Prego! Invitation to Italian Second Edition

Vital Statistics

Author: Graziana Lazzarino
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Series: A Workbook for Prego, A Laboratory Manual for Prego, Instructor's Manual, Audiotape program

Overview

Generally, reviewers review textbooks and their accompanying materials from one of two broad perspectives: from the perspective of someone who has not and is not currently using the materials in class, or from the perspective of a teacher who has or is currently using the materials in the classroom. Having used—and currently using—*Prego! An Invitation to Italian, Second Edition* in class, this reviewer cautions the reader to keep in mind that all comments are based upon the experience of someone who is teaching with these materials.

A user's review of *Prego!* seems timely and in order; after all, the first edition was on the market exactly four years before being superceded by the second edition, now also in its fourth year. Can a third, revised edition be far behind?

Using the complete *Prego!* package a number of quarters with various classes, this reviewer both appreciates and respects the practical excellence inherent in *Prego!*. At the same time, however, teachers of Italian using *Prego!* will encounter some confining shortcomings.

Grammar as Challenge

Reservations About Presentation. On the first page of the *Instructor's Manual,* the author states the common instructional objectives found in most basic language textbooks: 1) to present "all fundamental grammar structures within an authentic ... context", and, 2) "to develop and encourage oral and written communication in the language."

The first objective addresses itself to the problem of organization, that is, how to accomplish the breakdown of the unified whole into small and easily manageable language concepts or pieces. Once broken down, these pieces eventually need to be reassembled like a puzzle.

The second objective attempts to cope with the problems of keeping the material relevant, interesting, and motivational enough to capture the enthusiasm of the learner for the language.

From the outset, the author of *Prego!*—like most textbook authors—opts for one of three organizational approaches to accomplish the two instructional objectives. Textbook authors must decide if their text will be a simple, elementary puzzle whose pieces can be fit together relatively easily; or if it will be a more challenging puzzle, whose pieces have tortuous outlines and complicated shapes which are relatively hard to piece together; or, if the text will treat the center portion of the language puzzle in a manner that is easily assembled while saving the tricky pieces for the outer parts, that is, until the learner has acquired certain basic skills in manipulating the centerpiece of the target language.

While this reviewer's preference is with the last

approach, the author of *Prego!* seems to have opted for the second approach. Consequently, *Prego!* leans more toward the difficult side of the spectrum. This makes for a somewhat paradoxical text. On the one hand, *Prego!* does not lend itself easily to self-study, independent of the teacher; the teacher is a necessary intermediary and facilitator if the text is to be used effectively. Moreover, because it is not an "easy" text, the average and weaker students in a class often fall behind almost from the beginning. On the other hand, the text's difficulty is also an advantage in the sense that it weeds out those students whose language ability is wanting and who are unlikely to excel in mastering Italian.

Because most students who come to our language classes are of average ability and take our courses not because of interest but to fulfill a language requirement, many of us teaching required language courses subscribe to the notion of a relatively frustration-free honeymoon period for the beginning language learner. It seems desirable to provide—at least initially—an atmosphere of easy access, i.e., parameters of learning with which *average* students who apply themselves can expect an *average* amount of success.

What happens to this notion of a frustration-free honeymoon period with *Prego!?* What does the novice learner of Italian and the teacher of Italian encounter as they plow through the beginning chapters of *Prego!?*

The preliminary chapter does, indeed, begin *slowly;* the student is introduced to the Italian alphabet and its sound system, a few simple phrases, and numbers. Furthermore, both student and teacher encounter one of *Prego!'s* most-welcomed and prized attributes, namely, its structured chapter organization so well-suited to a five-day, a-chapter-a-week, syllabus. All chapters subsequent to the preliminary focus on a concrete cultural theme, and the material is broken down into three to five grammar points, each introduced—in keeping with the author's stated objectives—through an authentic context which takes the form of a mini-dialogue or one of many, wonderfully entertaining cartoons which also serve to "spice up" the book throughout.

Then follows a dialogue, a chapter review, and a list of active vocabulary.

