# Analytic/experiential materials for teaching Italian

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Mosaico (/moˈzaiko/ "mosaic") and Biglie (/ˈbiʎʎe/ "marbles") are two textbooks we have designed for students who learn Italian at Japanese universities of fine arts and music. In this paper we will explain how the contents of the textbooks have been structured and discuss some examples of tasks. We will also point out that the learning process we encourage is configured along an intersectional progression of grammar topics that aims at balancing metalinguistic knowledge and communicative competence. This dynamic configuration is what makes Mosaico and Biglie different from the textbooks of Italian normally used at Japanese universities.

　モザイコとビーリェは日本の大学でイタリア語を学ぶ学生のために作成された授業用教材である。本稿においては、これらの教材に関する作成・編集上の方針を述べるとともに、教材自体の学習に続いて行われるべきクラス活動について述べたい。私たちが利用者に提唱する学習方法は、既習の学習事項を反芻しながら新しい文法知識を吸収し、さらにはそれを活用した対話を試みるというものである。そうした学習に資するべく開発された両教材は、積み上げ式の知識構築を学習者に求めた多くの従来の授業用教材にはない特徴を備えた、実践・体験型の教材であると言える。

## The *Mosaico-Biglie* project

The choice of a textbook is probably one of the most serious challenges that teachers of Italian at Japanese universities face. Since textbooks and pedagogical aids published in Italy would be too difficult for Japanese university students, in recent years a number of new Italian manuals have been released by Japanese publishers. However, despite the increasing number of publications, most of these textbooks continue to be inadequate in terms of content configuration and techniques. Another problem
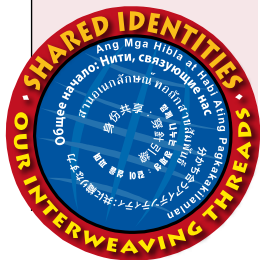
is that the vision of language learning these textbooks endorse seems to suggest that, eventually, mastering a foreign language is just a matter of learning vocabulary and grammar rules.

It is no surprise therefore that, except for a few "communicative" attempts of a situational-functional nature, usually based on scripts such as "Buying Train Tickets," or "Ordering at a Restaurant," most of the Italian textbooks adopted at Japanese universities focus on the analysis of language forms. With few exceptions, on the whole these books can be said to allow learners a rather passive role.

Italian is a language with a complex morphology. A background in English, which all Japanese students study in junior high and high school, can help Japanese students of Italian, especially at the lexical level; however, in order to acquire a basic linguistic competence in Italian, Japanese students not only have to acquire new words, but also need to become familiar with new morpho-syntactic structures, such as the inflection of nouns for gender and numbers, the forms of articles, quantifiers, demonstratives and adjectives, and the conjugations of verbs.

In this paper we will report on a project consisting of the creation of two textbooks of Italian, Mosaico /mozaiko/ "mosaic," and Biglie /ˈbiʎʎe/ "marbles," (Mizuno & Zamborlin, 2008, 2009a), along with additional pedagogical materials, that was accomplished thanks to a research grant from Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music, and the cooperation of over forty people. We wanted to target students at universities of fine arts and music, which in Japan is the most common context for learning Italian at the tertiary level (Takada, 2006).

Before embarking on our project, we considered the approach, design, procedure, and distinctiveness of the materials we were about to create (Richards & Rogers, 2001). We started by posing the four following questions based on the above criteria:

- Based on what concept of language learning/ teaching do we intend to produce the materials?

- What linguistic content are we going to cover? How are we going to present it?

- What sort of techniques and activities are we going to devise?

- Compared to other pedagogical materials available in Japan, will our textbooks be innovative? Will they be a useful contribution in fostering Japanese university students' motivation toward learning Italian? Will they facilitate the job of the teachers?

This paper will discuss how the aims that make up the structure of the project were defined, and through a discussion of the theoretical framework we referred to, we will provide a description of the materials, elucidate criteria on which we organized the contents, and offer examples of tasks. In conclusion, we will explain how *Mosaico* and *Biglie* differ from the majority of Italian language textbooks currently used at Japanese universities. We will also give a brief account of the results we are presently obtaining by using *Mosaico* and *Biglie* in our classes.

