

**Interactive Readings on Italian Culture for Intermediate Italian.  
Innovative Language Teaching Fellowship - January 2017**

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**Project Summary:** During summer 2016 we developed original material intended for the independent use of our intermediate Italian students to support them throughout the whole learning process. We created a WordPress site displaying five short stories, which contain audio tracks with reading comprehension questions, clickable links leading to vocab explanation pop-ups and concise grammar review. All written texts also contain audios of the whole stories and hidden answers to comprehension questions. These materials are open to anyone in the Five College Consortium and accessible here: <https://sophia.smith.edu/capire/>

**Project implementation and student evaluation of materials used in class in Fall 2016**

Online materials we created as part of this project was used in two Intermediate Italian classes during the fall semester 2016, one class at Smith College taught by Bruno Grazioli and one class at Mount Holyoke taught by Morena Svaldi. At the fall semester 2016, we created an online evaluation questionnaire using Google Forms, which is accessible at the following link: <https://docs.google.com/a/smith.edu/forms/d/1DjfWeJ6j8JUe4voM6KjggadwiolKSdDkt8Bq6szfnmk/edit>

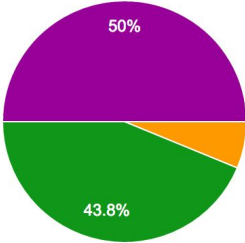
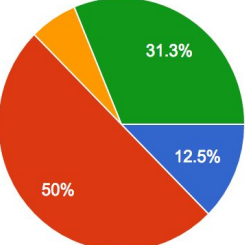
The questionnaire contains 8 questions. Questions 1-4 address specific aspects of the stories we created and how they appear on the WordPress site. In questions 5-8 students were asked to evaluate and comment on their experience using these materials as part of the Intermediate Italian course. Students also had the possibility to add comments and explain their choices, as well as include constructive suggestions for future improvements.

At Smith C., Bruno scheduled WordPress readings for the final 5 weeks in the semester, where one reading was reviewed and discussed over two classes. In years past, readings from various literary sources (poems, short stories, novels etc.) were assigned and used for class activities. The 5 readings were also the basis for a end-of-semester 10-minute long speaking test. At Mount Holyoke C., Morena assigned WordPress reading throughout the semester. There were discussions in class and questions (about the readings) on the biweekly quizzes

and on the final exam. This semester, and for the first time, Morena introduced an oral exam 15 minutes long about the WordPress readings to prepare them for university exams in Italy.

**Evaluations and feedback received from students at Smith College:**

16 students out of 21 completed the online evaluation questionnaire. Here below is a breakdown of all questions and results/comments received from our students:

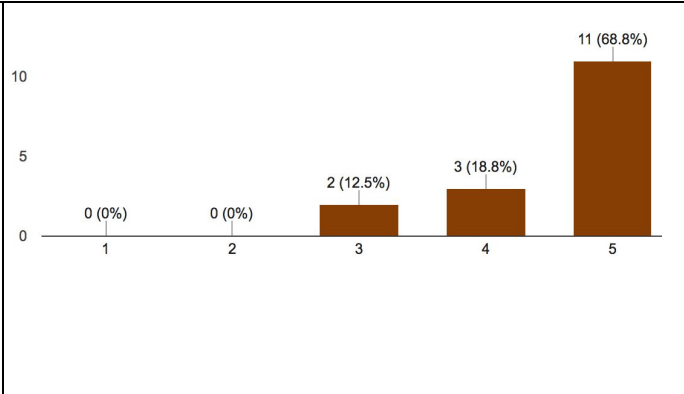
<p><b>In Question #1, we asked students whether they found it easy to access and play audios contained in each story.</b></p> <p>All of them essentially found it very easy to navigate the WordPress site and to use audios contained in each of the five stories.</p>	 <p>Legend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Extremely difficult</li> <li>● Rather difficult</li> <li>● Neutral</li> <li>● Rather easy</li> <li>● Extremely easy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Question #2 asked students to express their preference about the position of audios within each passage, whether in between paragraphs (stories 1-3) or to the right of paragraphs (stories 4 and 5).</b></p> <p>The second option seemed to be most favored by students. Having said that, almost 40% of students did not mind either way.</p>	 <p>Legend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In between each paragraphs</li> <li>● Against each paragraphs</li> <li>● Both</li> <li>● It doesn't matter</li> </ul>
<p><b>Selected comments on Question #2.</b></p> <p>Given the subjective nature of this question, students' comments are not homogeneous as they reveal different opinions and preferences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What the question was referring to was more clear when they were between the paragraphs.</li> <li>● I thought that both were clearly connected to their corresponding paragraph.</li> <li>● I liked being able to just click and listen to the question, and then read the paragraph it corresponded. It was less confusing and</li> </ul>

