

UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ITALIAN LANGUAGE STUDY AT PRIMARY SCHOOL AND REASONS FOR DISCONTINUATION INTO SECONDARY STUDY IN AUSTRALIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within language education in English-speaking countries, there is an ongoing need to understand students' experiences in language studies throughout their schooling and the main factors associated with discontinuation, i.e. why is it that students stop learning a particular language, such as Italian, at any point during their education? Research in the area is needed to counteract the well-known high attrition rates in language study, including for Italian, at all levels of education (see for example Clyne, 2008; Liddicoat, 2010; Nettelbeck *et al.*, 2007 for Australia; Oakes, 2013 for the UK; Levine, 2011 for the USA).

In Australia, like in other English-speaking countries (see e.g. Chambers, 2018 for further discussion on this), scholarship on the learning experiences of language students² has focused mainly on secondary or tertiary levels of education (see e.g. Martín *et al.*, 2016; Nettelbeck *et al.*, 2009; see however Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013, who focussed on primary and secondary school students). As Mason and Hajek (2021) note, there is considerably less research on what happens during primary education, so that «it is impossible to describe with any confidence a typical primary school experience of language study» (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2007: 83). In addition, there appears to be little research on why students discontinue with specific language study, e.g. Italian, as they move through primary school and then transition into secondary school (Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013; Lo Bianco, Slaughter, 2009) as well as a lack of current research exploring whether discontinuation is caused by motivational (e.g. lack of interest) or structural reasons (e.g. lack of access).

In Australia, unlike in other English-speaking countries, Italian has held a prominent position as a school subject since the 1990s (DET, 2019; Di Biase *et al.*, 1993; Lo Bianco, Slaughter, 2009): it is taught not only in the secondary sector but is also widely offered in primary schools. The most recent international data on learners of Italian in the world (MAECI, 2019) suggest that Australia has the highest overall number of students learning the language (339,958) in comparison to any other country. This outcome is a remarkable achievement, given Australia's relatively small population (only 25.8 million residents in 2021). However, it also masks the massive attrition in enrolment numbers for Italian that occurs over the education lifecycle (including in the transition from primary to secondary school) - a pattern which has long been identified as a major problem for Italian language

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² In the Australian context, the term 'foreign language' is generally avoided, as languages offered in schools are often those of well-established and integrated migrant communities. Instead, the terms 'language' and 'language education' or 'languages education' are preferred and their intended meaning is understood.

education in the country (e.g. Hajek, 2000; Slaughter, Hajek, 2014). As all three authors of this study have a specialization in Italian Studies, we have a particular interest in understanding better what factors underlie this issue for Italian and how they might be addressed.

Given the length and complexities of the (primary – secondary – tertiary) education lifecycle for a typical student today, in this study, for reasons of time and space, we focus our attention specifically on Italian language study during primary school. Detailed exploration of language learning experiences during secondary and tertiary education is left to future research.

The present study examines specifically the experiences of a sample of university students in the Australian state of Victoria, who have previously studied Italian at primary school. All these students attended primary school in the greater Melbourne area. It seeks to address the following two key questions:

- a) What is students' experience of their Italian language study at primary school?
- b) What is the role of motivational and structural issues in contributing to discontinuation in Italian language study between primary and secondary?

It is hoped that any answers to these questions might ultimately help those with a stake in Italian language education, e.g. teachers, schools and policymakers, to understand and address those factors that impact on students' motivation and experience of learning Italian and that also potentially stop them from continuing with their Italian studies in the longer term.