## Approach: Beyond the method

We believe that methods cannot be judged as "right or wrong" on a theoretical basis, but should be regarded as "coherent, or incoherent," "appropriate, or inappropriate," and consistent with the particular context in which they are put into practice (Balboni, 2002, p. 27). However, considering the classroom reality we are more familiar with, we decided not to take a stance on any one method, but rather to construct a creative solution, which would help to address most of the issues teachers like us face in their daily work. Accordingly, *Mosaico* and *Biglie* offer an approach that does not relate to a structured system of principles, but to general parameters of Italian language teaching methodology.

This choice was motivated by the fact that Italian teachers at Japanese universities are not necessarily experts in language teaching methodology. The research fields of most of them are usually related to other dimensions of Italian culture, such as Italian literature, arts and opera. *Mosaico* and *Biglie* therefore are aimed at allowing teachers freedom to use them according to their pedagogical preferences, which can be either strictly grammatically or communicatively oriented.

The conception of language learning/teaching on which *Mosaico* and *Biglie* are grounded, therefore, integrates both a "quantitative/analytic" and a "qualitative/experiential" viewpoint (Ellis, 2007, p. 543). The ideal goal was to create materials that also had the potential of guiding learners toward the achievement of a balanced linguistic/communicative competence in Italian at a basic user level by combining metalinguistic knowledge, lexical ability, listening and oral production skills, and sociopragmatic awareness. This conception, furthermore, is informed by Kumaravedivelu's three "macrostrategies" which are: activating intuitive heuristics by encouraging learners to make educated guesses in inferring grammatical rules; integrating language skills, as they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing; and facilitating negotiated interaction by actively involving learners in classroom discourse and cooperation (as cited in Adamson, 2007, pp. 617-618).

## Design and procedures

*Mosaico* consists of a grammar book with exercises and readings, a booklet of tests, and a CD, while *Biglie* consists of a workbook with a DVD and a CD. The two volumes are structured to parallel each other and cover the grammar items that are usually taught at Japanese universities in 45 hours of classes, that is, 15 classes of 90 minutes x 2 (i.e., twice a week in one semester, or once a week in two semesters). The textbooks also offer enough material for an additional 15 classes. However, while *Mosaico* is aimed at building linguistic competence and, as the title suggests, can be seen as a sort of mosaic outlining a broad-spectrum introduction of the functions of Italian grammar, the aim of *Biglie* is to enhance listening and oral production skills in an interactive way with students interacting much as kids do when playing marbles.

Ideally, the two textbooks should be used jointly. However, although they are deeply interrelated, teachers who prefer to focus on the study of sentence structure may choose to employ only *Mosaico*. On the other hand, in classes aimed at improving students' communication skills, teachers may decide to use only *Biglie*.

In Ellis's (2008) terms, we can say that *Mosaico*'s approach is one of explicit Focus on Forms Instruction (FFI) (p. 438). Through explicit FFI, grammar rules are taught during the learning process, and learners are encouraged to analyze grammar structures in order to develop metalinguistic knowledge. On the other hand, the purpose of *Biglie* is to encourage learners to make use of the knowledge learned in *Mosaico* by experiencing verbal communication from the beginning.

*Mosaico's* and *Biglie's* tasks are based on our vision of the textbooks as two integrated components of a complete educational project. This is based on our belief that learning can be better achieved, and motivation to learn can be enhanced, through activities in which induction and deduction, and implicit acquisition and explicit instruction complement each other.

### Mosaico's contents

*Mosaico* is a pedagogical grammar book containing the rules of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The progression of *Mosaico's* language rules tracks the traditional sequence of Italian grammar books used in Japan, although, as we will show, the criteria on which we arranged the contents are rather dissimilar.

