

## The Impact of Age and Audiovisual Input on Italian L2 Acquisition in Malta

Clara Cordova\*, Sandro Caruana

L-Università ta' Malta

\*Corresponding author: Clara Cordova, Email: cobiec102197@gmail.com

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### Abstract

*In this contribution we reconsider the effects of the media on the learning and acquisition of Italian in Malta, several years after research had shown that TV viewing was highly effective to develop competences in this language. We do so in the light of the reduced mediatic exposure to Italian in Malta today, and by investigating whether the performance of subjects of different ages varies when carrying out a picture-story and a translation task. We conclude that age differences are not clear-cut, although participants in the 41-50 age group carried out the tasks most successfully. The predictors which led to the best outcomes are early, copious and regular exposure to the L2, and confirm the important role that Italian media have on the acquisition of this language in Malta. The decline of this exposure, which we denote in this paper, is therefore cause for concern.*

### 1. Introduction

The history of Malta is rich and diverse, and many different languages have been spoken on the island throughout the centuries. The arabs, who ruled Malta between 870 and 1090 a.d., introduced their vernacular, which eventually replaced pre-existing languages (Brincat 2021). Maltese typologically belongs to the arabic branch of the Semitic language family, although it has a long history of language contact. After the arab period, in fact, Malta was taken over by the normans and the island re-approached the romance world, and both latin and Italo-romance varieties became widespread. More recently, between 1800 and 1964, Malta experienced another phase of language contact during the British colonial period, when English was introduced and became an official language of Malta, alongside Maltese. The Council of Europe (2015: 11-14) reports that Maltese is the 11 of 97% of Maltese nationals, while 59% of them can hold a conversation fluently in both languages. As expected, the two languages are used in different situations and contexts, with diverse functions. Data regarding language use in a recent nation-wide survey (nSo, 2023) reveal that the most common languages understood by persons living in the country are English (96%), followed by Maltese (90.4%) and Italian (62%). This outcome is influenced by the sizeable amount of non-Maltese citizens residing on the island: out of the over 40,000 of them included in this survey, 96.5% claim to understand English, as opposed to only 35.8% who understand Maltese.

Although Malta is bilingual, with both Maltese and English as official languages, its present linguistic situation is more complex, both because of the presence of many non-nationals, as hinted above, and because Italian also has an important role. Italian television programmes were, in fact, popular in Malta once Tv started to become widespread in the early Sixties, and their popularity increased rapidly and reached its peak from the Seventies until the early nineties. The introduction of cable and satellite television, and the subsequent advent of the Internet, revolutionised the media, rendering English the preferred media-access language. Viewership of Italian television channels in Malta was well over 50% up to the nineties, meaning that at least half of local Tv viewers would access programmes

in Italian daily. This decreased to 26.6% by 2000 and eventually, in 2016, to 17.6%. Unfortunately, it is not possible to report more recent figures, because the local Broadcasting authority surveys now place Italian Tv viewership in a generic 'other' category, together with data for viewership of programmes in other foreign languages. This category, which also includes UK channels available locally on streaming platforms, registered a share of 15.4% in May 2023 (Broadcasting authority, 2023). Statistics, moreover, point towards a gradual 'ageing' of the Maltese television audience, as the younger generations do not access Tv often, as they follow the news, watch movies and series via social media (Caruana 2021: 14). They do so mainly in English and Italian has now lost its role as the language of international media in Malta.

Exposure to Italian, however, does not only occur through television or the media: in educational settings, specifically at Secondary level, school students' study one or two foreign languages and Italian is the most popular option with over 60% of learners opting to study it, generally between the ages of 11 to 16. Furthermore, the number of Italians who have settled in Malta over the past years has increased significantly and there are several opportunities for Maltese nationals to interact with them - in many cases exchanges occur in English, but Italian is used frequently too (Caruana 2023).

Given the importance of Italian in Malta, this article investigates the effects of age and input from the media on the acquisition of it as a second language (L2). Based on the background we provided, the first hypothesis is that Maltese nationals aged above 40 and who are therefore most likely to have had the opportunity to be exposed to a copious amount of Italian via television from an early age are expected to have higher levels of speaking and comprehension skills in Italian, as opposed to their younger Maltese counterparts. The second hypothesis is aimed at re-evaluating Caruana's (2003) finding that the performance of Maltese nationals who acquired Italian *mainly* spontaneously (e.g., through television, at work, with friends, etc.) is similar to that of their counterparts who acquired Italian *mainly* formally (e.g., at school, evening classes, private classes, etc.), specifically in terms of Italian spoken production and

comprehension. The reason for this re-evaluation is that exposure to Italian in Malta has decreased considerably, compared to when Caruana's (2003) study was carried out.

## 2. Literature Review

In this section we present some reflections on the two main variables of our study, namely age and the effects of media input on second language acquisition (SLA), based on the extensive body of research available on both.

