The Maintenance and Promotion of the Italian Language at the Secondary Level in the Province of Ontario

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L’italiano è la lingua di un grande cinema, di un grande teatro e in generale di una grande arte verbale. Ma è anche la lingua di una grande elaborazione filosofico-scientifica, una dimensione spesso trascurata. (Simone 31)

Abstract: This paper reports on a comparative pilot study on the status of teaching International Languages in the province of Ontario at the elementary and secondary levels. The research examines enrollment trends and shows positive and negative growth rates focusing on the recent decline in enrollment that Italian teachers are witnessing at the high school level and reports the reasons why students are not pursuing Italian beyond the elementary level. Data for these studies were gathered by means of a voluntary written survey. An analysis of the data reveals that students need to become aware of the importance of studying and preserving International Languages in Ontario. In addition, the studies also focus on previous research findings on the “Teaching of Italian in Ontario” in previous decades (Chandler 1976, 1985; Clivio 1971; Corsini 1975; Di Giovanni 1985; Jackman 1967; Kuitunen 1979, 1983, 1985, 1988, 1997; Macchiarella; Haller; Mollica 1966, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1992, 2001, 2008; Aulino & Ferlisi 2009, 2010; Bergami & Aulino 2009), and how reported implications contributed to the overall enrollment of Italian from all levels of learning. These studies also focus on “Heritage Language” (Brinton; Kagan, & Bauckus.; Cummins 1983, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1993; Cummins & Danesi 1990; Cummins & Swain 1986; Danesi 1991, 1993; Danesi, McLeod & Morris 1993; Duff 2008), and “Attitudes and Motivation” (Li 2005). The paper acknowledges support for the teaching of IL at the primary and secondary levels. Teachers will be provided with a pedagogical rationale to help sustain the teaching of Italian in the Province of Ontario.

Research Rationale

The research study focuses on the current trends/shifting affecting Italian courses offered at the secondary level in the province of Ontario with a particular emphasis on what motivates or discourages students from studying an international language.

A Historical Overview of the Teaching of Italian in the Province of Ontario

The teaching of Italian has been significant in the history of language education in Canada. Italian was among the first of foreign languages to be introduced in bilingual Canada. The Italian language has been taught in Canada since 1850 (Bergami and Aulino; Kuitunen, From Caboto to Muliculturalism; Kuitunen, “L’insegnamento dell’Italiano in Canada”). It was introduced as a teaching subject at the University of Toronto by James Forneri, a member of the Giovine Italia and at the secondary school level before the Second World War, as an assessment requirement for university admission by secondary school students. Italian reached a considerable expansion in the secondary high schools between 1965 and 1980 (Kuitunen, From Caboto to Multiculturalism). In fact, in 1968, a curriculum outline was published by the Department of Education in Ontario (Mollica, “L’insegnamento dell’italiano in Canada”; Clivio) and then shortly thereafter, in 1970, Anthony Mollica was appointed as Program Consultant for Italian and Spanish to oversee the teaching of
these two languages. The majority of the students pursuing Italian were either native speakers born in Italy, or first generation Canadians who spoke an Italian dialect fluently (Corsini; Kuitunen, From Caboto to Multiculturalism; Danesi, “Teaching a Heritage Language”).

**Support Systems that Have Maintained the Italian Language Courses in the Province of Ontario**

Over the years, many different support systems were put in place to preserve and sustain the teaching of the Italian language and culture at the secondary level. (Di Giovanni and Gaspari; Macchiarella, Haller and Severino; Mollica, A Handbook for Teacher of Italian”; Rincker; Chandler). As a result, in 1983, The Association of Ontario Secondary School Teachers of Italian (AOSSTI) was formed. In 1991, the above-mentioned association, which became known as OATI (Ontario Association for Teachers of Italian), hosted an annual province-wide Italian language and poetry contest at various high schools in Southern Ontario, and provided workshops/in-services for teachers of Italian (Aulino and Ferlisi, “Present Status of the Teaching of Italian”). In the last ten years, this contest has been held and sponsored in a university setting. The contest focuses on writing, speaking and listening skills, as well as the artistic talents that also attract many non-native speakers to the Italian language.

Another strong support system of the Italian language has been Centro Scuola e Cultura Italiana (Di Giovanni). This cultural institution offers full immersion Italian summer and semester courses in Italy, in partnership with Toronto Catholic and York Catholic District School Boards, along with Interdisciplinary courses such as art, history, music and Italian language (Aulino and Ferlisi, “Failures and Success in Education”).

In addition, various Ontario universities (such as University of Toronto Mississauga, Queen’s University and Laurentian University) have put in place an annual theatrical Italian performance geared for high school level students, which motivates them to continue with their Italian studies at both the secondary and post secondary levels.