As with most grammar books, *Mosaico's* point of departure is in the study of the sounds of the language. However, in the phonology section, it is made clear that *katakana*, which is employed as a system of phonetic transcription in almost all textbooks of Italian published in Japan, can by no means be considered a reliable system for connecting symbols to speech sounds. To overcome the faults related to the use of *katakana*, in the first chapter of *Mosaico* a table of Italian phones in a "broad" IPA transcription, that is, a simplified system of representation which does not aim at containing all information possible but records only the essential differences between sounds, was included (Liddicoat & Curnow, 2007, p. 27). *Katakana* symbols are also included in the table, but only to point out their inadequacy and to raise students' awareness that even though Italian and Japanese are quite similar in their phonemic inventories, the two languages differ in their phonotactics, that is to say, in the different possibilities each language has for combining sounds into syllables (Kubozono, 2002). The CD provided with *Mosaico* contains listening sections through which students can be guided to notice these differences.

Subsequent chapters illustrate how the basic rules of Italian grammar operate. Students learn how to combine constituents into simple sentences, and they acquire the meaning of new words by paying attention to their occurrence in phrases and texts. Every unit of *Mosaico* consists of four pages. Each left-hand page displays an exercise in which grammar rules have to be inferred by looking at a picture. Below the exercise, grammar explanations are provided. Each right-hand page includes deductive exercises, for example deducing from the rule to its application, followed by an explanatory section introducing an additional grammar topic at a higher degree of complexity. These final sections can be skipped without compromising the logical sequence of the contents, and it is possible to come back to these sections when

reviewing items already studied. As a result, because of this configuration, the progression of *Mosaico's* contents may be said to resemble a spiral, rather than a straight line. Also, further tasks of a deductive and inductive nature are contained in the test booklet.

## Mosaico's tasks

As was explained above, *Mosaico*'s approach is one of explicit FFI (Ellis, 2008). From the perspective of the learners, this form of instruction can be achieved either deductively, as when rules are presented to the learners, or inductively, as when the learners are asked to discover rules by themselves from an array of available linguistic data (Ellis, 2008; DeKeyser, 2003). Furthermore, in line with Balboni (1998), we were careful to introduce grammar rules in such a way that their understanding did not represent the point of departure, but rather the point of arrival. Therefore, *Mosaico*'s tasks are arranged so that students are encouraged to discover grammar rules first, and systematize metalinguistic knowledge through reflection and exercises of a deductive nature later. As an example let us consider the introductory exercise in Figure 1. The task requires that learners carefully look at a picture and fill in the blanks based on the linguistic information provided. We recommend that students focus on items from ① to ④ before looking at the whole picture. By carrying out the task up to point ④, students will be able to define a grammar postulate (Italian nouns have gender: masculine or feminine) from which the first rule of Italian grammar stems (most masculine names end in –o; most feminine names end in –a). After completing the exercises, students will look at the grammar explanations

describing the rules they have conjectured. Subsequently, students can systematize the linguistic knowledge they have attained by performing exercises of a deductive nature.

## Biglie's contents

Given that *Biglie* is a textbook aimed at enhancing oral communication skills, it contains only synthetic grammar explanations. For that reason, we included several links to *Mosaico* along with an appendix that outlines the essential mechanisms of Italian grammar. As for the topics, the 15 units of *Biglie* cover most of the categories of language used in level A1 and A2 (the basic user level), consistent with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Accordingly, students are encouraged to communicate in simple and routine tasks employing frequently used expressions related to areas of immediate relevance, for example, basic personal and family information, study, part-time jobs, etc.

As with *Mosaico*, the contents of each chapter are enclosed in four pages and structured into two main sections. *Biglie* was designed to be used with an 88-minute DVD that we produced. All scenes are based on a screenplay, which is integrally reproduced in the workbook in the layout shown in Figure 2. The first section of the textbook, "Let's Learn the Expressions," features Italian native speakers living in Bologna, and Japanese university students speaking in Italian with their teachers. Section 2 of the video, "Model Interactions," is set on the campus of the *Catholic University of the Sacred Heart* in Milan. The main characters here are four Italian students who have a conversation about their lives. By constructing utterances and by practicing

conversation formulae modeled on what they see and hear, students can engage in oral communication tasks beginning with lesson one. Furthermore, by observing how language is used in context, students are provided with several cues that can help them understand not only the meaning of new words and expressions, but also some basic mechanisms of a sociopragmatic nature.

