

Green Italian: Intermediate Conversation in the Botanic Garden  
Innovative Language Teaching Fellowship  
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**Final report.**

**Overview:** the re-designed Intermediate Italian Conversation course (“Green Italian”) held in the teaching space of the Botanic Garden at Smith College and focusing on Italian geography, environment, and natural landscape was extremely successful. Students learned about nature and botany, observed and discussed about a variety of flowers and plants, grew fennel seeds, and gave tours in Italian of an exhibition about medicinal plants of ancient Pompeii. They also enjoyed studying and preparing for class using audio materials that I created as part of the Innovative Language Teaching Fellowship initiative.

The Intermediate Italian Conversation course I taught during the spring semester 2017 is a 2-credit elective course. At the beginning of the semester, preliminary enrolment in this course was not as promising as anticipated with only 7 students (out of a pool of the 21 students who had attended Intermediate Italian in fall 2016). Since a Smith course must have a minimum of 7 students in order to be offered, there was a possibility the course be cancelled. In an attempt to raise the enrolment, during the week of Jan 23<sup>rd</sup> I sent an email to 13 intermediate students from past semesters, who had not yet signed up. As a result, only two more students joined the course bringing the total number up to 9, and ensuring that the course could run as scheduled.

**I would like to thank the Innovative Language Pedagogy grant leadership group and the Five College Inc. for allowing me to work on this project, which had a significant impact on students’ learning experience and left them enthusiastic about learning Italian. Given the results and data that I have collected in the following pages, it is reasonable to assume that students will feel inspired and motivated to take future Italian classes, when they return from their study abroad experience.**

**Purpose of project:** in my original proposal, I set out to eliminate all written materials (readings, assignments, tests) from the course and to replace them with audio materials that would provide students with the necessary content to be prepared for class, be able to complete a class listening tests, and engage in conversation and activities. The idea was also to offer students the possibility to play the audio tracks on their portable mobile devices (smartphones or tablets), instead of using their laptop computers, which would require users to be sitting and connected to the wi-fi network, instead of listening *on the go*. By facilitating the way in which students prepare for class and by creating assignments that are aurally stimulating and visually appealing, my project aimed at encouraging

more students to continue studying Italian beyond the 3 semesters of language classes that are required to study abroad. It also aimed at inspiring those students who were not planning on going abroad to Italy and who would be dropping Italian altogether to attend the conversation course. These two goals were met: on the one hand students were generally intrigued and curious to find out what an Italian conversation class held in the Botanic Garden could be like, and on the other hand 2 students (a senior and student who will not be going to Italy, next semester) attended the course out of desire to practise the language, that is not because they tried to fulfil a requirement (for example, to study abroad) or earn credits for their major/minor.

**Description of work completed and evolution of project:** for this project I wrote the content for each audio recording for a total of approximately 10,000 words. Subsequently, I recorded the audios and, most importantly, I created a new WordPress site where all the audio materials were stored and that students used during the semester. Help and support from Joe Bacall (Applications Administrator, Educational Technology Services) at Smith College was instrumental in the creation of this website. The WordPress site is public and can be found accessed: <https://sophia.smith.edu/green-italian/>

Naturally, the project slightly evolved from the original proposal I submitted to the Five College in December 2016. The most significant modification was that instead of creating 4 audio recordings (writing scripts, recording audios, and uploading them on to the website) by the end of January 2017 and creating the remaining 3 by mid-semester, I completed all course materials ahead of our first class on Jan 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Specifics of these audio recordings are as follows:

- 20 audio recordings grouped in 7 lessons
- The total length of the audios is cumulatively about 60 minutes.
- The WordPress site contains the 7 lessons that are clearly identifiable and accessible.
- Each lesson contains not only audio tracks, but also images (maps, photographs and charts).
- Each audio also contains questions that students answered by posting a message directly in the comment section at the bottom of the webpage.
- Each audio track is followed by a list of vocabulary (Italian with English translation) unfamiliar to the students.
- I did not post transcripts of the audios to encourage students to listen multiple times to the track and make an effort to advance their listening and understanding skills only with the support of the list of new vocab.

