BOOK REVIEWS


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Italian 1 is a basic language course in the Foundations Languages Series published in 2001 by Palgrave in 2001 and designed for students taking a language option at a tertiary institution. The book is structured into 10 units, which are to be taught over a period of 24 weeks. It is expected that on completion of the course, the students will be able to communicate in the Italian language in several basic situations. The authors employ a task-based teaching approach. The focus is on the development of the four macro-skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and on the ability to use them for effective communication.

Each unit starts with the presentation of aims and objectives, which specifies the content that the students will be able to use by the end of the unit in order to communicate in the target language. The new linguistic content is introduced in various forms, either through listening, reading, writing or speaking tasks. Instead of passively receiving knowledge, students are required to discover and understand new vocabulary and the grammar items through a set of tasks, as they analyse the input to arrive at their own understanding of the materials. This approach also engages students in using the language for communicative purposes. At the end of each unit, further opportunities for practice and use of new material are provided through exercises that focus on pair-work activities. Although this practice is an integral part of any language programme, it should be noted that not all beginning students may be willing to engage in collaborative work. Therefore, alternative options should be offered to reluctant students, and some preparation may be required for some learners to overcome their negative attitudes towards tasks that require communicative pair work. The importance of the Italian grammar system as part of language learning is also promoted through the task-based activities contained in the book. When students have mastered the challenge of inducing Italian grammar rules, they are given basic explanations of grammatical concepts and a set of traditional practice exercises to consolidate the acquired knowledge. The book also provides a glossary of terms for those not familiar with linguistic terminology and a summary of the basic grammar rules at the end of the publication. Throughout the book, all explanations are written in English, while the instructions are in both English and Italian.
Overall this Italian textbook seems to focus on quality of the language rather than quantity. The authors have built the syllabus according to the time typically available for this type of course. Thus they have created a course that encourages the students to stay focused, as the target seems achievable and they are clearly informed about aims and objectives, and therefore about the knowledge and skills that they are expected to acquire. This approach creates a positive attitude towards language learning and may help learners overcome the feelings of anxiety many students face in the initial stages of the acquisition process. The course aims to teach how to use the target language in various situations and how to minimise negative feelings towards grammar. However, by putting considerable trust in the student’s diligence, this book appears somewhat idealistic. It is hoped that students will quickly understand their role in the language learning process. Learners are expected to achieve the course aims through initiative, self-study and review, and through practice and use of appropriate resources. Although language learning strategies are encouraged, they are not directly given assistance in this regard by the book. Therefore, it would remain the teachers’ responsibility to provide motivation and practical guidance on language acquisition.

In summary, the book provides a basic introduction to language learning. It relies on, but does not equip students with, important learning strategies, such as ensuring regular class attendance, promoting participation, self-study outside the classroom, and regular revision. These are encouraged through the provision of a set of additional exercises placed at the end of the book as an add-on section and appear non-essential. Moreover, most of the cultural content is limited to this later section. As a language course, the book will be useful mainly to young adults who are undertaking the study of Italian during their tertiary studies. The focus is on providing some basic information that young adults may need when travelling to Italy for study or for a working holiday. Finally, although the structure of units and of the whole book is relatively easy to follow, the black and white graphics do not make the volume particularly attractive from a visual point of view.