

FACILITATING ITALIAN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AMONG ROMANIAN SPEAKERS IN AN ONLINE SETTING: THE ADVANTAGES OF INTEGRATING DIGITAL RESOURCES

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Abstract

This study examines the integration of digital tools and flipped classroom strategies in the online delivery of an A1-level Italian course for Romanian speakers. Using an online course from a well-known platform, instruction combined multimedia input, Romanian-language scaffolding, and cross-linguistic comparisons to support early language acquisition. Supplementary resources such as collaborative activities and gamified platforms enhanced vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, and learner engagement. Feedback indicated that flexible preparation, multimodal materials, and immediate corrective support contributed significantly to the learners' progress, with English proficiency aiding access to external resources. The findings highlight the effectiveness of a digitally enriched, learner-centered design for beginner-level Italian language instruction in online education.

Keywords: online course, cross-linguistic comparisons, digital pedagogy, multimedia input, feedback

JEL Classification: I21, I23

1. Introduction

Italian language is widely recognized for its melodic and expressive qualities, characterized by phonetic clarity and rhythmic intonation, making it appealing to a diverse audience, including business professionals, travelers, and language enthusiasts. While Standard Italian is promoted for official and educational purposes, there is a growing movement to preserve regional languages and dialects such as Neapolitan, Sicilian, Venetian, Lombard, and Sardinian, as integral components of Italy's cultural heritage [1]; [2].

Globally, Italian ranks among the top 25 most spoken languages, with approximately 67 million native speakers in the European Union and up to 85 million speakers worldwide [3]; [4]. Although its global reach may not match that of English or Mandarin, Italian has significant value due to its rich artistic, literary, musical, and architectural heritage.

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Proficiency in Italian provides us with direct access to these cultural treasures in their original form.

Beyond cultural attractions, Italian offers strategic advantages in various professional fields. Italy's global influence in fashion, automotive design, gastronomy, and the fine arts enhances the utility of Italian in international markets. Consequently, individuals are often motivated to learn Italian due to personal relationships, such as family ties or romantic partnerships, as well as professional collaborations.

From a cognitive perspective, bilingualism has been associated with enhanced cognitive reserve, potentially delaying the onset of age-related cognitive decline and conditions like dementia [5]; [6]. Linguistically, Italian shares significant structural and lexical similarities with other Romance languages, including French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. This typological proximity facilitates cross-linguistic transfer, making Italian more approachable for students who already speak another Romance language, as they can utilize familiar grammatical patterns and cognates.

2. The Acquisition of Italian by Romanian Speakers

Third language (L3) acquisition is a well-established domain within the field of multilingualism. It investigates the processes by which individuals who already possess proficiency in two or more languages acquire an additional language and examines how their existing linguistic repertoire influences this learning trajectory. The acquisition of Italian as a third language involves a dynamic interplay of linguistic proximity, cognitive processes, and pedagogical practices. This section draws on research in language transfer, language proximity, cross-linguistic transfer, and the role of technology in facilitating language acquisition.

Romanian and Italian share a high degree of structural, lexical, and phonological similarity, which lowers the learning barrier for native Romanian speakers engaging with Italian as a third language. One of the most prominent features aiding mutual intelligibility is the abundance of cognates (i.e. words that are etymologically related and often retain similar meanings and forms across both languages). Examples such as *mamă* (Romanian) and *mamma* (Italian), or *casă* (Romanian) and *casa* (Italian) facilitate intuitive vocabulary recognition for students. These linguistic parallels often allow Romanian speakers to infer the meanings of unfamiliar Italian words with minimal effort. Furthermore, both languages exhibit similar verb conjugation systems, including regular and irregular patterns, as well as subject-verb-object sentence structure, for example, the Romanian sentence "*Ea vorbește limba italiană*" and its equivalent sentence in Italian "*Lei parla l'Italiano*". While no Italian dialect is directly close to Romanian, there are notable linguistic similarities between Romanian and certain southern and central Italian dialects particularly in vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics due to their shared Latin roots [7]; [8].

Syntactic parallels such as noun-adjective agreement and gendered articles provide students with a familiar grammatical framework. For instance, constructions like *un câine frumos* in Romanian and *un cane bello* in Italian reflect almost identical structural logic, making them easily transferable. However, one important grammatical difference lies in the gender system: while Italian operates with two grammatical genders (masculine and feminine), Romanian maintains three (masculine, feminine, and neuter). This asymmetry may lead to confusion, particularly when Romanian neuter or feminine nouns correspond to masculine nouns in Italian, potentially interfering with article and adjective agreement during production (“libro” in Italian is a masculine noun whereas its Romanian equivalent “carte” is a feminine noun; “giorno” in Italian is a masculine noun whereas its Romanian equivalent “zi” is a feminine noun).

