Learning Italian as an L2: the case of Arabic mother tongue learners

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Abstract

This paper aims to report the investigations and outcome of a study conducted in the context of learning a foreign language, aimed at discovering whether a relationship exists between the difficulty in learning structures that are typical of the L2 (Italian) but which are not present in the source language (Arabic).To do this, questionnaires were given to a group of Arabic-speaking students at the Università for Foreigners of Perugia, with questions concerning various verbal and phonological aspects of the Italian language. The questionnaires assessed the competence in Italian of the Arab students, aiding the understanding of the real degree of linguistic competence of the sample examined. From this, it was also possible to gain an understanding as to whether there is a relationship between the skills of the students and the time spent in Italy.

Keywords: Language learning, Language acquisition Arabic language, Italian language, L1, L2, phonology, verbs.

Introduction

The present study was developed within the framework of the Master's Degree Course in Teaching Italian L2, held in the academic year 2019-2020 at the University of Naples l'Orientale. Thanks to the in-depth study of glottodidactics, it was possible to reflect fruitfully on the learning of a foreign language, which in this case is Italian, by Arabic-speaking students. Their search uses a questionnaire administered to a sample of learners and is based on studies conducted on learning processes. From these studies, it emerged that some acquisition difficulties are linked to structures that in the target language exhibit marked traits; i.e. traits that are rare in world languages, and/or traits that are particularly complex (Chini and Bosiso 2014, pp.50-51). The two different linguistic systems, L1 and L2, plus the one commonly called *interlanguage*, have some points in common as well as very dissimilar ones, making it is easy for the learner to make mistakes, especially if the L1 system influences the learning of the L2 system; if the teaching process insists on some aspects rather than others (Selinker 1984, p.32); if the learner chooses valid acquisition and communication strategies; and if he or she uses L2 rules in contexts where they should not be applied. The research investigated the types of errors made by the Arabic-speaking students who answered the survey questions.

Study topics

To determine which aspects of Italian to investigate with the questionnaire, the critical points of learning for Arabic people were considered and theL1 and L2 were compared, looking for traits that were not in common between the two languages. In particular, the verbal and phonological systems were selected.

As far as the verbal system is concerned, the perfective and imperfective aspects exist in both Arabic and Italian, though there is no precise correspondence between the two languages. In fact, in Italian there are various types of aspects: the imperfective is differentiated into habitual, progressive and continuous; the perfective is differentiated into accomplished and aorist. Each of these aspects is associated with a tense of the indicative mode, which in Italian are eight in total. In Arabic, on the other hand, though there are perfective and imperfective aspects, they do not associate with tenses as in Italian, since in Arabic there are only two tenses: the past and the non-past (Al-Ali 2015 pp. 180-181). This lack of direct correspondence causes problems for Arabic speakers learning Italian, who may therefore have difficulties in understanding in which contexts different types of past tenses should be used, such as passato prossimo / perfect past, passato remoto /remote past and imperfetto / imperfect. Moreover, the main problem is that the two aspects of perfectivity and imperfectivity coexist within the only past tense that the Arabic language knows.

As far as the phonological system is concerned, it has been noted that learning how to articulate the so-called *exotic sounds* is often neglected (Chini Bosisio 2014, p. 111) and that the interference of the Arabic language can cause errors, from the point of view of sounds, in the learning of Italian. Particularly when it comes to pronunciation, one must consider that pronunciation in the L2 language will reflect the influence of the L1. Phonology, therefore, seems to be the component most susceptible to fossilisation, as

well as being the component most permeable to interference (Elgheriwi 2017, p. 96). Among the various phonological issues that could be studied, here we have considered the problem because in Arabic there is no opposition between *p* and *b* phonemes and *f* and *v* phonemes, which in Italian have a distinctive character, and that there is a general tendency for Arabic to pronounce atonal vowels as indistinct. In addition, consideration should also be given to the fact that standard Arabic, even if it provides a reference, does not reflect the reality of the facts, because there are so many diatopic varieties of Arabic that "lead the Arabs themselves to a certain insecurity in writing some sounds of their language and this insecurity is also reflected in the writing of the same sounds in Italian" (Elgheriwi 2014, p. 101). Finally, possible problems with accentuation were also investigated, since "in Standard Arabic [...] several identical words do not change their meaning due to the position of the accent, on the contrary, it is the length of a vowel that can become a distinctive feature" (Elgheriwi 2017, p. 57). In Italian, however, vowel length is not a distinctive feature.

Questions were asked about the use of some verbal tenses of the Italian indicative mode: the passato prossimo, the passato remote and the imperfetto. In fact, time categories are based on the concept that they express not only the moment in which the action takes place, but also the distance in time between the action and the moment in which it is spoken, or how events unfold in time (Daina, Properzi and Silvestrin, 2004).

In the field of phonology, some Italian phonemes that are distinguished by their sonority (such as *p* and *b*, both labial sounds but one deaf and the other sonorous) and the position of the accent, have been studied.

Expectations

The aim of this research, using the questionnaire as a tool, was to find out whether native Arabic speakers experience difficulties in relation to the particular features in the Italian language that do not have direct correspondents in the source language.

The 'model' recipient of the questionnaire was an Arab who had a requirement to study Italian for scholastic or academic purposes and who therefore often holds a certificate issued by an Arab or Italian language school or university. In either case, L2 learning starts in the country of origin, at least at a basic level.

It would therefore be interesting to find out whether, in the face of a common initial difficulty, a change of study method could influence performance. In fact, if the study was, at least initially, carried out only according to a formalistic method focusing on grammar, one might find that direct and sustained exposure to the L2 can actually significantly improve the learner's competence. This is because communicative needs and oral skills, together with contact with native speakers, could improve the skills of Arabic learners also in relation to those problematic aspects -as being absent in Arabic-of Italian grammar. The expectation, then, was that a longer exposure time would correspond to greater competence in those specific areas.

Finally, it was interesting to note whether a correspondence exists between greater or lesser development of competence in certain subjects in relation to the region of origin

in the Arab world.

Methodology

The *target population* (Griffee 2012, p. 56), is part of the hypothetical group of native Arabic speakers who have learned Italian as an L2. The *unit of analysis*, on the other hand, includes university students from an Arabic-speaking country who have come to study in Italy: this ensures that the Arabic speaker has studied Italian at least at an intermediate level, a competence necessary to carry out study abroad.

The questionnaires were distributed via social networks and were intended for students enrolled (or who were enrolled and then completed or interrupted their studies) at an Italian university, in particular within the circle of those attending the University for Foreigners of Perugia, which compared to other universities or academies has a higher number of foreigners, in particular Arabs. The total number of participants was 82 Arabic speakers. The number of students enrolled at the University for Foreigners of Perugia in the a.y. 2014-2015 (according to the 2016 report) was 984 for the bachelor and master degree courses. Of these, 4% came from North Africa and 6% from Occidental Asia. Thus, if we consider that the most widely spoken language in these two areas is Arabic, there were approximately 98 Arabic-speaking students enrolled. If we consider that these 82 students who responded to the survey studied at the University for Foreigners of Perugia, the sample analysed is sufficiently representative, being over 80%.

The data collection questionnaire was created using Google Docs, a tool that facilitates the dissemination of the questionnaire via social networks and e-mail as well as allowing the data to be analysed in real-time through various graph software and spreadsheets. The questionnaire was divided into 5 sections:

1. the first is aimed at collecting general data on students (geographical origin, age, level of education, length of stay, employment, certified level of Italian language and certifying body);
2. the second assesses basic grammatical competence (A1/A2);
3. the third assesses intermediate grammatical competence (B1/B2);
4. the fourth assesses advanced grammatical competence (C1/C2);
5. the fifth assesses competence in morphology and phonology.

Sections 2, 3 and 4 are in turn divided into several parts:

1. the first contains grammar questions in which the learner has to choose between two or more sentences and identify the one in which, according to the learner, there are no errors. The options available do not always allow a clear distinction between 'right' and 'wrong': in some cases there is a wrong answer, but others are equally acceptable because they relate to two different areas of Italian usage. For example, on verb morphology, tenses, and verbal aspects, the choice between the past perfect and past remote is based also on regional and formality criteria (Berretta 2003, pp. 210-214): in northern regions, the past perfect is preferred in informal contexts, without any aspectual distinction; the past remote survives

almost exclusively in formal and written contexts, in this case without diatopic variability. The imperfect, in common usage, also covers uses not foreseen by normative grammars. Some questions relating to the issues under study are "hidden" among the generic grammar questions (Ciulli and Proietti 2005). These grammar questions to assess competence are distributed in sections 2, 3 and 4 in order of increasing difficulty to assess the Italian competence stated in section 1;

2. The second part is devoted to self-assessment: three self-assessment questions are asked as a way of gaining insight into the learner's awareness of their preparedness.