In the study design, a mixed methods approach was used, combining data collected through student questionnaires as well as interviews with four respondents (see section 3). While our focus in this article is on Italian, our findings may potentially also be generalizable to other languages both in Australia and in other English-speaking countries, such as the UK and America. For this reason, the study is informed by previous scholarship focusing on language education (i.e. not specifically for Italian) at primary level and on research on students' retention and attrition in language study in the move to secondary. The study also draws on previous literature in the field of L2 motivation. While many motivational studies now employ identity-based perspectives (see e.g. Al-Hoorie, 2017 for a recent critical overview), here we are particularly interested in the influence of factors associated with the L2 learning experience on students' motivation (Dörnyei, 2019, e.g. school context, syllabus, teachers, etc.), and particularly those reported in previous studies on continuation and transition. This is due to the fact that previous research has shown that identity-based perspectives are not relevant to young language learners (see Chambers, 2018 and also Dörnyei, 2009) and that, conversely, factors related directly to the immediate learning context are crucial in shaping motivated behaviour (Chambers, 2018). As noted previously, with our study, we also aim to produce practical findings that can be directly accessible to policymakers, schools and educators, rather than only to scholars in the field of L2 motivation.

In the sections that follow we first offer some critical information about language education in Australia and on previous scholarship on student attrition in language studies for the year levels under investigation. We then describe in more detail the methodology of our study. Finally, we present and discuss the results, outlining in particular their pedagogical implications.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Australia currently does not have a consistent national languages education policy, meaning that the provision and enforcement of language education is at the discretion of each state, and territory within its federal political structure, and highly varied as a result (Kohler, 2017). In Victoria, the state where this study was conducted, primary school education consists of seven years of schooling (Foundation to year 6) whilst secondary schools include the remaining six year levels (year 7 to year 12). While many of the challenges to the provision of language education are the same across Australia, Victoria usually distinguishes itself from other Australian states and territories for its implementation of a recommended language learning requirement from the start of primary school well into secondary school, as well as for the prominent role of Italian as one of the main languages offered at primary level (Kohler, 2017; see also Mason and Hajek, 2021).

As noted in the introduction, this study looks at students' experience with Italian language learning specifically at primary school. In the field of L2 motivation, the influence of the L2 learning experience on motivated behaviour has attracted considerable interest over time, and most motivational models have included elements associated with the L2 experience as factors impacting on motivation (see e.g. Dörnyei, Ottó, 1998; Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2019). As noted previously, however, the construct has been recently neglected in research in favour of new identity-based perspectives (see e.g. Dörnyei, 2019). Key components of the L2 learning experience, as conceptualised by Dörnyei, (2019: 25), are teachers, the school environment (e.g. whether the school supports or does not support language learning); the syllabus and teaching material; and peers (e.g. group cohesiveness, social acceptance, etc.).

In the past various scholars have discussed the issues of transition and continuity from primary to secondary level in Australia, (Cunningham 1986, 1994, 2004; Imberger, 1988). This scholarship has rarely featured data on students' experiences, focussing instead on common structural issues associated with discontinuation in the transition from one level to the other, such as a lack of coordinated provision of the L2, differences in teaching approaches, differences in content or skills covered, staffing difficulties, etc. Other more practical studies have aimed to provide suggestions to facilitate continuation, for example by encouraging teachers to move from a short-term to a long-term view of language programming across school levels (Kohler, 2003), and by developing techniques for tracking student progress so that accurate information can be passed on from the primary level to secondary school and by establishing continuity in teaching methods and curricula (Purvis, Ranaldo, 2003; Steigler, Peters 2003).

Although there is evidence that the move between primary to secondary school is often associated with changes in motivation (Burns *et al.*, 2013; MacCallum, 2001) as well as with considerable adjustment on the part of the pupils (Chedzoy, Burden, 2005; West *et al.*, 2010), there is a lack of recent empirical studies in Australia that have examined the experiences of primary school students before they transition to secondary school, and that have specifically looked at their motivation to continue or discontinue. In somewhat dated empirical studies, Kleinsasser (2000) and Tolbert (2003) found that many discontinuing students reported disinterest in the language studied (alongside a desire to start learning another language) and were also dissatisfied with their teachers. They also noted that discontinuation also appeared to be caused by lack of L2 provision across levels, although they did not quantify how frequently this actually occurred for students. It remains true today that the lack of coordinated provision of the same language(s)

between primary and secondary schools in the same geographical area is a feature of the Australian school system. Schools are free to select the language(s) they wish to offer students, and the choice(s) they make may depend on such things as school preference, and teacher availability.

