

A Note to the Instructor

Introduction

Why a new beginning Italian textbook when so many already exist? Because we have recently been favored with a renewal of interest in Italian language learning: official reports reveal that enrollment in Italian is growing in U.S. institutions of higher education and that it is increasing at a faster rate than enrollments in the most commonly taught foreign languages—Spanish, French, and German.¹ We believe that it is time to offer a viable alternative to the first-year textbooks available today. Although marketed and presented as proficiency-based and task-oriented, it seems that many of these programs ultimately favor a grammar-based approach to language learning—which implies that the foreign language is codified into frozen rules of morphology and syntax to be explained and temporarily memorized. The focus of such instruction is the manipulation of formal features—not the production of communication skills. *Pronti... Via!* has been written in an attempt to allow language instructors to de-emphasize the drill-oriented memorization approach that is still often used in teaching Italian. We guarantee that teachers will have the opportunity to spend truly comfortable hours of foreign language instruction and that more and more students—regardless of their career and personal aspirations—will experience the kind of satisfaction that they need in order to make a more mature commitment to language learning. The *Pronti... Via!* beginning Italian textbook is intended for all colleges and institutions that offer Italian in their foreign language curricula. It can be used as a manual in two-semester or in three-quarter year courses. As it is a first-year

language textbook, no prerequisites are required for courses taught with it.

2005 was designated as the “Year of Languages” in the United States. Although we do not know whether U.S. Senate Resolution 28 will in fact contribute to curtail the reported love affair with monolingualism, we tend to share professor and scholar Mary Louise Pratt’s sentiment about foreign language learning, in that:

Today’s dramatic circumstances offer a broader opening for a new public idea about language, language learning, multilingualism, and citizenship. If scholars and teachers of language are able to seize this opening, they will make themselves heard as advocates . . . for the importance of knowing languages and of knowing the world through languages. . . . Language education is far too big an issue to be contained by national security concerns alone. (3)

Thus, *Pronti... Via!* represents one of the many ways to speak up and “make the case for language learning as an aspect of educated citizenship” (3). From a strictly academic standpoint, we are deeply convinced that in the field of Italian studies we need a viable way to fully attain the most important goals of elementary language classes: to lead more and more students towards the possibility of cultivating language study, and to help beginners become the knowledgeable and skilled intermediates who will populate our upper-level courses—where we use both a cultural/travel and a literary orientation.

In the following sections, we will introduce you to

1. Elizabeth B. Welles—in her report presenting the figures compiled by the MLA (Modern Language Association) in September 2003—shows that the number of students studying Italian both at the undergraduate and graduate levels rose from 49,287 in 1998 to 63,866 in 2002. Comparatively, Italian language studies rose 29.6 percent, whereas Spanish language enrollment rose 13.7 percent, French rose 1.5 percent and German 2.3 per cent.

Pronti... Via!'s program first by elucidating its pedagogical paradigm and applications, and then by presenting the practical advantages it offers to instructors and students alike. The "How to use this textbook" section in the "To the student" message illustrates *Pronti... Via!*'s format and features.

***Pronti... Via!* and the Natural Approach: Pedagogy and Applications.**

Inspired by what is known as the "communicative" philosophy, and aimed at helping students achieve proficiency in all language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing), *Pronti... Via!* relies on an eclectic methodology that is neither prescriptive nor restrictive in nature, but that fundamentally centers on Tracy D. Terrell's Natural Approach to language instruction. This in turn follows from Stephen Krashen's theoretical model of second-language acquisition. In their 1983 book *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*, the two researchers outlined five overlapping hypotheses supported by field-tested scientific studies with adult and young learners—both in subjects acquiring English as a second language (speaking different first languages) and acquiring other foreign languages. Even though there is no ultimate truth about second language acquisition, the five hypotheses presented by Krashen and Terrell and are still today virtually unblemished by counterexamples. I have taught Romance languages in a wide array of geographical and academic settings for fifteen years and have corroborated the premise outlined in Terrell and Krashen's seminal book: the Natural Approach is relatively simple to use and can be easily modified to deal with different types of students, regardless of their cognitive styles and academic preparation or orientation. Interestingly, the two scholars themselves concede that "[t]he Natural Approach need not be adopted in whole" (1)—although it should be enormously encouraging that instructors who have initiated it even in part within their programs report dramatic improvement in their students' linguistic abilities and attitudes toward language study in general.

The first of Krashen and Terrell's the five outlined hypotheses is the acquisition-learning hypothesis, which holds that the ability to "pick up" a language implic-

itly—like that of children who are not aware of the rules they are acquiring but only of the fact that they are communicating—is still with us as adults and should be taken into consideration as we initiate our students into the foreign language experience.