### 2.1 Age and SLA

The role of age (including early onset in SLA) has been discussed extensively, not only in relation to biological age, but also in the terms introduced through the debates that stemmed as a result of the controversial Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg 1967). This notion is relevant to our study, because although our subjects are adults (see Section 3), we are interested in investigating whether exposure to Italian during their childhood and/or adolescence could have affected the acquisition of this language. Research on CPH in this respect is largely inconclusive and there is little agreement as to the extent to which such 'critical' or 'sensitive' periods affect SLA, as Granena and Long (2013: 312-314) illustrate by referring to several empirical studies. Nevertheless, even researchers who have engaged critically with the CPH (e.g., Muñoz and Singleton 2011; Keeley 2016; Bialystok and Kroll 2018) acknowledge that correlations between age and L2 development and attainment may exist, even if these may be limited to specific aspects, such as achieving near native-like pronunciation, producing complex syntactic structures, developing pragmatic competences etc.

Dollmann *et al.*, (2020), for example, found that foreign 'accentedness' was particularly evident in late learners, such as those who arrived at destination after the age of 10. This 'accentedness' was even more pronounced in late learners who arrived at their destination country after the age of 16. Overall, research supporting the CPH (e.g., Abrahamson and Hyltenstam 2000; deKeyser *et al.* 2010; Flege 2019) claims that it is not necessarily biological age per se that accounts for high proficiency in the L2, but rather an early onset of acquisition, backing 'the younger, the better' stance. On the other hand, research taking a more critical stance towards the Critical Period Hypothesis (e.g., Birdsong 1999; 2014; 2018; Singleton and Ięsniewska 2021), including Bialystok (1997), reveals that difficulties in L2 learning are common to most learners and occur irrespective of age. For example, children or early acquirers usually create new category boundaries to represent the L2, whereas older, or late learners tend to incorporate categories of the L2 into their native language.

Furthermore, other factors need to be taken into consideration, such as the typological proximity between the L1 (and other previously known languages) and the L2, and quality and quantity of active exposure to the L2. For instance, in a later study carried out by Bialystok herself (2011), she found that it is not only early onset that leads to high proficiency in the L2, but also the 'continuity' of the bilingual experience, indicating that what significantly impacts L2 proficiency is not only the age at which exposure to the second language starts, but especially the regular, frequent and active use of it. Counterarguments to the CPH were also presented in a study carried out by Keeley (2016) who, while acknowledging that age-related factors may affect successful SLA, underlines that other factors may be even more significant, such as personal experiences, attitudes, individual traits, memory, motivation or personal expectations.

Research conducted by Unsworth (2012; 2016) also indicates that across various L2 domains (e.g. morphology, lexicon and syntax, etc.) there is little evidence for age effects in early L2 acquisition, as scores obtained by children in her research were significantly correlated with their current amount of L2 exposure. The researcher, though, points out that despite the important role that the quantity of L2 input plays in SLA, two other important factors to consider are quality of L2 input and L1 transfer. Finally, in a review by Singleton and Ięsniewska (2021), the authors refer to neurological evidence that supports the view that late learners can indeed be successful at L2 learning, whereas deluca *et al.*, (2019) point out that limiting maturational constraints to puberty may be ambiguous, as puberty can start biologically from as early as eight years old. Overall, research presenting counterarguments to the CPH supports the view that successful L2 learning is possible in late learners, though there generally is the acknowledgment that early onset is beneficial for L2 ultimate attainment.

Overall, there is widespread agreement that age-related factors cannot be accounted for in isolation when investigating L2 acquisition and/or learning, because many other factors come into play, such as individual differences, actively engaging in conversations in the L2, motivation, aptitude, quality of input, quantity of exposure to the L2 and personal orientations. Most researchers also agree with the view that early onset is effective in order to reach a high L2 level of proficiency, especially if this is copious and is accompanied by regular exposure.

### 2.2 The Media and SLA

L2 input occurs both in formal (e.g., the language classroom) and in naturalistic (e.g., informal interactions with native speakers) settings and it can result from exposure to the media. While the effects of this on language acquisition were often ignored when such input resulted from traditional media, such as print newspapers, cinema and TV, the rapid technological advancements of the last decades by virtue of which L2 input can easily be accessed via the Internet has created more interest and awareness in relation to the potential of audiovisual input for language acquisition. Several studies (Webb and Rodgers 2009; Kuppens 2010; Webb 2015; Ashcroft *et al.*, 2018;) explain that even unidirectional audiovisual input, including exposure to television programmes or movies, can be beneficial for language acquisition. For example, L2 learners who were exposed to copious authentic L2 input while watching subtitled TV programmes registered positive results in terms of short-term retention of vocabulary (van Lommel *et al.*, 2006). Other studies, reviewed by Caruana (2021), also point to the efficacy of TV and audiovisual input, especially on vocabulary acquisition.