Perhaps the most comprehensive investigation to date on the language learning experiences of school students in Australia is Lo Bianco and Aliani's (2013) longitudinal mixed-method study on primary (n = 147) and secondary (n = 648) school pupils in four selected schools in Melbourne. The study examined the way in which language policies are «received, perceived and enacted in schools and among learners» (xv), focussing on learners of Italian and Japanese as case studies. Primary students of Italian generally had positive attitudes towards the language and language learning in general, but negatively evaluated their experiences in the classroom: classes were sometimes perceived as too easy (“a bludge”) or boring and the students felt the program needed more practical activities and more focus on communication skills. Students were also pessimistic about the outcomes of their language learning efforts and wished for more structured and higher quality learning. The study also found that around 40% of primary students wished to continue L2 learning in secondary school, mostly to further their language skills. However, a similar proportion of students (40%) reported being unsure of continuing and explained that they wished to study a new language or did not know if Italian was taught at their secondary school. The study, however, did not discuss in any detail the reasons behind students' decisions to discontinue.

In an evaluation of language study in Australian primary schools, Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009) identify teacher preparation and supply as well-known longstanding problems (see also Liddicoat, 2010; Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013; Mason, Poyatos Matas, 2016; Swanson, Mason, 2018), often linked to specific patterns of teaching employment in that sector, e.g. a higher rate of casualisation and part-time employment. The perceived deficiency in L2 skills of primary teachers has also been observed in other countries (see e.g. Driscoll *et al.*, 2004, for the UK and Santipolo, 2016 for English in Italy), where generalist teachers – as opposed to specialist language teachers – have also been reported to be employed on an *ad hoc* basis to teach languages.

Other critical issues relate to the limited contact time for language learning in schools, which also poses curricular constraints (see also Liddicoat, 2010; Scarino *et al.*, 2011). As Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009) note, the average time devoted to language study in Australia amounts to only 63 minutes a week (DEECD, 2007; Liddicoat *et al.*, 2007), which coupled with the frequently limited provision across primary years results in an average total of 200 hours of tuition after seven years or primary schooling. Unsurprisingly, this limited exposure translates in general low attainment in L2 knowledge and negative attitudes about their language learning efforts (Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013). These observations cohere with previous research in the UK, which has highlighted limited curriculum time, priority given to other core subjects, the low status given to languages, the lack of appropriate liaison between primary and secondary school about language programs, and difficulties in the supply of skilled and experienced language teachers (Chambers, 2014, 2018; Driscoll, Jones, Macrory, 2004; Martin, 2000; McLachlan; 2009) as key issues associated with student demotivation at primary level. In her analysis of the transition in language studies of 18 students in the UK, Chambers (2018), for instance, found that her respondents enjoyed their primary and secondary school experience and that two factors were mostly associated with students' demotivation at primary level: teaching quality (including the low proficiency of teachers) and poor progress, often due to limitations in the language curriculum.

The present study is also informed by recent studies on transition conducted in the UK, where the move between the two school levels has come under scrutiny for, among others, the perceived lack of curriculum continuity and students' psychological issues related to the change (Chambers, 2014; Chedzoy, Burden, 2005: 22). As Chambers (2018) notes, these studies mostly focus on teachers' perspectives and school policy, while only a few «give students a voice» (Chambers, 2018: 2). Research focusing on languages (see Chambers, 2014 for an overview of teachers' perspectives, and Kirsch, 2008 for a discussion on language learning at primary level) has shown that, in addition to negative experiences in primary school, key issues associated with discontinuation are lack of language provision in secondary school, insufficient family and peer support, and inadequate coordination of language offerings between primary and secondary. As noted above, many of these issues have also been observed in the Australian context (see e.g. Lo Bianco, Slaughter, 2009). More specifically, it appears that the failure of the system, whether in Australia or the UK, to offer continued study of the same language may damage students' long-term motivation, as well as general perceptions about the value of language learning as a school subject at parental and societal level (Chambers, 2018; Bolster *et al.*, 2004; Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013; Lo Bianco, Slaughter, 2013; Mason, Hajek, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