[A]dults have two distinct ways of developing competence in second languages. The first way is via language **acquisition**, that is, by using language for real communication. Language acquisition is the "natural" way to develop linguistic ability, and is a subconscious process; . . . The second way to develop competence in a second language is by language **learning**. Language learning is "knowing about" language, or "formal knowledge" of a language. While acquisition is subconscious, learning is conscious. (26)

Pronti... Via!'s pedagogical matrix suggests that in order to produce a fruitful and enjoyable learning experience with first-year students we need to encourage "acquisition"—not "learning"—in the classroom. In order to do that, we need to (re)create the most natural communicative situations possible and guide students as they enjoy manipulation of meaning from day one. Of course, we are not advocating the exclusion of formal grammar study; we are simply placing grammar *at the service* of communication and, ultimately, of proficiency. As will be described in detail later, *Pronti... Via!* makes this possible in a very practical way: the grammar explanations are visibly separated from the content-based activities so as to not interrupt—either visually or practically—the seamless sequence of communicative moments that constitute the majority of our lessons. Indeed, they are designed to give students, beforehand, the tools they need to carry out classroom activities and, at the same time, to teach them to be proactive in autonomously taking up their grammar study. We have created thorough and specialized grammar sections that are at the same time simple and clear. These sections provide learners with a better understanding of English first, and then of Italian grammar, in a way that we cannot ordinarily be done during class time.

We are deeply interested in grammar, and so is the average college student in language courses. However, the key for a successful language program is first acqui-

sition via comprehensible input, then grammar. If grammar were truly the most important aspect of developing linguistic competence, we wouldn't have generation after generation of students who complete their language careers with poor language abilities. *Pronti... Via!*'s lessons do not emphasize explanations of rules or the correction of errors, but focus instead on a natural sequence of content-based activities that are truly communicative² and have been placed within meaningful contexts that engage students' attention as they learn about the mechanics of the language.

The second hypothesis outlined by the two Californian scholars—the natural order hypothesis—states that “grammatical structures are acquired (not necessarily learned) in a predictable order” (28), even though not every new speaker will acquire grammatical structures in the exact same order. Most important, this hypothesis also allows the possibility that “structures may be acquired in groups, several at about the same time” (28). As most of us have experienced in class—especially those of us who have also had the opportunity to compare and contrast second language acquisition in the classroom with first language acquisition of children in the natural setting of daily life—adults who focus on communication in content-based activities show a natural order of acquisition of grammatical structures; they also—exactly like children who are learning how to speak—are capable of acquiring more than one structure at the same time.

Assuredly, it would be counterintuitive to hypothesize the contrary, given the fact that the students in our first-year language classes are technologically savvy young people who simultaneously attend similar or higher level courses in subjects such as organic chemistry, physics, international law, political science, history, Latin, (comparative) literature, and so on. For this reason, we cannot possibly assume that they are developmentally unready for a maturity of commitment to Foreign Language 101. An example will corroborate

this idea. During the three-year period in which *Pronti... Via!* was pilot-tested at the University of Georgia, over 500 students studied all the verb conjugations at once in the middle of chapter 2—that is, in the second or third week of their first semester of Italian—and not a single eyebrow was raised. The theme of the chapter—titled *Chi siamo? (Who are we?)*—flows from a very solid activity arrangement that intertwines context, content, and language by focusing on the same topics of conversations that most students on campuses engage in even in their native language at the beginning of a term: their names and ages; their cities and/or countries of origin; their majors and their minors (or their preliminary thoughts, in some cases); the other classes that they are taking and their current schedules; and last but not least, college life outside class time. In other words, the activities in chapter 2 lead students to focus on meaning and true communication as they develop their initial sense of belonging to the classroom community, and it is for this reason that students successfully put their formidable memory and studying skills to use.

By relying both on the learners' natural tendency to acquire grammatical structures in a predictable order and on their innate ability to acquire more than one structure at the same time, *Pronti... Via!* combines enough grammar to facilitate learning in those students who are more grammar oriented, but not too much to stifle those who are eager to jump in and begin manipulating meaning from week one. Its eleven chapters are interspersed with different levels of discourse that take the students easily into each situation. At the same time, they teach and encourage the discipline that respect for another language and culture requires. Without fail, meaningful language interaction and high expectations in terms of intellectual commitment will bring about a noticeable rise in students' involvement in the lessons. Obviously, this result cannot possibly be equated with impeccable accuracy of speech. This takes us to the Natural Approach's third hypothesis.