What makes the above-described approach tilt *Prego!* in the direction of challenging and difficult? It is not so much a question of the approach as it is a question of *when* to introduce *how much* grammatical detail *qua* exceptions.

In order to encourage beginning language learners to acquire basic competence in manipulating the more general language structures, many language teachers spare their students the so-called rule-exception dilemma as long as possible. Although I applaud *Prego!'s* immediate use of "avere" and its idiomatic expressions and "buono" with its irregular forms—evidence that the author is aware of the pragmatics of language use—I question both the purpose and usefulness of giving a run-down of the use of the definite article in Chapter 2. It is possible, at this point, to avoid examples involving the contrastive analysis in Italian and English of this most intricate and difficult aspect of grammar. Although this intricate topic is taken up again in Chapter 11, *there,* unfortunately, it is treated unsatisfactorily. This dissatisfaction centers primarily around the omission of the definite article altogether and using a partitive form or the indefinite article. Furthermore, the partitive is only briefly mentioned, almost in passing, in the context of the discussion of indefinite adjectives (Chapter 12, p. 243).

I also question the timing of introducing a difficult concept like the idiomatic use of the present tense with "da" in conjunction with the conjugations of an already prodigious number of regular and irregular verbs in Chapter 4. Based on experience, it seems to be a case of sheer luck if 10% of the class use "da" correctly on the final examination!

In the framework of timing, I also question the practicality of introducing so early in the text the optional placement of the object pronoun with the modals ("lo voglio vedere" as opposed to "voglio vederlo"). Important as it may be, could this alternative not be explained later as more object pronouns are introduced? In the early part of the text, it seems to me, a footnote about this optional placement would suffice. Similarly, mentioning the optional elision of the pronouns "mi, ti, lo,

la'²-common as they may be—and the optional agreement with the past participle of "mi, ti ci, vi" in Chapter 6 lead to a great deal of confusion among students. A better-timed, later introduction of these optional agreements would avoid some of this confusion.

Positive Features of the Grammar. The reservations expressed about the grammar presentation apply mainly to the first few chapters: They address problem areas consistently encountered in the first quarter Italian course.

The grammar breakdown in the later chapters is generally manageable, though sometimes more so for the teacher than for the student. Explanations in English are succinct, accurate, and appropriate. The use of boldface type clarifies representative examples and tables throughout the text. Some of the best grammar presentations in *Prego!* include the following: 1) separate units on verbs with contiguous semantic fields such as "dire-parlare-raccontare" (Chapter 9), "conoscere-sapere" (Chapter 6), and "partire-uscire-andare via-lasciare" (Chapter 5); 2) the introduction of accessory vocabulary, although this feature is not consistently implemented. Nevertheless, for her consciousness of the importance of pragmatic and contextual learning, the author of *Prego!* deserves high marks.

Exercises as Translation Practice

Drawbacks. The author incorporates the second instructional objective—the development and encouragement of oral and written communication—in the exercises following each unit of grammar. It is here that the user of *Prego!* confronts its major drawback: the omnipresent translation practice. Most often, this translation exercise immediately precedes the conversation practice. Is this to convey the implicit message that successful communication takes place *after* successful translation? Moreover, does not the excessive use of translation—a constant source of frustration for most students—contradict the stated goal of achieving communicative competence?

With regard to the excessive emphasis on translation, I cannot help but wonder if the author is unable to embrace wholeheartedly the new methodology of contextual learning which aims at eliminating the automatic recourse to and the contrastive analysis of the native language. Perhaps, the author intends to teach writing through translation.

Although translation may be a useful method for *controlling* understanding of grammatical structures or for *controlling* comprehension (certain multiple choice exercises on the audio tape program accompanying Prego! use this function in an exemplary fashion), do we not want to distance ourselves from the idea of using excessive translation in the introductory language course?

Excellence of Non-Translation Exercises. Where *Prego!* excels is in the quality of its non-translation exercises. These exercises represent an outstanding mix of approaches and types, ranging from multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, substitutions, and re-writes to question-answer patterns. Most noteworthy and welcome are those exercises which make use of sentence combining and situational pragmatics. If there is a weakness in the non-translation exercises it is probably the conversation exercises: a series of unrelated questions all lined up—questions for which the instructor has to provide the appropriate context or transition.