As for the pronunciation of words, Romanian and Italian both maintain five core vowel sounds with relatively stable pronunciations, and their consonant systems and stress patterns follow predictable and comparable rules. This phonetic proximity greatly aids Romanian speakers in acquiring accurate Italian pronunciation and prosody. However, as [9] points out, second language learners often face challenges in phonology, vocabulary, and grammar due to interference from their first language (L1) habits. Consequently, according to [10], the comprehensible input hypothesis posits that language acquisition is most effective when students are exposed to input that is both understandable and slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. A multimodal strategy that incorporates such input across diverse, authentic contexts promotes repeated encounters with key language structures, thereby supporting both understanding and practical use.

[11] provides insights into the dynamics of L3 acquisition by examining the roles of the first language (L1) and second language (L2) in L3 production. His findings reveal that learners often rely on their L2, especially when it shares similarities with the L3. However, when acquiring a third language, Romanian speakers may experience language interference by transferring linguistic elements from their native language to the Italian language. A common example is the phonological interference, such as the pronunciation of the letter *h*. In Italian, *h* is silent, while in Romanian it is clearly articulated. As a result, Romanian speakers at A1 level of Italian proficiency may overpronounce *h* in Italian words like *ho*, *hai*, and *ha* (forms of the verb *essere*), reflecting transfer from their native phonological system.

Other researchers seek to understand the broader conditions under which linguistic transfer occurs. Specifically, in a systematic review they examine what factors determine when, how, and to what extent previous linguistic experience, whether from the first language, second language, or both, affects the initial stages and beyond of adult third language (L3) acquisition [12]. Finally, [13] advocate for linguistically responsive teaching practices in multilingual settings. Their work emphasizes the need for educators to recognize and leverage learners’ existing linguistic resources, promoting a more inclusive and effective language learning environment.

Recognizing the role of sociocultural engagement in virtual settings, the integration of digital tools and platforms expands opportunities for meaningful interaction and personalized learning, enhancing both the accessibility and effectiveness of online Italian instruction. Digital platforms have revolutionized language learning by offering flexible, learner-centered approaches. Tools such as Duolingo, and Coursera provide interactive content, immediate feedback, and self-paced progression, which are valid elements that support effective acquisition of Italian. Among freely available tools for Italian language learning, the course “Parliamo in Italiano” on Edulia Treccani – Scuola² stands out for its comprehensive and methodologically sound structure. Developed by one of Italy’s leading linguistic institutions, Treccani, the course is designed for adult and young adult learners acquiring Italian as a foreign language, and spans four levels aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), covering A1–A2 and B1–B2 proficiency levels [14].

3. Instructional Design for A1-Level Italian: Integrating Digital Tools in an Online Setting

This section outlines the instructional design and teaching strategies employed in the online delivery (via Microsoft Teams) of an A1-level Italian course for Romanian speakers, with particular attention to the integration of external digital tools to enhance third language acquisition. The course, *Parliamo in Italiano*, was used to teach fifteen Romanian learners whose second language is English. The primary objective was to guide learners toward successfully completing the A1 level of Italian proficiency within three months.

To ensure the successful implementation of online resources, it was crucial to consider a well-prepared instructional design and the digital competence of both the teacher and the learners. For the teacher, digital competence involved not only the technical ability to navigate and use various educational technologies but also the pedagogical knowledge to integrate these tools meaningfully into the learning process. This included selecting appropriate resources, adapting content for online delivery, and providing ongoing support for them in using these tools. For a learner, digital competence meant having the skills to engage with the online course materials, participating in digital activities, troubleshooting common technical issues, and collaborating with peers through online platforms.

The online course supports both guided instruction and independent study, making it suitable for classroom integration as well as autonomous learning [15]. What distinguishes “Parliamo in Italiano” is its integration of multimedia content, interactive exercises, and authentic spoken input. Each thematic unit is centered around communicative situations drawn from everyday life, beginning with a video sequence that features authentic spoken

² Source: <https://inclasse.edulia.it/resources?type=parliamoitaliano>

Italian and is available with or without subtitles [16]. These video inputs are intended to spark learner motivation while activating cognitive and perceptual mechanisms essential to language acquisition [17]. Morphosyntactic, pragmatic, conversational, and lexical features of Italian are contextualized within these scenarios and further explored through a range of focused tasks within each unit [18], as shown below.