In the following pages I analyze data (quantitative and qualitative) that I collected during the semester either by administering evaluation questionnaires I designed for this course and also data from two other evaluation forms students filled out for the Botanic Garden and for Smith College.

## Evaluation of project.

Overall, students completed 5 survey questionnaires for this course:

1. First week of classes: students completed a questionnaire where they self-evaluated their speaking proficiency in Italian and indicated their expectations for the course.

**9 out of 9 students in the class completes this survey.**

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2. Midterm point: students completed a quick questionnaire where they indicated strength and weaknesses (likes and dislikes) of new audio materials created for the course and how they perceived their speaking skills had progressed since the start of the course.

**7 out of 9 students in the class completes this survey.**

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3. Last week of classes: students completed an exit questionnaire about the course where they measured their progress by re-evaluating their original self-assessment (the results of the entry questionnaire from the beginning of the semester).

**7 out of 9 students in the class completes this survey.**

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdTCxGmw2RLEprboW0eTb9tHTjdiXm8eoOxaA7WVuVy2ZtfUg/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdTCxGmw2RLEprboW0eTb9tHTjdiXm8eoOxaA7WVuVy2ZtfUg/viewform?usp=sf_link)

4. End-of-semester evaluations: as part of the course assessment procedures routinely performed by Smith C. administration, students completed a general end-of-semester evaluation, where some students tangentially mentioned or commented on the audio materials created for the course. These evaluation forms offer useful qualitative (but not quantitative) data.

5. Botanic Garden evaluations: finally, students also completed evaluation forms specific to the Botanic Garden and aimed at gathering information on their experience taking a class within the space of the B. G. and using the teaching facilities available. Just like #4 above, in these evaluations students discuss the course in general terms (and not specifically on the use of the audio materials I created), but some of their comments can still offer an interesting perspective and can inform the general picture I am attempting to draw in this final report about the Innovative Language Teaching Fellowship project.

### **Entry vs. Exit Questionnaires.**

The two questionnaires were composed of 5 questions each:

- 3 multiple-choice questions
- 2 open-ended questions.

These self-evaluation questionnaires were designed in order to help students focus and reflect upon what their real abilities in speaking Italian were before taking the course and at end, after spending a whole semester working on developing and strengthening specific listening and speaking skills. For these reasons, the 3 multiple-choice questions were the same in both questionnaires, but the 2 open-ended questions slightly varied between one and the other in order to encourage students to think carefully about their improvement between beginning and end of the course and, in so doing, highlighting the progress that had occurred during those months.

### **Midterm Questionnaire.**

This was composed of a total of 4 questions:

- 3 multiple-choice questions
- 1 open-ended question.

In this self-evaluation questionnaire students were asked to specifically evaluate the audio materials I created for the course in order to measure easiness in accessing the audios, interest in the topics covered, and general appreciation of such non-traditional teaching/learning tool. They were also asked to comment on how their speaking skills had improved (if at all) since the beginning of the course as a result of incorporating the audio assignments as weekly homework and as self-study materials for the class.

I must emphasize, as already indicated above on page 3, that an unequal number of students completed the two questionnaires: 9/9 for the entry questionnaire, 7/9 for the exit one, and again 7/9 for the Midterm questionnaire. Although the difference is quite significant for a relatively small class like this one, a shift is still visible in the way students responded to the questions and, as a result, in the way they measured and evaluated their own language skills.

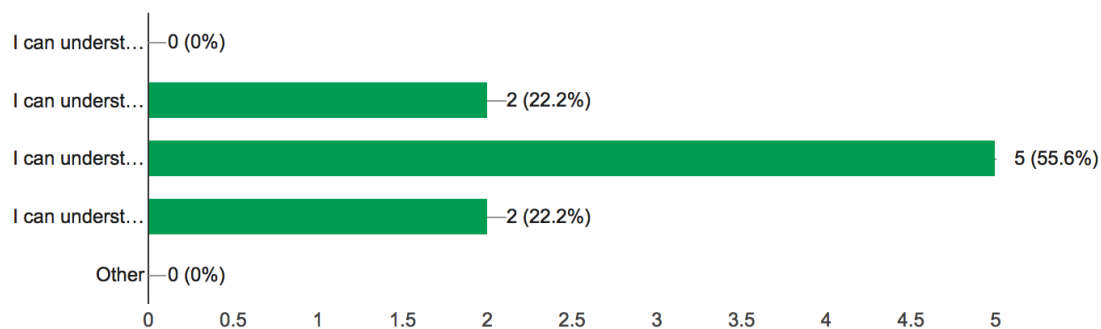
In the following pages, I analyze the results from the three questionnaires, and I include quantitative data (graphs generated by Google Form) and qualitative data (students' comments). I analyze the entry questionnaire together with the exit one to try and measure how much progress students experienced during the semester, whereas I analyze the midterm and Smith C. end-of-semester evaluation questionnaires by themselves at the end.