Given the ethical and practical difficulties involved in obtaining information directly from primary school children (see e.g. Greig *et al.*, 2012), we decided to gather data from older students regarding their past experiences in primary school. The data reported in this article are taken from a larger study designed to investigate students' experiences of learning Italian and the reasons for continuation and discontinuation of such learning at various points during their learning trajectories from primary into tertiary education (see also Kavadias *et al.*, 2022). Participants in the present study were recruited from a major university in Melbourne (Australia). At the time of data collection, they ($n = 62$) were enrolled either in (a) Italian studies (29.9%), (b) another language subject (49.3%), or (c) an introductory linguistic subject (20.8%). They were all local Australian students, who had completed primary and secondary schooling in Victoria. At university, they were enrolled mostly in Arts ($n = 53.2\%$) or Science degrees ($n = 27.4\%$), all aged between 18 and 25 years, and based in Melbourne. They were also all L1 English speakers and mostly non-Italian in background (77.4%).

As noted in the introduction, the data were collected through an online questionnaire – administered via the software Qualtrics – that elicited both quantitative and qualitative data as well as through interviews with four respondents who were recruited via the questionnaire and compensated for their time.

The adoption of a mixed-method approach is consistent with previous research (see e.g. Parrish, Lanvers, 2019; Lanvers, 2020; see also Dörnyei, Ushioda, 2011). The Likert items included in the survey reflected classroom-specific aspects identified in Dörnyei's (2019) recent conceptualization of the L2 learning experience, as well as causes for discontinuation previously identified in the literature (see section 2). Similar questions were also asked in the interviews to facilitate data triangulation.

For the quantitative data collected, standard descriptive data analysis was completed using SPSS software and Qualtrics data analysis. All interviews were recorded and

transcribed by the first author. Qualitative data, whether collected via survey or interview, were analysed following general content analysis principles (see e.g. Creswell, 2013).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Questionnaire data

4.1.1. Experience in primary school

In this section we report on survey data from our sample of 62 respondents who had studied Italian in primary school. Responses to the Likert scales are presented in Table 1. For ease of presentation, here and elsewhere in the results section, we provide frequencies and percentages in relation to overall agreement or disagreement rates.

It can be observed that the majority of respondents ($n = 42$, 67.7%) found Italian study at primary school enjoyable (**item 1**). However, students had mixed opinions about how engaging Italian language study was (**item 2**), with a plurality ($n = 28$, 45.2%) finding it engaging, but 18 respondents (29%) disagreeing, and 16 being unsure (25.8%). Possible reasons for students' lack of engagement with Italian studies can be found by examining the next items. The majority of respondents found the learning did not support varied skill levels (**item 3**, $n = 36$, 58.0%), the curriculum did not build on previous material (**item 4**, $n = 43$, 69.4%), and the school did not offer adequate support to teachers or the program (**item 5**, $n = 32$, 51.6%). In addition, most respondents were in agreement that Italian education was not valued by their school (**item 6**, $n = 36$, 58.0%) and were especially clear that the curriculum was without depth (**item 7**, $n = 54$, 87.1%). Of these results, questions about the curriculum fared the worst: only 11 respondents (17.7%) agreed with the statement regarding adequate progression of the curriculum, and only six (9.7%) disagreed with the statement that the curriculum had no depth. Given these negative evaluations, it is not surprising if a majority of respondents did not feel motivated to continue studying after primary school (**item 8**, $n = 33$, 53.2%).