2. “Truly communicative” implies that a conversation takes place to exchange information or transfer knowledge from one speaker to the other. For example, a simple exercise on colors is not “truly” communicative if the speakers are asking each other questions such as *Di che colore è il libro di italiano?*; *Di che colore sono le banane?*; *Di che colore è la bandiera degli Stati Uniti?* or *Di che colore sono i miei capelli?* Truly communicative questions would be *Di che colore è la tua maglietta preferita?*; *Di che colore è il sofà a casa tua?*; or *Di che colore sono gli occhi di tua madre?*

The monitor hypothesis states that conscious learning, especially at the beginning level, can only be used as a monitor. That usually implies that our students—as speakers or writers—can edit their utterances only *after* they have been generated. In particular, as Krashen and Terrell explain, “[t]he hypothesis says that when we produce utterances in a second language, the utterance is ‘initiated’ by the acquired system, and our conscious learning only comes into play later” (30). Research has revealed that monitor use is very limited, since it can only be successfully implemented if three binding conditions are met:

1. The performer has to have enough time. In rapid conversation, taking time to think about rules, such as the subjunctive or subject-verb agreement, may disrupt communication.
2. The performer has to be thinking about correctness, or be focused on form. Even when we have time, we may not be concerned with whether we have inflected the form correctly! We may be more concerned with *what* we are saying and not *how* we are saying it.
3. The performer has to know the rule. This is a very formidable requirement. Linguists readily admit that they have only been able to describe a subset, a fragment, of the grammar of even well-studied languages such as English. We can assume that even the best students fail to learn everything presented to them. (30–31)

As it turns out, monitoring aimed at producing grammatically correct utterances is very difficult to implement in communicative contexts. For this reason, *Pronti... Vial's* eclectic approach provides a unique opportunity to oscillate logically between monitored situations involving formal knowledge of grammar—through carefully contextualized drills and exercises—and acquisition-oriented activities and readings. Specifically, in written homework we ask our students to carry out grammar exercises and pay close attention to correct application of grammar rules, whereas we spend the majority of classroom time on the use of those rules in truly communicative activities involving both directed and spontaneous speech. This dual dy-

namic fosters a progressive increase in both the learners’ capability to understand their new linguistic universe and their motivation to “stay tuned” to a language experience that is organic and holistic for students and instructors alike.

Our strong commitment to the creation of a practical possibility to de-emphasize the conscious learning of grammar and replace it with activities that stress the importance of true communication is based on the convincing arguments that the Natural Approach theory presents through Krashen and Terrell’s fourth hypothesis—the input hypothesis. The input hypothesis states that we acquire language in only one way, and that is when we understand messages and obtain input that we comprehend. This is a crucial hypothesis that not only reports that we acquire language through comprehensible input, but also asserts that the input has to go slightly beyond our current level of linguistic competence and, finally, that “speaking ability is not taught directly, but rather *emerges* after the acquirer has built up competence through comprehending input” (32).

Research in applied linguistics and in child language acquisition has amply shown that language classes that bring about comprehensible input produce consistently better results than traditional classes. What students produce will depend on what they can understand from our input. But how can we fill up first-year language lessons in our classrooms with comprehensible input? The answer is complex and deserves our attention. First and foremost, we choose a context that students are able to grasp and with which they will possibly feel familiar. Virtually all professional literature insists on the positive role of background knowledge in second language acquisition. In *Teaching Language in Context*—a book that collects an impressive amount of theoretical and empirical data on the topic—Alice Omaggio Hadley observes that familiarity “plays a crucial role as learners begin to develop their second language skills. . . . For material to be meaningful, it must be clearly relatable to existing knowledge that the learner already possesses” (131). In order to activate the students’ extra-linguistic knowledge, we add visual aids, repetition, and whatever means we have to make ourselves understood: hand gestures, facial ex-

pressions, drawings on the blackboard, objects brought into class, other students in the class. What is ultimately desirable, in sum, is to employ meaning to help acquire language. During aural, oral and reading activities in *Pronti... Via!*, students' attention focuses on the exchange of ideas and the collection of information, with the result that students experience enjoyment that derives from the comprehension of seemingly difficult listening and reading passages. As a matter of fact, the input hypothesis—which is of crucial importance to foreign language pedagogy—also states that:

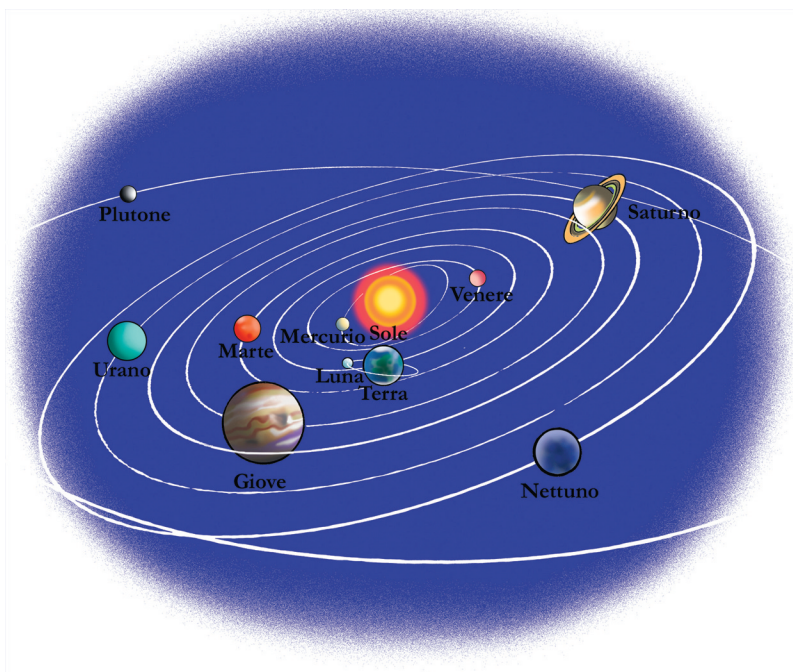
[I]n order for acquirers to progress to the next stages in the acquisition of the target language, they need to understand input language that includes a structure that is part of the next stage. . . . To state the hypothesis a bit more formally, an acquirer can “move” from a stage i (where i is the acquirer's level of competence) to a stage $i + 1$ (where $i + 1$ is the stage immediately following i along some natural order) by understanding language containing $i + 1$ A corollary of the input hy-

pothesis is the idea that input need not be finely tuned. . . . [A]ll the teacher needs to do is make sure the students **understand** what is being said or what they are reading. (32–33)

A couple of detailed examples—the first related to aural and the second to written comprehensible input—will illustrate both the theory and practice of Krashen and Terrel's fourth hypothesis. These examples are based on segments from the second chapter of *Pronti... Via!*, reflecting the competence level of students who are in their third or fourth week of class (with 4 or 5 contact hours weekly).

The first is a listening comprehension activity that presents the days of the week as a preliminary step towards students' own presentation of their complete schedule of classes. Considering that the etymology of the days of the week derives from seven of the most important bodies in the solar system, the days are presented via the transparency illustrating the sun and the main planets in its orbit.

In order to implicitly reinforce the idea that there is



a link between the Italian words and the names of the celestial bodies, an empty calendar week diagram is quickly sketched on the board and filled in with the names of the days of the week—as connections with each planet are made. The aural comprehensible input that the students receive during this short presentation could consist of the following:

I nomi dei giorni della settimana derivano dai nomi dei corpi celesti del sistema solare (write: *corpi celesti* and repeat, pointing to each celestial body)—**i nomi dei giorni della settimana derivano dai nomi dei corpi celesti: il Sole, la Luna, e cinque pianeti: Saturno, Giove, Marte, Venere e Mercurio. I babilonesi** (write: *babilonesi*) **furono i primi ad associare i giorni della settimana** (point at empty calendar diagram), **con i sette corpi celesti** (point at solar system on the transparency). **La terminologia—cioè il nome di ogni giorno della settimana—fu poi ereditata dagli antichi romani** (write: *antichi romani*—presentation moves on). **Il primo giorno della settimana di un calendario italiano è associato con la Luna** (point at the Moon on the transparency)—**in latino si diceva *Lunae dies*** (write *Lunae dies* and indicate both words as you repeat): **il giorno della Luna —lunedì** (write *lunedì* in the first column of the diagram and continue). **Poi c'è il giorno di Marte** (indicate Mars in the solar system and write *martedì*)—**Marte: martedì... Mercoledì significa il giorno di Mercurio** (indicate Mercury, write *mercoledì* and keep on). **Dopo mercoledì c'è giovedì, cioè il giorno di Giove, e il quinto giorno è associato con Venere, il pianeta Venere. Il sesto giorno della settimana dei calendari italiani è sabato, e la parola *sabato* deriva... da quale pianeta?** (Students may say *Saturno* or *Saturn*, to which the answer will be: **Esatto! Saturno.**) **Però la parola *Saturno* corrisponde all'inglese *Saturday*, e non all'italiano *sabato*... Il motivo è che gli Antichi Romani sostituirono il nome pagano *Saturni dies*: il giorno di Saturno** (point at Saturn on the solar system) **con il termine ebraico** (write *ebraico*) ***shabbat*, che significa *riposo***

