

# Teaching Italian With The Virtual Reality Of Video\*

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## Abstract

Today's technology allows the teacher to create a more realistic learning environment with the classroom using film. In this paper the theoretical basis and the methodology for application is presented for teaching Italian, or any other foreign language, using feature films, both classic and modern, and special interest documentary type videos, such as Jamie Oliver's Great Italian Escape. Using the film is perceived as entertainment by the students, and as reality by the brain, making these both fun and more useful than books. Organization and flexibility are emphasized as it is better to involve students in creating their own learning environment whenever possible. The students enjoy and take ownership of the learning, thus increasing efficacy. It is more work than using a book, but the benefits are many. Students carry the learning into their daily lives and integrate it with their other activities and they learn faster when they are deeply engaged.

**Keywords:** Language teaching, Italian, video.

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\* Article. URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/83>

## 1. Theoretical Basis

Learning language is very natural when we are children and we learn our first, and sometimes a second, without instruction by using it, making mistakes and playing with it. Using language is fun, but sometimes the fun ends when we get to school. Some teachers turn language learning, even our own first language, back into work. We still live with the outdated idea that learning must be hard work, and must NOT be fun. Well learning happens faster when the learner is intensely interested, and that is fun (Burmark, 2004; Robin, 2008). Teachers who are very creative, flexible and highly organized will keep the fun in while the students learn. Knowing your audience is the key to great entertainment, and great teachers use this to guide their selection of material so the students will strive to learn to understand it. Then they take ownership and work with the instructor. Picking materials that fit the age, culture and interests of the class members is the beginning and using activities that students like pushes to the finish line. If the teacher can prepare many different plans ahead the class can help to decide what will be used, thereby becoming invested into the activity. This paper focuses upon teaching Italian with film, but any language teaching can work with this plan and many of the methods will also work for other subjects. The choices of materials available for use in teaching Italian are many, but they fall into only a few categories: feature film, classic or modern; animations (only recommended for advanced since the students will not get the benefit of seeing the words pronounced); instruction video for hobbies, such as cooking, sports, art or crafts etc.; classic educational films, old ones that are fascinating, or new ones by BBC or PBS and equivalents (available for purchase on the Internet); and television shows. Some films supply all the information for the lesson directly, while others work well to introduce new topics to propel the students into a new lesson. The focus for this is paper narrative film, such as feature or classic films and special interest films, since the same activities apply to all.

Classic films such as *Cinema Paradiso* by Giuseppe Tornatore or *Piccolo Diavolo* draw the student into a virtual world and the language learning becomes a tool to understanding the intricacies of plot and characterization (Dreon, Kerper, and Landis 2011, 4). Documentaries may be less involving as the narrative can be very loose, but some, like *Planet Earth*, are fantastically eye-catching, and provide information that can be used to introduce deeper topics. Television series' for hobbies, such as cooking, gardening etc. might work better with the older age groups. I have a some classes of Culinary Arts students studying ab-intio Italian who become totally involved with Jamie Oliver's *Great Italian Escape* and then want to see more cooking shows in Italian as they progress. Old educational films in the target language

are also a lot of fun as they are so dated the students love to see them. Any kind of film adds visual and auditory cues that are not present in text alone, while a narrative context will provide many other clues to meaning (Lee 2009, 57). Narrative or story is a major component of this learning style. Story affects people more intimately than informational communication can do (Louise 1994). Using video the students travel with a highly respected chef, watching him worry, make mistakes and learn. In classic films they identify with the characters. They also know that the language they hear is not always perfect, so they struggle with Jamie, straining to understand the Italian, just as he does. Then when they understand the Italian, as confirmed by Oliver or when the teacher does so by showing the clip with subtitles, a rush of pleasure is visibly apparent that is far more powerful than simple questions in a classroom or conversational practice can promote. Students become immersed in movies so that they feel enough fear to shiver, enough joy to grin and enough sadness to cry with the characters, and this causes a strong emotional response, which enhances memory (Paivio 1969).

Learning without engagement is soon lost. Fun while learning increases the effectiveness of the learning, but strong emotions also work, whatever kind they be. Vuilleumier et. al. state that "...emotional information is favoured in terms of attention (Vuilleumier, Armony, & Dolan, 2003) and memory (Kensinger & Corkin, 2003), ..... and "emotional material may undergo more in-depth processing." (Buchanan et al., 2000) . There may be a biochemical agent at work here, since memory is usually enhanced by emotions of any kind (Berry, Schmied, and Schrock 2008, 437). The emotional material or vocalizations may be positive or negative, but both are more strongly remembered (Doan 2010, 1065). Strong emotions which are less than traumatic enhance learning. However, learning should be fun, because it most often brings the students back for more. The other component which plays an important part in learning from video is narrative (Marston 2011, 16). By deriving meaning from narrative we make sense of our world and create "real life references" Bruner (1987, p.18) tell us that, "stories about one's experiences and the experiences of others are the fundamental portions of human memory, knowledge and social communication." We construct our memories in this same way. Therefore, using story that involves the students, as in the story of Jamie Oliver's travels in Italy, has a very positive effect. This is truer of classic films, or even contemporary films of quality, since the narrative has become emotional rather than informational. The content also is a little different, and the student learns ordinary language that people use every day, not just functional phrases for carrying out tasks or soliciting help. These words can actually be used in conversations the students might really have in their own mother tongue, and the more they use the language in a realistic setting, the more they remember. It often becomes unnecessary to memorize vocabulary, because it takes fewer repetitions when the language

has a real target. The author did one short test of this hypothesis in class by introducing five relatively easy words in a list with no context and five slightly more difficult words using a rebus and pictures. Then groups of students were asked to make a short story, skit or joke using the five more difficult words, and to remember the five easier words for a test the next day. Each group then presented their creative work to the class. The following day an exam was passed out using all ten words. Of 27 students, all students passed the exam, and more than twenty students got all five of the more difficult words correct when asked to translate from English and then use each word in a sentence. However, 22 of the students missed at least one of the easy words that were not really used. The last question on the exam was how long they had studied for it and if they studied all ten words. 18 of the students had not studied the second list, yet got all of them right, while 4 of the 18 missed one or more of the easy ones. Four students had studied all ten, but got more of the harder words correct than the easy ones. The other five students admitted that they had not really studied, but they all got more of the second group correct than the first. Over all the average score on the first groups was 4.3 of the 5 and 4.8 of the second five. This represents 86% versus 96% on the two different groups. While these findings are not scientific, as they were loosely constructs, and the test group was really too small to be valid, it does present anecdotal evidence enough for this teach to move more into using language than studying it. Most textbooks teach vocabulary in order from easiest to most difficult, but it may be more effective to teach it in order of need, from most often needed for use to least often needed. The meanings of words tend to “stick” when they are “experienced” as in the context of the virtual reality the brain constructs when we cry or laugh or shiver in a movie. Just like dreams, spectator sports or video games the brain treats them as real and stores all the connections to the languages within easy reach (Berry, Schmied, and Schrock 2008, 437). Narrative is powerful and we react to it powerfully. The listener understands better and learns more by listening to a story. MBA schools understand this, as they generally use case studies, and Harvard tends to use them in every class possible. Case studies are just another type of story.

## **2. Organization**

When using film, the first class will likely be devoted to introducing the choices and getting the students to pick their materials. Then activities are introduced and some choices presented and made. For example, the decision of whether to watch with subtitles on or off first should be decided by the students, and many will want to try both ways. A short demonstration can be done in class. If the teacher picks a clip where there are many visual and auditory cues to meaning it will encourage students to watch first with subtitles off. Since much of the Italian

vocabulary has English cognates the students will likely be able to guess many of the words. The clip can be run then rewound and gone through slowly discussing what the students think is going on. Watching with subtitles on first for most people is easier, but they will not learn as fast or as much (Harji, Woods, and Alavi 2010, 37). By this demonstration the students will see that it is not that difficult to guess the meanings (Izadpanah 2010, 47). One word of caution is that in a living language, meaning is not static and is coloured by context, so meaning is open to discussion and each individual will likely interpret a little differently. That is just fine, since the aim is communication, not passing a vocabulary test. The same holds true for other subjects. Many films or documentaries that can be used for other subjects leave considerable room for class discussion, and often there is no “right” answer, only an answer that is more acceptable to more people.

By teaching language students to extrapolate meaning they learn how to take advantage of the stronger learning by discovery (Nikitina 2011). Using language live forces students to try to communicate even when they may not know what they see as the “right” words. This will also help them to read without a dictionary. A class database for vocabulary can be a great project and the teacher can distribute vocabulary lists with only the vocabulary words for each week. The students can decide how to figure out the meaning. However, each student or group of students should be responsible for adding some vocabulary to the class database. The definition should include usage examples that use the word in the same manner as the definition, and should not be copied from a dictionary. If the students understand that meaning varies by context, they will become literate a lot more quickly. All kinds of activities can be developed to present an opportunity for real communication with other speakers of Italian (Mississippi State Dept. of Education, Jackson. 2001).

Narrative enhances cognitive processing. The audience suspends disbelief and becomes completely immersed in the story. The brain cannot tell the difference once the learner becomes emotionally involved. Just like dreams it will be treated as real, and the emotional reaction will intensify the experience and recall (Albrecht et al 2009 ). The stories of classic Italian films are rich in narrative and the students observed by this author love them. Whatever films the teacher has available can be presented to the students and some chosen for use. Cinema Paradiso is a well known Academy Award winner. Walter Mathau stars in the comedy about a little demon in *Piccolo Diavolo*. The heart rending story of *La Vita è Bella* is about WWII and the experience of one Jewish Italian family as they struggled to survive. The teacher can give a slightly more detailed description than is here. After all, the teacher will

know the films intimately.

Television shows devoted to a special interest of the class work extremely well for a different reason based upon something else the student wants to learn. This and narrative films help the student learn to think in Italian (Whiting and Granoff 2010). In the case of special interest films, as in the case of my classes who are studying culinary arts and also learning ab-intio Italian, it becomes possible to connect the language learning to real life when the special interest coincides with their own lives, thus solidifying the connections made to vocabulary. The integration of visuals with text and sound enhances student comprehension (Burmark, 2004; Robin, 2008). When content and connections are relevant to students' lives it creates meaning and purpose for the study, bringing the language into their lives as Dewey suggested (1912).

### 3. Procedures

The teacher will develop his or her own way to work with these films. Once the Italian vocabulary has been distributed or is displayed for students to copy, the teacher can introduce the words in context and get the student to try to guess the meaning in class. Then review can be included as opportunity presents with the film clip chosen. Once the basic vocabulary is acquired, the teacher can add words by asking questions. Some students will start taking down the questions as they hear them and note what meaning they understood. The teacher can suggest this as soon as one student does it, thereby praising the initiative of that student. If nobody does it after several weeks, which would be surprising, then it can attributed to the ubiquitous "some of you". The questions asked while running the film clip can include the five "W"s: who what where when and why, and invite discussion. Another way to connect the learning is to ask students to identify what cannot be seen, but can be imagined. Such as smell, sounds, texture, temperature etc. Once the students advance enough to have sufficient vocabulary for intangibles, thoughts and intent can be discussed. All of this increases vocabulary by making cross connections (Lee 2009, 57). It should be understood that some students will have a lot of fun with this and that being correct on the "smell " in the room is not necessary, because the teacher has asked what they think, but the teacher can ask them to explain, getting another laugh at times.

Students of any foreign language need to have a dictionary in the target language. I suggest Italian to Italian for my students, and they need to be committed to using it. Most new words in a definition are the answers they want and the other words are repeated in every definition of the same type. Students will begin to think in Italian as they do this, and acquire the true

meaning or the words. This is another reason to introduce a film clip before giving out the prepared vocabulary. Pointing to different things and asking questions is fun and does not have to involve any acknowledged right or wrong. When the teacher follows immediately with the right words, praising anyone who guessed right and encouraging by not telling anyone they are WRONG, it becomes a more informal collaborative discussion. If nobody guesses the teacher can translate quickly and move on. The reverse can also be done: ask the question in English and let the students pick out the right parts, actions or objects. The teacher can follow each question with the translation to Italian and eventually just use Italian. The students will often follow suit by answering in all Italian. If not the teacher can encourage this by translating anything the students say to Italian, quickly and without fuss, as if it were expected. There are also plenty of visual cues even in special interest films. If applied to other subjects questions will be different, but discussion will work and be something the students value.

Food is central to culture, as is language. Therefore they are central to who we are and this helps us understand why these videos work so well. The lives of these culinary students focus on food. If they want to be really great chefs, they must understand the culture of the food they cook, and Jamie Oliver went to Italy for just that reason, to get an inside track on Italian food. This content is very real and important to these students, thus making the learning real (Bird 2005, 311). The learning takes place on two or more levels. They learn words because the terms are connected to cooking or culture, and cultural significance increases vocabulary understanding (Fitzsimmons and Lanphar 2011, 35). The series includes six different regions of Italy and shows how rationality is part of Italian culture, especially with food. Jamie Oliver presents the important foods, and the culture with important terms and bits of Italian language. One example is the name of the tiny "orchete" pasta, which comes from the Italian "little ears". Food and language are closely bound, and this is true of every natural language. Adding aromas and sound or any other background sensory information will add significance of different tastes, textures and smells (Lee 2009, 57).

Videos work better for learning procedures and language becomes incidental as students focus on the content. In Jamie Oliver Italian is subtitled in English, reinforcing the understanding, enhanced by the auditory and visual impression of the video. Students also see the words pronounced by native speakers and can copy the looks of mouths, lips, and teeth. Multilevel learning is making even more cognitive connections (Harji, Woods, and Alavi 2010, 37). Cookbooks also have little or no information about the tools and stoves or sometimes even ingredients. One of the videos with Jamie Oliver had a hot charcoal oven where food is placed in the oven using a metal pallet on a pole. Jamie overcooked the first try and had to throw it away. Even the experts make mistakes.