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1 There have been many research projects that have examined the teaching of the Italian language and International Languages formerly known as Heritage Languages in Ontario from the mid 1960s to present: Chandler; Mollica, “Italian in Ontario”; Jackman; Clivio; Kuitunen, “Lo Studio dell’italiano”; Danesi, “Revisiting the Research Findings on Heritage Language”; Mollica, “Teaching of Italian in the High Schools”; Kuitunen, From Caboto to Multiculturalism; Bergami and Aulino; Brinton, Kagan and Bauckus; Cummins, “Heritage Language Teaching in Canadian Schools”; Danesi; McLeod and Morris; Duff; Cummins and Danesi, Heritage Languages).
**Growth Trends**

Italian at the secondary level in Ontario has gone through some radical changes from its traditional day school setting. Many factors that have played a role in this change have been the following various educational reforms (Aulino and Ferlisi, “Failures and Success in Education”):

- The implementation of Ontario Schools Intermediate and Senior (OSIS) in 1984, which increased the compulsory credits to 16 and excluded foreign languages.
- In 1991, the government permitted students to fast-track through high school in 4 years instead of 5, which in turn made it difficult for students to pursue an international language course.
- In 1999, the new Secondary School Reform was put into effect eliminating the Ontario Academic Credit (OAC), thus removing the two senior level courses (LWI OAC and LWJ OAC). In addition, the requirements for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) changed. Students were required to pursue 30 credits, 18 of which are compulsory. Among the 12 existing elective courses, students must satisfy specific requirements in 3 groups of courses, leaving very little opportunity for any study of languages, including French.
- In the Catholic school system, students must pursue religion courses each year, which does not afford them opportunity to study another language.
- The changing population and community needs of the particular schools have affected the study of international languages. For instance, with the recent mandate of compulsory schooling until the age of 18 or graduation, credit recovery courses, English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Language Learner (ELL) and other specialized programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB), Advance Placement (AP), pathways, gifted and high school majors, administrators are faced with scheduling challenges.

Despite all these changes, it should be highlighted that in the Greater Toronto Area and surrounding areas, the limited enrolment in Italian language courses during the regular day schedule is very much maintained thanks to the undying efforts of the teachers, parents and school administrators who organize various events throughout the school year to motivate and encourage the study of Italian (Li; Cummins, “The Research for Heritage Language Promotion”).

Such events include school day trips to Italian cultural/community places such as the CHIN Building, March Break and summer trips overseas, Italian cultural days/nights, plays and theatrical performances, and through the proficiency certificate which is issued to students who have a minimum of two secondary Italian courses. In addition, Italian teachers in conjunction with school boards have instituted an Italian course in Grade 9 for beginner level students to attract students during the initial start of their high school year. It must be noted that in some high schools, Italian has been kept alive by offering it as a split course.
Teachers have taken this on, despite the course overload and additional preparation time onto their already exhausting teaching schedule.

Consequently, it stands to reason that Italian courses in the traditional setting of the high school have decreased in some areas of Ontario; nevertheless, enrolment in Italian courses has begun to gain some ground in non-traditional settings.

Data collected by the province of Ontario highlights that the peak of enrolment in Italian courses at the high school level was in 1984-1985 when 111 high schools in 32 of the 129 total school boards offered it with a grand total of 10,775 students. Since then, the numbers have steadily dropped. However, in 2003 and 2004 there was a slight increase. Then in 2005-2006 it remained relatively stable and a noticeable shift was recorded in 2006-2007 with an increase of 319 students. Our collected data reports enrollment statistics up to 2007 and 2008 with a moderate increase of 101 more students (Kuitunen; Mollica, “L’insegnamento dell’italiano in Canada”; Aulino and Ferlisi, “Failures and Success in Education”; Aulino and Ferlisi, Present Status of the Teaching of Italian”).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Number of Students Taking Italian at the Secondary Level in Ontario</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984-1985</td>
<td>8,388</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986-1987</td>
<td>7,702</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994-1995</td>
<td>4,548</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995-1996</td>
<td>4,158</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>3,165</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,318</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>2,429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>2,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>2,724</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>3,144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implementation of Educational Reforms in the Province of Ontario (refer to Growth Trends section for an overview)

<table>
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<tr>
<th><em>1984</em></th>
<th>OSIS (Ontario Schools Intermediate and Senior)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>1991</em></td>
<td>Fast-Track 4/5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>1999</em></td>
<td>Secondary School Reform</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1: Italian High School Students 1984-2008

2 For the years 1988-1993 and 1999-2000 statistics were not including in research studies dealing with enrolments in Italian courses at the secondary school level.
Conclusion

At this point, further investigation of growth trends along with students’ motivating factors and challenges for studying or not studying the Italian language at the secondary level in the province of Ontario is needed (Aulino and Ferlisi, “Failures and Success in Education”; Aulino and Ferlisi, “Present Status of the Teaching of Italian”; “Present Status of Teaching Italian at the Secondary Level in Ontario”). A questionnaire is being distributed to secondary level students of various grades where quantitative and qualitative data will be analyzed. A report will be published in order to address the current issues affecting the maintenance and promotion of the Italian language at the secondary level. A list of recommendations will be presented to the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Works Cited


Bergami, Roberto and Biagio Aulino. “Teaching and Learning Italian Abroad:


