# From Linear-Piling up Learning to Inter-sectional Learning: The *Mosaico-Biglie* Project

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### イタリア語教育の新展開と教材開発に関する試み

## 1. Introduction

In this paper (cf. also Zamborlin and Mizuno under review), we will report on a project that we accomplished thanks to a research grant from Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music. The project consisted of the creation of two textbooks of Italian, *Mosaico* ("Mosaic," Mizuno & Zamborlin 2008), and *Biglie* ("Marbles," Mizuno & Zamborlin 2009), with additional pedagogical aids. The materials were designed for Japanese university students who learn Italian at universities of fine arts and music, which is the pedagogical context in which we work.

Respectively, *Mosaico* and *Biglie* consist of 1) a grammar book with exercises and readings, a booklet of tests, and a CD; 2) a workbook with a DVD, and a CD. The two volumes feature the topics of Italian grammar that at Japanese universities are usually covered during two/three semesters. However, while *Mosaico* is aimed at building meta-linguistic competence and, as the title suggests, can be seen as a sort of "mosaic" outlining a broad-spectrum introduction to the mechanisms of Italian grammar, the purpose of *Biglie* is to enhance listening and oral production skills in an interactive way, as children do when playing marbles. Ideally, the two textbooks should be used jointly. However, we were advised to arrange the contents of each volume in such a way that teachers could choose either one or both if they wanted.

Before starting on our project, we considered carefully what the materials were supposed to involve in terms of approach, design, procedure (Richards & Rogers 2001), and originality. We started on our plan by posing ourselves the following questions:

- Based on what conception of language learning shall we create our materials?
- How are we going to present the contents?
- What sort of techniques and activities are we going to devise?
- Compared to other textbooks, would our materials be innovative?

Below, we will discuss how addressing the above questions we defined the aims that make up the structure of our project. Discussing the theoretical framework we referred to, we will also provide a general description of the materials, and explain based on which criteria contents and tasks have been designed. In conclusion, we will say why we believe that *Mosaico* and *Biglie* can contribute to enhance university students' motivation, and can be considered original compared to most of the textbooks of Italian used at Japanese universities.

## 2. Approach

Through the creation of *Mosaico* and *Biglie* we never thought of proposing a new method, neither of relying on a pre-existent one. Of course, we do not oppose methods in principle. In fact, we believe that methods cannot be judged as "right or wrong" on a theoretical basis, but should only be regarded as "coherent, or incoherent", "appropriate, or inappropriate" consistent with the particular context in which

they are put into practice (Balboni 2006: 27). Considering the classroom reality we are more familiar with, we decided to take a sort of "post-method" stance, aiming at constructing a creative solution which could help to address some of the issues teachers like us face in their daily work. Accordingly, we decided to propose an approach, which do not originate from a particular method but which refers to general parameters of language teaching methodology.

The conception of language teaching/learning on which these parameters are grounded integrates both a "quantitative/analytic" and a "qualitative/experiential" viewpoint (Ellis 2007: 543). Our ideal was to create materials that had the potentiality of being used to guide learners toward the achievement of a balanced linguistic competence in Italian at a basic user level, combining 1) meta-linguistic knowledge, 2) lexical ability, 3) listening and oral production skills, and 4) socio-pragmatic awareness.

## 3. Design

In Ellis's (2008) terms, we can say that *Mosaico*'s approach is one of explicit Focus on Forms Instruction (FFI). Through explicit FFI, grammar rules are being thought during the learning process, and learners are encouraged to *analyze* grammar structures in order to develop meta-linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, *Biglie* aims at encouraging learners to make use of that knowledge by *experiencing* verbal communication from the beginning.

As for the grammar contents, which are structured in a parallel way, *Mosaico* and *Biglie* cover the linguistic items that at Japanese university are usually taught in 45 hours of classes (i.e., 15 classes of 90 minutes x 2). However, the materials that the textbooks offer are so abundant that their use can be extended to an additional set of 15 classes.