### Biglie's tasks

*Biglie's* tasks conform to the principle of "bimodality" described by Danesi (1988, 1998) and Balboni (2000), in which both brain hemispheres are involved in language acquisition, the R-mode being analogical, visual, global, and simultaneous, and the L-mode being logical, verbal, analytical, and sequential. Danesi also suggested that when people learn a foreign language, the natural way for the brain to process information follows a directional pattern that goes from the right hemisphere to the left. The opposite route may result in tiredness and cause de-motivation.

In light of Danesi's (1988; 1998) research, we structured *Biglie's* units in a way that students' first assignment is to watch the DVD and perform some listening tasks in a fill-in-the-blank format. After understanding the meaning of the expressions covered in the unit, students employ them in oral communication tasks working in pairs or small groups. These activities consist of a few analytical tasks, such as answering questions about the scenes, and many experiential tasks in which students have to personalize the interactions through activities that we called "Schemes to be Filled in," "Schemes to be Constructed," and "Scripts in Progress." In these simple conversation tasks, students produce utterances

modeled on the interactions they see, and they acquire most of the expressions implicitly as conversational formulae. The book offers explanations in Japanese about the meaning of each utterance contained in the script (Figure 2) and, of course, teachers are free to offer feedback and further clarifications. Nevertheless, it is important that students can infer meanings by themselves by watching how the language is used in context. In terms of grammar content, the linguistic mechanisms of each utterance become clear later, combining the implicit learning endorsed by *Biglie* with the explicit FFI supported by *Mosaico*.

### Distinctiveness and motivation enhancement: Discussion

Due to the approach, the configuration of content and the typology of tasks, we can say that the process of Italian language acquisition that *Mosaico* and *Biglie* foster is structured along an "intersectional" progression of topics balancing analysis (metalinguistic competence) and experience (communicative competence) (Mizuno & Zamborlin, 2009b). This dynamic configuration is what makes *Mosaico* and *Biglie* different from the textbooks currently used at Japanese universities, the contents of which are generally structured along a linear, inflexible sequence of grammar explanations, while the activities usually consist of translations of sentences, and batteries of pattern drills.

However, do *Mosaico* and *Biglie* actually motivate Japanese university students to learn Italian? In order to address this issue, we should first recall that nowadays most Japanese universities of fine arts and music are forced to lower their selectivity standards due to financial

problems caused by the decrease of college-age students. Consequently, one might expect that as the ability level of students admitted each year drops, the number of students who do not perceive foreign languages and liberal arts as useful to their studies is likely to increase. If in the past a language such as Italian could be comfortably mastered through a rigorous grammar-translation approach, today, for the majority of our students, such an approach would prove to be unproductive.

Nonetheless, we should take into account that motivation, being a factor of an affective nature, is adaptable (Ellis, 2007, p. 536). Dörnyei (2001), for example, pointed out that learners of a foreign language can be influenced by the quality of the learning experience. Accordingly, we thought that offering a visual aid along with a textbook and a workbook, could contribute to raising students' interest. We also thought that if we could manage to engage students in various typologies of tasks, assigning them the responsibility of discovering how the mechanisms of the language work, we could make the experience of teaching/learning Italian less tedious.

It also has to be recalled that at Japanese universities of fine arts and music only a small number of highly motivated students, such as opera singers or specialists in Italian design and art history, learn Italian because it may be helpful in their areas of expertise. These students are moved by "extrinsic factors." That is, their extrinsically motivated behaviors are actions carried out to achieve some instrumental ends (Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, 2000). Disregarding a number of students who would fall into this category of a-motivated learners, the majority of

students learn Italian simply to obtain credits. The *Mosaico-Biglie* project was designed for this latter type of student, who could at least be "intrinsically motivated," that is to say, enticed into engaging in tasks for the simple reason that they are perceived as enjoyable (Noels et al., 2000).