Table 1. *Primary school study responses by question (total number of respondents = 62) respondents. The most frequent response for each item is in bold*

Question	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I enjoyed Italian in primary school	4 (6.5%)	7 (11.3%)	9 (14.5%)	31 (50%)	11 (17.7%)
2	I found Italian language education in primary school engaging	5 (8.1%)	13 (20.9%)	16 (25.8%)	19 (30.6%)	9 (14.5%)
3	During primary school I found that the learning was varied enough to support all skill levels	15 (24.2%)	21 (33.9%)	8 (12.9%)	14 (22.6%)	4 (6.5%)

4	I felt that the primary school language curriculum built on previous years and introduced new material as we progressed	22 (35.5%)	21 (33.9%)	8 (12.9%)	8 (12.9%)	3 (4.8%)
5	I felt that the school offered adequate support to the Italian language program through things such as classroom resources	9 (14.5%)	23 (37.1%)	9 (14.5%)	14 (22.6%)	7 (11.3%)
6	I feel that Italian language education was valued by the school	8 (12.9%)	28 (45.3%)	13 (20.9%)	8 (12.9%)	5 (8.1%)
7	The primary school curriculum did not have much depth and can be summarised by the following: Colours, numbers, pasta, gelato and Carnevale	2 (3.2%)	4 (6.5%)	2 (3.2%)	20 (32.3%)	34 (54.8%)
8	At the end of my primary school Italian language program I felt motivated to continue studying	11 (17.7%)	22 (35.5%)	10 (16.1%)	14 (22.6%)	5 (8.1%)

Questionnaire respondents were also prompted to leave comments regarding Italian learning at primary school. The themes emerging from the **45 qualitative** responses received confirm the previously discussed quantitative findings. Italian was said to be seen as a “*fun thing*” without “*too much depth to the content*”. Lack of depth was often described as “[failure] *to build on knowledge from previous years*” and a lack of actual grammar instruction: participants observed that they were often instructed to memorise sentences without understanding their constituent parts.

Some respondents believed that making the content fun was a positive thing, but that they would have liked to see more advanced content in preparation for secondary school. Primary school study was also described as being “*shallow and repetitive*”. Repetition was often sighted as involving the same topics every year such as Carnevale, gelato, pizza, tombola, counting and reading English language stories about Italian culture. One student summarised the depth of learning for their entire primary school program as being the same as “[their] *first week of French 1* [beginners’ language course at university]”.

Students also highlighted lack of staff proficiency or consistency, stating there was a “*new Italian teacher every year*” or that their teacher “*had never learned Italian herself*” and was teaching directly out of “*Italian for dummies*”. A lack of time in the classroom was also cited

as a major issue for some. A few respondents reported that teacher attitudes and behaviour demotivated them in the class, such as teacher frustration at lack of progress, which the respondents found unfair as the curriculum did not give much room for progression. Another consistent theme related to the curriculum. Respondents noted that there was a move away from Italian language in later years to a focus on history and culture, which many found unengaging.

4.1.2. Reasons for discontinuation

Interestingly, despite the many negative comments by students about their primary school experience, the majority ($n = 36$) continued into secondary school. Only 26 respondents ceased Italian study and were thus eligible to respond to the question set reported in this section. As not every participant chose to respond to all statements, we report sample numbers for each item in Table 2. It is of interest that, although teaching staff ability was identified as an issue in the previous section, the large majority of respondents (**item 1**, $n = 17$, 70.8%) did not identify teachers as an influence in their decision to discontinue Italian study. Family pressure (**item 2**, $n = 23$, 100%), and pressure from the peer group (**item 3**, $n = 24$, 100%) were also rejected by every respondent who answered those statements. This is of note as it seems to contradict earlier work by Parrish and Lanvers (2019) on secondary school students in which it was found that family and peer pressure were some of the biggest demotivators for language students. Finally, our group was somewhat split on their assessment of the impact of their primary school experience on their decision to continue studying (**item 4**), with 13 disagreeing (54.2%) that it had any impact and 10 (41.7%) agreeing that it did, while one respondent was unsure. Hence, given these data, we cannot draw any particularly salient conclusion regarding this aspect.