Research investigating the role of L2 input originating from the media was also carried out in Malta and shows that Maltese nationals who were exposed to a greater quantity of Italian input through regular TV viewing attained more advanced L2 comprehension skills compared to their counterparts who received less copious exposure to Italian. This was also favoured by the several Italo-Romance lexical items in Maltese which often aided comprehension, especially during the initial stages of acquisition. Caruana (2003) also found

that formal and spontaneous learners followed similar acquisitional processes, even though formal learners had slightly higher levels of accuracy when using Italian. Moreover, participants who were exposed to Italian via media before the age of 11 had a significantly more native-like morphological and syntactic structures and reverted to code-switching less frequently to express themselves. In a more recent study carried out by Caruana, Ghia and Pavesi (2014), it was found that exposure to Italian-language original movies and to American or English movies dubbed into Italian can both be beneficial to L2 development at advanced stages of proficiency, especially in terms of vocabulary and comprehension. Overall, research carried out in Malta shows that Maltese speakers of Italian have a good level of L2 comprehension and production, irrespectively of whether they are/were formal or spontaneous learners, and that this is often the result of regular and copious audiovisual TV input. However, as explained in Section 1, exposure to Italian media has decreased considerably, especially among the younger generations. In this paper we therefore seek to investigate the extent to which this decreased exposure affects competence of Italian L2 by taking different age groups into consideration, as we explain in the following section.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 The Language Background Questionnaire

The aim of the research presented in this article is to investigate the effects of age and audiovisual input on the acquisition and learning of Italian in Malta. For this purpose, firstly, a language background questionnaire was devised to gather information about the participants' age, educational background, linguistic background, and media-viewing habits. The questionnaire, that could be taken either in English or in Maltese, was completed by a total of 377 participants, who were also given the option to leave their email address if they wished to participate in the second part of the research, involving the participation in the tasks described below. 80 respondents were then selected among those who accepted to carry out these tasks and were equally divided into four age groups: 18-30, 31-40, 41-50 and 51+. Since our aim was to compare these groups we attempted, as much as possible, to include subjects with a homogenous socio-educational background.

#### 3.2 Participants

The 80 participants were all Maltese nationals (22 males, 58 females) who were born in Malta and completed their education on the island. The youngest participants were 20 years old and the eldest participant was 74 years old at the time of data collection. They all affirmed that they had some prior knowledge of Italian - this was a necessary step in the sub-sampling procedure, as these subjects were required to carry out tasks in Italian, as we will explain in the next paragraph (3.3). 66 subjects were formal learners of Italian having learnt the language at school: 14 learnt Italian solely via informal exposure to it, mainly through the media. This imbalance between the two groups reflects the local reality, as Italian is the foreign language which the large majority of Maltese students learn at school. As consequence of this, the spontaneous learners in our sample only range from 3-5

subjects in the 20-30, 31-40 and 41-50 age groups. Only one participant in the 51+ age group acquired the language spontaneously, as practically all the subjects belonging to this group learnt Italian at school.

#### 3.3 Collecting Language Samples

In order to collect varied data from participants, in the second part of the research three tasks were devised: (a) an informal interview held in Italian, (b) a picture-story task to be carried out in Italian and (c) a written translation exercise containing single words and phrases to translate from Italian into either Maltese or English. By their very nature, our tasks cover different L2 competences (e.g. the ability to narrate semi-freely in the picture story retelling; the eliciting of specific vocabulary via translation etc.) and are designed to test a broad range of competences (Section 3.4). The three research tasks were broadly based on Gass and Mackey's (2011) data elicitation tasks. They were all recorded and stored for analyses' purposes.

##### 3.3.1 Task one: The Informal Interview

The first task was an informal interview of an approximate duration of five minutes. The participants were asked about their hobbies, their occupation, the places in Italy that they visited or which they would like to visit and further questions about their interest in the Italian language and/or culture. The interview was carried out in Italian and the main objective of this task was to allow respondents to feel more at ease while carrying out the following two tasks. For this reason, data collected from the interviews will not be analysed in this paper.

##### 3.3.2 Task Two: The Picture-Story Task

The second task was a picture-story, which participants were required to describe and/or narrate in Italian. This task was devised to investigate the participants' competence of Italian L2, particularly their use of verb tenses within sentence structures. The picture-story chosen, in fact, was aimed at eliciting the perfective/imperfective aspectual distinction, considered one of the main stages of development of Italian interlanguage (Giacalone Ramat 2003; Andorno 2006).