   The first two questions are graded, in which the respondent may express a preference ranging from 1 to 5: *How confident do you feel about your answers?;* and *Do you usually use sentences that contain these grammatical structures?*

   The third question is a closed-ended one: *which sentence best describes your preparation on those grammatical structures?* To which the respondent may reply: "I know the grammar and I know how to use it correctly: I don't think I make mistakes", "I know the grammar but I am not sure about its use: I know I make mistakes", "I am not sure about the grammar: I prefer not to use such structures in order not to make mistakes".

Section 5, on the other hand, is reserved only for the morphology and phonology questions under study: the learner's competence is assessed with grammar questions apparently similar to those in the previous sections. This section is divided into two parts, morphology and phonology, which is in turn sub-divided into a part for phonemes and one for accent; each of these sections is followed by two self-assessment questions, closed-ended and graded.

   The questionnaire was distributed to students by sharing it on social networks (in particular Facebook), through the author's personal page, and through aggregation groups for students enrolled at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. The questionnaire was made anonymous via the settings in the Google Docs tool and respondents could fill in the questionnaire even without accessing the tool through their personal Google account.

The administration lasted for about 5 days, with a peak in responses coming between the second and third day of administration thanks to word of mouth, whereas on the first day only 10% of the total responses had been submitted. A total of 82 completed questionnaires were collected.

Research results in Section 1
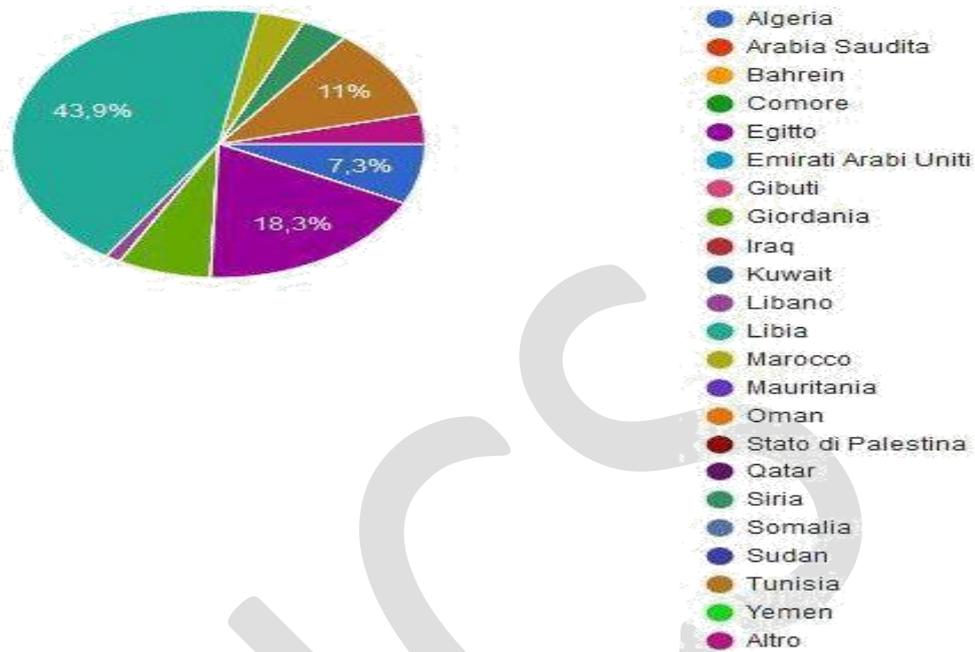
The origin of respondents is quite varied. As expected, the largest percentages came from North Africa: 43.9 % from Libya (36 students), 18.3 % from Egypt (15), 11% from Tunisia (9), and 7.3% from Algeria (6). The figure for Libya can be explained by considering the nationality of the author and promoter of the questionnaire: those who answered the call were mainly friends and closest colleagues who are often also of the same nationality, hence Libyan. Another substantial 7.3% came from Jordan (6), 1.2% from Lebanon (1) while Morocco, Syria and 'other' made up 3.7% (3).

Età
82 risposte
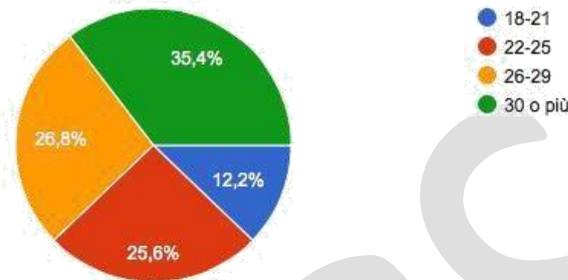
The age graph shows that the number of Arabic speakers who study or have studied in Italy and who took part in the survey increases relative to age: 29 are 30 years or older; 22 are between 26 and 29; 21 are between 22 and 25; 10 are between 18 and 21. From the analysis using Excel, there does not seem to be a relationship between the age groups and the countries of origin.

Livello di istruzione
82 risposte
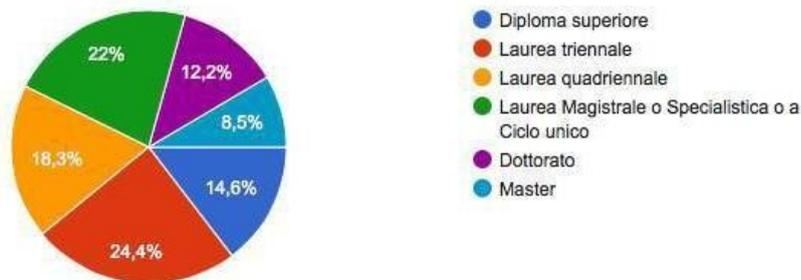
The level of education is quite varied. The comparison using the Excel work sheet shows that there is no relationship between the level of education and the age of the survey participants. For example, it might have been expected that a majority of the 8.5% of students who have only a high school diploma were those in the 18-21 age group: instead, of the 13 who hold only a high school diploma only 2 are in the 18-21 age group, with 2 being in the 22-25 age group, 4 in the 26-29 age group, and 4 also in the 30+ age group. This distribution of data also reflects the percentages of the age groups. This data should be analysed keeping in mind that the survey did not ask whether this qualification was obtained in Italy or elsewhere.
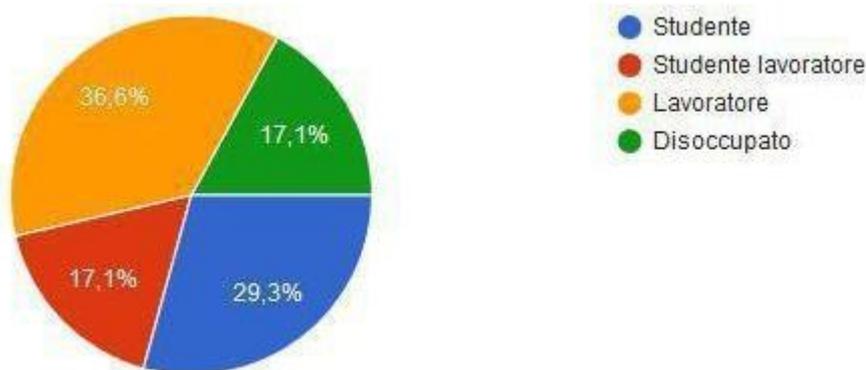
The employment graph shows a fairly balanced distribution.

The Excel sheet shows that for the categories 'student' and 'worker' there are clear connections with age, while the categories 'student-worker' and 'unemployed' show a rather varied age. Specifically, students belong to the lowest age groups, while workers are 30 years or older.
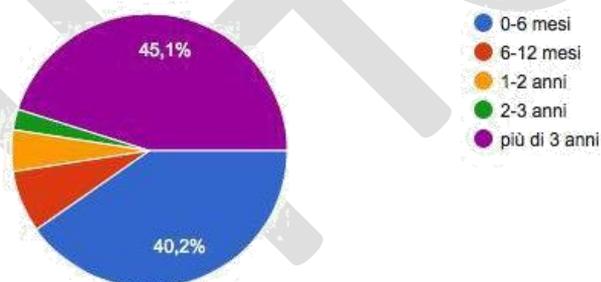

The majority of the students who answered the questionnaire had already been in Italy for 0-6 months or more than 3 years.

From the comparison between the time of stay and the level of education, it will be seen that there is no direct correlation: a longer stay in Italy does not correspond to a higher level of education. This indicates that Italy is not a preferred destination for a full university course of study, but rather a destination for a Doctorate or Master's degree after having obtained a lower qualification elsewhere.