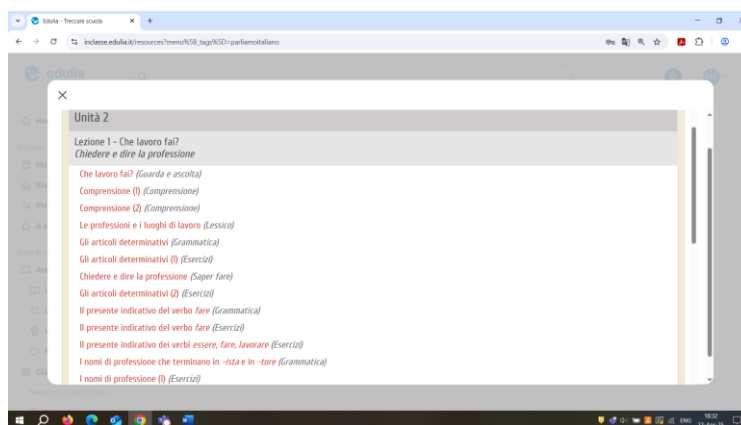


Figure 1: Screenshot of the overview of activities in Unit 2, Lesson 1 from the “Parliamo in Italiano” course, Edulia Treccani - Scuola³

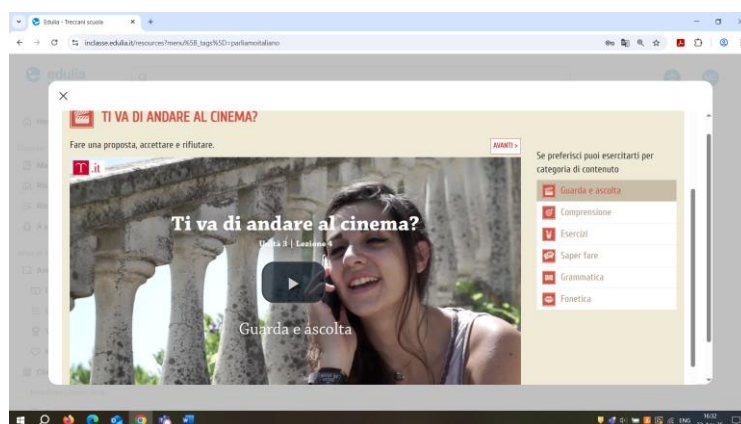


Figure 2: Screenshot of a Lesson Interface from “Parliamo in Italiano” course, Edulia Treccani - Scuola: “Ti va di andare al cinema?”⁴

³ Source: https://inclasse.edulia.it/resources?menu%5B_tags%5D=parliamoitaliano

⁴ Source: https://inclasse.edulia.it/resources?menu%5B_tags%5D=parliamoitaliano

To achieve the objectives of an instructional design, the teacher selected the lesson “Ti va di andare al cinema?” from the “Parliamo in Italiano” course (see Figure 2). This lesson introduces foundational communicative competencies relevant to everyday social interactions, including making and refusing invitations, expressing availability, and employing modal verbs such as “potere”, “volere”, and “dovere”.

The Flipped Classroom Model

In recent years, the flipped classroom model has gained significant attention in language education as a means of enhancing learner engagement, autonomy, and active classroom participation. The flipped model, as defined by [19], enhances adult learners’ engagement by shifting initial input and rule discovery to individual preparation, allowing class time to focus on communicative practice and collaborative tasks.

In the context of Italian as a foreign language (IFL), the model has been applied across educational levels, including beginner (A1) courses, with promising results. For example, a foundational study examining the integration of flipped learning in a university-level beginner Italian course, emphasizes that the flipped model, when aligned with the principles of inductive learning and communicative pedagogy, can enhance learner autonomy and in-class collaboration through a cyclical structure of pre-class video content, interactive class practice, and post-class reinforcement [20].

Adding to recent innovations, Carmelo Galati’s “Gratis!: A Flipped-Classroom and Active Learning Approach to Italian” offers an open-access flipped classroom resource specifically designed for Italian language instruction [21]. The textbook integrates asynchronous learning materials such as video lectures and digital exercises with active, student-centered classroom activities aimed at developing communicative competence. Expanding the application of technology-enhanced flipped models, Laura Capitani’s blended learning course at Maastricht University offers another example of successful integration. As reported by [22], Capitani combines Babbel’s online modules with supplementary resources and individualized Skype sessions: students first engage independently with structured Babbel lessons, then reinforce their skills through additional practice activities, before participating in one-to-one tutorials focused on communicative practice. This model not only promotes learner autonomy and flexibility but also personalizes instruction, allowing students to progress at their own pace and receive immediate, targeted feedback [23].