Dialogues

Admirably Constructed. The dialogues are excellent in that they manage both to focus the chapter's cultural theme and apply the grammatical structures studied *without compromising situational verisimilitude* or linguistic authenticity. In the beginning, they often reflect the students' actual speaking competence; hence, they can be used as a model for role-playing and recitation from memory. Later, as they increase in length and complexity, they can be used as reading comprehension exercises.

Vocabulary

The student who uses *Prego!* is expected to master an extensive corpus of active vocabulary.

However, since the dialogue designed to facilitate vocabulary acquisition is the last part of a chapter and prior to the review section and vocabulary list, the instructor must make a conscious and structured effort to introduce and use the vocabulary from the moment a chapter is begun. The vocabulary list could be improved by separating idiomatic expressions from simple lexical items since the former present an ubiquitous stumbling block and require different processing for memorization. Furthermore, it might be useful to have a distinct column for verbal structures, e.g., "cominciare a, andare a", with a sample, illustrative sentence.

Reinforcement

For the effort to provide adequate reinforcement of the material studied, the author of *Prego!* once again deserves high marks. Each chapter includes separate chapter review sections ("Di tutto un po'"), in which comprehension and retention are tested in contexts different from those encountered in the chapter itself. Thus, the instructor does not need to prepare a review sheet or review outline on the chalkboard.

Excellent Workbook and Lab Program. Reinforcement is further supported in a most exemplary way by the excellent workbook and audio tape laboratory program. Both follow the outline and subdivisions of the textbook. Each even includes a totally new and different review section (workbook: "Comprehension Exercises"; lab manual: "Un po' di tutto"). Both workbook and lab manual offer the student the opportunities to distinguish, isolate, and concentrate on the practice of a single skill while acquiring a specific linguistic concept.

Culture as Strong Suit

Through a variety of media and methods, the presentation of Italian culture is, in all likelihood, the strongest and best feature of *Prego!* A wealth of excellent quality photographs and interesting tidbits of information ("Curiosità")—often dealing with etymology (what does "cappuccino" really mean?)—make culture a "living" entity in this text.

While a significant amount of cultural information is already contained in the dialogues, there is, in addition, an optional cultural section ("Intermezzo") after each chapter, containing creative suggestions for activities involving cultural themes, poems, songs, and reading passages elaborating a specific aspect of the culture. In this respect, *Prego!* is a regular source book providing cultural material that otherwise might not be so readily available.

Overall Evaluation

A user-friendly, well-organized, and visually appealing textbook, *Prego!'s* practical excellence is due to the wealth of cultural materials, the quality and quantity of exercises (especially in the workbook) and its appendix. Its greatest drawback can be found in the excessive and counterproductive emphasis on translation.

When a third edition of *Prego!* is under consideration, teachers of Italian and students would benefit if most of the translation practice were replaced with exercises more appropriately geared toward developing writing skills: sentence-combining exercises, cloze tests, and guided compositions. Furthermore, if a revised version of *Prego!* abandoned the non-sequitur approach to conversation practice in favor of more situational communication exercises— where the student, supplied with a list of pertinent vocabulary is invited to respond and express his personal opinion—then the instructional objectives of *Prego!* would coincide with the instructional techniques designed to point the linguistic abilities of students in the direction of communicative competence.

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Defining and Developing Proficiency: Guidelines, Implementations, and Concepts

Vital Statistics

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The Push for Proficiency

There seems to be no end to the discussions provoked by the "push" for proficiency. *Defining and Developing Proficiency: Guidelines, Implementations, and Concepts,* Volume 17 of the ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series, addresses some of the proficiency movement's most salient issues, particularly the core issue of 1987, namely, the need for valid and penetrating research into those aspects of proficiency that can direct classroom practices and procedures.

The five major essays or chapters in this book cover a wide range of topics, yet at the same time, define a single purpose: the clarification of the polemics developing among foreign language educators.

In the introduction, Byrnes and Canale praise the extant literature but warn against becoming caught up in the rhetorical debate of the movement—rhetoric that can misrepresent and confuse the crucial problems (p.1).