We admit that it would be quite naïve to expect student motivation to rise considerably. However, in experimenting with *Mosaico* and *Biglie* in our classes, we can honestly say that the approach we propose appears to rouse students' attention, considering that the number of students sleeping during class has noticeably lessened. We are presently using *Mosaico* and *Biglie* in classes of various levels and sizes, and in different combinations (i.e., only *Mosaico*, only *Biglie*, or *Mosaico* + photocopies from *Biglie*).

At this stage we are not able to provide reliable data, however, our overall impression is that students' concentration and involvement are noticeably higher compared to previous teaching experiences we had using traditional textbooks. In Zamborlin and Mizuno (2008), for example, we offered qualitative evidence based on videos that we took in some of our classes in which *Biglie* was used. The videos show students interacting among themselves in pairs, in small groups, or with their teachers. They are always smiling and laughing, and appear to enjoy speaking in Italian. We must admit, however, that these videos feature only classes in which students were highly motivated from the beginning. Therefore, we cannot prove that motivation did actually increase because of the textbook.

In some classes in which only *Mosaico* was used, motivation appears to have risen thanks to the new testing format. *Mosaico*'s tests are designed to assess students'

ability to reflect on the mechanisms of language, rather than to evaluate the actual degree of linguistic competence they are able to attain. This kind of grammar testing, which leaves students free to look at the textbook if they want to, appears to relieve tension and increase student participation. However, in at least two classes in which only *Mosaico* was used, we did not obtain positive results.

To conclude, though we think that the majority of our students appear to enjoy the new materials, which also makes teaching easier, our project is still under construction. One shortcoming is the absence of a teacher's manual. Teachers who may choose to employ *Mosaico* and/or *Biglie* might not fully understand the criteria on which the textbooks were constructed. Therefore we are planning to publish a teacher's manual, which will offer some examples of how, in our view, *Mosaico's* and *Biglie's* tasks can be carried out. Also, we are considering the possibility of offering a website for *Mosaico-Biglie* where suggestions, tests, extra exercises, and videos showing how to perform oral activities/evaluations based on *Biglie's* scripts can be provided.

*Mosaico* went on sale in 2008 and *Biglie* will be on sale starting in April, 2009. It would be interesting to find a way to open a channel of communication with teachers adopting the textbooks in order to get both positive and negative feedback from them so that we can perfect these materials. Therefore, although the materials are now on sale, the authors regard the *Mosaico-Biglie* project as research in progress.

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## Appendix 1

### *Excerpts from the books*

① bambino 少年 [boy]（単数）m.

② alberi 木 [trees]（複数）

　> albero [tree]（単数）m.

③ scuola 学校 [school]（単数）f.

④ bambine [girls]（少女）（複数）

　> bambina [girl]（単数）f.



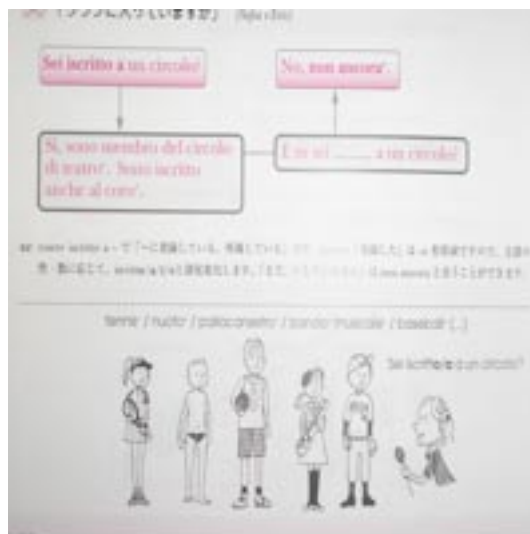**Figure 1. Gender and number of nouns (Mizuno & Zamborlin, 2008, p. 8)**



**Figure 2. Configuration of Biglie's script (Mizuno & Zamborlin, 2009a, p. 20)**