Table 2. *Ceasing primary school study responses by question (where n =number of respondents to individual questions). The most frequent response(s) for each item is in bold*

Question	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I did not continue Italian studies after primary school as I felt the teaching staff would be unsupportive and wouldn't help me to do well ($n=24$)	7 (29.1%)	10 (41.6%)	5 (20.8%)	2 (8.3%)	0
2	I did not continue Italian studies past primary school due to pressure from family making me feel it was not a good idea ($n=23$)	18 (78.2%)	5 (21.7%)	0	0	0

3	I did not continue Italian studies past primary school due to pressure from friends making me feel it was not a good idea (n=24)	20 (83.3%)	4 (16.7%)	0	0	0
4	I didn't continue Italian studies into secondary school because I'd found my experience in primary school boring and unengaging (n=24)	6 (25%)	7 (29.2%)	1 (4.2%)	7 (29.2%)	3 (12.5%)

Questionnaire respondents were also asked to answer two yes/no questions relating to the provision of Italian at their secondary school. Of the 26 respondents who ceased learning Italian after primary school, 4 indicated that they did not continue despite their secondary school offering an Italian program, but the remaining 22 said that their school did not offer Italian and that the lack of provision was the main cause for discontinuation. This is interesting, as it appears that in the vast majority of cases the reason for discontinuation in the first instance was the lack of access to an Italian language course at secondary school, rather than any previous learning experience. While our research did not examine the individual reasons for the lack of provision at the respective secondary schools, this is noted as an enduring issue in Australian language education due to the ability of schools to select their own language and a lack of qualified specialist language teachers (for more detailed discussions see e.g. Kleinsasser, 2000; Tolbert, 2003). It should be noted that students in Victoria (and Australia more broadly), can continue learning a language even when it is not offered by their school – for example by attending language classes in a partner institution (e.g. through the Victorian School of Languages). Despite this, our findings show that lack of provision at the students' own school is a major deterrent to continuation.

While it cannot be excluded that the wording in very negative terms of the Likert items displayed in Table 2 may have somewhat influenced students' responses, the qualitative data collected from participants (n = 24) who ceased study after primary school supported the quantitative findings. Not surprisingly, a major theme that emerged was the lack of provision for Italian studies at secondary level (“*It wasn't offered by my high school*”; “*My secondary school did not offer Italian therefore I did not think there was a need to continue to pursue Italian*”, “*I was offered the option of French instead*”). Some respondents did note that they had greater interest in another language (“*It wasn't offered in secondary school but even if it had been, I much prefer French*”), while others stated that they would have continued studying it if it were available to them (“*If Italian was offered at my high school, I probably would have taken it*”). Respondents also identified that due to the poor management of their learning in primary school, they did not believe they would have felt prepared or motivated enough to continue regardless of its availability at their chosen secondary school (“*I felt I wasn't progressing*”, “*I wouldn't have been good enough to continue due to inadequate teaching [in primary school]*”).

In addition, some indicated a lack of interest in the Italian language for its limited utility and had decided to choose other languages that they perceived more useful, such as Japanese and French. Students perceived Italian as providing fewer career opportunities than other languages and linked this to its usefulness post-education. This is known as the economic rationalist approach to language learning and has also been noted in Lo Bianco & Aliani (2013). The two scholars found that Italian is systematically devalued in comparison to languages such as Japanese and Spanish due to a perception that they provide greater economic opportunities because of their communicative reach and prevalence in the global community. Students saw Italian as limited to one country and associated this with limited career opportunities.

4.2. Interview data

To supplement the data collected via the online survey, we report on qualitative findings obtained from interviews with four students, using pseudonyms when referring to them to protect their anonymity (Alex, Taylor, Kyle, Blake). All four respondents who were interviewed had studied Italian in primary school, with two also having studied the language at secondary school and three having chosen Italian at university.