Livello di italiano certificato

82 risposte
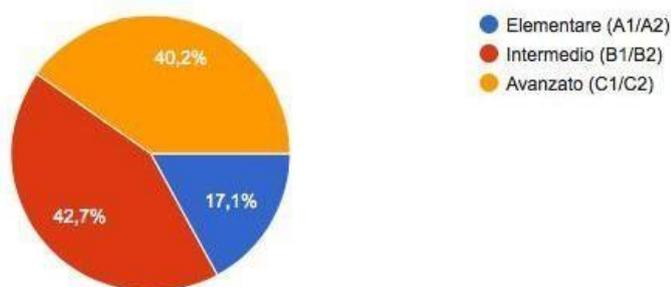
The level of certified competence in the Italian language is distributed harmoniously between the intermediate and advanced levels. Instead, only 17.1% of the students have a basic level of certified language. Perhaps this indicates that students have come to Italy with the specific aim of studying the Italian language or that, in some cases, a certain level of foreign language maybe required before they can begin a course of study in the destination country.

When the data were processed using an Excel spread sheet, no particular relationship was found between the level of certified Italian language acquisition and the level of education or age of the students.

On the other hand, with regard to the relationship between competence and time spent by students in Italy, it is interesting to note that:

- of those 34 who hold a certification between C1 and C2, 11 had been in Italy for 0-6 months (32.4%), 1 for 6-12 months (2.9%) and 22 for more than3 years (64.7%);
- Of those 35 who have a certificate between B1 and B2, 15 had been in Italy for 0-6 months (42.9%), 5 for 6-12 months (14.3%), 1 for 1-2 years (2.8%), 2 for 2-3 years (5.7%) and 12 for more than 3 years (34.3%);
- of those 14 who have a certification between A1 and A2, 7 had been in Italy for 0-6 months (50%), 3 for 1-2 years (21.4%) and 4 for more than 3 years (28.6%).

While the intermediate level is quite varied, the advanced level shows a prevalence of students resident in Italy for more than 3 years and the elementary level shows a prevalence of students resident in Italy for less than 6 months. This data seems to meet the hypothesis of the growth in competence as the length of stay in Italy increases. However, improvement of linguistic abilities in relation to the morphological and phonological aspects of interest remains to be confirmed.
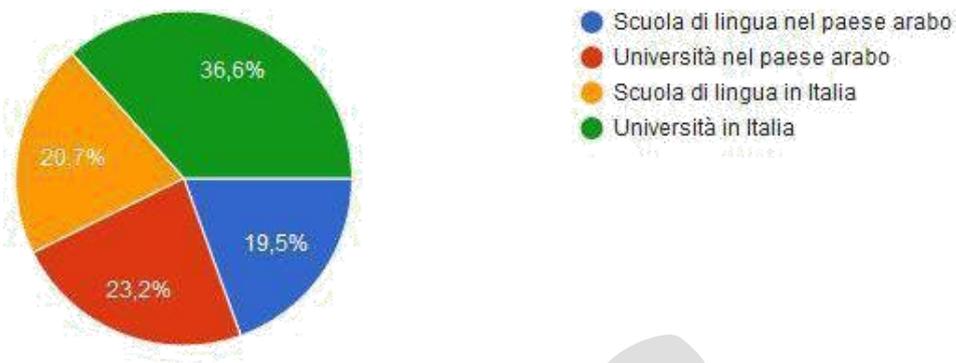
The bodies that issued the certification vary in nature. A majority of students obtained their certification at a university in Italy (57.3%), a minority at a language school in their Arab country of origin (42.7%). It is important to note that 59.8% of the students relied on a university and 40.2% on a language school for their training and certification; furthermore, 42.7% of the students obtained certification in their country of origin while 57.3% obtained certification in Italy.

Results of the research in Section 2
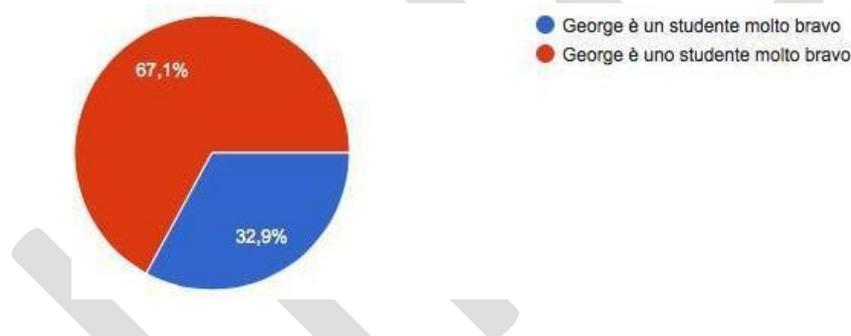
Most of the students (55) gave the correct answer. Of these, 47.3% have an advanced level, 38.2% intermediate, and 14.5% elementary.
The second question yielded the following results:

- *George studia ogni giorno la lezione* (72.8%)
- *George studia ogni giorno le lezione* (27.2%)

Of the 59 students who gave the correct answer, 44% have an advanced level, 42% intermediate, and 14% elementary.
Of the 22 who gave the wrong answer, 32% have an advanced level, 41% intermediate, and 27% elementary.

80 risposte

● Mary a Milano
● Mary abita in Milano
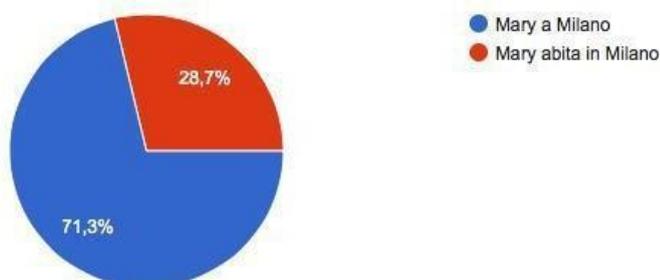
In the third question, there was an error - a print error – in the questionnaire: the first option should have been "Mary lives in Milan". Faced with this omission, some attempted the answer, perhaps imagining the missing part, others (2) preferred not to answer. Of the 57 students who gave the correct answer (or what should have been the correct answer), 40% have an advanced level, 46% intermediate, and14% elementary. Of the 23 students who gave the wrong answer, 39% have a certified advanced level, 39% intermediate and 22% elementary.

82 risposte

● Mary abita a una casa vicina alla scuola
● Mary abita in una casa vicina alla scuola
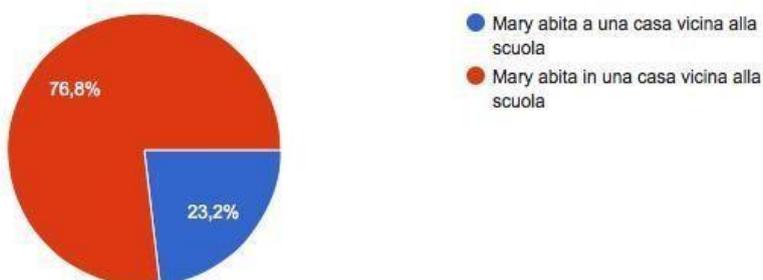
Of the 63 who answered question 4 correctly, 41% have an advanced level, 43% intermediate, and 16% elementary. Of the 37 who answered incorrectly, 19% have an advanced level, 70% intermediate, and 11% elementary.

82 risposte
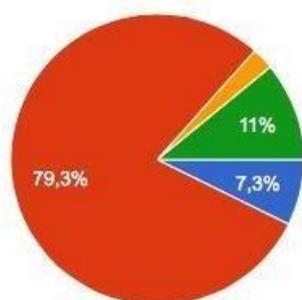
- Mentre andavo all'Università, incontravo Maria
- Mentre andavo all'Università, ho incontrato Maria
- Mentre sono andato all'Università, incontravo Maria
- Mentre sono andato all'Università, ho incontrato Maria

The answers to this fifth question, which are used here to assess competence, will be taken up later when assessing understanding of the aspects of perfectivity and imperfectivity.

Of the 65 who gave the correct answer, 46% have an advanced language level, 45% intermediate, and 9% elementary.

Of the remaining 17 who gave the wrong answer, we can meanwhile note that 13.4% preferred action in the near past, which has a perfective aspect, to act as a background to the action of the main proposition; only 7.3% used the imperfective to act as a background but used the imperfective e also in the main sentence: the sentence *Mentre andavo al l'Università, incontravo Maria* is considered here as "wrong", though it could be correct in other contexts, such as within a narrative, and if the meeting with Maria had been a constant or a habit for example.

82 risposte
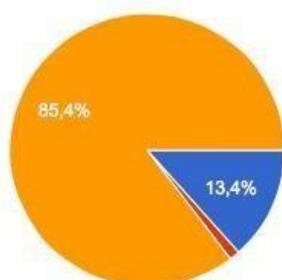
- A Mario
- A Lucia
- A Mario e Lucia

The sixth question was closed-ended: *Nella seguente frase, a chi si riferisce il pronome "gli"? "Mario e Lucia sono in ritardo. Gli ho detto di fare in fretta!"*. For this question, we have to distinguish between normative grammar and Italian usage. In fact, according to normative grammar, the correct answer would be *A Mario,* since a pronoun referring to both would be *loro* (*Mario e Lucia sono in ritardo. Ho ditto loro di fare in fretta!*); however, according to Italian usage, the pronoun *gli* can also be used instead of *loro*. Therefore, if 11 people answered correctly according to normative grammar, we cannot say that the 70 who answered *A Mario and Lucia* were wrong. The only wrong answer

is *A Lucia*, which was given by only one respondent who has an elementary certified language level despite having been in Italy for 3 years or more. The majority of those who answered according to the normative grammar have an intermediate language level (64%), 27% advanced, and 9% elementary. Of the 70 who answered according to usage, 43% have an advanced level, 40% intermediate, and 17% elementary.