Finally, in their study on the broader adoption of flipped learning in Italian schools, [24] report that educators employ the model to foster student-centered learning environments. Their findings suggest that technology accessibility and teacher training are pivotal factors influencing the model’s success. Although their study does not focus solely on Italian language instruction, it reflects the growing institutional support for flipped pedagogies in Italy.

Implementation

Prior to the online session, learners engaged with the video of the lesson and accompanying comprehension activities. At the beginner stage, they are still developing a basic understanding of the new language. To support this process, the teacher initially explained key lesson concepts in Romanian, ensuring that students understood essential vocabulary, grammatical rules, and sentence structures related to making invitations, expressing refusals, and offering alternatives. This approach allowed students to grasp the material more easily, drawing on their familiarity with Romanian linguistic structures. For example, when teaching the conjugation of verbs in the present tense, the teacher highlighted the similarities between the two languages, helping students recognize the shared patterns and structure. Drawing explicit cross-linguistic comparisons during instruction can enhance comprehension, reduce cognitive load, and promote positive transfer from Romanian to Italian in the early stages of communicative language use. A comparison between the two languages reveals important similarities that can facilitate the acquisition of these competencies. Both Italian and Romanian, as Romance languages, use specific verbs to express ability (*potere / a putea*), necessity (*dovere / a trebui*), and desire (*volere / a vrea*). However, while Italian typically combines these modal verbs directly with an infinitive (e.g., *Posso leggere il tuo nome* – “I can read your name”), Romanian often introduces an additional particle (*să*) before the infinitive (e.g., *Trebuie să citesc mesajul* – “I must read the message”). Understanding these structural differences can help them transfer existing knowledge while adapting to the syntactic patterns of Italian.

While the course provides structured and comprehensible content, its implementation in an online environment could be significantly enhanced by incorporating supplementary digital tools and platforms. For instance, the video of the lesson was replayed during class with strategic pauses to facilitate clarification and pronunciation drills. Learners were also introduced to supplementary resources, such as “The Beginner Podcast series” from “News in Slow Italian”⁵, which is specifically designed for A1 level of proficiency. This podcast delivers news content at a slower pace, using simplified language to support language acquisition [25]. To reinforce their understanding of modal verbs such as *dovere*, *potere*, and *volere*, the teacher incorporated an interactive digital grammar quiz focused on practicing these modal verbs, which are essential for expressing intentions and managing invitations. In this exercise (see Figure 3), they completed sentences by selecting the correct conjugated verb form based on context such as *Perché Francesco non ____ venire alla festa?* (*potere*) or *Noi ____ vedere quel bosco* (*volere*)⁶.

These structured yet contextually rich exercises provided immediate, scaffolded practice with high-frequency verbs crucial for A1-level communicative competence. The visually clear interface and focused input helped support the development of grammatical accuracy

⁵ Source: <https://www.newsinslowitalian.com/>

⁶ Source: <https://www.newsinslowitalian.com/series/grammar/27/186/quiz/2>

while maintaining learner engagement. Although the platforms support a limited selection of languages, excluding Romanian, they were able to successfully engage with the tasks thanks to their intermediate English proficiency (ranging from B1 to B2), minimizing potential language barriers. They are increasingly accustomed to navigating various digital platforms for diverse purposes and their familiarity with online environments likely facilitated their engagement with the tasks and enabled them to manage the technological aspects of the learning process with greater ease.

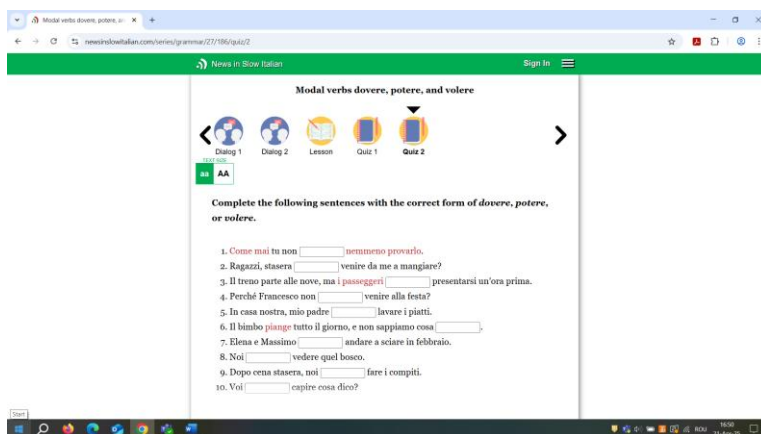


Figure 3: Screenshot of a grammar activity from “News in Slow Italian”, The Beginner Podcast series, practicing modal verbs⁷