While Alex stated that they enjoyed their studies in primary school, Taylor, Charlie and Blake had negative experiences, which they attributed to a lack of organisation, inconsistent classes and teacher engagement, in keeping with the findings we discussed above. Taylor stated that students “*learned the same thing every [year and] didn't absorb [anything] new*”. Kyle noted that “[Italian education] *is very repetitive*” describing his classes as “[filling] *children's time with something and [slapping] an Italian sticker on the front*”. Blake was critical about the quality of teaching and of the time allocated to language learning (“*We only did it an hour a week, it was one class a week. No one gave us any homework to do*”) and also perceived no real outcome associated with proficiency in Italian.

Taylor and Alex both attributed the deficiencies they identified in teaching with the limited nature of the primary school curriculum in Victoria, while Kyle described his Italian teacher as unengaged, attributing bad outcomes to these factors. Kyle stated their experience in primary school was heavily impacted upon by a lack of quality teaching by staff. Both Taylor and Kyle were forced to discontinue Italian studies in secondary school because it was not offered. They both recognised their negative experiences in primary school as being unrelated to the language and so did not factor these into their study decisions at university. Although Blake had negative experiences in primary school, he still continued with Italian at secondary school, as it was offered.

5. DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study show that in general students enjoyed Italian language learning at primary school. However, when asked about specific aspects of their primary school experience, many respondents were very negative about them. Given students' negative comments, it is perhaps surprising that their primary experience was still perceived as enjoyable as a whole. It should be noted, however, that this apparent contradiction has also been found in previous research on primary school students, e.g. Chambers (2018) and Lo Bianco, Aliani (2013). This finding is possibly due to the framing of Italian as a “fun” and non-cognitively demanding subject. While game-based

approaches for teaching languages in primary school can contribute to students' enjoyment (see e.g. Maynard, 2011), there is also evidence in our data that for some learners the excessive simplification of the content (and its frequent repetition) as well as the playful approach can contribute to reducing the value attributed to the subject and possibly lead to subsequent attrition in the long-term (see also Lo Bianco, Slaughter, 2009; Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013).

Key issues associated with negative experiences, as emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data, were linked to the L2 learning experience and the quality of language education more broadly: (1) teachers, and in particular their limited knowledge of the L2, (2) perceived lack of progress, and (3) curricular limitations (i.e. content covered and reduced contact hours). These findings cohere with Lo Bianco, Slaughter and Lo Bianco, Aliani's (2013) evaluation of critical issues in Australian primary schools (see section 2) as well as with previous research conducted in the UK (see section 2).

The role of teachers in accounting for motivation/demotivation in L2 students' experiences at primary level is widely acknowledged (see e.g. Chambers, 2018; Cunningham, 1986, 1994, 2004; Imberger, 1888; Kleinsasser, 2000; Nikolov, Djigunović, 2006; Lamb, 2017). Our findings suggest that the current practice in some primary schools, whereby languages are taught *ad hoc* by teachers who only have limited proficiency, contributes to negative evaluations (see e.g. Chambers, 2018; Nikolov, Djigunović, 2006). It should be noted that work is being done at the policy level to combat some of these trends in Victoria, where our data were collected. Sterjova (2017), for instance, has identified current initiatives by the Victorian government, whose current language policy includes support to incentivise language teaching positions and increase the quality of language teaching graduates.

Our findings also show that, as one might expect, perceived lack of progress and curriculum limitations go hand in hand. Curriculum constraints in terms of time and content covered translate in poor knowledge of Italian, which, in turn, makes some respondents feel unprepared about continuing with the language at secondary level. These critical issues echo the experiences of among primary students of modern languages in other studies in Australia (Kleinsasser, 2000; Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013; Tolbert, 2003) and in the UK (Chambers, 2018). Our results suggest that work is required at the policy level to increase the number of contact hours and to give more depth to the curriculum.