##### 3.3.3 Task Three: The Translation

The 80 respondents were then asked to translate words and sentences in Italian into either Maltese or English. These included 20 single words (cognate words, false friends, high frequency words, medium frequency words and low frequency words), four simple phrases and sentences, four compound sentences, four complex sentences and two idioms. Frequency was derived from a 2020 corpus of the Italian language available on SketchEngine<sup>1</sup>, and a combination of nouns, verbs and adjectives was included in the words selected for this task. Moreover, to devise the sentences used for the translation task, six different verb tenses and moods were employed, as well as four different types of conjunctions for the compound sentences and ten types of subordinate clauses for the complex sentences.

#### 3.4 Evaluation Criteria

In order to analyse the data collected from the participants through the research tasks, two different types of evaluation

were devised: one for the picture-story (see 3.3.2) and one for the translation task (see 3.3.3).

The picture-story evaluation was based on the CIIS (*Certificazione d'Italiano come Lingua Straniera*)<sub>2</sub> assessment and it took into consideration communicative

efficiency (including listening and comprehension skills), lexical richness and morphological correctness of the participants' spoken productions. The scale of evaluation ranged from one to five, as shown in Table 1 below, in which each evaluation range (Er) is described:

<b>ER1</b>	Poor l2 production skills. Speakers are unable to communicate efficiently and have a very limited range of vocabulary.
<b>ER2</b>	limited l2 competence. Speakers rely on context and the interlocutor to express themselves. vocabulary range is somewhat limited.
<b>ER3</b>	Intermediate l2 competence. Speakers communicate effectively, despite some difficulties when formulating sentences. Syntax and vocabulary are used appropriately. There is evidence of morphological inflection, including expressions of temporality.
<b>ER4</b>	Medium-high l2 competence. Speakers communicate autonomously but may encounter some difficulties related to vocabulary or specific, complex grammatical features.
<b>ER5</b>	High l2 proficiency. Speakers have a wide range of vocabulary, and they can discuss and formulate complex thoughts. an array of verb tenses, verb forms and complex sentence structures are also employed.

**Table 1:** Evaluation criteria for the informal interview and the picture-story task.

The evaluation ranges described above are aligned to Giacalone ramat's (2003: 20-23) and Chini's (2005: 80-87) reflections on the stages of Italian l2 acquisition: the 'pre-basic' phase corresponds to Er1 as, for example, speakers formulate utterances that lack grammatical markers for temporality, with loose syntactic organisation and the use of limited lexical units. The 'basic' phase corresponds to Er2 as, for example, adverbial forms start to appear to refer to past or future events. In verb morphology, the present tense starts to appear alongside the infinitive and at times, the past participle (without the auxiliary) is employed to express the perfective. The 'post-basic' phase corresponds to Er3, Er4 and Er5 as the Italian l2 competence of the speakers develops further and gradually becomes richer, approaching native-

like structures. This phase is characterised by perfective and imperfective aspectual distinction and by the emergence of subordinate clauses in their speech – as we will explain, many of our participants could make this distinction, hence the necessity to use three evaluation ranges in which to classify the responses of those who demonstrated 'post-basic competences'.

As for the translation task marks were assigned to each participant, based on three ranges: '0-5', '6-7' and '8-10'. Half-marks were assigned to participants when the translations provided were not completely accurate or equivalent to the Maltese or English forms, but were nonetheless communicatively or pragmatically acceptable:

<b>Score 0-5</b>	Participants can comprehend high-frequency words and are able to translate some simple sentences. They are unable to translate compound and complex sentences, nor either of the two idioms.
<b>Score 6-7</b>	Participants can translate high and medium-frequency words. Simple, compound and complex sentences are translated correctly, although some inaccuracies related to verb tenses are registered. one of the two idioms are translated correctly, at least partially.
<b>Score 8-10</b>	Participants can translate all words correctly, with some uncertainties only related to false friends. Simple, compound and complex sentences are also translated, with only minor inaccuracies regarding verb tenses. Both idioms were translated correctly.

**Table 2:** Evaluation criteria for the translation task.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Language background and media exposure

as mentioned earlier, for the purposes of this paper we describe the results obtained from the sub-sample of 80 participants (72% females, 28% males) who completed the picture story and the translation tasks. The participants were divided equally into four age groups (18-30, 31-40, 41-50 and 51+). They held a variety of jobs, including occupations in the field of education, IT and health; others were students, retired or unemployed. The majority of the 31-40, 41-50 and 51+ participants declared that Maltese was the first language that they learned to speak at home. Most participants in the 20-30 age group, on the other hand, declared that they grew up speaking both English and Maltese at home. In addition, 81.3% of the respondents claimed that they had studied Italian in the past and 65% claimed that they had started

studying Italian formally at secondary school, so at age 11 or 12.