Social Interaction

To enhance social interaction, the teacher adopted an innovative approach using Microsoft Teams. Learners were paired in breakout rooms to role-play invitations and refusals in real-time. One illustrative A1-level breakout activity, titled “Inviting a Friend Out”, focused on the use of functional expressions like *Ti va di...?*; *Che ne dici di...?* together with the modal verbs (*potere*, *volere*, *dovere*). To model the task, the teacher performed a brief sample dialogue with a student: *Che ne dici di andare al cinema sabato?* / *Mi dispiace, non posso. Vado a trovare mia madre.* / *Allora, facciamo domenica?* / *Va bene, volentieri!*. Key expressions were shared via screen or chat to support comprehension. Students, working in pairs, were then instructed to co-construct a short dialogue including one invitation, one polite refusal with a reason, and one accepted alternative, using at least three of the target structures. The activity followed a structured timing breakdown: 2 minutes to enter breakout rooms, 3 minutes to review instructions, 8 minutes to write and rehearse the dialogue, 5 minutes to perform and self-correct, and 2 minutes to return to the main room. This

⁷ Source: <https://www.newsinslowitalian.com/series/grammar/27/186/quiz/2>

scaffolded role-play not only reinforced functional language use but also promoted peer collaboration and real-time negotiation of meaning in a communicative context. In alignment with the sociocultural theory and the Interaction Hypothesis, these dialogic exchanges played a crucial role in facilitating the internalization of syntactic structures and pragmatic norms, particularly among adult learners capable of metalinguistic reflection [26]; [27].

As part of a personalization-oriented technique, students were tasked with writing customized dialogues in which they invited peers to events of personal interest (e.g., concerts, dinners, sports, etc.). These dialogues were composed and shared collaboratively via the Files section of Microsoft Teams. For instance, one pair created a conversation in which a student invited a classmate to a live concert using the expression “*Ti va di venire al concerto sabato sera?*”, followed by a polite refusal and an alternative proposal. Peers were encouraged to view, comment on, and suggest edits directly within the shared document, fostering a sense of co-authorship and reflective learning.

In parallel, the teacher provided targeted written feedback through the document’s comment feature, praising accurate usage of expressions (e.g., *Benissimo! Ottimo uso di “Ti va di...”*) and gently correcting errors related to syntax or verb conjugation. In some instances, teachers added reformulations or guiding questions (e.g., *Potresti aggiungere un’alternativa più specifica?*) to promote revision and metalinguistic awareness. This scaffolded feedback loop enhanced the pedagogical value of the activity by supporting both accuracy and learner autonomy. [28] emphasizes that learners engage more deeply with materials that connect to their social identities and experiences. In this context, the opportunity for personalization combined with collaborative authorship and timely feedback, made the language practice both meaningful and memorable.

Finally, to reinforce vocabulary acquisition and grammatical structures introduced during instruction, as well as to sustain learner motivation in the online environment, the teacher developed interactive exercises to review the introduced vocabulary and structures. For example, they were tasked with matching expressions to appropriate responses (e.g., *Ti va di uscire?* → *Mi dispiace, non posso*), completing sentence gaps using modal verbs (e.g., *Voglio andare al cinema, ma non posso, devo studiare*), and selecting context-appropriate invitations from multiple-choice options, such as:

Ce înseamnă “*Ti va di andare al cinema?*”

- A) Vrei să mergi la cinema?
- B) Mergi la cinema?
- C) Poți să mergi la cinema?
- D) Nu vreau să merg la cinema.

Care este răspunsul corect la invitația “*Ti va di mangiare fuori stasera?*” dacă nu poți merge?

- A) Mi dispiace, non posso.

- B) Va bene, ci vediamo alle 7.
- C) Non voglio.
- D) Sì, mi piace mangiare fuori.

Care dintre următoarele este un refuz politicos la o invitație?

- A) Sì, con piacere!
- B) Mi dispiace, non posso.
- C) Andiamo!
- D) Mi piace molto l'idea.