As editors, Byrnes and Canale signal the need for a variety of relevant research studies to monitor the proficiency movement in its largest focus and specific investigations to examine its micro-elements. Neither the editors nor the contributors leave any doubts in the mind of the reader that the obvious challenge facing foreign language educators has been and continues to be finding the means to combine research findings with accessible educational practices that encourage proficiency in the classroom.

A Progress Report on Guidelines

The first essay by Hiple, "A Progress Report on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 1982-1986," also serves as an introduction to the ACTFL Revised Generic Guidelines in the volume's appendix.

Discussing the revised perspective given to the previously neglected receptive skills, Hiple sees the 1986 revision as more balanced in its treatment of the various language skill areas. Noting that the new guidelines are no longer called provisional, Hiple encourages further research to sharpen the guidelines even more. Intended to be used for "global assessment" (p.15), each level describes a typical learner within a particular range of ability. Although not intended as a model for curriculum, proponents of the guidelines hope they will be influential in providing direction for curricular objectives.

From Defining to Developing Proficiency

Galloway presents a creative and penetrating examination of the guidelines themselves when he discusses the logical implications for curriculum and instruction in an essay entitled "From Defining to Developing Proficiency: A Look at Decisions."

Looking specifically at the guidelines for speaking—and by contrast, those for reading—in order to demonstrate, via a series of continua, the interrelated components of function, content/context, and accuracy which define pragmatic scope and intent, Galloway focuses on the "realness" aspects of proficiency, namely, the observable, functional and authentic behaviors that are relevant to the learner's needs.

In the process of this penetrating look at the proficiency guidelines, Galloway defines a "missing link:" those guidelines for culture which cannot and should not be developed from the same mold as those which describe the four skills.

ACTFL's Current Research

Dandonoli's chapter, "ACTFL's Current Research in Proficiency Testing," complements well Galloway's perception of proficiency in that it focuses on the history of and recent developments in ACTFL's efforts to develop computer-mediated adaptive proficiency tests in reading and listening.

It is in the framework of a review of the spectrum of language tests and their use (achievement, aptitude, diagnostic, and proficiency) that Dandonoli defines ACTFL's proposed computer adaptive proficiency tests.

Language Proficiency and Text Typology

Child addresses the problem of circularity in defining text types in a chapter entitled, "Language Proficiency Levels and Typology of Texts." In current descriptions of proficiency, functional use is defined in terms of text types which, in turn, are defined by the level of the learner likely to be able to read and comprehend them. Child has developed a system that provides a textually based set of descriptions to establish a frame of reference for the elements of language produced or comprehended at the four levels of proficiency.

Moreover, he identifies four textual levels: the orientation mode, the instructive mode, the evaluative mode, and the projective mode. As this taxonomy develops and undergoes revisions, it will prove invaluable to teachers and should provide standards for language testing and curricula.

Insights from a Proficiency Orientation

Defining and Developing Proficiency concludes with an "urgent call" by Byrnes for proficiency related research in her paper entitled, "Second Language Acquisition: Insights from a Proficiency Orientation."

Byrnes summarizes—under the headings of processes, sequences, and ultimate attainment and rate of acquisition—the insights into second language acquisition that have been gained through proficiency testing. She questions, however, whether these insights can and should affect syllabus design and order. The question remains: What might these insights mean for classroom procedure and methodology?

Conclusions

Defining and Developing Proficiency merits a careful reading by anyone seriously interested in improving foreign language instruction. The inclusion of the ACTFL guidelines also makes this book a useful reference source. The writings, especially those by Galloway and Dandonoli, are thoughtful, insightful, and thought-provoking.

The writers of *Defining and Developing Proficiency* give a perspective on proficiency as seen by those most intimately associated with its concepts and practices. Unfortunately, the complex issues identified in this book merely open the door to the problems that will continue to challenge foreign language educators; in short, continued scrutiny and evaluation of the proficiency movement will ultimately determine its acceptance or rejection.