### *Mosaico's contents*

*Mosaico* is a pedagogical grammar book, intending by "grammar" the linguistic dimension containing the rules of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. The progression of *Mosaico*'s grammar topics tracks the traditional sequence of the Italian grammar books used in Japan, although, as we will see, the criteria based on which we arranged the contents are rather dissimilar.

Like most grammar book, *Mosaico*'s point of departure is the study of the sounds of language. However, in the phonology section we wanted to make clear that conventional writing systems are not adequate to represent language sounds. In particular we wanted to show that *katakana*, which is employed as a system of phonetic transcription in almost all textbooks of Italian published in Japan, can by no means be considered a reliable procedure to connect symbols to speech sounds. To overcome the faults related to the (ab)use of *katakana*, in the first chapter of *Mosaico* we included a table of Italian phones in a broad IPA transcription. In the table also *katakana* symbols are used, but only to point out contrastively their inadequacy.

The following chapters illustrate how the basic rules of Italian grammar operate. Students can learn how to combine constituents into simple sentences, and acquire the meaning of new words by paying attention at their occurrence in a context. As for the rules governing the structure of constituents, *Mosaico*'s progression begins with the explanations of the morphology of nouns, determiners (i.e., articles, demonstratives) and adjectives, along with the rules governing their combination into meaningful sentences. The sequence of grammar topics continues with the inflections of many regular and irregular verbs in the indicative (present, present perfect, imperfect, future) and conditional moods, the gerund and the imperative mood, followed by the clitic pronouns (reflexive, direct, and indirect). Explanations on the semantics of the indicative simple past, the subjunctive, and of the rules governing the formation of subordinate clauses are also included in an appendix for further expansions.

Every unit of *Mosaico* consists of four pages. Each left-hand page displays an exercise, in which grammar rules have to be inferred by looking at a picture. Below the exercise, grammar explanations are provided. Each right-hand page includes exercises of deductive nature (from the rule to its application), followed by an explanatory section the aim of which is to introduce an additional grammar topic of a higher degree of complexity. These final sections can be skipped, without compromising the logical sequence of the contents. Teachers are advised to come back to these sections when reviewing items already studied.

### Biglie's contents

*Biglie* is textbook aimed at enhancing listening and oral communication skills, and contains only synthetic grammar explanations. For that reason, we put several links to *Mosaico*, along with an appendix that outlines the essential mechanisms of Italian grammar. As for the topics, the 15 units of *Biglie* cover most of the categories of language used at level A1 and A2 (basic user levels), consistent with the European Framework of Reference. Accordingly, students are encouraged to communicate in simple and routine tasks employing frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance. They can learn how to introduce themselves and others, how to ask/answer questions about personal details (e.g. where they live, what they do, people they know, things they possess, things they have done), and how to interact in a simple way, provided that the other person talks slowly.

*Biglie* was designed to be used in conjunction with an 88-minute DVD that we produced. All scenes are based on a screenplay, the transcription of which is integrally included in the workbook. The contents of each chapter are enclosed in four pages (the same way as *Mosaico*) and structured into two main sections: 1) "Lets' learn the expressions," and 2) "Model interactions." The first section features Italian native speakers living in Italy, or Japanese university students talking in Italian with their teachers. Section two is set in the campus of the *Catholic University of the Sacred Heart* in Milan. Here the main characters are four Italian students who have a conversation about their lives. By constructing utterances

and by practicing conversation formulae modeled on what they *see* and *hear*, students can engage in oral communication tasks from lesson one.

## 4. Procedure

*Mosaico*'s and *Biglie*'s tasks ground on the vision of the two textbooks as the two integrated components of a whole educational project. This vision, furthermore, relies on the belief that learning can be better achieved — and motivation to learn can possibly be enhanced — by proposing activities in which *induction* and *deduction, implicit acquisition and explicit instruction* are balanced.

As we explained, *Mosaico*'s approach is one of explicit FFI (Ellis 2008). From the perspective of who is learning, this form of instruction can be achieved either *deductively*, as when rules are presented to students, or *inductively*, as when the learners are asked to discover rules by themselves from an assortment of linguistic data (Ellis 2008, DeKeyser 2003). Furthermore, in line with Balboni (1998, 2002), we planned to introduce grammar rules so that their understanding did not represent the point of departure, but the point of arrival in the learning process. Accordingly *Mosaico*'s tasks are arranged in such a way that learners are encouraged to discover grammar rules first (induction), and to systematize meta-linguistic knowledge through reflection and exercises of analytic nature later (deduction).

