



Learning Italian in a Los Angeles kindergarten

Judith Harris (October 10, 2011)



There is a public, not a private, school in California that is unique: it offers its students, beginning in kindergarten, full immersion in studies of a second language, which can be German, Spanish or Italian.

They're first graders, all of six years old, and their enthusiasm more than makes up for a certain tunelessness as they sing "Fratelli d'Italia...." This was a rehearsal for their big performance—a rendering of the Italian national anthem as part of the Columbus Day celebration in Los Angeles organized by the Los Angeles Casa Italiana.

Curiously, not all of these youngsters singing their hearts out in Italian are Italian. They are students in the Italian immersion project at the Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in the Glendale district. This is a public, not a private school, and, unique in California, it offers its students, beginning in kindergarten, what is known as an immersion program of studies in a second language, which can be German, Spanish or Italian. In kindergarten and first grade 90% of the teaching,



including in arithmetic, is in Italian (or German or Spanish) and 10% in English. With each passing school year (and the year includes an optional summer program for those desiring it) the percentage in English rises until fifth and sixth grade, when it is half and half.

Each language has a separate teacher, and instruction is always by native speakers. At a time of worsening student-teacher ratios, these students have the luxury of having two teaching assistants—also native speakers—to help the teacher in the classroom. One comes thanks to a grant from the Fondazione Italia. The other is an intern brought to Glendale from Italy by the school's parent Foundation through the Amity Institute Exchange Teacher Program (www.amity.org [2]). These interns are offered hospitality by a pupil's family.

What's the point? According to an expert in childhood bilingualism, Simona Montanari, "Research shows repeatedly that children in long-term bilingual programs not only develop higher competence in English than children learning solely in English, but they also reach higher academic achievements than children educated in only one language. Bilingual programs have cognitive, emotional and practical benefits."

Help in maintaining this unusual public school program comes first of all from the Glendale District, but, as a magnet school, it also is the beneficiary of a grant from the Federal Government, which funds the work of a full-time teacher specialist to work on the curricula for programs in all four languages, for seven years of schooling for circa 500 students. Now in its fourth year, the immersion program so far has pupils who've just entered the third grade. Some of those in the Italian program have Italian parents, but the majority are from homes where the parents have elected to have their children study in Italian. A few have grandparents who were Italian immigrants, but whose parents never learned Italian at all and are only now, through their children, discovering their linguistic and deeper cultural roots.

The project involved turning limoni into limonata. Gentrification of Glendale meant that, as housing prices rose, the neighborhood school was losing students. "But this has now been reversed, reviving the school," according to principal Vickie Atikian Aviles. "Placement demand is on the rise." Another benefit: some of the local Spanish-speaking families are taking advantage of the immersion program to give their children a third language. Success means, however, that in the Italian program there was space for only half the applicants this school year.

Ana Jones is the inspired and inspiring guiding spirit who coordinates this trio of language programs. In practice, she says, "most of the children don't even know that their Italian teacher speaks English. And in state examinations in English, 72% of the 32 immersion students had either proficiency or advanced status. In math, they did even better, at 78%."

The school library, where I passed a pleasant afternoon with a number of the younger Italian pupils, has a section with children's books in Italian, and volunteer parents were on hand to help with reading and homework. Enthusiastic parents were also involved as volunteers creating a garden for the pupils to tend. Volunteer parents made cedar frame planters for vegetables, and planted shade and fruit trees. A sink and benches were added to the grounds. "We hope the students will better understand the value of conserving materials, of recycling and of leading sustainable life styles," says parent Charlotte Culina, one of the project's prime movers and fund raisers.

Grants to the program have already come from [Fondazione Italia](http://www.fondazioneitalia.org) [3] and the Yahoo Foundation, and more grants are being sought. Besides financial contributions, donations of books in Italian would be welcome. "We are also searching for trained bilingual teachers," says Ms. Jones. Teachers must have multiple subject credentials since in elementary school they teach everything from social studies to arithmetic and, of course, a language. "Luckily, our teachers are enthusiastic beyond belief—they love the language, the program, the workshops and the students."

The feeling is reciprocal. Kindergarten in Italian is hard, admits little Maya Mahler, age five, after the first three weeks, but adds that she loves her teacher: "Maestra Gargiulo e' molto brava."



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