made me least likely to press on the wrong audio question for the wrong paragraph.

- It makes the paragraphs more cohesive and makes them flow better, whereas with the in between each paragraph there was always an unnecessary space.

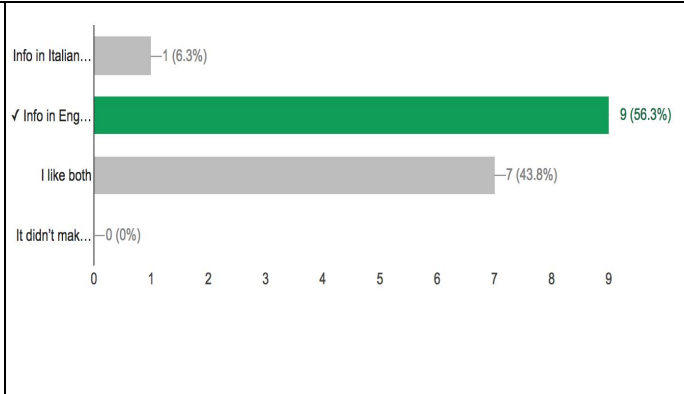
**For Question #3 students indicated how useful vocab pop-ups were on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents “completely useless” and 5 represents “very useful”.**

Almost 90% of students found them useful.



**Question #4 asked students to indicate whether they found information in vocab pop-ups more useful in Italian or in English.**

About 60% of students preferred information in pop-ups to be displayed in English.



**Selected comments on Question #4.**

Comments from students do not show a unique preference, but rather, as in Question #2, personal and changeable. Among the most valuable points raised that may guide us towards amending and updating our materials are the fact that more vocabulary might need explanatory pop-ups, and that, in the case of information provided in Italian, students

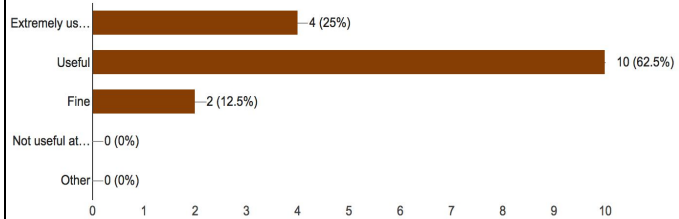
- I'm ok with pop-ups in italian when they are not difficult to understand, but it seems counterintuitive to have words i have to look up in the pop-ups.
- Some of the words that had pop-ups were words we used commonly in class before that, but some words that didn't have explanations or pop-ups were completely new and a pop-up would have been helpful.
- I liked both, but I think that Italian explanations are more useful, even though harder to understand, because it helps us get the important skill of explaining unknown terms in Italian, rather than just saying in English.

still had to make use of external tools (i.e. wordreference.com) to understand the content of pop-ups.

- I prefer having everything in Italian - though I have to think a little more to understand the translations, it feels more immersive.
- The explanations were easier to understand in English and allowed me to comprehend the significance without having to go to word reference and figuring out the explanation if it was written in Italian.
- A combination of Italian and English might be more helpful.

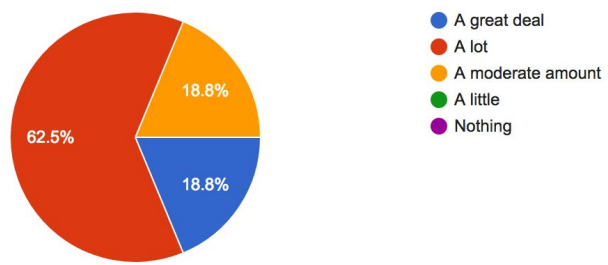
**In Question #5 we asked students to indicate the usefulness of assigned activities in WordPress and to evaluate how prepared for class discussions they felt after completing them.**

About 68% of them found passages useful, of which 25% found them “extremely useful”.