Regarding the participants' current television habits, 58.75% (47/80) follow English Tv programmes on a daily basis, as opposed to 31.25% (25/80) who follow Maltese Tv programmes daily. 45% (36/80) of our sample declared following Italian Tv programmes every day, with Tv shows and cartoons being the most popular. 65% (13/20) of participants belonging to age groups 41-50 and 60% (12/20) of participants belonging to the 51+ age group currently follow Italian television programmes daily. The proportion decreases considerably when it comes to the younger age groups, as only 20% (4/20) of participants belonging to the age group 20-30 and 35% (7/20) of respondents belonging to the 31-40 age group currently follow Italian television programmes daily. These data indicate that today regular

access to Italian media products is more widespread among the older age-groups.

The participants’ Italian television viewing habits during their primary school years were similar across the 20-30, 31-40 and 41-50 age groups, as 50% of these subjects used to watch these programmes daily. This, however, was lower in the 51+ age group: only 15% (3/20) watched Italian Tv daily, possibly because in their childhood only a limited number of channels were available, and transmissions were received solely via antenna. These data suggest that whereas the 41-50 age group had constant and regular exposure to Italian television, viewing habits in the other three age groups were less consistent.

40% (32/80) of our subjects stated that they are exposed to the language via online articles, with most of these belonging to the 31-40 and the 41-50 age groups. almost half of them

have opportunities to speak Italian in various situations or contexts, such as at work, with family or friends, on social media, etc. 57.5% (46/80) of participants reported that the reason why they decided to study Italian was that they were attracted to the language and/or culture, that they wanted to understand Italian better or that they had developed an interest in Italian after years exposure to television.

The participants were also asked to self-assess their receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills in Italian on a scale from one to four, where ‘1’ indicated poor skills and ‘4’ indicated high proficiency levels. according to this self-assessment 77.5% (62/80) of the respondents can understand Italian very well, whereas 62.5% (50/80) declared that they are very or quite fluent when speaking Italian. Moreover, differences were registered between the four age groups, as shown in Table 3 below:

<b>Italian comprehension</b>	<b>Age Group 20-30</b>	<b>Age Group 31-40</b>	<b>Age Group 41-50</b>	<b>Age Group 51+</b>
<i>I understand everything (or most of it)</i>	70%	80%	90%	70%
<b>Italian Production</b>	<b>Age Group 20-30</b>	<b>Age Group 31-40</b>	<b>Age Group 41-50</b>	<b>Age Group 51+</b>
<i>am very or quite fluent</i>	40%	70%	80%	60%

**Table 3:** Participants’ self-assessment scores for Italian receptive and productive skills.

The results shown in Table 3 indicate that, overall, respondents belonging to the 31-40 and 41-50 age groups state that their competence of Italian is better than that of the two other age-groups. Furthermore, insofar as production is concerned, the youngest age-group (20-30) rates itself as much less competent than the others. This is probably related to a lesser degree of current exposure to the language with respect to the other three groups, as explained earlier, but this result is to be interpreted with caution because of the limited reliability of such self-report evaluations.

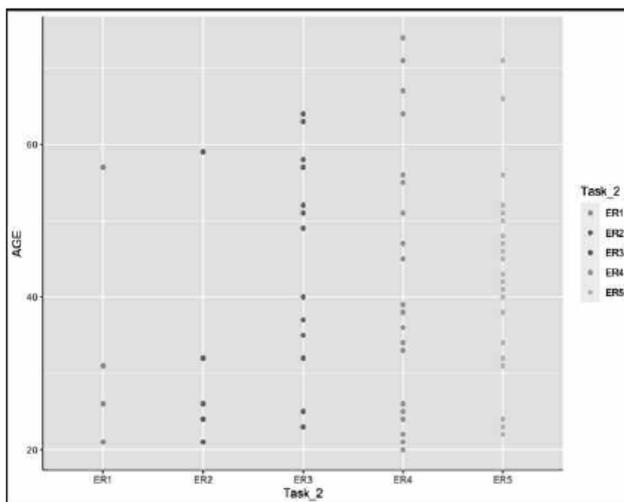
**4.2 The picture-story and translation task: age and guided vs spontaneous input**

We now expose the results gathered via the two tasks described respectively in 3.3.1 and 3.3.2, and we focus on our two main predictors: age and guided vs spontaneous input. In the picture-story task, 4/80 participants were placed in category Er1 and 5/80 participants in Er2. These 9 participants, amounting to 11.25% of the sample, were the least proficient based on the criteria described in Table 1. 17.5% (14/80) of the participants were assigned the mid-range evaluation, Er3. on the other hand, 26.25% (21/80) participants were placed in the Er4 category and