## Entry vs. Exit Questionnaires.

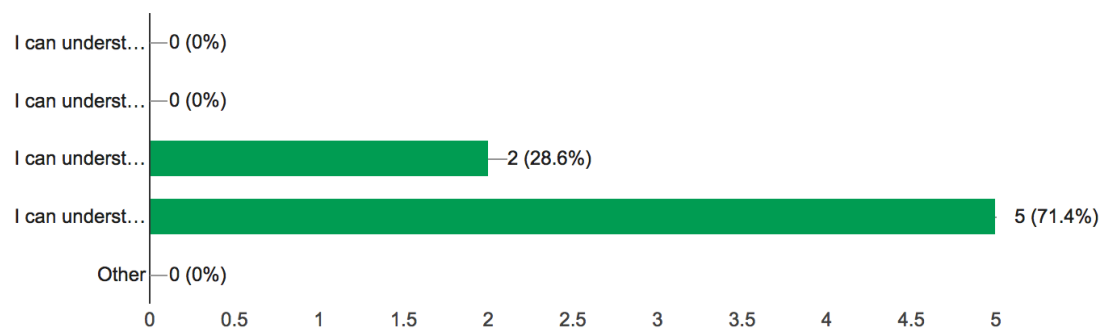
### 1- Evaluate your listening skills in Italian

- a. I can understand familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly
- b. I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.
- c. I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programs on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.
- d. I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programs.

Beginning of semester:



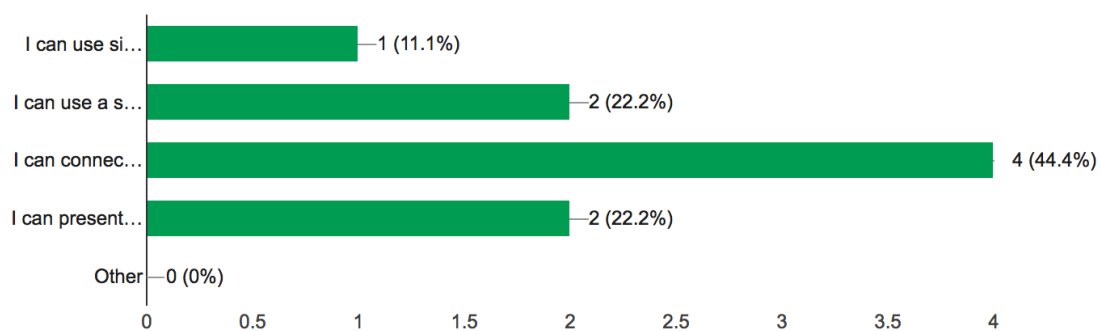
End of semester:



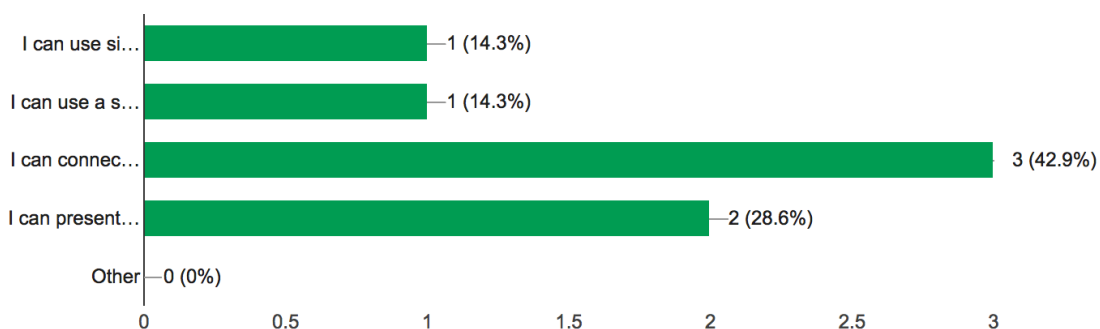
The most obvious change is that at the end of the semester most students felt that their listening skills had progressed quite considerably. Also, the responses of the whole class fell within the two top options (c. and d.). This indicates a global shift in the way students approach listening of audios as well as real conversations in Italian: they are now, after the course, more comfortable and in control of what they know.

- 2- Evaluate your speaking skills in Italian (When I have to answer a question in class, I can...)
- I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.
  - I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.
  - I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.
  - I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Beginning of semester:



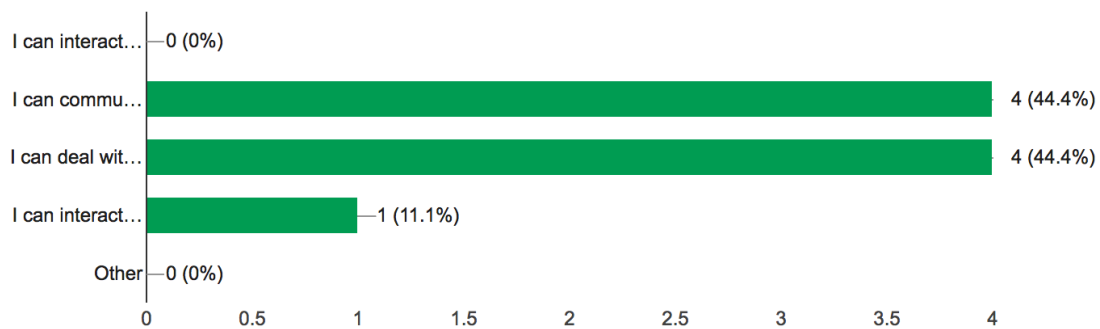
End of semester:



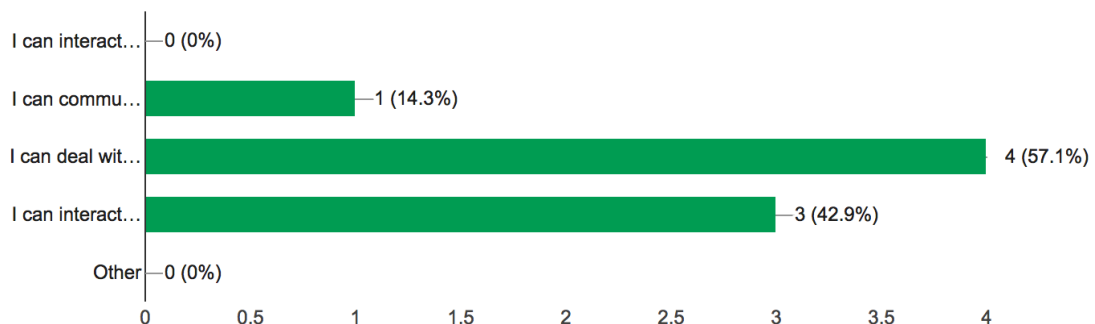
In this case, changes between the beginning and the end of the semester are less obvious. Quantitatively speaking, the percentage of students who chose the same answers in the exit questionnaire has essentially remained unaltered in comparison to the entry questionnaire. This is, in a way, understandable considering that the speaking skills is indeed the slowest to develop and the one that is greatly affected by how much contact with the real spoken language students have experienced (for example, during the study abroad period). However, students' comments (p. 8) about their progress during the course seem to tell a different story and add further information to question #2.

- 3- Evaluate your speaking interaction in Italian (When I speak with other people in Italian, I can...)
- I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.
  - I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.
  - I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).
  - I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.