(repeat *riposo* and make hand gesture; presentation continues and winds up). **E la parola *domenica* da che cosa deriva?... Inizialmente da il giorno del Sole** (write *Sunday*), **un'espressione che poi fu sostituita con *Dominus dies*** (write *Dominus dies*, indicate both words as you repeat **il giorno del Signore** and write *Lord* underneath *Signore*) **dall'imperatore Costantino, l'imperatore romano** (write *Costantino = imperatore romano*) **convertito al cristianesimo nel 313 dopo Cristo... È chiaro? *Dominus dies*... il giorno del Signore... si trasforma in *domenica*: il settimo giorno del calendario italiano. Dunque, ripetiamo: lunedì, martedì, mercoledì, giovedì, venerdì, sabato e domenica.**

This presentation (approximately two-hundred-and-fifty words long) will only last a few minutes, but will attain several important results through the use of meaningful aural comprehensible input. It will be relevant to students (who may or may not be aware of the etymology of those seven words); it will make reference to an important cultural distinction (Italian calendars versus U.S. calendars); and, most importantly, it will cultivate students' enthusiasm towards their own listening skills which, in turn, will raise the overall motivation and self-confidence of each learner.

Our second example is the reading passage that closes chapter 2 and that aims at situating the target language in its basic geographical context. The passage, titled *L'Italia*, is a four-paragraph text that instructors are encouraged to present as a listening activity with the aid of a map of Italy before they let students proceed with the reading themselves. I use a 53 × 38 inch map that I ask one student to hang up so that everybody can take a close look as the written passage is presented.³ Again, during the presentation, it is important to speak slowly and clearly and to use enough repetition to help students “fragment” the speech into comprehensible bits. The text—as with the rest of the pedagogically prepared reading passages in *Pronti... Via!*—consists of a slightly simplified code that ensures comprehensible input at all times but in no way em-

3. This reading activity is located at the end of the chapter 2 white pages.

ploy simplified content or nonauthentic discourse. When students read the text aloud, it will be evident from their intonation that they feel knowledgeable about the acquired geographical information, even though they may not perfectly pronounce the words *Svizzera*, *Austria*, *Francia*, and *Slovenia*, or several of them may stumble on *Mar Ionio*, *capoluogo*, or *Marche* and read *Arizona*, *Tunisia*, and *Mediterraneo* with an intact English pronunciation. But sure enough, even those students who can count on preexisting geographical knowledge will experience the satisfaction of having understood all the relevant information in the target language and will again feel empowered by the evidence of their successful manipulation of meaning during the third or fourth week of class.

The issues of students' motivation and self-confidence lead us to the fifth and last hypothesis, which focuses on the study of the emotional variables that are related to second language achievement. The affective filter hypothesis indicates that motivated and self-confident learners do better in second language acquisition.

Performers with optimal attitudes have a lower affective filter. A low filter means that the performer is more "open" to the input, and that the "input" strikes deeper. . . . Thus, having the right attitudes may do two things for second language acquirers: it will encourage them to try to get more input, to interact with speakers of the target language with confidence, and also to be more receptive to the input they get. (38)

Pronti... Via! effectively promotes low anxiety levels in the classroom because it implements an approach that consistently restricts explanations of rules and correction of errors to situations in which monitoring is scheduled and does not interrupt the natural instructor-student bond or student-student conversation. Instead, the lessons engage learners in a natural sequence of truly communicative activities that converge on the students' microcosm as much as possible. Without compromising the fundamental and instructional goals of the academic setting, this approach keeps learners off the defensive.

As we conclude our discussion of the pedagogical

foundation of *Pronti... Via!*, we cannot omit the impact of the numerous ideas that reverberate from academic institutions to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language and back. So far, we have shown how *Pronti... Via!* strives towards the goal of proficiency through an eclectic, effective, and dynamic approach, taking into consideration the solid body of practical experience and research evidence available to inform good language teaching practices. As the ACTFL Standards for Foreign Language Learning task force summarized, these good practices can be succinctly encompassed in ten words: "Knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom":

All the linguistic and social knowledge required for effective human-to-human interaction is encompassed in [these] ten words. Formerly, most teaching in foreign language classrooms concentrated on the **how** (grammar) to say **what** (vocabulary). While these components of language are indeed crucial, the current organizing principle for foreign language study is communication, which also highlights the **why**, the **whom**, and the **when**. So, while grammar and vocabulary are essential tools for communication, it is the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages that is the ultimate goal of today's foreign language classroom. (3)

Pronti... Via!'s pedagogical approach also encompasses the five goal areas identified by the ACTFL task force—the celebrated five C's of foreign language education: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. These goals reflect an expanded view of language instruction and an overall interdisciplinary approach that provides students and instructors with the stimulating opportunity to expand the confines of language classes and create bridges between the knowledge of the target language and culture and the knowledge of the other subjects that constitute our students' programs of study.