Perhaps surprisingly, despite the depth of these negative evaluations, we did not have any conclusive evidence that negative learning experiences in themselves lead to significant discontinuation after primary school. While this was the case for some learners, it is clear from our data that the key aspect accounting for attrition in the transition from primary to secondary had little to do with students' motivation and was instead more dependent on systemic and structural issues related to continued provision across the two levels. In simple terms, our findings show that if Italian is offered at secondary level, students continue to study it, regardless of how negative their prior experience in primary school may have been. These findings suggest that active work at policy level should be done to encourage retention. As Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009: 49) note, «problems of transition and articulation can only be resolved by systemic effort which senior administrators and curriculum designers must embrace (see e.g. Imberger, 1988; Sharpe, 2001; Tolbert, 2003) in order to ensure continuity at transition» (see also Bolster, 2009). The responses of the participants in this study also provided little evidence to suggest that there was any communication between primary schools and secondary schools regarding the learning of Italian before and after transition. This is certainly a problem because, as Jones and Coffey (2016) note (2016: 145), «it is vital to ensure that the initial interest in

and enjoyment of primary MFL [modern foreign languages] is maintained, and that primary and secondary teachers work together to ensure that learning is sequential and coherent» (see also Burns *et al.* 2013; Imberger, 1988). Improved communication between primary and secondary schools could also attenuate students' worry about their level of Italian proficiency in the transition between the two school levels (see also Imberger, 1988; Kleinsasser, 2000).

Our results also show that some respondents discontinued because they did not perceive Italian to be a useful language. Students did not consider language learning useless per se, but appeared to have negative attitudes towards the practical applications of Italian in their daily life (cf. Imberger, 1988; Lo Bianco, Aliani, 2013). In light of our results, more work could be done to show the usefulness of language skills to students, perhaps through the implementation of visualisation activities in the classroom (see e.g. Amorati, 2020; Lanvers, 2020). Overall, educating students about the importance and utility of second languages in general (not just those deemed preferable) would combat some of the negative motivational influences which prevent students from seeing the value of language learning (including of Italian), besides a pure instrumentalist approach (see a discussion of this in relation to the university context in Kinoshita, Zhang, 2014). This can be done, among other things, by helping students see the relevance of their language skills in the local socio-context (Amorati, 2021; Group of 8, 2007; Huang, Cordella, 2016), for instance by capitalising on the presence of the very large Italian community in Australia.

Interestingly, family and peers did not appear to account for discontinuation, with students rejecting the notion that this outcome was not influenced by family and peers in any meaningful way. This finding is not at all in line with previous literature (see e.g. Chambers, 2018; see also Parrish, Lanvers, 2019 for the secondary level) and, as a result, warrants further investigation in future studies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined students' experience of learning Italian at primary school and reasons for discontinuation into secondary school. As noted previously, the results show that while many students enjoyed Italian language education, they were also very critical about many aspects associated with their learning experience. Despite this, our data indicate discontinuation was mainly caused by structural issues related to lack of provision at the secondary level and, to a lesser extent, also by students' perceptions about their own limited progress in Italian and the perceived scarce usefulness of the language. Our findings suggest that it is important to ensure coordinated provision of Italian language study between primary and secondary and that, in terms of the curriculum, a balance should be found between maintaining the subject fun but also giving it as much value as for other subjects, for example by increasing contact hours, reducing repetition in content across year levels, and monitoring teachers' training and performance.

As this study had a focus on reasons for discontinuation – which were more pressing at this stage for us to identify and understand – future research should look at the reasons for continuation to develop a more sophisticated understanding of what drives or fails to drive students of Italian in primary and secondary school. Our research has shown that most primary students continue with Italian once at secondary school despite negative experiences; it would be interesting to examine whether continuation is simply due to lack of alternative language options and/or whether any prior experience with a language (no

matter if unsatisfying in many respects) still acts as a driver for continued study. Finally, this study paves the way for future exploration of language attrition and retention with respect to other languages, both in Australia and elsewhere. It is likely that our results for Italian in Australia are also relevant to other languages and other contexts, since most of our findings were in keeping with prior scholarship conducted on different languages in other countries (see e.g. Chambers, 2018; Santipolo, 2016).

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