Beginning of semester:



End of semester:



As for this question, the shift in the way students responded is visible in the fact that more students selected the top answer (d.) and less students selected answer b. at the end of the semester than they did at the beginning. This indicates that students felt they became more fluent and spontaneous when speaking in Italian; that they moved away from the idea of speaking Italian in response to an assignment, and that enjoyed the act of speaking the language more than they had done before.

#### 4- Reflect upon your weaknesses

Beginning of semester: **Identify one/two possible actions (for example: "I want to participate more in class" or "I must speak at a higher volume")**

I want to speak without fear of making mistakes. I think that with more confidence I will be able to speak more effectively in a classroom environment.

I want to speak Italian in class/with my classmates without reverting to English as much as possible.

I want to feel more comfortable speaking up in class

I must listen to more Italian audio and participate more in class

I want to participate more in class

I want to be able to speak comfortably at a higher volume, including in conversations about things I don't usually talk about.

I definitely want to speak at a higher volume and participate more in class, but I would also like to become more comfortable speaking to/in front of people in general. These are all things I struggle with in general even in English, and more so in Italian.

I want to speak more in class and speak freely without worrying about making a mistake

I want to participate more in class and I want to practice using more vocab and high frequency phrases

End of semester: **Has something changed since the beginning of the course? Have you been able to overcome some of your weaknesses? Did you manage to acquire awareness of your strengths? Please, be specific.**

I have more confidence in my ability to speak

I think I've grown my ability to be spontaneous, and overall I feel more comfortable in trying to say things even if I don't necessarily have all of the words.

I became more comfortable with speaking in class as well as using words that I learned in this class in my other Italian class.

I think I've gotten better at forming sentences while speaking and have realized that I know more words than I think I do.

I definitely feel more comfortable speaking Italian, than I did when I started taking the course. I feel more confident about my knowledge of the language.

This class, in combination with discussing complex literary topics in 250, has definitely helped to make me much more comfortable speaking (and writing) in Italian. I definitely still get a little tongue-tied/flustered in the moment, sometimes, and I really need to work on my grammar and agreements. I think the biggest problem I still have is that I second guess myself a lot, and then later find out my original thought was correct, or at least close. I need to work on my confidence, especially while speaking, which I think is what is probably holding me back most right now.

I feel so much more comfortable speaking with and in front of people :) I'm very happy with how I've improved.

These comments are in line with what has emerged from the results for question #3 and they can also help understand (and integrate) the results for question #2. At the end of the course, students markedly felt more confident and comfortable (two recurring terms in the above comments) in using the Italian language, which meant understanding that they can successfully communicate even though they lack knowledge of specific vocabulary or topics. Students also developed a stronger awareness of how the Italian language works from a morphologic point of view, and improved their public speaking skills.



## 5- Indicate your expectations for this course

Beginning of semester: **By the end of this course, I would like to be able to / I would like to know**

I want to go to Florence with confidence in my speaking abilities, knowing that mistakes are part of the learning process. I don't want to be afraid to speak when I first get to Italy.

I would like to become comfortable with speaking spontaneously/without thinking about what I'll say beforehand, and I want to be less concerned with grammatical mistakes when I speak (thus, be able to sustain a better-flowing conversation).

I would like to be able to feel comfortable speaking Italian in front and with others

I'd like to be able to speak Italian with less hesitation

I would like to be able to hold a conversation better & not get discouraged by not knowing one word I want to say

I would like to be able to speak at a higher level.

I would like to be able to sustain a conversation in Italian more easily/naturally and to be able to speak comfortably around groups of people.

By the end of this course I would like to be able to hold a conversation in Italian again

I would like to be able to be confident enough in my Italian that I do not worry about saying everything perfectly.

End of semester: **Have your expectations for this course been met?**

yes

Yes

Yes. I learned more vocabulary, spoke up in class, became more comfortable with listening to Italian in conversation and the online component. This course exceeded my expectations.

Yes because we talked about the plants and in a way that was different than I had ever done.

Yes, because I was able to practice listening and speaking Italian more. I feel like I got to use all the knowledge that I've learned before and actually speak and form conversation.

