

# **Getting Over the Cultural Shock in Italy. Developing Pragmatic Awareness to Ease Sociocultural Adaptation for Incoming International Students**

**Pilot study on perceptions on linguistic and metalinguistic aspects in formal and informal contexts for the creation of a support learning path to help exchange students with only FL education backgrounds**

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-Abstract-

Finding an effective way to develop and assess pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competences, especially in FL education environments, is not a simple task. The lack of specific teaching materials, as well as the possible instructors' misperceiving of the current cultural context of the target language, are factual facts. Learners' pragmatic awareness of the object language is somehow taken for granted in the teaching practice of many FL environments, arguably because of the pervasive employ of the grammar-translation approach, which is still widely preferred in many countries. As a result, language and culture are often mistakenly considered as two separate fields of teaching, but in fact the goal of foreign language instructors' efforts should consist in training their learners to be competent communicators when operating in the target language of study. It is not just about stumbling over grammar as rules to be learned mechanically, or memorizing as many headwords as possible, ready-to-use phrases, and decontextualized expressions. Saying is doing and language is action: learners need to fully participate in social interaction with native speakers in culturally appropriate ways.

As far as Italian language teaching is concerned, for instance, learners need to handle real-life interactions in clearly specified contexts, such as understanding why and when to address people with an informal register based on the clitic pronoun *tu* or, depending on the social context and other sociocultural determinants, the formal one based on the clitic pronoun *Lei*. In cases like these, learners deal with complex social rules and concurrent factors such as individual choices based on the social position and the result of the negotiation of the social identities of people involved in that specific communication event. Interaction patterns provide consequently a tangible locus where language and culture visibly meet, as interaction focuses not just on what is said, but also on what is done or achieved.

From this viewpoint, especially learners of Italian as a FL with few or none experience of the actual sociocultural context of their target language, need to understand how communication-in-interaction actually works, in order to recognize that communication flow proceeds in certain subsequent turns as speakers/actors negotiate who is speaking/acting next, presumably in different ways compared the to their L1. Interaction describes indeed the orderly, shared ways in which members of a language community accomplish everyday actions, such as greeting and complimenting one another, formulating, and responding to a request, or opening up a telephone call. This is the crucial point within which cultural significance may reveal itself, but also the context in which potential misunderstandings in intercultural communication may contribute to what is known as “cultural shock”.

In my Ph.D. research, attempting to convey my experiences as Italian Language Instructor in Japan and my interest in Pragmatics in Language Teaching, I am focusing on how incoming international students involved in study program in Italy adapt to the new sociocultural context with only FL education background in Italian Language and Culture. Over the coming months I will be given the opportunity to support and, in some cases, tutor incoming Erasmus students, with the purpose of conducting field-based testing. However, as a preliminary step, I am currently setting up the spectrum of my research by refining all the relevant details.

At an exploratory stage, as a pilot study, adopting an epistemological framework of analysis based on a pragmatic approach, I designed a questionnaire divided on seven items on the appropriateness of different “practs” (the in-context implementation of pragmemes) to collect data on how participants perceive the formality and informality in Italian language. The 64 respondents to the questionnaire, each of whom has different characteristics in terms of age, nationality, L1, knowledge of other languages and level of competence in Italian language, stated they were responding before starting their study program in Italy, and expressed, in the 10% of the cases, their will to participate to an experimental online session of two encounters with the purpose of triggering their translingual/transcultural awareness.

Considering the competence levels participants declared in order to take part to this phase, I designed three separated learning paths for absolute beginners pre-A1, basic users A1-A2 and independent users B1-B2. The teaching material employed has been mainly developed for a target of university students and, along with some communicative activities from existing textbooks such as the ones of “*Espresso*” series and “*Parla con me*” (Alma Publishing), I included some royalty-free videos from YouTube and a considerable portion of teaching materials taken from the LIRA repository (“*Lingua e Cultura Italiana in Rete per l’Apprendimento*” i.e. “Italian Language and Culture for online learning”).

Unfortunately, due to the organizational difficulties of combining participants’ different time zones and - the most important aspect - the very low number of consents to the registration of the online sessions, the current pilot study only features one significant video registration of a B1 participant. However, on the other hand, all the data collected provide remarkable insights on how future students perceive linguistics and metalinguistics aspects underlying social distance and affective orientation in the Italian sociocultural context.

The presentation aims to outline the pilot study so far, as well as potentialities of developments and applications as a structured learning path conceived to support future incoming international students in their sociocultural awareness structuring process of the hosting Italian context.

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