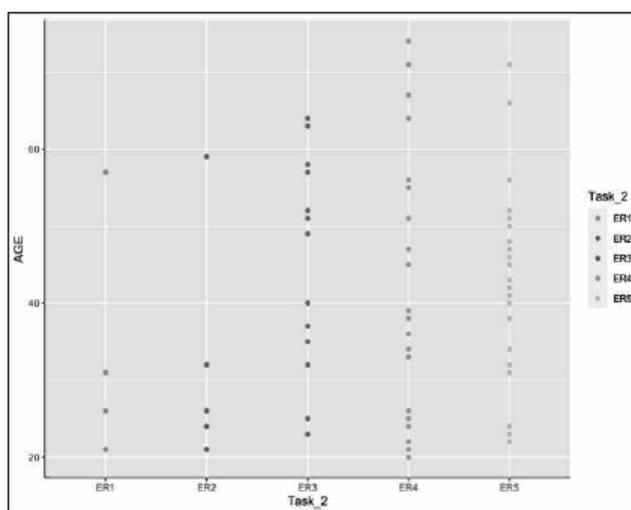
45% (36/80) in Er5. These 57 (71.25%) subjects were therefore deemed to have completed the picture story in a very satisfactory manner.

In the translation task, 8.75% (7/80) of the participants were assigned a score of ‘0-5’ indicating that these respondents were not able to comprehend and translate the material in a satisfactory manner. 13.75% (11/80) of our sample obtained a score of ‘6-7’ indicating that their comprehension of Italian was average. In contrast, 77.5% (62/80) of our subjects were awarded a score of ‘8-10’ and, according to the criteria described in Table 2, they represent the group who completed the translation task in the best possible manner.

The age group that performed best, both in the picture-story and in the translation task, was the 41-50 group. Interestingly, this group contained a high number of respondents who currently watch Italian television daily, as well as the highest proportion of participants who reported having the highest competences both in receptive and productive skills (Table 3). Results are shown in the figures below:



**Figure 1:** Participants’ performance in the picture-story task, based on age



**Figure 2:** Participants’ performance in the translation task, based on age.

As shown in Figures 1 and 2 most participants, across all the four age groups, performed well in both tasks. Because of the high level registered across all groups, no statistically significant differences could be identified. nevertheless, within the limits of this study and without further generalisations, we note that the 41-50 age group outperformed the other three. We will investigate this result further in Sections 4.3 and 4.4 below.

No significant differences were found between the participants who started learning Italian at school earlier (at 10 years of age) or later (generally between ages 11-13), but the number of

respondents in the latter group was much higher than in the former. There were also no major differences in performance between guided and spontaneous participants, but this result must be interpreted in the light of the unbalanced number between the two groups (see Section 3.2). although both groups performed well in the tasks, but one must take account of the fact that, contrarily to the age-groups which were divided equally and included 20 participants, guided learners were much more numerous than spontaneous learners. results are shown in the Table 4 below:

<b>Picture Story</b>	<b>Guided</b> 66 participants	<b>Spontaneous</b> 14 participants
ER1	2 (3%)	2 (14.3%)
ER2	4 (6.1%)	1 (7.1%)
ER3	12 (18.2%)	2 (14.3%)
ER4	19 (28.8%)	2 (14.3%)
ER5	29 (43.9%)	7 (50%)
<b>Translation</b>	<b>Guided</b> 66 participants	<b>Spontaneous</b> 14 participants
Score 0-5	5 (7.6%)	2 (14.3%)
Score 6-7	9 (13.6%)	2 (14.3%)
Score 8-10	52 (78.8%)	10 (71.4%)

**Table 4:** Performance based on guided vs spontaneous input.

To conclude, differences in guided learning vs spontaneous acquisition were not decisive factors to account for better or worse performance in the assigned picture story and translation task, as both groups performed equally well. This result is due to the good performance registered by subjects who learnt Italian spontaneously, an outcome which is analogous to Caruana's (2003) conclusions.

As hinted earlier, since the results exposed in this section were clearly affected by the amount of exposure to the L2, our next step was therefore to analyse age and guided vs spontaneous input in relation to the participants' media habits in Italian.

#### 4.3 Analysing the significant input predictors for successful completion of the Italian L2 tasks

To understand which factors could account for obtaining a high score in the picture-story and in the translation task, two models containing the most potentially significant variables were created through linear regression analysis<sup>5</sup> on rStudio. The variables that were taken into consideration for each model included the participants' Italian media habits (past and present Tv habits, music, radio, online resources, speaking and reading), the duration of their Italian studies and the class in which they started learning Italian. The results of the linear regression analysis are shown in Table 5 below, in which we include only those variables which gave at least one statistically significant outcome:

Significant predictors (p < 0.05)	Picture Story r <sup>2</sup> = 0.49	Translation task r <sup>2</sup> = 0.37
Primary School Italian Tv viewing habits	****	*
Secondary School Italian Tv viewing habits	n.s	**
Present Italian Tv viewing habits	***	n.s
Speaking Italian at present	***	n.s
online resources in Italian at present	n.s	***
* = significant at 0.05 level ** = significant at 0.01 level *** = significant at 0.005 level **** = significant at 0.001 level n.s. = not significant		