I think they definitely have. Learning how to talk about nature, plants, climate, landscape, and other topics was new and interesting, especially because those are things we tend to talk about almost every day without really thinking about it. The best part for me, though, was our project with the plants of Pompeii exhibit. I've been in a class about Pompeii all semester and it was really fun, and interesting, to connect what I was learning here to that class and vice versa, and it was really rewarding to be able to translate those more complex and technical thoughts into Italian through what we'd learned in this class.

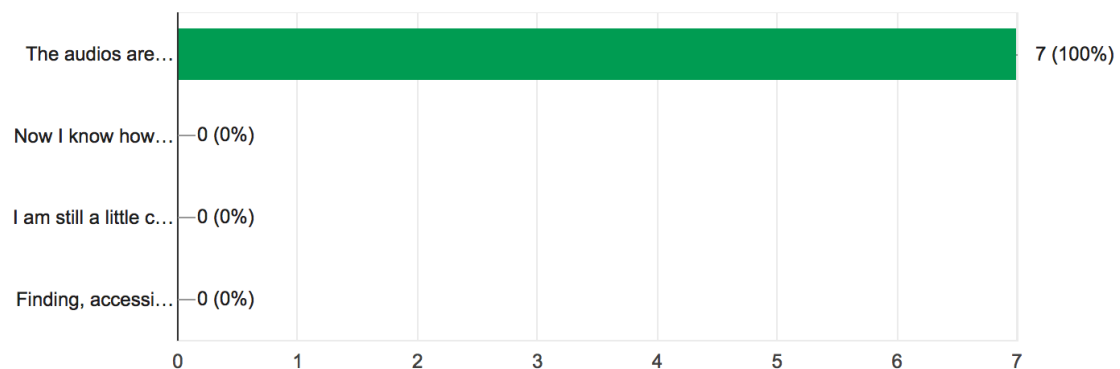
Yes! By speaking so much in class I now feel a lot more comfortable speaking in front of and with others.

Whereas students' answers at the beginning of the semester closely resemble the ones given in the previous questions (#4) in that they all emphasize the desire to speak Italian in a more relaxed manner and more naturally, the answers at the end of the semester highlight something different, as students talk about new vocabulary they have acquired, about new and different topics of conversation, and generally about being challenged during the course to keep speaking and use all they knew of the Italian language. There's a palpable sense of accomplishment in these comments, and, in between the lines, one can detect students' excitement at the prospect of continue improving, especially once abroad.

## Midterm Questionnaire.

### 1- Comment on how you use audios for this course

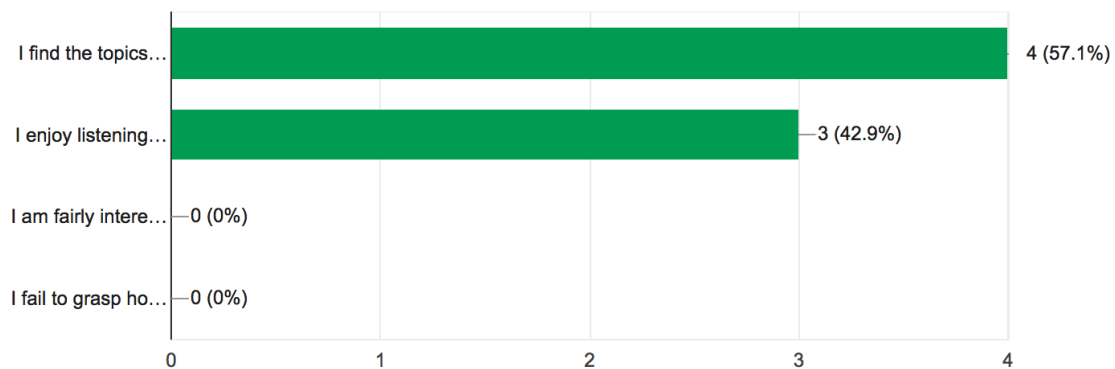
- a. **The audios are easily accessible: I know where to find them, how to use them and what the expectations are**
- b. **Now I know how to use audios for this course, but it took me some time at the beginning of the course to figure this out**
- c. **I am still a little confused about how to use audios and I often have to remind myself about how to complete weekly assignments**
- d. **Finding, accessing, listening to audios feels like an imposition: I'd rather complete more traditional assignments**



Students indicated that it was not difficult or confusing for them to complete homework assigned between a class and the next. They knew they could find audios on the WordPress site set up for course (<https://sophia.smith.edu/green-italian/>), whether on their computer or on their smartphones. This aspect of the course was also very clear as the semester progressed. As a matter of fact, and differently from most other courses I teach, students never asked me where audio were “stored” or to clarify expectations and purpose of homework assigned.