These questions helped them connect vocabulary and expressions to their real-world equivalents in Romanian, reinforcing comprehension and recall.

4. Insights and Perspectives

Requesting feedback allows instructors to ensure that their teaching aligns with learners' needs and to adjust accordingly. In this study, the teacher determined that the most practical moment to collect feedback was at the end of the lesson, using the Microsoft Teams chat function. At this point, all had already engaged with the content and were better positioned to reflect on the effectiveness of the session. The teacher prepared questions to allow them to reflect on different aspects of their learning experience, from content preparation to engagement and interaction. Key questions included: *How effective did you find the online resources in helping you prepare for the lesson?*; *How did the online format impact your participation?*; *What part of the lesson did you find most engaging or useful? Why?*; *Were the multimedia resources helpful in reinforcing the lesson content? If yes, how?* and *What would you recommend for progressing to the next level of Italian proficiency?*

They actively shared their insights, and the teacher observed that, in an online environment, they tended to provide feedback more readily than students participating in face-to-face settings. To illustrate this, they emphasized that access to pre-class video materials and multimedia resources enabled them to prepare at their own pace, fostering a sense of autonomy and boosting their confidence during live sessions. This flexible preparatory phase supported deeper engagement with the content and promoted mental readiness for interactive classroom activities.

Moreover, they found the combination of visual and auditory input particularly beneficial for vocabulary retention and comprehension, as it allowed for more effective internalization of new structures. In-class pauses during video playback were especially appreciated as they offered moments to reflect on the language, identify grammatical patterns, and consolidate their understanding of modal verbs and functional expressions through guided scaffolding.

Finally, the integration of external resources that give access to grammar tutorials and contextualized video examples was also perceived as highly supportive. Most of these tools

were accessed in English, due to the limited availability of Romanian-language materials on mainstream platforms. Collaborative in-class activities, including role-plays, dialogue construction, and peer interaction in breakout rooms (via Microsoft Teams), were considered meaningful opportunities for communicative practice and personalization of the language. The use of collaborative digital tools further encouraged creative expression and enabled them to receive written feedback, which they regarded as particularly useful for developing grammatical accuracy and reflective learning strategies. Gamified platforms were also highlighted as effective tools for enhancing engagement. These tools encouraged active recall in a low-pressure environment, and the immediacy of feedback they provided was especially valued for allowing timely self-correction and reinforcement of vocabulary and grammar.

Although the course was delivered online and entirely in Italian, posing occasional challenges, they felt that the availability of support materials in English effectively compensated for the absence of Romanian-language resources. Their ability to draw on English-language explanations and examples was identified as a key factor in their progress. They also observed that their mother tongue, Romanian, positively influenced their acquisition of Italian, particularly in the development of speaking skills. They identified structural and lexical similarities between the two Romance languages, which facilitated pronunciation, the intuitive use of cognates, and the construction of basic sentence patterns. However, several learners expressed a preference for a blended learning approach, suggesting that a combination of online and in-person instruction could enhance the learning experience. Such a format would foster stronger social connections and encourage more spontaneous spoken interaction.

5. Conclusion

The Italian language has both cultural significance and professional value, particularly in globally influential sectors such as tourism, fashion, design, and gastronomy. For Romanian speakers, Italian acquisition is notably facilitated by the structural, lexical, and phonological similarities between the two Romance languages, which support accelerated comprehension and production through the recognition of cognates and comparable grammatical patterns.

The design and delivery of the A1 lesson, conducted online, via Microsoft Teams, demonstrated the pedagogical effectiveness of digitally mediated instruction. The integration of external digital resources, such as “News in Slow Italian” and gamified learning platforms, further enriched the multimodal, learner-centered environment, promoting scaffolded development and fostering autonomy. Learners consistently emphasized the benefits of combining visual, auditory, and interactive content, which contributed to improved vocabulary retention, grammatical understanding, and pronunciation accuracy. Although the absence of Romanian-language support materials

presented some challenges, participants successfully utilized their English proficiency as a mediating tool in their third language (L3) acquisition.

Future adaptations of the course could benefit from a blended learning model, combining online flexibility with in-person sessions to enhance interpersonal communication, strengthen group cohesion, and boost learner motivation through spontaneous interaction. In conclusion, the instructional model employed in this study offers a flexible and effective framework for beginner-level Italian learning in online contexts, leveraging digital tools and learner-centered strategies to support communicative competence in third language acquisition.

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