**Table 5:** The most significant predictors for high proficiency in the two tasks (p < 0.05).

These results show that frequency of exposure to Italian television programmes in primary school (6-11 years old) accounts for high scores both in the picture-story and in the translation task, suggesting that early exposure to the L2 led to the successful completion of both tasks. Speaking Italian frequently (at present) also led to a significantly good outcome in the completion of the picture-story, confirming the view that L2 interaction allows learners to create and negotiate meaning, allowing them to receive feedback and improve their overall spoken proficiency (Yilmaz and Granena 2010; Sato 2015; 2017).

On the other hand, frequency of exposure to Italian television in the secondary school years (11-16 years old) and frequency of accessing online resources in Italian<sup>6</sup> (at present) were significant predictors for a high score in the translation task, but not for the picture story. This suggests that late childhood (after 11 years of age) Tv exposure, as well as the use of online resources, were less effective than earlier-childhood Tv exposure for successful completion of this task.

Interestingly, the frequency of watching Italian television at present (during adulthood) was a significant variable for high L2 spoken proficiency in the picture task but did not lead to a

significant correlation in relation to a positive performance in the translation task. This result is possibly influenced by the different nature of the two tasks, as translating requires different L2 skills with respect to narrating, although our results in relation to Tv viewing habits are inconsistent, the trend we witness is that it helped our subjects to produce an L2 output which is useful to narrate and describe, as required by the picture story, while it was less effective when carrying out translation tasks, which require more focus on form. nevertheless, we reiterate that exposure from a young age was effective for the successful completion of both the picture story and the translation task. overall, this confirms that when early L2 input is frequent, regular and copious, there are benefits not only for receptive skills, but also for productive ones.

#### 4.4 Analysing the significant predictors regarding TV viewing habits in relation to performance

We here present how the significant predictors regarding Tv viewing habits (identified in Section 4.3) can be analysed in relation to the performance and age of subjects in both tasks. For brevity's sake we will only report results for the 41-50 age group. Since this group outperformed the other three (see Section 4.2), it is the one that can lead to the most consistent conclusions:

	Picture Story	Translation task
<b>Weekly frequency of access to Italian TV</b>	<b>ER 5</b>	<b>Score 8-10</b>
	<i>Age Group: 41-50</i>	<i>Age Group: 41-50</i>
<b>Primary School TV</b> = 3 hrs - 5+ hrs	47% (14/29)	34% (15/44)
<b>Secondary School TV</b> = 3 hrs - 5+ hrs	42% (13/31)	26% (13/48)
<b>Present TV</b> = 3 hrs - 5+ hrs	41% (7/17)	29% (8/27)

**Table 6:** Participants belonging to the 41-50 age group who completed both tasks most successfully.

As shown in Table 6, 47% of the 41-50 age group participants who obtained the best evaluation (Er5) in the picture story and 34% of these participants who obtained the highest scores in the translation task, used to watch Italian television programmes for a minimum of 3 hours up to more than 5 hours a week during their primary school years. Similar trends can be observed for television habits when they used to attend secondary school, as 42% of these participants were placed in category Er5 in the picture story, and 26% of them scored '8-10' in the translation task. Participants aged 41-50 who carried out both tasks very successfully also reported frequent exposure to Italian television programmes, both in the past and at present. These results confirm the strong effect of early media L2 exposure on the positive outcomes registered in both tasks.

### 5. Discussion and concluding remarks

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of age and the effects of the media on Italian L2 acquisition in Malta. Our first hypothesis was that older participants who received copious and frequent Italian input since childhood would perform better than younger participants who were less exposed, or exposed later, to Italian. The second hypothesis was that participants who acquired Italian mainly spontaneously would perform better than participants who acquired Italian mainly in formal and guided settings (see Section 1). In our research design we created four age-groups, of 20 participants each, which were as homogenous as possible, therefore valid for comparative purposes. However, the 20-30-year-old age group included more participants who use both English and Maltese at home, whereas in the age of the other age groups Maltese is more dominant.

The responses of our questionnaire indicate that the two older age groups (41-50 and 51+) still follow Italian television programmes frequently, probably because of the viewing habits they developed in the years when the popularity of Italian television was at its peak in Malta. nevertheless, subjects in the 51+ group were less exposed to Tv in their childhood for the reasons mentioned in Section 4.1. These findings are in line with those of a recent skills' national survey (nSo 2023) which reveal that more than 60% of persons aged 25 years and over have at least basic knowledge of Italian, as they claim to understand this language. Percentages are much lower for the 15-24-year-old age group thereby indicating that competence of this language is declining among the younger generations.