Activities that sustain the program's interdisciplinary focus are scattered throughout the main textbook and its ancillary material. The following list is not exhaustive but provides a fairly complete range of examples. Besides the sections that refer to astronomy and

local geography, we have placed one that originates from the reading *Una fotografia alla società italiana* and, through the use of a colored planisphere, aims at familiarizing students with current waves of migration toward Italy. Similarly, we have expanded the usual weather conversations into a review of *Le regioni climatiche della Terra*—through a reading passage that relies on knowledge of world geographic and climatic areas as well as of the delimitations created by the five most important parallels imagined on the surface of the Earth. Also related to the traditional introductory topic of weather, the activity titled *Conversioni* engages students in the conversion of temperatures from Fahrenheit to Celsius and vice versa with the practical use of mathematical formulas. Later, the reading passage *Casa dolce casa!* leads students to consider the Italian concept of domestic space from a historical as well as an architectural point of view. The theme of food serves as a starting point first to revisit the nutritional guidelines outlined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Health and Human Services in the food pyramid and later—in the passage titled *La dieta mediterranea*—to shed some light on the scientific work carried out in the 1950s by scientist Ancel Keys.

Where the thematic focus is students' educational experience before college, we have included a meta-thematic passage that centers on the life and work of Maria Montessori, making explicit references to her pedagogical stance. The chapter on travel and vacation incorporates numerous references to world geography, activities involving knowledge of Italian topographic features, and a historically detailed reading activity titled *Un grande viaggiatore italiano: Marco Polo (Venezia 1254–1324)*.⁴ Several activities that are aimed at acquiring vocabulary of the human body rely on the students' knowledge of anatomy and musculature. Subsequently, within the context of the future and its possibilities, students carry out an activity that is inspired by clinical psychology projective technique aimed at delving patients' perceptions of their own personality. Finally, toward the end of the program, when the thematic focus circles back to college life and to out-

side-of-class activities, students are encouraged to share their choices as moviegoers—after which the topic of Italian cinema is introduced, and the *Sacco and Vanzetti* motion picture is accurately contextualized within its pertinent historical time frame. At this point, review of college life aims for a deeper and more articulate emphasis on its responsibilities and possibilities. By making use of and further developing their skills in geography, health, history, science, and so on, learners will clearly perceive that their beginning Italian language class can and in fact does play a role in shaping their future as college graduates. In order to reach these objectives, the target language is successfully engaged as both an end and a means.

Summary: *Pronti... Via!*'s Language Teaching Philosophy.

The following is an outline of the main characteristics of *Pronti... Via!*'s pedagogical approach. We subsequently will concentrate on the practical advantages that this approach has to offer to instructors and students.

1. The thematic focus starts from the personal to arrive at the general.
2. All classroom activities are clearly contextualized to conform as much as possible to the theme of the unit of study.
3. Instruction is meaningful to students.
4. Instruction is interactive and responds to learners' different styles and needs.
5. Beginning-level students are encouraged to study the grammar sections on their own but grammar exercises will be used judiciously in the classroom. Students will be provided with abundant opportunities to experience the language organically—our alternative to learning isolated grammar points through memorization and drilling.
6. Students are concerned with the message, not with form, and this approach will bring down their filter.

4. This reading activity is located at the end of chapter 8, in the *Quaderno degli esercizi* (Workbook).

7. The primary objective of class time is to practice useful vocabulary in meaningful, communicative contexts.
8. Class time is filled with aural and written comprehensible input so that both teachers and learners are able to enjoy the natural and gradual emergence of accurate speech.

Practical Advantages for Directors and Instructors.

Based on the assumption that language programs benefit from a proficiency-oriented first-year textbook, *Pronti... Via!* relies on a sound pedagogical framework whose methods and structure will generate all the enthusiasm needed for learning Italian as a foreign language. From a practical standpoint, the program minimizes lesson planning by supplying a logical sequencing of chapters, activities, readings, and exercises. Activities are designed to engage students in real communication and, most importantly, are juxtaposed to unfold in a build-up sequence that simply makes sense. *Pronti... Via!* instructors have a major advantage of being liberated from the nitty-gritty of daily lesson planning and from the wresting of meaningful content from a set of disjointed, disconnected sentences or exercises.