81 risposte
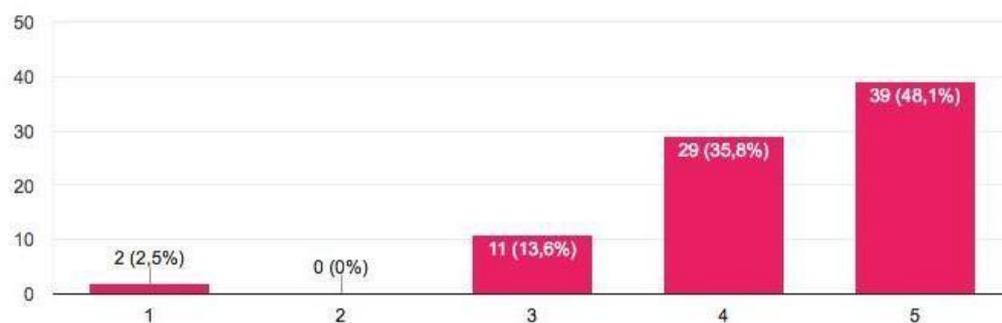
The first self-assessment question, *quanto ti senti sicuro delle risposte che hai dato?* Is used to find out how confident each student feels about the answer she or he has given. On this scale, 1='not at all sure' and 5='completely sure'.
One respondent (advanced level with 5 out of 6 correct answers) did not answer. Two of the respondents are not at all sure about their answers, both answering 4 out of 6 questions correctly.

Of the 39 who were completely sure of their answers, only 38% gave all correct answers, 21% gave 5 out of 6 correct answers, 26% 4/6, 13% answered only half of the questions correctly, and 2% answered 2 out of 6 questions correctly. In addition, only 29% of those participants with an advanced level answered all questions correctly, those with an elementary level gave most of the wrong answers, while those with an intermediate level reported varied results.

81 risposte
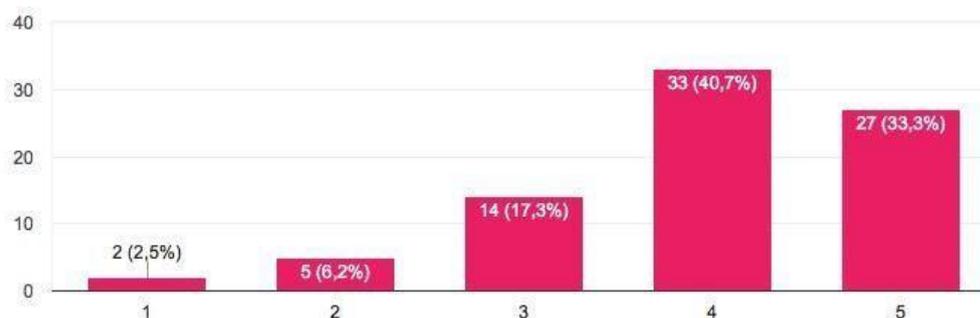
The second self-assessment question was: di solito usi frasi che usano queste strutture grammaticali? The majority of respondents (33 students) answered with a value of 4 on a scale of 1 = never, to 5 = always. It can be assumed that the majority of the students use these structures quite often.

Of these 33, only 18% gave 6 correct answers out of 6. Of the 27 who answered "always", 33% gave all the correct answers.

Interestingly, 36% of the participants who answered with a value of "3" gave correct answers.

82 risposte
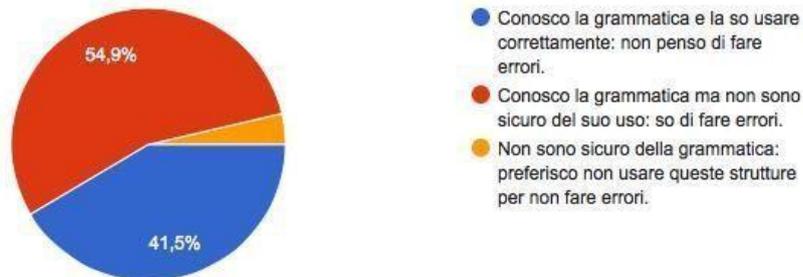
The last self-assessment question was: *quale frase descrive meglio la tua preparazione su quelle strutture grammaticali?*

Of the 34 respondents who did not think they made any mistakes, 56% had an advanced level of language, 32% intermediate, and 12% elementary. Of the 56% with an advanced level, only 37% answered all the questions correctly.

Results of the research in Section 3

82 risposte
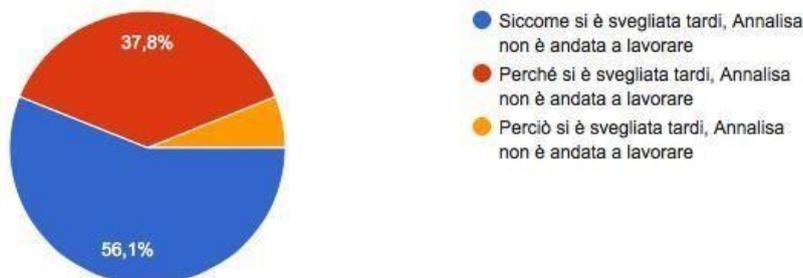
The correct choice according to normative grammar is the one with the conjunction *Siccome*.

The conjunction *perciò* "has a conclusive value by introducing a proposition expressing the consequence of facts already stated that are in some way its cause " **(Treccani)**, so it is to be considered wrong here.

The conjunction *perché* here would not be entirely wrong, but reserved for literary use, since "it can introduce the statement of an already known cause, premised on the proposition in which the consequence is expressed" (Treccani). It is therefore normal that a large percentage, although smaller than those who answered *siccome*, chose the

conjunction *perché*.

Of the 5 who responded *perciò* it is interesting to note that 1 has an advanced level, 2 intermediate, and 2 elementary.

79 risposte
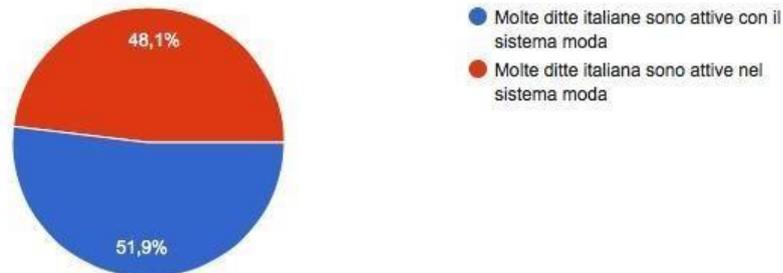
Three of the survey participants did not answer this second question. This can be explained by an error in the structure of the questionnaire: in fact we wanted to see the correct use of the preposition, with the possibility of choosing between *nel* and *con il*. The correct answer should have been the one with the preposition *nel*. Unfortunately, however, a concordance error was included in the same answer, which must have confused the survey participants: instead of *ditte italiane,* a s stated in the incorrect answer, the correct answer stated *ditte italiana.* This would also explain the distribution of answers, which is rather balanced at around half.
Therefore, this question cannot be used to assess language competence.

79 risposte
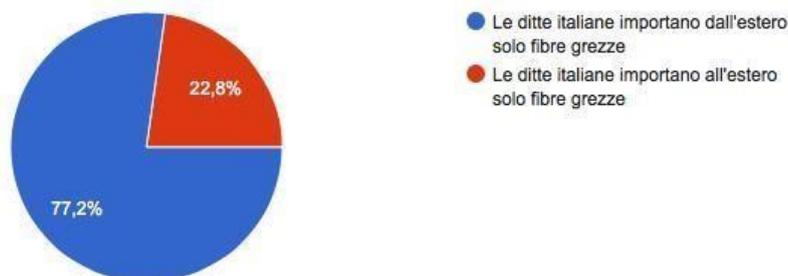
Out of 79 students who answered the third question, 61 correctly chose the preposition *dalla*. The 18 who answered *alla* did not understand the direction of the motion expressed by the verb in the sentence.

Of those who got it wrong, 39% had an advanced level, 39% intermediate, and 22% elementary.