Most participants provided a coherent narration when completing the picture-story task, using a variety of L2 structures. almost three-quarters of the participants obtained high scores, comparable to 'basic' and 'postbasic' phases of acquisition described in various studies that originated from the Pavia Project on the acquisition of Italian, including Giacalone ramat (2003), Banfi and Bernini (2003) and Chini (2005). The translation task was also completed successfully by most of our participants. The outcomes of both tasks reflect the self-assessment scores provided by the respondents: the number of participants who self-assess themselves as competent in Italian corresponds to those who performed both tasks most successfully.

The fact that from an initial sample of 377, we had little difficulty to recruit 80 participants who were disposed to carry out our tasks as they felt confident enough to understand and speak Italian, indicates that despite the considerable reduction of exposure from the media, this language is still quite popular

among the Maltese. notwithstanding this, the trend registered among the younger generation indicates that Italian is on an alarming decline with respect to the recent past, which is seemingly irreversible in view of the pervasive role that English has today in Malta. This is confirmed by the self-assessment scores that our participants reported, with the 20-30-year-old participants acknowledging limited recognition and, especially, production skills in Italian, once again corroborating the inclinations reported in the local skills' survey (nSo, 2023).

As stated above, our first hypothesis was based on the effect of age on the learning and acquisition of Italian L2. The 'age' variable was mainly analysed by taking account of our participants' exposure to Italian L2 via the media, in the past and at present. In both the picture-story and in the translation task, the 41-50 age group consistently outperformed the other age groups whereas the 20-30 age group obtained the lowest scores. nevertheless, the differences we found were not statistically significant, and our findings are therefore inconclusive.

The 41-50 age group also contained the largest number of participants who, besides having copious and regular exposure to Italian television in the past, are still regularly exposed to it at present and who actively speak the language. This leads us to the clearest outcome of this study, i.e., that a combination of different variables, including age of exposure and copiousness of input during childhood and adolescence led to the best scores in both the picture story and the translation task.

Media exposure per se accounted more significantly and consistently for high scores in the two research tasks, irrespective of subjects' age. These findings are in line with the literature (Caruana 2021), according to which input via the media can be both a prime mover for language acquisition and a useful supplement for successful L2 learning, even when it is largely unidirectional, as in the case of 'traditional' Tv. Furthermore, they confirm that while age is possibly an important predictor in Italian L2 acquisition in Malta, in line with the arguments in favour of the CPH (e.g., deKeyser et al. 2010), it is influenced by other variables (Keeley, 2016; Singleton and leńniewska 2021) including onset, which in the case of our study often coincides with Italian Tv exposure during primary school. Furthermore, speaking Italian at present and accessing online resources in Italian were also conducive to completing our tasks successfully, confirming the view that regular, copious and active exposure to the L2 is beneficial for successful L2 learning (Yilmaz and Granena 2010; Bialystok 2011).

In relation to our second hypothesis, both groups of learners performed well in the tasks, although a slightly larger proportion of spontaneous learners performed better in the picture-story task and, conversely, a slightly larger amount of guided learners performed better in the translation task. However, the two groups are not comparable, as the number of respondents who learned Italian at school is much larger than those who did not. In addition to this, it was not possible to make a clearcut distinction between participants who only received guided instruction and participants who only were exposed to Italian in naturalistic settings. The minor differences registered in the two tasks may be due to the input received: for example, spontaneous acquirers use more informal, colloquial varieties of Italian, while learners who were exposed to Italian in formal settings, approached the tasks by placing more focus on form, including applying rules and correct grammar. For this reason they were more accurate in the translation task. By and large our results

confirm that input through media exposure leading to spontaneous acquisition is key to achieving high levels of Italian in Malta, as reported in earlier research, especially Caruana (2003): our small group of spontaneous learners performed well and even those who learnt Italian at school reaped benefits from exposure in informal settings.

To conclude, our findings indicate that whereas age, as an isolated variable, and type of input received are not statistically significant factors for successful completion of the picture-story and translation tasks, early, copious and regular exposure to the L2 are significant predictors. While our research shows that Italian is still showing signs of vitality in Malta, it underlines that there are indications of a concerning decline. This is not only evident from the remarks we make in relation to the 21-30 age group, i.e., the subjects who, especially today, receive less copious input in Italian, but also because English is today rapidly taking over the space previously occupied by Italian on the media. The extensive use of English is also present in other spheres: for example, some Italian residents in Malta sometimes prefer using this language with their children, rather than their 11 and Italian schoolchildren sometimes switch to it even when asked to use their 11 (Caruana, 2023).

Further research, including large scale surveys, are therefore necessary to obtain a more representative picture of the state of Italian in Malta, especially among younger cohorts, also because our research offers a partial picture of the present situation as it was carried out among subjects who had a least basic competences in communicative Italian in order to complete the tasks we set.

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