**In Question #6 students evaluated how much they learned about Italian culture from readings in WordPress.**

More than 80% of students answered that they learned considerably about Italian culture from online passages.



**In Question #7 we asked students suggest other topics they may have wanted to be included.** In this case, students’ comments are quite univocal in recognizing that they found readings and

- I really appreciated the variety of topics included and I definitely learned a lot about Italian culture through reading them. I especially enjoyed the reading about "Made in Italy", so more about design might be nice. I also would have liked to read about history and art.

<p>activities we created useful and they they learned new aspects about Italian culture, life, traditions, etc. In addition, students also added ideas for additional passages to be written.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A survey of significant Italian architectural landmarks would be interesting!</li> <li>● I would love to read about Italian cuisine.</li> <li>● Italian hand gestures, and their meanings/history</li> </ul>
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<p><b>Question #8 asked students about what they would have done differently.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I would have us read these from the beginning.</li> <li>● WordPress all year.</li> <li>● I wouldn't change anything.</li> </ul>
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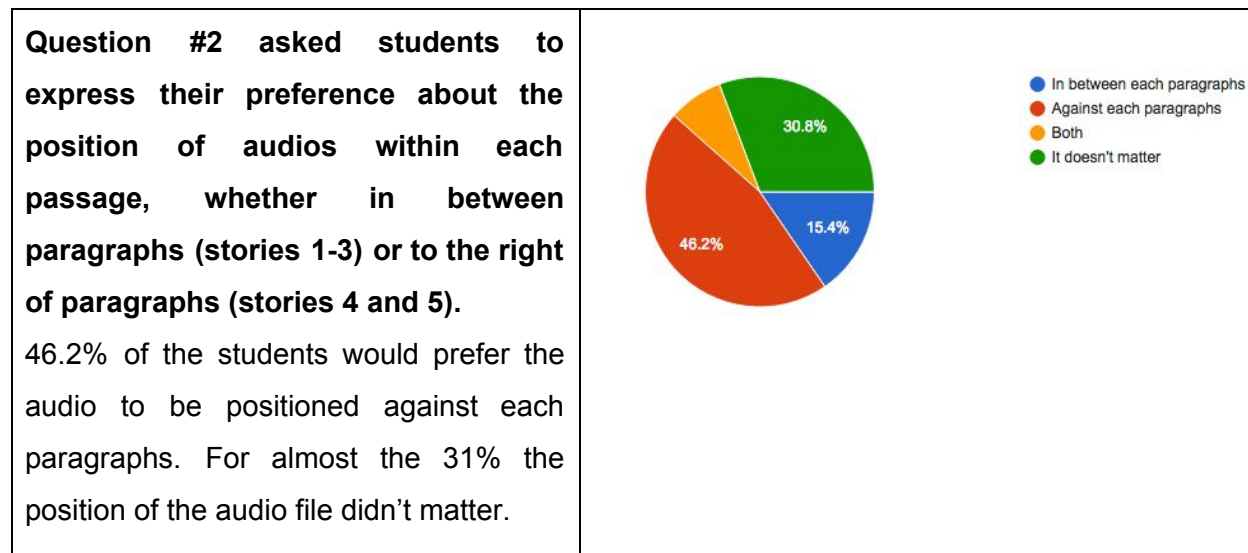
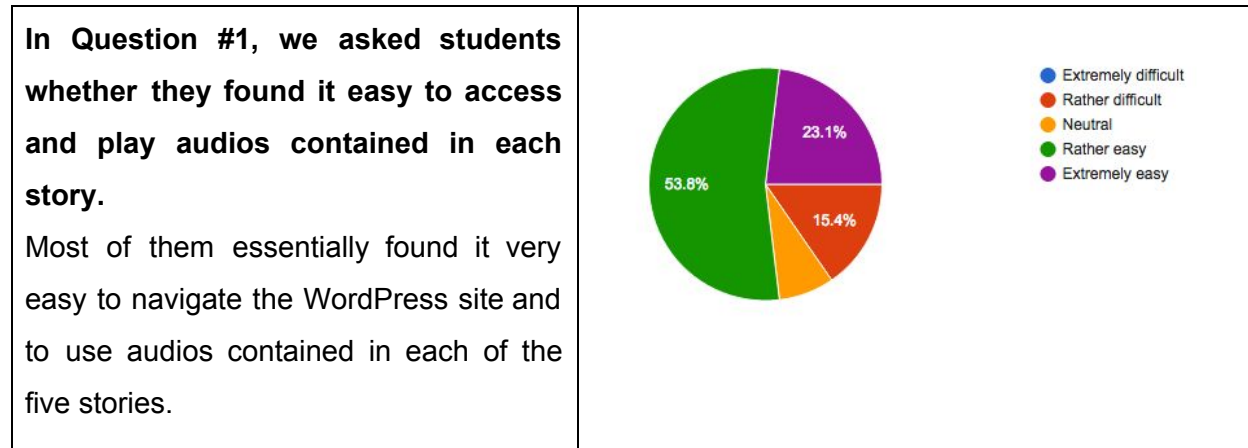
**Final considerations about evaluations from Smith College students:**