80 risposte

- Nel 1813 il parmigiano si è prodotto già da oltre mezzo secolo
- Nel 1813 il parmigiano si era prodotto già da oltre mezzo secolo
- Nel 1813 il parmigiano si produceva già da oltre mezzo secolo
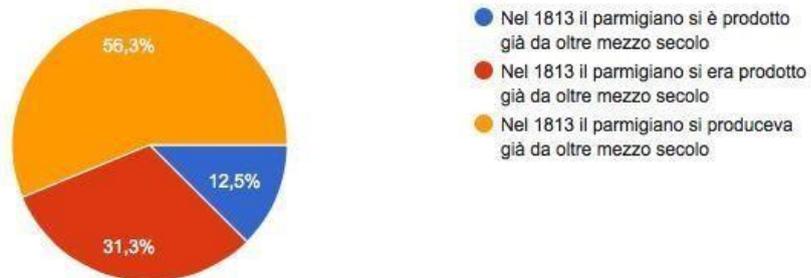
The correct choice in the fourth question was identified by the majority of the respondents, with 60% having an advanced level, 29% intermediate, and 11% elementary.

The two incorrect answers contain the passive form of the verb *produrre;* while 25 chose the present passive,1 0 opted for the imperfect passive.

The question could also be useful for a reflection on appearance, since even those who failed to get it right still showed a preference for imperfectivity (which is also characteristic of the correct answer) rather than perfectivity.

80 risposte

- Sono contenta di tornare a casa, ma mi mancherebbe Venezia
- Sono contenta di tornare a casa, ma mi mancherà Venezia
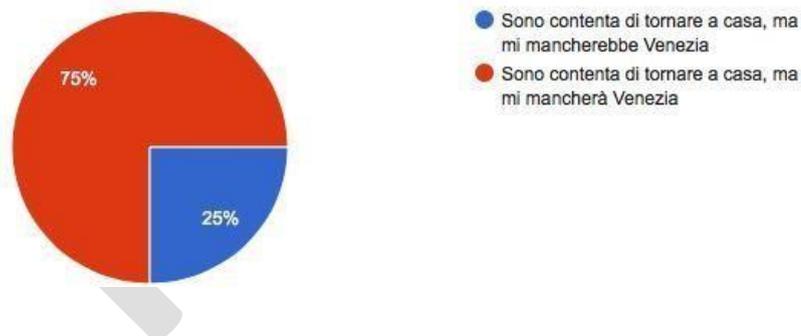
Two students, one elementary and one intermediate level, preferred not to answer this fifth question. Of the 20 who gave the wrong answer (with the conditional tense *mancherebbe*), 20% have an advanced level, 55% intermediate, and 25% elementary.

77 risposte

- Pur studiare molto, mi sono divertito un sacco
- Pur studiato molto, mi sono divertito un sacco
- Pur studiando molto, mi sono divertito un sacco

Five respondents (6%) preferred not to answer this sixth question.
A total of 35 students out of 77 chose the wrong answer. Of these, only 11% have an advanced certified language level, 75% intermediate, and 14% elementary.

The majority of those who answered correctly (42 students) have an advanced level (60%), 26% intermediate, and1 4% a basic level.

81 risposte

- Dopo cena lo zio è accompagnato a casa da noi
- Dopo cena siamo accompagnati lo zio a casa
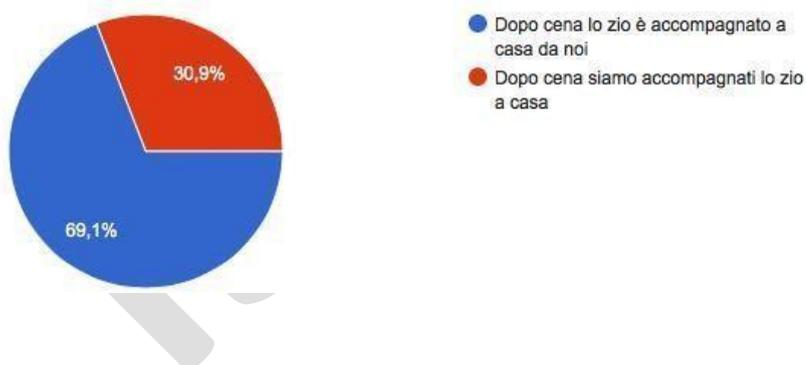
The seventh question was:*scegli la forma passiva della seguente frase: "Dopo cena accompagniamo a casa lo zio"*. Of the 25 students who did not find the correct passive form, 20% have an advanced level of certified language, 52% intermediate, and 28% elementary.

78 risposte

● Guardi, non si preoccupa, la chiamo io
● Guardi, non si preoccupi, la chiamo io
● Guardi, non si preoccupi, le chiamo io
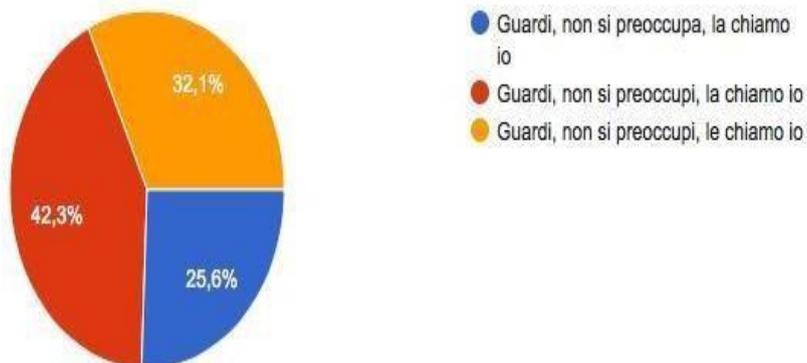
The eighth question in this section was:*scegli la corretta espressione formale della seguente frase informale: "Guarda, non ti preoccupare, ti chiamo io"*. Four students did not answer.

The majority gave the correct answer, and of these 34 students, 53%, were advanced,3 5% intermediate, and 12% elementary.

Of those who answered incorrectly, 25 got the pronoun wrong and 20 got the verbal person wrong.

78 risposte
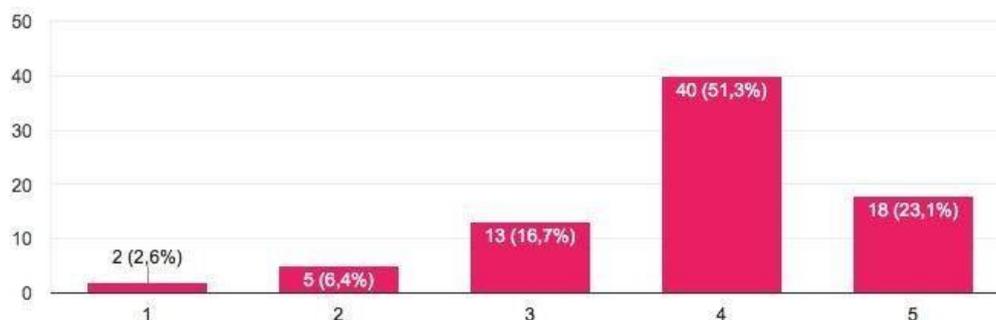
The first self-assessment question was: *quanto ti senti sicuro delle risposte che hai dato?*

Unlike the previous section, in which the elementary level (A1/A2) was assessed and in which the majority of respondents felt completely confident in their answers, in this section the majority of students (more than half of the total) gave a value of "4" for confidence, while only 23.1% were completely confident. This result is consistent with the increase in difficulty.

78 risposte

When asked: *di solito usi frasi che usano queste strutture grammaticali?*, the pattern of answers on this scale mirrors that of the previous self-assessment.

79 risposte
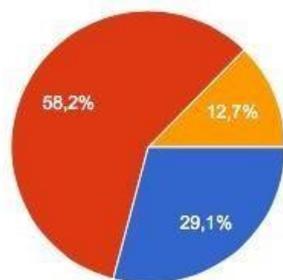
The third self-assessment question was: *quale frase descrive meglio la tua preparazione su quelle strutture grammaticali?*

Compared to the previous section, there was a decrease of 12.4% in the number of students who had complete confidence in their grammatical skills, which added a small portion (3.3%) to the group containing those who think they know the grammar yet are not entirely confident in using it and therefore believe they are making mistakes; as well as adding a large portion (9%) to the group containing those who are not confident they know the grammatical norm and therefore prefer to avoid using these structures in order not to make mistakes. As might be expected, of the 10 who are lack confidence in their use of the grammar norm none have an advanced level, though 50% have an intermediate level; i.e. the level that was being evaluated in this section of the survey.

Research results in Section 4

From this section onwards there is a higher number of non-responses. Perhaps for some students the questionnaire was too long or did not hold their attention sufficiently, preferring to stop completing it.

75 risposte
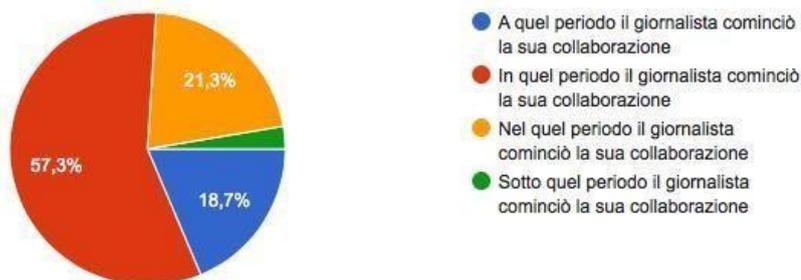
In the first question, 43 students answered correctly, with 65% have an advanced language level, 33% intermediate, and 2% elementary.