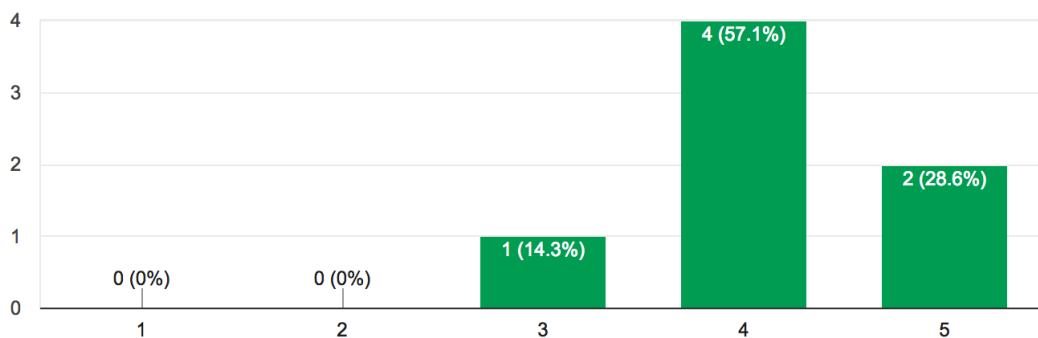
**2- Comment on the content/topics covered in the audios**

- a. I find the topics of the audios relevant and original, and I feel they are a great addition to what I have previously learned**
- b. I enjoy listening to the audios and I think the content is generally interesting, regardless of their relevance to everyday speaking**
- c. I am fairly interested in the topics of the audios, although I feel some of them will not necessarily help me in future speaking situations**
- d. I fail to grasp how the topics of the audios can benefit my knowledge of the language and prepare me to be a better speaker of Italian**



**3- Have you enjoyed listening to audios so far?**

**Rate on a scale of 1-5 (1 = "Strongly disagree" / 5 = "Strongly agree")**



The topics dealt with in each audio did meet students' interest (Question #3), both because they considered them a significant addition to what they had previously learned in other language classes, but also as general knowledge, that is perhaps not necessary in everyday conversational exchanges, but still useful information to have acquired and to have. This is also evident in the fact that students enjoyed listening to the audios as shown in the results for Question #4.

**4- Briefly indicate how you feel your own speaking skills in Italian have changed since the beginning of the course.**

**Please, be practical and specific (I can.... / I cannot...).**

I can speak about most topics brought up in class. I feel more confident speaking now than I did at the beginning of the semester.

I feel that my Italian speaking skills have improved. I know more words and understand how to communicate better. I feel that I can talk a bit more easily now.

I feel somewhat more confident in speaking. I think I have the courage now to try to make myself understood speaking Italian to a non-English speaker in Italy.

I feel that I can now speak more effectively about a wider variety of topics that I usually discuss on a daily basis, like the climate, geography, and nature. I have a greater confidence in my ability to communicate clearly.

I feel that my speaking skills have stayed relatively the same. I have gotten better at talking around words or phrases I don't know, though.

I didn't know a lot about the specifics of Italian culture before taking this course but now I think I could at least hold more of a conversation about something like the weather or flowers.

I feel way more comfortable speaking now

Answers to this question are in line with the ones students provided for Questions #4 and 5 in the Entry and Exit Questionnaires. By the end of the course, students felt more confident in speaking Italian, they felt they had acquired new vocabulary, and that they knew how to communicate in a more efficient and effective manner. Students also noted that the course provided them with new knowledge about Italian culture, which was one of the objectives for this project (and for the course as a whole).