We are confident that directors of sizeable Italian language programs who require that their instructors be trained in foreign language pedagogy will be attracted our state-of-the-art approach to language teaching. At the same time, we trust that instructors in smaller programs or in mixed foreign languages / Romance languages departments, where foreign language pedagogy is not always available, will find *Pronti... Via!* an asset and an aid. *Pronti... Via!* is a user-friendly book that is easily adaptable to many teaching philosophies. It also takes into account the usual limitations imposed by time, space, and the often-excessive number of students in beginning language classes. The seamless sequence of content-based activities helps first of all to eliminate the artificiality that too often wearies even the most eager language learner; second, it creates a classroom environment in which opportunities to acquire the target language through comprehensible input are maximized; and, third, it contributes to the growing excitement about foreign language

learning that is currently sweeping U.S. colleges and universities.

The design is aimed at making *Pronti... Via!* easy to consult. A photograph and the chapter title open each unit, but no reference is made immediately to the morphological aspects introduced in the chapter, since the program is not organized around grammar goals. Rather, each unit is based on a sequence of thematically contextualized activities that allow students to converse and to manipulate comprehensible input. Grammar explanations and corresponding exercises—which are intended as homework assignments—are placed in stand-apart, green-tinted sections, which students learn to refer to as *Le pagine verdi*. Similarly, the vocabulary sections at the end of each chapter are semantically grouped and visually distinguished by a yellow tint; students refer to them as *Le pagine gialle*. Instructors may choose to review grammar exercises in class or encourage self-correction. Regardless of your preference in this matter, the regular (white) sections of *Pronti... Via!* naturally orient classroom meetings towards purposeful activities and allow our students to practice their comprehension skills and produce Italian in an authentic way.

There is one main purpose to the guidance offered in the Annotated Instructor's Edition of *Pronti... Via!*, and that is to maximize opportunities to become familiar with the strategies of the Natural Approach, offering suggestions on how to take artificiality out of the Italian language classroom. The annotations save instructors time while they get acquainted with the program. Subsequently, as is often the case when we familiarize ourselves with a new textbook, notes can be phased out, expanded, or modified according to each instructor's needs. Also, because the program actively fosters replacing daily grammar lessons with content-based activities, instructors will enjoy the possibility of incorporating source material in line with their own intellectual and cultural preferences and the academic directions of each group.

The principles of the Natural Approach are suitable to language acquirers of all ages. Obviously, the acquisition process can be faster for those students who live in locations where they obtain large quantities of input from native speakers. That is rarely the case with Ital-

ian in the United States, except for a number of urban areas. We, as instructors of beginning-level students have a responsibility to create a speech environment that—although sheltered within specific vocabulary needs—creates a plausible version of real-world communicative situations. As a matter of fact, “while the real world”—to use Terrell and Krashen’s words—“can provide excellent input for intermediates or advanced acquirers, it also can be difficult to deal with, especially for beginners, and much time is lost hearing input which is too far above the students’ current level” (180). *Pronti... Via!* readily leads instructors to create a classroom environment in which a logical sequencing of build-up activities carefully fulfills the early acquisition needs of our first-year students. The immediate advantage of this approach is to allow us to escape the narrow boundaries that teaching a language as a system of rules and formulas inevitably impose, thus enabling us to employ a meaningful and rewarding holistic approach. Gradually, our students—who, regardless of their learning styles, will perceive the logic behind the tasks that they are asked to accomplish in class—will grow into the better-prepared and more linguistically-competent learners that we expect will populate our intermediate and advanced-level courses.

Practical Advantages for Students.

At the college level, students who take first-year Italian classes are potential majors and non-majors; some of them are very motivated students of modern languages and literatures, others are animated by career goals and those goals’ relation to Italian language and culture. Others still are stimulated by their Italian ethnocultural heritage or by a desire to travel to Italy. Last, but not least, are those students who fit two or more of the abovementioned categories. The best prepared and most motivated students find *any* textbook effective and interesting. However, the majority of students—many of whom are taking language courses as a requirement—continue to leave our departments thinking that foreign languages are not their cup of tea.