74 risposte
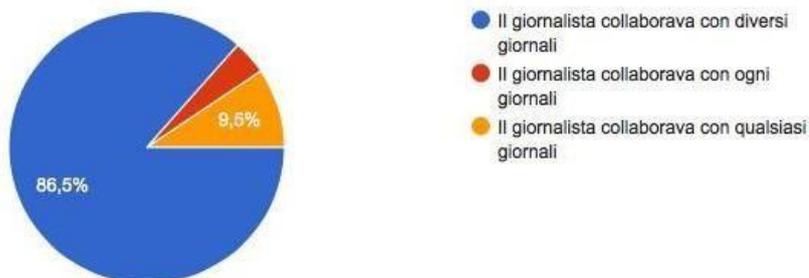
The second question has a high percentage of answers chosen correctly. This can be explained by the fact that, in the incorrect answers, the error was twofold: not only regarding the choice between *ogni* or *qualsiasi*, but also the concordance error of *giornali* instead of *giornale*. This could also explain the fact that 11% of those who answered correctly have an elementary language level.
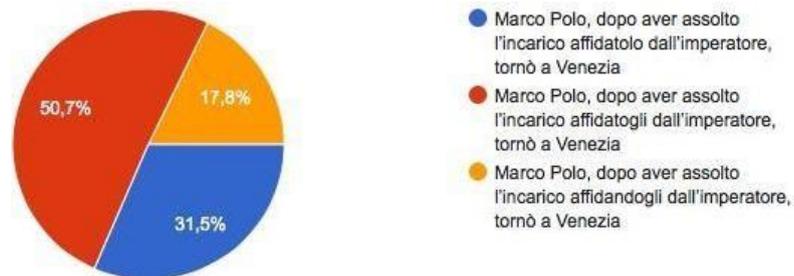
For the third question, the majority of respondents (50.7% + 31.5%) identified the verb in the correct form (past participle), while a small proportion chose the verb in the gerund form, but with the correct pronoun.
Of the group who identified the participle as correct, the majority (50%) chose the correct pronoun (*gli*) while 31.5% chose the incorrect pronoun (*lo*). It can be seen that among the students who answered correctly, a good percentage (22%) are at the elementary level, and 24% at the intermediate level.

71 risposte
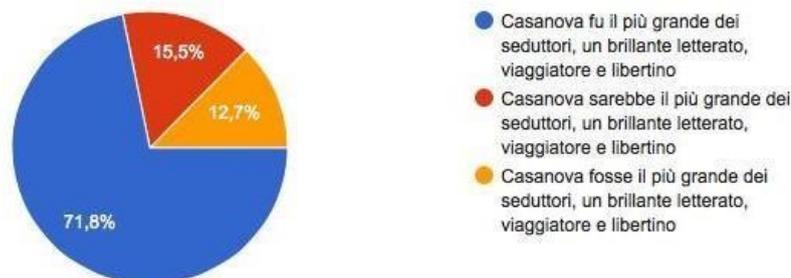
More than 70% of the respondents answered this fourth question correctly. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the choice of verbal mode in L2 is easier for the learner than the choice of tense or verbal aspect.

70 risposte
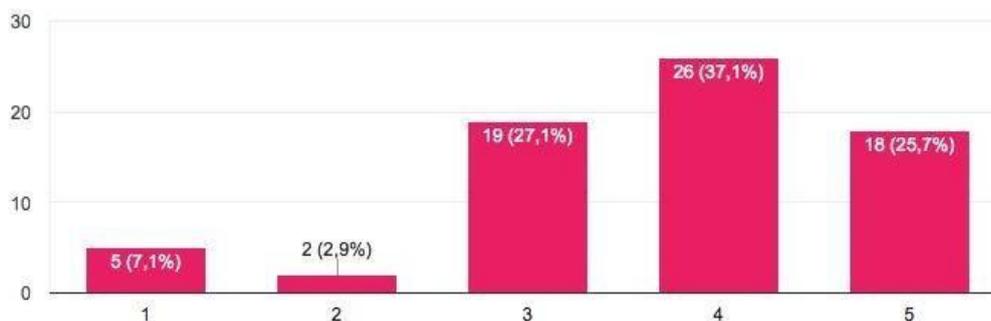
The first self-assessment question was:*quanto ti senti sicuro delle risposte che hai dato?*
The most obvious finding in the self-assessment of the advanced level is a decrease in confidence, as 5 people answered "1".
Of the most confident, 72% possess an advanced level, 21% intermediate, and 5% elementary.
Of the 18 who were confident of their answers, 2 got all the answers in the section wrong, 4 achieved 1 out of 4 questions right, 3 achieved 2/4 and 9 achieved 4/4.

72 risposte
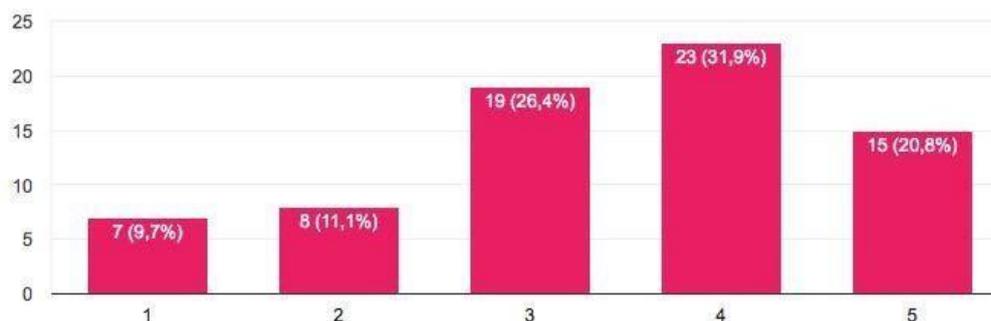
The third question for the self-assessment was: *di solito usi frasi che usano queste strutture grammaticali?*
Fifteen students declared that they always use (value"5") the grammar structures assessed in this section. Among them, as expected, 67% have an advanced level of competence.

72 risposte
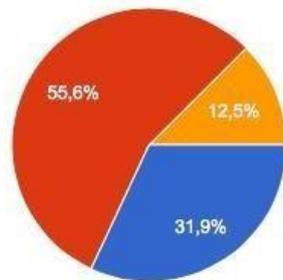
- Conosco la grammatica e la so usare correttamente: non penso di fare errori.
- Conosco la grammatica ma non sono sicuro del suo uso: so di fare errori.
- Non sono sicuro della grammatica: preferisco non usare queste strutture per non fare errori.

The question for the self-assessment was: *quale frase descrive meglio la tua preparazione su quelle strutture grammaticali?*
Compared to the other sections, the number of respondents who are confident about grammar and its use increased. Of these 23, 61%, have an advanced language level.

Research results in Section 5: Morphology
In this section, using 4 questions we aimed to assess student competence in recognising the value of the verbal aspect, through the choice of the right verbal tense.

71 risposte
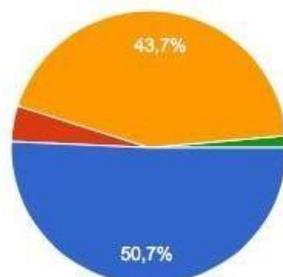
- Mentre Sara mangiava, le cadeva la forchetta
- Mentre Sara ha mangiato, le cadeva la forchetta
- Mentre Sara mangiava, le cadde la forchetta
- Mentre Sara ha mangiato, le cadde la forchetta

For the first question, only a very small percentage of the respondents (5.6%) gave an answer involving the use of the past perfect tense (perfective aspect) in the temporal proposition introduced by the conjunction *mentre*.
Concerning the main proposition, 50.7% of the respondents chose the imperfect tense (imperfective aspect), which gives the sentence a narrative or literary tone.

It would have been more correct to answer, as 43.7% of the respondents did, with a remote past tense (perfective aspect), which highlights the momentary aspect of the

action of *cadere* as opposed to the continuous aspect of *mangiare*, which is the setting. Of the 31 who chose the correct option, 55% had an advanced level, 39% intermediate, and 6% elementary. As regards their stay in Italy, 32% had been in Italy for less than 6 months, and 52% for 3 years or more.

Of the 36 who responded according to a narrative use, 42% had been in Italy for less than 6 months, and 42% for 3 years or more; 36% have an advanced language level, 50% intermediate, and 14% elementary.

Of the 4 students who chose a perfective aspect tense for the temporal proposition introduced by *mentre,* all have an elementary language level and had been in Italy for3 years or more as workers or unemployed.