### **Smith College end-of-semester evaluation forms.**

In the official and customary course evaluations they completed after the end of the semester, some students made a reference to and commented on using the WordPress site and the audios created for the ILTF project and for the course. Below are some excerpts from those comments (emphasis mine):

*Clarity on Moodle and website, incorporation of the Greenhouse and its resources, **variety of interesting assignments, manageable workload** (was the perfect amount for a 2-credit class), clear and helpful feedback on written & oral components.*

***I really liked the website where we could learn about vocab I would never had known before.***

*I put in a lot effort to learn in this course. **I listened to the audios multiple times, and also made an effort to participate in class.***

*I put a lot of effort into the work for this class. **The audio activities sometimes took me a really long time, but I also felt like I got a lot out of them.***

***I liked the variety of topics in the audios** and also that it was based around the botanic garden. **I was different than the rest of the classes because of that,** and I would definitely recommend this class to others were to be offered other semesters.*

*This course was great because **I could really see how I would be able to use what we were learning in the future. The audios were really helpful,** and, while it was difficult, I really liked the Pompeii project, too. The classes were fun and I liked the way the botanical gardens were a part of them.*

***I would have liked to have a transcript that accompanied the audios- while I understand that the audios were meant to have us listen more closely, but I would have appreciated to have the audios also written out.** I also think that this class took up more time than anticipated- but I definitely feel like I learned a lot from it.*

***I feel like I spent more time than anticipated on the coursework- especially the audios. I would have liked to maybe see videos accompanied with audios,** especially because videos can be more interesting than audios, and might have helped me understand the material better.*

A couple of interesting aspects can be found here. On the one hand, students' comments confirm what has already emerged from the questionnaires I administered in class during the semester, that is a strong appreciation and interest for the innovative way the course was structured, for the variety of interesting topics, and for incorporating audios into the syllabus as a useful learning tool. On the other hand, a couple of students offered ideas as to how the course and the project could be improved for future semesters, by making the transcripts of the audios available to students and by adding relevant videos as a means to integrate and complement the audios.

### **Botanic Garden evaluations**

As indicated on page 3 of this report, these evaluations are specific to the Botanic Garden (and administered by their staff). It consisted of an evaluation form to be filled out by hand, where students were asked to give feedback on what it was like to spend a whole semester taking a class within the Botanic Garden. This is why students did not make any comments or express opinions/suggestions about the audio material created for the ILTF project. They did, however, indicate that they would have appreciated even more interaction with the collections of the B. G. that is they would have enjoyed spending even more time in the numerous greenhouses. I think this is something to keep in mind for the future. More time in the greenhouses would require more and diverse activities to be designed so as to allow students to freely “roam around”, complete an assignment and report back to me.

### **Final considerations and suggestions for future improvement.**

- 1- By the end of the course students felt more in control of their ability to speak in Italian (regardless of the accuracy of the language used).
- 2- Students felt more confident in listening and understanding recordings about topics they were not familiar with.
- 3- Students felt they were more in control of the linguistic knowledge they had acquired in the previous 3 semesters (both what they know and what they do not know).
- 4- As a consequence, the emotional impact speaking in a foreign language used to have on students lessened, as they felt not as stressed or insecure about initiating or being part of a conversation in Italian as it happened previously.
- 5- At the same time, students became more aware of the fact that fluency in the language will require further work and dedication, but also that it is a realistic goal to be reached.
- 6- In line with the previous statement, students acquired new insight about how the Italian language works and about the techniques required to communicate successfully (which often entails the ability to describe, instead of using a specific set of terms).
- 7- Students enjoyed learning and using the Italian language in different ways than they had been used before.
- 8- Students enjoyed the sense of achievement deriving from being able to communicate effectively in a foreign language.
- 9- Students not only improved linguistically and acquired a stronger awareness of their speaking skills, but they also explored and learned new aspects about Italia culture.
- 10- The way the course was structured (WordPress site, Moodle, expectations and purpose of assignments, etc.) worked well, as students knew exactly what to do week after week.
- 11- For future semester, the course and the ILTF project could be improved by including the transcripts of the audios as well as by adding videos to the audios.
- 12- It could also be improved by means of designing more activities that would allow students to spend more time in the greenhouses and in direct contact with the plants and flowers that are part of the Botanic Garden collections.