The whole-language strategy implemented with the Natural Approach can have a very positive impact on students’ enthusiasm. It relies on the satisfaction that learners promptly experience when they realize that

they are soon capable of effectively manipulating meaning in truly communicative and low-anxiety situations that have purpose and use for them. In turn, this satisfaction successfully results in learners who are not inhibited and will ‘take chances’ in using their knowledge to converse with teachers and other students. By dealing with the language as a holistic phenomenon taking place in a meaningful and relevant context from the very first lessons, *Pronti... Via!* encourages students’ deep engagement with the target language—a key factor in the language acquisition process. The topical-situational focus of each chapter presents learners with numerous opportunities to make connections that are relevant to their daily lives, both inside and outside of academia. *Pronti... Via!*’s cross-referential approach helps students develop linguistic communication and learning strategies, improve critical thinking, effectively use the appropriate elements of the new language system and culture, and, ultimately, deepen their understanding of the world around them.

In order to stimulate students’ interest before they even open their textbook, we recommend that an introduction to the language acquisition theory that supports our program be presented, in the primary language, at the beginning of the course cycle. There are two reasons for this: first of all, because the philosophy underlying our approach is different from traditional approaches, and sometimes students still “expect a diet of drill and grammar” (Krashen and Terrell 74); second, because helping students understand how language is acquired leads them to develop the sort of tolerance for ambiguity that will help them strive towards higher levels on their own.

Indeed, research has shown that students who are encouraged to acquire a second language in meaningful, creative, and spontaneous ways, albeit relying on a basic practice of particular grammar forms, outperform students in classes taught with traditional methods. As second language education scholars Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada report in *How Languages Are Learned* (published in 1999 by Oxford University Press), beginner and intermediate-level second language learners engaging in communicative activities in addition to their regular, required grammar study made greater improvements in reading comprehension and

conversation competence measures than did learners focusing primarily on accuracy and form. However, they add, “Somewhat unexpectedly, the area of greatest improvement for [groups] getting ‘real world’ communicative practice was in grammatical accuracy” (121). In a further effort to interpret available research on second language acquisition in the classroom, the two Canadian scholars conclude that “these studies offer support for the hypothesis that meaning-based instruction is advantageous, *not* that form-based instruction is not” (122).

Once again, we have developed *Pronti... Via!* in an honest attempt to not only nurture the sense of enthusiasm and gratification on the part of first-year Italian language teachers but also to empower students with confidence in their language learning abilities. The core of *Pronti... Via!*'s program is acquisition through comprehensible input that is logical and enjoyable, and that eliminates first-year frustrations because students are required to think about grammar only when it does not interfere with the basic purpose of language: true communication.

***Pronti... Via!*'s Ancillary Material.**

Pronti... Via! has ancillary materials both for instructors and students.

FOR THE INSTRUCTOR:

- The **Instructor's Edition** provides an introduction to the language teaching philosophy of the textbook and on-page annotations that include suggestion for carrying out the activities, presenting narration series, recycling vocabulary, and incorporating follow-up activities. The Instructor's Edition also provides teachers with answers to all fixed-response activities. It will be evident—both to instructors who have a background in foreign language pedagogy and to those who do not—that the logical sequencing of chapters, exercises, readings and activities will minimize lesson planning.
- The electronic **Test Bank** tests students on the five language skills: listening, reading, writing, speaking, and cultural awareness. *Pronti... Via!*'s Test Bank also provides suggestions as to how to recycle

tests by following an essential procedure: given the fact that exams will reflect the same pedagogical approach as the exercises and activities presented in the student text, it will be possible to direct students to write on their own papers and not on the test sheets. Thus, instructors can number the test sheets and collect them at the end of each test. This means that test sheets will not circulate among students. The advantage of this procedure is twofold: from the academic standpoint, it benefits individual instructors and language program directors, who do not have to create entirely new tests each term; from the administrative standpoint, it contributes to reducing paper and energy waste, and easing budgetary concerns.

- The online **Laboratory Audio Program** consists of eleven twenty-to-forty-minute lessons, one for each chapter.
- The online **Tapescript** contains the texts of all recorded material.
- The set of online **Overhead Transparencies** displays much of the art of the student text, color maps, and other items.
- The **CD-ROM** adds an interactive multimedia component to permit students to see, hear, and work with language content from the text in a different and more dynamic format than the printed materials alone can provide.

FOR THE STUDENT:

- The **Student's Edition** of *Pronti... Via!*
- The ***Quaderno degli esercizi*** (*Workbook*) provides additional practice with vocabulary and structures through a variety of reading, writing, and online listening exercises. Answers to the *Workbook* exercises are also available online.
- The online **Audio Program**, to carry out the activities in the *Quaderno degli esercizi*.
- The ***In laboratorio!*** online manual, containing activities to be carried out with the Laboratory Audio Program provided to adopting institutions.

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