*Biglie*'s tasks, on the other hand, can be said to conform to the principle of "bi-modality," described by Marcel Danesi (1988, 1998. Cf. also Balboni 1998, 2000), according to whom in language acquisition both brain's hemispheres are involved (the R-mode being analogical, visual, global, and simultaneous, and the L-mode being logical, verbal, analytical and sequential). Danesi (1988, 1998) also showed that when people learn a foreign language the natural way for the brain to processes information follows a directional pattern, which goes from the right hemisphere to the left: R→L. Vice-versa (L→R) may result in fatigue, and ultimately may cause de-motivation.

Accordingly we structured *Biglie*'s units in a way that that students' first assignment is to *watch* the DVD and perform some listening tasks in a fill-in-the-blank format (R-mode). After understanding the meaning and the function of each expression covered in the unit (L-mode), students have the assignment to employ what they have learnt by performing oral communication tasks in pairs. It is not necessary that they analyze all linguistic items. In fact, most of the expressions can be acquired as conversational formulae.

## 5. Originality: "Linear piling-up" vs. "inter-sectional" learning

Due to the approach, the configuration of contents and the typology of tasks, we can say that the process of Italian language acquisition that *Mosaico* and *Biglie* foster is dynamic and "inter-sectional." That is to say, it is structured along an ideal spiral-shaped development and combination of meta-linguistic knowledge and communication skills, both at a synchronic and at a diachronic level. From

a synchronic point of view, students' ability to produce/understand utterances in the target language is linked to the meta-linguistic knowledge they attain while performing grammar exercises （*Mosaico*）; from a diachronic point of view, student's meta-linguistic knowledge is recovered and reinforced at a further level of acquisition, after they have developed the ability to produce/understand grammatically correct and socio-pragmatically appropriate utterances （*Biglie*）. This configuration is what makes *Mosaico-Biglie* different compared to the materials normally used at Japanese universities, the contents of which are usually structured along a linear and rather rigid progression of grammar topics.

Using *Mosaico* and *Biglie* jointly, furthermore, students are given the chance to become responsible of the construction of their linguistic competence and to use the target language creatively. For instance, once students have learnt grammar rules, words, and expressions （*Mosaico*）, they are asked to personalize the linguistic knowledge by referring to the interactions featured in the DVD （*Biglie*）. In contrast, the practice that many Italian textbooks published in Japan generally encourage consists of translation of structures from Japanese into the target language, or vice-versa. This grammar-translation procedure is likely to result in tediousness, both for students and for teachers.

At this point a question still has to be answered: do *Mosaico* and *Biglie* really motivate Japanese university students to learn Italian? Experimenting the textbooks in our classes, we can say that the materials appear to rouse students' interest. We are presently using the textbooks in classes of different sizes, and our overall impression is that in most of classes students' concentration and involvement are sensibly higher compared to previous teaching experiences we had using traditional textbooks.


## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to point out that the materials we created are far from faultless. Among the shortcomings, the absence of a teacher's manual has to be mentioned. We are now planning to publish a short guidebook offering some suggestions on how *Mosaico*'s and *Biglie*'s tasks can be carried out. We also think it would be helpful to offer some examples of how to perform evaluation. For instance, *Mosaico*'s tests were designed with the aim of assessing students' ability to reflect actively on how the mechanisms of language operate — rather than to assess the actual degree of linguistic knowledge they can attain. This kind of grammar testing, which can be performed leaving students free to look the textbook if they want to, is quite unusual for Japanese students. It appears however to release tension and to increase students' participation.

We are also considering the possibility of expanding *Mosaico* and *Biglie* online, creating a web site on which to upload extra exercises, videos showing how to carry out activities/tests based on *Biglie*'s oral communication tasks （Zamborlin & Mizuno 2008）, and possibly share suggestions with other teachers of Italian.

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