71 risposte

- Mario raccontava sempre la storia che tu hai ascoltato ieri
- Mario raccontò sempre la storia che tu hai acoltato ieri
- Mario raccontò sempre la storia che tu ascoltasti ieri
- Mario raccontava sempre la storia che tu ascoltasti ieri
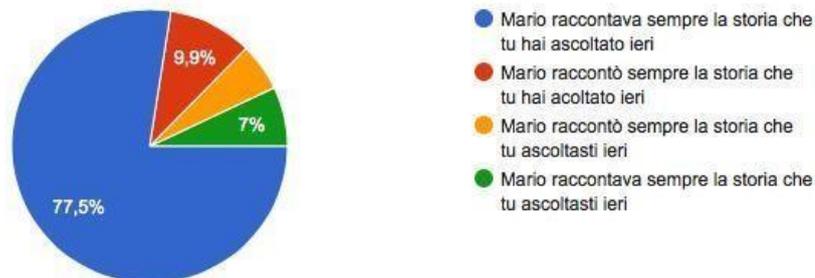
The correct answer to the second question, according to normative grammar, was chosen by the majority of respondents.
The adverb *sempre* encourages the choice of a verbal tense with an imperfective aspect, and thus in this case the imperfect and not the past tense / remote past. The adverb *ieri* encourages discarding the remote past for the present perfect / recent past.
Of the 55 who answered correctly, 53% have an advanced language level, 36% intermediate, and 11% elementary. Thirty-six percent had been in Italy for less than 6 months and 53% for 3 years or more.

71 risposte

- Quando tornai a casa, mio padre ha dormito
- Quando sono tornato a casa, mio padre ha dormito
- Quando tornai a casa, mio padre dormiva
- Quando sono tornato a casa, mio padre dormiva
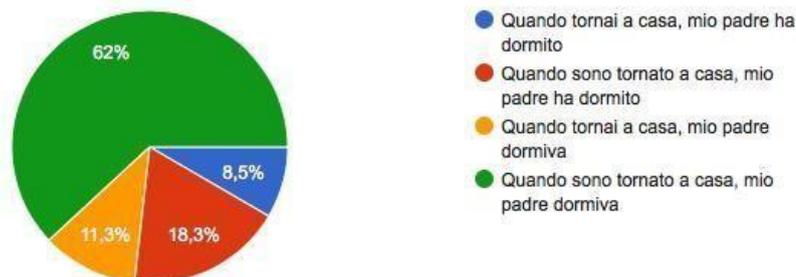
In this third question, the answers with the past perfect tense in the main proposition are definitely incorrect. The students who chose these answers are mostly of elementary and intermediate level and only one has an advanced level. The majority has been in Italy for less than 6 months, immediately followed by the group who had been in Italy for 3 or more years.

71 risposte

The correct textbook answer in this fourth case is that marked in yellow: *l'anno scorso telefonai a Maria, ma l'ho incontrata solo una settimana fa*. This answer emphasises the temporal distance between the past tense of last year and the present tense of a week ago.

Despite this, it cannot be said that the answer I *l'anno scorso ho telefonato a Maria, ma l'ho incontrata solo una settimana fa* is incorrect, as the remote past is disappearing in current Italian usage.

Of the 35 who followed Italian usage, 54% had been in Italy for less than 6 months and 34% for more than 3 years.

71 risposte
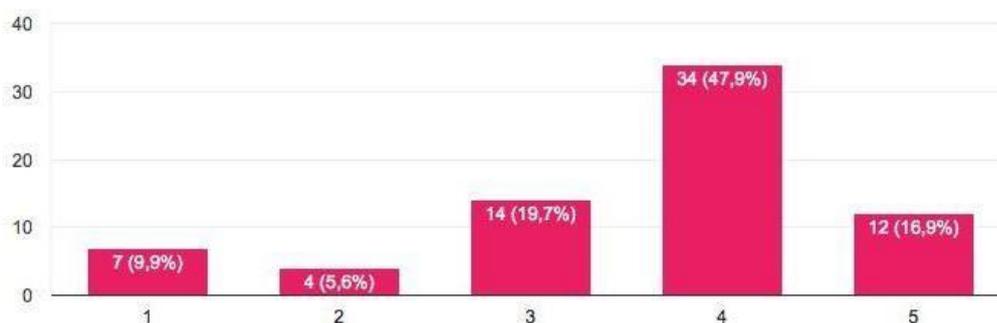
The first self-assessment question was: *quanto sei sicuro delle tue risposte sui tempi verbali?*

Twelve students said they were completely confident in their answers and 75% of them had been in Italy for 3 or more years and had a competence between intermediate and

advanced.

Those who gave a confidence value of 4 (41%) had been in Italy for less than 6 months (approximately half with an advanced level of competence, the other half between intermediate and elementary), with 53% present for more than 3 years (approximately half with an advanced level of competence, the other half between intermediate and elementary).

Most of the students who answered with values between 1 and 3 have been in Italy for less than 6 months.

71 risposte
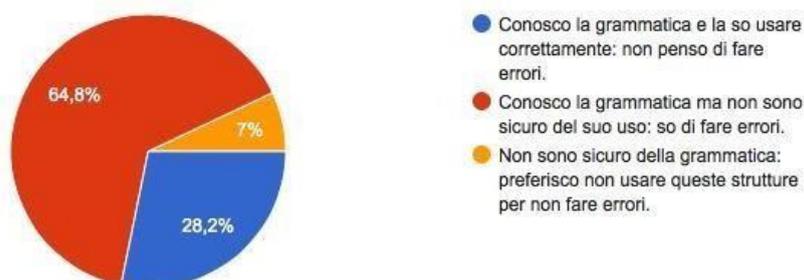
The second question for the self-assessment was: *quale frase descrive meglio la tua preparazione sui tempi verbali delle frasi precedenti?*

Twenty students felt confident in their knowledge of grammar and in their ability to use it, 60% of whom had been in Italy for more than 3 years with advanced competence, while 35% had been in Italy for less than 6 months with a varied competence.

Research results in Section 5: Phonology

71 risposte

- Mi piace guardare la nazionale di calcio italiana
- Mi piace guardare la nasionale di calcio italiana
- Mi piace guardare la nazionale di calscio italiana
- Mi piace guardare la nasionale di calscio italiana
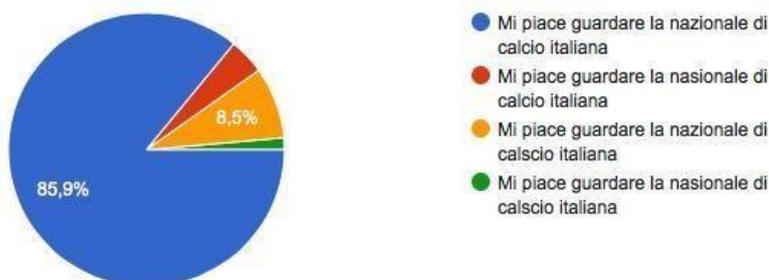
The majority of students, faced with this first question, chose the two correct spellings. Among those who did not choose the correct option, competence is equally distributed between the basic and intermediate levels.

70 risposte

- Festeggio il mio compleanno in pisseria
- Festeggio il mio compleanno in bisseria
- Festeggio il mio compleanno in pizzeria
- Festeggio il mio compleanno in bizzeria
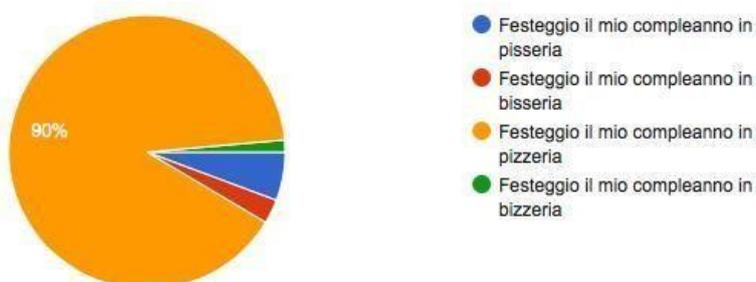
The majority of students also chose the two correct spellings for the second question. Among those who did not choose the correct option, competence is between elementary and intermediate level; the period of stay in Italy is mostly between 0 and 6 months.

71 risposte
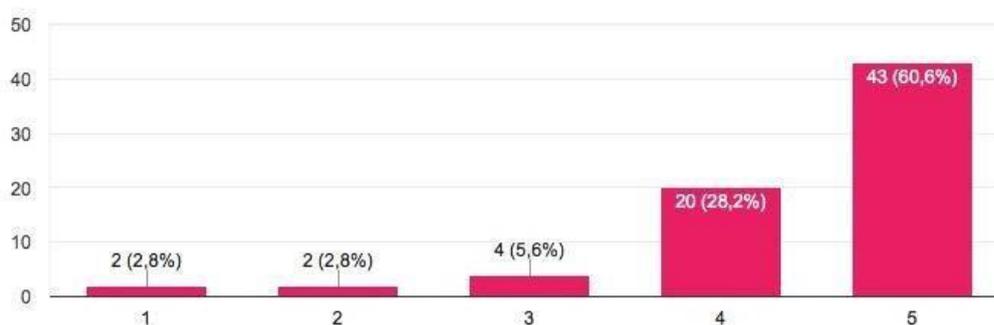
Self-assessment questions then followed.

