



# Teaching Italian Language to Egyptian Adult TBs (True Beginners) through Direct Methodology Accompanied by Technology

**Radwa Ali**

Faculty of Languages (Al-Alsun), Ain Shams University (Egypt)

[contactradwa@gmail.com](mailto:contactradwa@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

In today's world that had already been one global village, learning a foreign language has become indispensable for all of us. As reasons for a foreign language acquisition may vary from a learner to another, reasons for teaching it could vary too. Teaching Italian language is a passion as well as a profession for me. Once found in class with my students, I forget anything that is not related to the lesson and I only focus on my role as an instructor as well as my students' needs. I, personally, like to engage my students in class and make them feel as an integrated part of the teaching process itself that could actually collapse without their participation. With this said, the direct method seemed more attractive methodology than the grammar-translation one to teach the Italian Language to my class of 12 Egyptian true beginners. The main purpose of adopting this method was that of helping those 12 students -who had no idea about Italian- interact with native Italians and speak flawlessly.

### The Grammar-Translation method vs. Direct method

The Grammar-Translation Method (known also as the GTM) is one of the oldest methods in foreign language teaching. Its focus is on accuracy and not fluency, and on learning the rules of grammar and their application in translations from mother tongue into the target language and vice-versa so that the skills to be practiced are only reading and writing. The GTM is widely adopted till now even though teachers have more modern methods but according to Stern, for example, the GTM is still employed, despite many attacks, if not as the main strategy, then as a contributory one among other modern strategies. This is a fact that I, as a learner and teacher, can fully confirm and I assume that the reason why the classical method is still being adopted –at least as a contributory strategy- is that a few concepts/words in foreign languages can sometimes be hardly explained by any other means than translation.

As for the Direct method (also known as the DM/Reform method and Berlitz method), according to Stern, it is mainly characterized by the use of the target language as a means of teaching and communication the classroom. The mother tongue language is totally avoided and is used in class neither by the instructor nor by the students.

### DM in my class

I have witnessed my students through 3 phases in class: phase I (true beginners' courses), phase II (intermediate courses), phase III (advanced courses). Along the three phases, I had to teach them grammar, vocabulary and conversation but the techniques/approaches had to be different in each phase according to the difficulty of what was being taught and to the proficiency level of my students.

For the vocabulary –along the three phases- I used both the formal language and the everyday sentences. And on teaching new words, I basically explained their meaning in the target language and added up some drawings and sometimes I even acted out. Introducing concrete vocabulary was not hard because I always taught it to my students through demonstrations, real objects and pictures. But explaining abstract objects was a sort of dilemma that sometimes required a lot of association of ideas.

As teaching grammar rules directly should totally be avoided, I taught grammar inductively by introducing and generalizing examples from which my students could infer the rule. I usually wrote the examples and then asked them what they noticed. While discussing the tense, I used to underline the conjugated verbs with different subjects. And by reaching the conclusion that the first group "are" for example is conjugated with certain endings in the present simple tense while the second and third have different endings, I asked them about the meaning of the examples written on the board. Obviously, more examples were always needed to introduce irregular verbs.

In intermediate and advanced levels, I sometimes combined grammar and culture together. For instance, I once had to teach them some vocabulary about the Italian cuisine and the imperative tense too. So, I made a recipe with all verbs conjugated in the imperative tense, and after introducing and discussing the idea thoroughly, I divided my class into small groups asking them to use the flash cards

I had previously provided to make more recipes. This way, my students were able to use both the imperative tense and the new vocabulary related to cooking, condiments and ingredients.

Regarding the conversations, one of the main demands of my students was to speak Italian flawlessly and eventually that became one of my major goals. And since the DM includes high oral interaction and spontaneous use of the target language, I dedicated, through the three phases, major attention to conversations. I always started the lessons with a dialogue using modern conversational style (always in the target language). I posed questions and they provided answers and eventually switched roles with them so that they were the ones who should ask and I replied to their questions. At the end of each lesson, they were all divided into small groups and asked for role plays where –if the theme was traveling for example- one had to be the passenger and the other was the pilot while the third was the air hostess. Another group could be formed from tourists and residents. Role plays varied according to the themes of the lesson.

## **DM with some technology**

As my students' proficiency level started to get higher, I decided to introduce some technology to my class; I sometimes adopted the flipping classroom approach (known also as the inverted classroom) where I had to propose a model in which students had to gain first-exposure learning prior to class. Thus, I had to provide my students with a variety of tools to gain first exposure to material outside of class: textbook readings, some videos, Power point presentations with voice over and printable Power point slides. This approach was very successful in making the students more motivated. In addition, it saved so much time. Accordingly, class time was then spent on activities that encouraged students to apply the concepts that have been already introduced to them even before coming to class.

During the last course that I taught to my students, I had a lesson with a very rich them; the various Italian dialects. After revealing the different Italian dialects and discussing them briefly, I had to choose one and focus, which was not so easy. I decided to make this lesson as friendly as possible. So, I made them listen to one of the most famous songs sung by Alberto Sordi in roman dialect. At first, they watched him singing it on YouTube, monitoring his pronunciation and lip sync and then I made them listen to it with the lyrics written in front of them once in roman and once in standard. Finally, I asked them to state the differences that they had noticed between the standard Italian and the roman dialect. I have to admit that this was among the most interesting classes we have ever had.

## **Conclusion**

I started that course with 12 true beginners in 2011. All of them were motivated and very keen to learn the Italian language through the Berlitz methodology, and they got promoted to the next levels. As the curriculum started to be more serious and demanding and the approach became more advanced, 4 students were discouraged and decided to quit. Two of them perceived the DM as an obstacle rather than a helper, stating that the strategy to which they got used at school was much more efficient and convenient for them. Eight students continued the path and managed to speak flawless Italian. In January 2013, four of my students got a 2 year contract in their company's branch in Italy due to their high language proficiency.

Based on personal experience and my teaching practice, I think that the DM, just like the GTM, has some advantages and disadvantages.

Although the DM, especially in teaching grammar, is time consuming and also a little bit difficult to apply when it comes to abstract vocabulary, I found this method effective and fruitful, as it engages both teacher and student in the teaching/learning process. Moreover, providing examples and working with the students on discovering the grammatical rule is more practical than reading it from a grammar textbook or even writing it directly on the board. One of the disadvantages that I was concerned about while adopting the DM method was that the writing skill is somehow postponed till later and sometimes overlooked, which is –from my point of view- a point of weakness, because it is essential to practice all four skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing) if we, instructors, are willing to have students who actively take part of the communication process.

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