were in Primary school.

Proportions were also relatively high for the youngest and oldest age groups, as around 50% of participants used to watch Italian television programmes on a frequent basis in Primary school, as well. The Italian television viewing habits remained stable during Secondary school, as approximately 70% of the 31-40, 41-50 and 51+ age groups and 45% of the 20-30 age group used to be exposed to Italian television programmes on a frequent weekly basis.

When asked about the use of subtitles, 61% (230/376) of participants reported that they do not make use of any subtitles when they watch a movie in Italian. On the other hand, 15% reported using subtitles in Italian and another 15% declared using English subtitles.

Respondents were also asked about their use of other types of less traditional media in the L2, such as accessing online resources, listening to music, reading books and / or listening to the radio. Over 80% of the participants never listen to Italian radio channels and never use social media in Italian and around 50% of them do not currently listen to Italian music.

Responses were different when participants were asked about accessing online resources in Italian (such as podcasts, articles, TedTalks, blogs, official websites, etc.). Although a high number of participants (63% or 237/376) never or rarely access online articles in Italian, 24% (90/376) do so quite regularly, between three to seven times a week, and the proportions among the age groups are fairly homogeneous. These responses become interesting in relation to the question about the participants' favourite reading materials in Italian, as over 32% (121/376) chose online articles or blogs. It is important to keep in mind that the question regarding reading habits in Italian did not include reading activities conducted in a classroom or in formal or educational settings.

The questionnaire was also aimed at investigating the participants' active use of Italian by asking them about the circumstances and frequency with which

they engage in conversations in Italian. Whereas in the past, 51% (192/376) of participants declared that they used to speak Italian regularly for a couple of days or weeks, 23% of them (87/376) did so for over a year. The remaining participants spoke Italian regularly for a minimum of one month to a maximum of one year. Presently, though, despite the various opportunities to speak and interact in Italian, 67.5% (254/376) of participants never or rarely do so. On the other hand, when it comes to speaking Italian between three to seven days a week, proportions increase as age increases: 15.5% (16/103) of respondents from the 20-30 age group, 20.7% (16/77) from the 31-40 age group, 25% (26/104) from the 41-50 age group and 31.5% (29/92) from the over-51 age group currently speak Italian on a regular and daily basis. Italian is used to interact with family members, friends, teachers and on social media by less than 14% of respondents and 15% use it for working purposes. The vast majority 66.2% (249/376) reported speaking Italian in a mix of circumstances, such as speaking with family and friends, to communicate with teachers or colleagues, for working purposes, in hotels or restaurants, on instant messaging platforms, etc.

Overall, these findings indicate that the preferred type of Italian media exposure in Malta remains television or exposure to series and movies on online streaming platforms like Netflix. Despite the preference for watching programmes or movies in Italian, reading online articles and accessing online resources in Italian has also become common practice among some Maltese nationals.

Self-assessment scores

Finally, participants were asked to self-assess their comprehension and production skills in Italian. No specific self-evaluation criteria was provided in the questionnaire; the participants were asked to rate their proficiency in Italian on a scale from 0 to 5, where "0" meant that they are unable to understand anything that is being said to them in Italian or unable to utter any word or sentence in Italian, and "5" meant that they can understand every word that is being spoken to them in Italian or that they are able to speak Italian at native-speaker levels.

With regards to comprehension skills (listening and reading), the three older age groups were by far the ones that reported having the highest listening and reading skills in Italian, with over 72% of respondents belonging to the 31-40 age group, 80% of participants in the 41-50 age group and over 71% of the 51+

age group who rated their Italian comprehension proficiency levels "4" or "5". On the other hand, the 20-30 age group contained the highest number of participants who reported not being proficient or having elementary proficiency levels in Italian reading and listening, rating their skills between "0" and "3". Despite the self-reported low proficiency scores, over 55% of the 21-30 age group also claimed having high levels of proficiency in Italian L2 comprehension. These self-reported results indicate that despite competence levels in L2 Italian are diminishing among the younger generations, comprehension levels of Italian in Malta still remain relatively high, as across the four age groups, over 50% declared being able to comprehend Italian quite well. Results are similar when it comes to productive skills in Italian, namely speaking and writing. The three older age groups (31-40, 41-50 and 51+) self-reported the highest proficiency levels in Italian spoken and written production, with over 56% of the 31-40 age group, 67% of the 41-50 age group and over 56% of the 51+ age group being able to speak and write fluently in Italian. Once more, the youngest age group contains the largest number of participants who declared having low to no proficiency when it comes to productive skills in Italian, with over 59% claiming not being proficient in writing and over 66% reporting not being able to engage in conversations held in Italian. Nevertheless, over 35% of the 20-30 age group declared being able to speak and write fluently in Italian.

Overall, the results of the self-assessment are in line with previous studies carried out in Malta (Caruana, 2003; Cordova, 2023), according to which comprehension skills in Italian in Malta are more developed compared to productive skills.

Analysis

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this study was to examine the relationship between exposure to Italian L2 media and the participants' self-reported proficiency scores. In order to carry out this investigation, linear regression [2] and chi-square test [3] were run on RStudio [4].

According to the results of the self-assessment scores, the participants belonging to the 41-50 age group self-reported the highest proficiency skills in Italian L2, compared to the other age groups; however, in line with Caruana (2003) and Cordova (2023), both age and type of input received (guided or spontaneous) were not statistically significant variables that could account for high levels of proficiency in the L2. In fact, similarly to Cordova (2023), in the

dataset used to carry out this investigation, the proportion of guided learners and spontaneous ones was too imbalanced for valid and statistically significant comparisons and overall, the self-reported competence in Italian in Malta seems to be fairly high across the four age groups. The imbalance concerning the number of guided learners and spontaneous ones reflects a reality of Malta, where Italian is still the most popular foreign language studied at school, as confirmed also by the results of the questionnaire in section 4.3, where 47% of participants declared learning Italian in formal settings and 37% through a mix of formal education and exposure to television in the L2.

In Cordova (2023), the most significant predictors for high proficiency levels in the L2 were derived through linear regression. Results showed that the most significant factors were exposure to Italian media in Primary school, in Secondary school and at present, together with frequency of accessing online resources in the L2 and frequency of speaking Italian at present. Linear regression was also used in this study, which took into account the responses of all 376 participants. Results are in line with Cordova's (2023) findings, with duration of studies – intended as the number of years that the participants spent studying Italian in formal settings – emerging as a potentially significant factor, too. This outcome might be linked to the fact that the dataset used to carry out this investigation was larger than the dataset used in Cordova (2023), where the number of participants was limited to 80; therefore, the higher proportion of respondents who declared learning Italian in formal settings could have increased the statistical significance of duration of studies.

Furthermore, the most significant variables resulting from the linear regression were analysed in relation to the participants' self-assessment scores through a chi-square test. Results indicate that exposure to Italian television in the past and at present, frequency of accessing online resources in Italian, frequency of speaking Italian and duration of studies were all significant in relation to high proficiency skills in L2 Italian, as shown in Table I below.

These results seem to confirm the statistical significance of the factors analysed, but most of all, they also confirm the strong impact that an early and regular exposure to L2 media can have on L2 proficiency and performance, as also corroborated in previous literature (Caruana, 2023, 2021; Webb, 2015; Ashcroft et al., 2018; Cordova 2023).

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Significant Predictors p < 0.05	ITA Speaking	ITA Listening	ITA Reading	ITA Writing
Italian TV at present	***	***	***	***
Italian TV in Secondary	***	***	***	***
Italian TV in Primary	***	***	***	***
Online Articles	***	***	***	***
Speaking ITA	***	***	***	***
Length of Studies	***	***	***	***

Table I: Exposure to Italian media in relation to productive and receptive skills in L2 Italian; *** = significant at 0.001 level, n.s. = not significant

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of L2 media exposure on second language acquisition of Italian in Malta, particularly when onset of exposure happened early in life. The research design of this paper included the subdivision of participants into four age groups which were as homogenous as possible for reliable comparative purposes; however, the 20-30 age group included less participants who grew up speaking Maltese and slightly more participants who were raised speaking both Maltese and English at home, compared to the other three age groups, where Maltese was more dominant. In addition, the vast majority of the respondents currently speak mainly Maltese at home or with friends.