All in all, students really enjoyed reading, listening and interacting with the online stories we created. The final suggestions students provided at the end of the evaluation questionnaire range from answers to previous questions, comments about the structure of the whole course, and ideas for future improvements. Here below is a selection of students' final comments that address readings and activities contained in the WordPress site used in the Intermediate Italian classes at Smith College.

- I thought the vocab pop-ups were extremely helpful.
- The grammar portion in red was difficult to access because of all the scrolling. I don't know if there's anything you could do to make it closer to each paragraph it referenced but that would be easier.
- Wordpress readings were very interesting, engaging and helpful. I would love to have more.
- I wish that we had had the WordPress readings from the beginning, especially because I found those a lot more interesting than the readings in the first half of the course. The phrases were encountered in the WordPress articles were much more relevant and useful to our writing, and even though they were moderately easy to follow, I felt like I learned something new whenever I read them.
- I found WordPress a good learning tool, especially in helping me figure out word meaning and phrases according to their context. I don't know if having the answers to the questions on the same page were a good idea -- I would have maybe provided them after the assignment was due.

**Evaluations and feedback received from students at Mount Holyoke:**

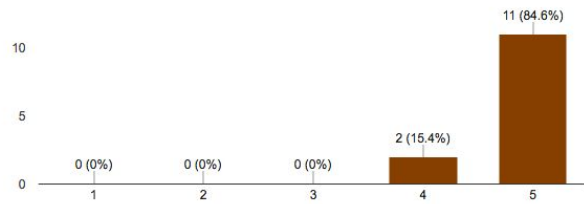
13 students out of 18 completed the online evaluation questionnaire. Here below is a breakdown of all questions and results/comments received from our students:



**For Question #3 students indicated how useful vocab pop-ups were on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents “completely useless” and 5 represents “very useful”. 84.5% of the students found very effective and useful the vocab pop-ups.**

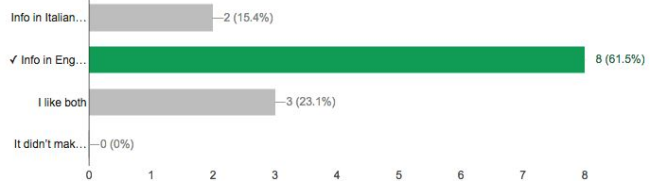
QUESTION 3: please, evaluate how effective and useful info provided in pop-ups was.

(13 responses)



**Question #4 asked students to indicate whether they found information in vocab pop-ups more useful in Italian or in English.**

About 62% of students preferred information in pop-ups to be displayed in English.



**Selected comments on Question #4.**

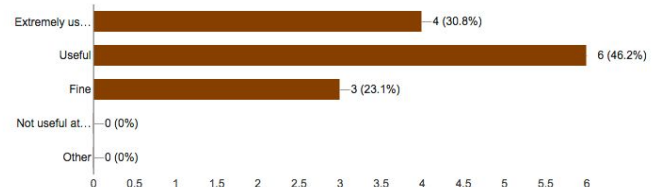
Students seem to prefer the vocab pop-ups in English rather than in Italian.