Duplicating a recipe is difficult if your equipment is not the same. From country to country resources and laws are different. Equipment must follow codes, so students may have to figure out what to modify to make the food the same or nearly so. Cooking shows from the countries of the target language show the original equipment used, which is also not in cookbooks. Jamie improvises when he does not have the right equipment. He created an oven with a large baking pan full of orchete set between a standing charcoal grill and a large pan over it filled with hot charcoal and encased in foil. Using basic Italian to discuss this allows the students' use of vocabulary to increase well beyond the learned phrases. Learning to create with a language is essential to its mastery (Nikitina 2010, 90). Late in the year, students may be interested in making their own content, and then they learn even faster. This can begin by having students change the content, write a different ending, change the recipe, explain what would happen if... It is fun to ask students to predict the next segment of a narrative and it involves them even more closely. Finally, pairs or groups can be asked to prepare a criticism of the film or even the content in the case of cooking. They must create their own dialogues and deliver it or publish it on the class web (or both). Having a product is the application of learning, and this sends the learned information to long-term memory. It also provides a very real product that students can share with friends and relatives.

For this exercise the students can be allowed to pick their own content as long as it is in the target language. Several weeks can be used with a little class time once or twice per week. Students tend to have fun with this, pretending to be famous film critics or food experts or whatever suits. My culinary students created some very funny tapes, almost spoofing cooking shows and using impossible ingredients. Their humour was appreciated by all and added emphasis to what was learned. Some students even dared to use word humour, such as double entendre or puns. A sign-up sheet avoids duplication in presentation subjects and this can be an end of year assessment also.

Mandalas can be fun and useful for brainstorming. One online example is the visual thesaurus, available in Italian and found at [www.visualthesaurus.com](http://www.visualthesaurus.com). It connects words visually and that carries the meaning of context. Students can make their own on paper for the walls or in electronic formats for the class web (Wheeldon 2011, 509). The charts provide ongoing guidance for the content and direction, and they look great. The teacher can use presentation in addition to a prepared script paper for more opportunity to assess speaking progress (Pomales-Garcia and Liu 2006, 163).



If a video camera can be acquired or rented, each student creation can be videoed and then aired in class with the other groups proposing constructive criticism in the target language. Even using some smart phone cameras can work. Then some time for rewriting can be allowed before making a new video. We are fortunate that video is digital, allowing for “redo’s” without expense. Rewriting and redoing the video is yet another lesson, that wrong is simply a step towards right. For assessment this plan is wonderful, as the teacher can assess the language development of the paper work, the video, the constructive criticism of others, the cooperation of students, their participation levels and the second version of the video.

New skill, coupled with practicing well-entrenched skills, reduces the stress of learning the new skill, since the learner has mastered the previously learned skill well. Culinary students practice their new Italian while they cook Italian and correct each other, making jokes and laughing. This kind of spill over into real life is more important than the language lessons (Nikitina 2011). Using the videos made a realistic virtual environment and practicing as they work in the kitchen is a completely authentic environment for these students as they are communicating something connected to the cooking with the new language in an appropriate setting. Finally, the student videos can even be published on Youtube and a little extra credit might be given for a lot of views. The students might even get useful comments from native speakers of the target language.

Basically, using Italian films to teach Italian language involves the students and changes their perception of language learning from work to fun communication, and a different way to express themselves. Focusing the activities to create their own videos requires planning and organization. Good script writing technique, which should be basically presented and followed, involves all of the senses, and using creative activities increases student enjoyment and learning. The activities mentioned can be expanded on the Internet by members of the class. How well films are used and how the students learn is limited only by the imagination. In addition, involving students in the creation of class activities and homework makes them partners with the teacher instead of adversaries.

Language is a living thing, and only assessment times should be matched to set criteria. It is fine to point out when a student breaks the rules of syntax and word usage or grammar, and they need to know when they make a mistake, but sometimes rewarding good effort is more useful. If a student invents a word that does not exist, but follows the rules in doing this, this is a sure sign of language development. For example, if a student says 'dimo' for small, it is the wrong Latin root, but it fits the English cognates diminish, diminutive and dim. Many words are in common use now that did not exist even ten years ago. Languages grow and change.

Student can be made cognisant of current usage without damaging self-esteem or denigrating their efforts. When the efforts are as visible as a video, even the students will notice mistakes and want to correct them, so assessing these student videos should be partly done by the teacher, and partly by the students. Peer assessment and criticism is usually quite acceptable to students and they listen, because their peers seem more like their target audience and more real than the teacher. As teachers discover what works and what does not work for their students classes and activities can be constantly modified and results recorded for future reference, which develops an atmosphere for action research. This ongoing active research is very valuable and pertinent to the particular classes and students and provides an excellent guide for the teacher (Stringer 2007).

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