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Japanese: Step 1

Vital Statistics

Author(s): Wolfgang Hadamitzky, Kimiko Fujie-Winter with the assistance of Mark Spahn
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Series: Audio tapes (3), *Kanji & Kana: Practice Book 1* (not available to the reviewer)

Overview

The first volume of *Japanese: Step 1* consists of 11 lessons. The format of each lesson includes the **dialogue** (with English equivalents), **vocabulary, grammar explanations,** and **exercises.** Answers for the exercises and a Japanese-English vocabulary (with the number of the lesson in which the word was first used) are given in the back of the book.

Beginning with Lesson 1 and continuing through Lesson 10, all Japanese words are written in romaji; hiragana—introduced in Lessons 3-10—is used exclusively in Lesson 11. The introduction of hiragana is gradual, and the text's exercises are designed so that students can check their accumulated knowledge.

Centrality of Dialogue

The authors rightly emphasize the centrality of the dialogue in their overall approach to the study of Japanese: They stress the importance—on the part of the student—of working actively with the three audio tapes that accompany this first volume.

Exercises

Exercises in *Japanese: Step 1* are extensive; they cover grammar patterns and translations—all of which are suitable for oral practice in the classroom or as assigned homework. The authors stress that "most of the class time ... be devoted to speaking exercises." Although extensive, the overall number of exercises is insufficient; in all likelihood, instructors will have to produce supplemental materials. Although there is an accompanying practice manual entitled *Kanji & Kana: Practice Book 1,* it was unavailable at the time of this review.

Exercises with emphasis on drawing pictures using hiragana (p.90) and crossword puzzles (p.120) are useful and fun.

Grammar

Explanations of grammar are appropriate for a beginning level; most are short, clear, and well-organized, using numbers, boldface type, charts, and frames to highlight, accentuate, and point out.

The sheer number of grammatical patterns introduced per lesson is often somewhat overwhelming. For example, Lesson 10 introduces **permission** and **prohibition** (-temoii/-tewaikenai), **non-polite imperative** (-nasai), **wish to do something** (-tai), **the way of doing something** (-kata), **become** (-naru), **honorific form** (0— ninaru), **nominalizers** (no/koto), **causality** (node/kara), and others!

Vocabulary

The vocabulary items in the word list are carefully selected. The number of selected words, about 800, is appropriate enough for a beginning Japanese language course. The English equivalents of the Japanese vocabulary items are generally accurate but overgeneralized. For example, **konnichiwa**=hello (p.13); **onnanohito**=woman & **otokonohito**=man as the polite forms of **onna**=woman and **otoko**=man (p.85).

The authors' explanations as to why they do not use accent marks in the textbook are somewhat misleading. According to the authors, ". . . most parts of the country use pitch accents which are different from the Tokyo dialect which is taken to be standard." Does that mean that a learner does not have to care at all about accents ever? Moreover, the authors maintain that ". . . the accent of a word is not fixed but varies with context." The truth is that the accent is only basically fixed and variation is rather regular. Finally, the authors state, " ...showing accents by diacritical marks in the text impair fluent reading and would distract one's concentration in hearing practice." How about marking the words in the vocabulary list, then?

Limitations

The audio tapes containing the lesson dialogues, vocabulary, and sample sentences are carefully made: pace is normal and different voices are used. Unfortunately, the pauses for student repetition of the dialogue are too short whereas those for vocabulary are too long.

Although the authors attempted to make the dialogues "as natural and appropriate to the situation as possible" (p.6), there are unnatural and awkward expressions in the dialogues. The following examples are indicative of "unnatural" sounding conversation:

1) Sensei: Sore wa hon desu ka, shinbun desu ka.
(Is that a book or a newspaper?)
Seito: Kore wa sasshi desu.
(This is a magazine.) (p. 12)

2) Sensei: Kono watakushi no furui kaban no naka ni nani ga arimasuka.
(What's inside this old briefcase of mine?) (p. 39)

It is unlikely that one would ask these questions in a natural setting.

Conclusions

Japanese: Step 1's method of presentation is straightforward and uncluttered. Carefully developed in terms of content and design, the book seems better-suited to a non-traditional, non-intensive beginner's course for adult learners than to college-age students interested in an intensive Japanese language course experience.

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