- The pops-ups (especially when in English) are very helpful
- Adding some color to identify verbs, articles, pronomi doppi etc. might be useful.
- They just helped me a lot
- They are great!
- I love it!
- Maybe putting English first in order to fully comprehend and then Italian under to apply what we learned would be helpful

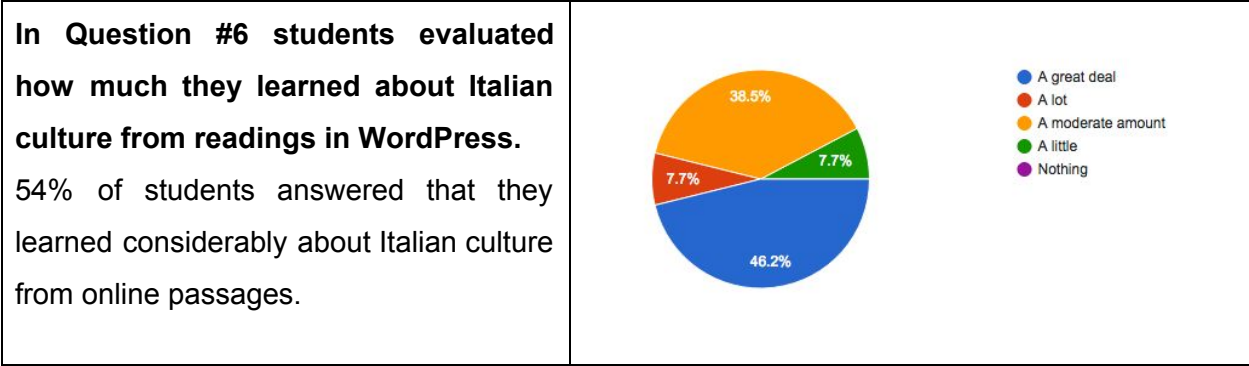
**In Question #5 we asked students to indicate the usefulness of assigned activities in WordPress and to evaluate how prepared for class discussions they felt after completing them.**

QUESTION 5: how useful and relevant were the readings to prepare you for class discussion activities?

(13 responses)



<p>About 46% of them found passages useful, 41% found them “extremely useful”.</p>	
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| <p><b>In Question #7 which other topics would you like to be included?</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More everyday things (grocery shopping, driving rules, etc ) would be good</li> <li>• History/traditional culture</li> <li>• Fashion and unknown/uncommon regions of Italy such as Umbria</li> <li>• Cinema, food, dialects, regional stereotypes</li> <li>• Italian students and education curriculum in Italy</li> <li>• More about Italian youth 20-30 years ago.</li> </ul> |
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| <p><b>Question #8 simply asked students about what they would have done differently.</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I liked it better than the textbook and especially find the audio to be great - easier to understand for me.</li> <li>• slower audio/audio cut by sentences so we can read and comprehend</li> <li>• The audio recordings and videos are particularly my favorite. I understand a lot more by listening than by reading.</li> <li>• I would spend more time looking up words I don't know.</li> <li>• I would read the questions first, hear the article, and then read it.</li> </ul> |
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### **Final considerations about evaluations from Mount Holyoke College students:**

It is clear that students really enjoyed reading, listening and discussing about the online stories we wrote. Most of them really enjoyed the passage *Usi e costumi a confronto*. During the oral exam they loved to compare some Italian habits with their own. Most of them reported that some of the readings prepared them for the study abroad experience. The final suggestions were enthusiastic for example: *I think you all did an incredible job!!!* One student suggested even more group work in class to talk about the articles and, most importantly, to see videos about the topics talked about in the article.

### **How the materials will be used in the future?**

At Smith College, these materials will be used in the same Intermediate Italian course during the spring and in the fall semesters 2017.

At Mount Holyoke College, these materials will be used in the same Intermediate Italian course during the in the fall semester 2017.

### **Conclusion.**

As students' feedback and comments show, the five readings and activities we created as part of the Innovative Teaching Fellowship Initiative were very well-received. What students emphasize in their evaluations is that the materials contained in the WordPress site helped them improve their language learning (acquisition of new vocabulary, review of grammar, reading and listening skills), but also offered them refreshing insight into Italian culture.