The responses of the questionnaire indicate that Italian television is still popular and frequently followed by the two older age groups (41-50 and 51+ years old), a phenomenon that is probably due to the Italian media viewing habits that these participants had in the past, when Italian enjoyed its peak popularity in Malta. However, the participants in the 51+ age group were less exposed to Italian television in their childhood and this is potentially due to the limited number of channels available at that time. On the other hand, English media is currently followed on a daily basis by over 70% of participants aged 31+ and by more than 85% of the youngest respondents, who were also the group who had received less exposure to Italian television both in Primary and in Secondary school. These findings reveal that despite the popularity that Italian still enjoys in Malta among the older age groups, its decline is taking place at a gradual, but alarming pace, while English rapidly takes over the media, our means of communication and the Internet. Results are also

corroborated by the self-assessment scores that the participants provided; in fact, whereas Italian proficiency levels seem to be fairly good among participants aged 31+, they decrease significantly among respondents belonging to the 20-30 age group. Once again, these results are in line with those reported in the local skills' survey (NSO, 2023).

The 'age' variable was analysed by taking into account the participants' age at testing and their exposure to Italian media in the past and at present. In this study, 'age' was not a statistically significant variable that could account for the high Italian proficiency levels that were self-reported by the participants; as a matter of fact, the majority of participants declared having an above-intermediate level of Italian across all age groups. However, the participants aged 41 to 50 reported having more advanced proficiency levels in Italian and this group also contained the highest number of respondents who used to be frequently exposed to Italian television programmes in Primary and in Secondary school. These findings lead to the clearest outcome of this study, i.e., that a combination of different variables, including age of exposure and copiousness of L2 media input during childhood and adolescence have a strong impact on second language acquisition of Italian in Malta.

In this research, media exposure per se played a more significant and consistent role in relation to self-reported high proficiency skills in Italian. These results are in line with previous literature (Caruana, 2021; Cordova, 2023), according to which L2 input received via the media plays an important role in encouraging and supporting second language acquisition and learning, even when input is largely unidirectional, as is the case of 'traditional' television or other streaming platforms. Moreover, this investigation confirms that while 'age' is an important variable in L2 acquisition of Italian in Malta, it is also heavily influenced by other variables, including onset of acquisition, which in this study corresponds to Italian television programmes in primary school. In addition to onset, other factors that could potentially contribute to ultimate second language attainment according to this study were the frequency of speaking Italian and of accessing online resources in Italian at present and the duration of the participants' Italian studies, corroborating the findings in previous literature, according to which regular, copious and active use of the L2 are beneficial for successful second language learning, together with the 'continuity' of the bilingual experience (Yilmaz and Granena 2010; Bialystok 2011).

In conclusion, the results of this research indicate that whereas age, as an isolated variable is not a statistically significant factor that could account for successful L2 acquisition of Italian in Malta, an early, copious and frequent exposure to the L2 through media or active use of the language was, on the other hand, highly significant. Even though these findings indicate that Italian is still somewhat popular among the Maltese population, they also reveal that the role of Italian in Malta is rapidly declining, not only among the youngest age group (20-30) who is more copiously and frequently exposed to English, but also among Italian residents in Malta who sometimes prefer using English with their children instead of their L1, as shown by Caruana (2023).

For this reason, more research is needed to obtain a more comprehensive and realistic picture of the role of the Italian language in Malta. This can be done by taking into consideration a larger dataset, which also includes Maltese subjects who do not necessarily have basic competences in Italian L2, and by delving deeper into the participants' exposure to Italian media.

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Endnotes

[1] In order to carry out this research, a process of data collection took place, for which ethical clearance was sought, approved and granted by the University of Malta

[2] Linear regression analysis was applied because of its function to determine the significance of a set of predictor variables in relation to a dependent variable (in this case, the self-assessment scores in Italian provided by the participants) and to predict the effect of the predictors on the dependent variable. In addition to the p-value, the results of the linear regression also returned the t-value (>1.96), the

standard error and the adjusted R-squared value, which determines the significance of each model.

[3] Chi-square test was deemed appropriate for this analysis because it allowed us to check for significant associations between two categorical variables by comparing expected outcomes with observed outcomes. Significance is determined by a p-value that is lower than 0.05.

[4] RStudio is an integrated development environment for R, a programming language for statistical computing and graphics.