The first was:*quanto sei sicuro delle tue risposte sulla fonologia?* The majority of errors were made by those who indicated a level of confidence between 1 and 2. Among the 43 who said they were completely sure, 35% had been in Italy for less than 6 months, while 53% had been in Italy for 3 years or more.

The second question was:*quale frase descrive meglio la tua preparazione sui suoni dell'italiano?*

70 risposte

- ● Conosco la forma giusta e la uso correttamente: non penso di fare errori.
- ● Conosco la forma corretta ma non sono sicuro del suo uso: so di fare errori.
- ● Non sono sicuro di quale sia la forma corretta: sono a disagio e ho paura di fare errori.
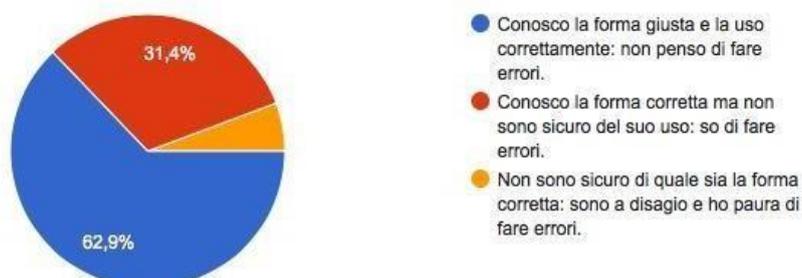
Forty-four students were most confident in their use of the grammar rule, 30% of whom had been in Italy for less than 6 months and 45% had been in Italy for more than 3 years. As far as competence is concerned, this is equally distributed between advanced and intermediate levels.

Finally, three questions were posed to investigate the issue of accentuation.

71 risposte
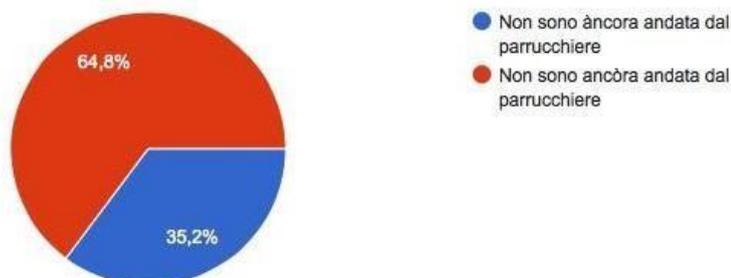
For the first question, the difficulty lies in the fact that *àncora* and *ancòra*, on which the tonic accent has been marked but which usually is not transcribed, are homographs in Italian.

Of the 46 who gave the correct answer, 46% had been in Italy for less than 6months, while 46% for more than 3 years. Thirty-seven percent had an advanced level of competence, 35% intermediate, and 15% elementary.

69 risposte
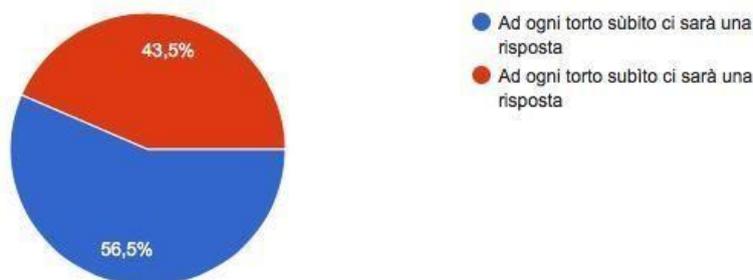
To the second question, the majority of students answered incorrectly. However, of 30 who chose the correct option, 23% had been in Italy for less than 6months, while 70% had been in Italy formorethan3 years.

On the other hand, of the 39 who answered incorrectly, 50% had been in Italy for less than six months, while 38% had been in Italy for more than three years.

71 risposte

- Delle volte càpitano delle disgrazie
- Delle volte capìtano delle disgrazie
- Delle volte capitàno delle disgrazie
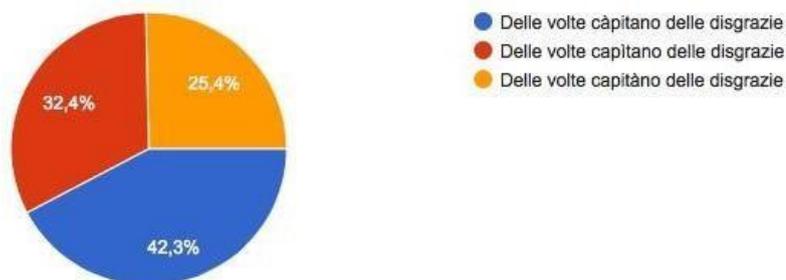
In this third question, in addition to the two homographs, an answer designed to distract respondents was included. Among the 30 who chose correctly (*càpitano*), 27% had been in Italy for less than six months, while 60% had been in Italy for more than three years .This was followed by two self-assessment questions. The first was: *quanto sei sicuro delle tue risposte sulla fonologia?*

70 risposte
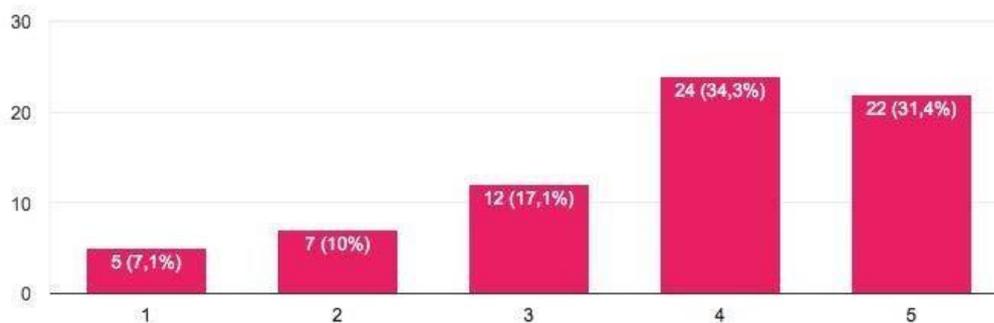
Those most confident of the answers on phonology were 22, and of these 41% had been in Italy for less than 6 months (varying competence), while 50% had been in Italy for 3 years or more (mainly advanced competence).

The second question was: *quale frase descrive meglio la tua preparazione sull'accento nelle frasi precedenti?*

70 risposte
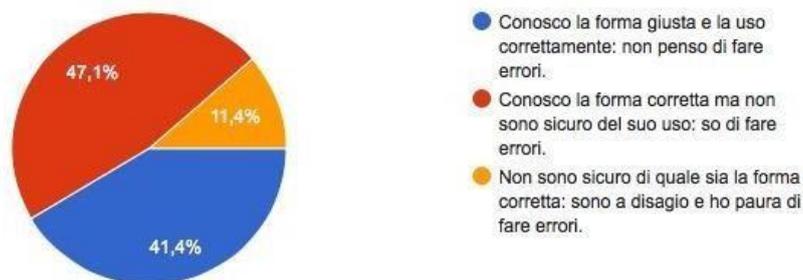
Twenty-nine students answered that they do not think they make mistakes, of which 41% had been in Italy for less than 6 months (competence varies), while 48% had been in Italy for 3 years or more and their competence is most advanced.

3. **Discussion of the data and conclusions**
4.

This research aimed to find out whether there is a relationship between the length of stay in Italy, and therefore of direct contact with native speakers in a situation of communicative necessity, and the growth of linguistic competence regarding certain topics in particular. These topics are aspects of L2 grammar that are not present in L1 and are therefore more difficult to understand.

One of the most significant problems encountered when studying the data was that 40% of the respondents had been in Italy between 0 and 6 months, and 45% for 3 years or more. The remaining 15% were distributed over the various other time periods. A sufficiently representative sample was therefore lacking for all the bands. The data can therefore be compared by considering in general the shortest and the longest stay.

Of the students who had been in Italy for less than 6 months, 33% are at an advanced level, 46% intermediate, and 21% elementary. Of the students who had been in Italy for 3 years or more, 57% are at an advanced level, 32% intermediate, and 11% elementary. The large difference that exists as regards advanced level competence between the two time periods raises a problem in evaluating the data: for example, we do not know when these students obtained the highest language certification and the data collected, even if it shows that there is indeed an improvement in competence among students who have been in Italy for longer, leaves open the possibility that there are other causes and other factors to investigate. We should therefore find out more about the personal history of each student and understand, for example, whether they have taken other language courses during their stay in Italy.

Research has indeed shown an improvement in morphology and phonology for those who had been in Italy for more than three years compared to those who had been in Italy for less than six months, but it cannot be said with certainty that the improvement is due (only) to prolonged direct contact with native speakers.

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