

**A Processability Approach to the Acquisition of Italian
as a Second Language: Theory and Applications**

Bruno Di Biase

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This thesis is mainly my own original work and contains a number of co-authored publications. The latter are clearly indicated in the Introduction and in the contextual introduction specifically written for each Section of the thesis. The nature of my own contribution is likewise specified.

Bruno Di Biase

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Abstract

This thesis concerns the acquisition of Italian as a second language in instructed adult and child learners within the framework of Processability Theory (Pienemann 1998) with particular reference to morphological and syntactic development. It also contains some contributions to an extension of the theory itself, particularly the development of syntax, leading to a new exploration of the interface between discourse-pragmatics and syntax in L2 learners. The empirical longitudinal and cross-sectional studies on which these papers are based support Processability Theory's universal developmental implicational hierarchy based on the hypothesised processing procedures in Levelt (1989). The second part of the thesis investigates the development of Italian L2 in primary school programs, testing both PT and Focus-on-form instruction. This study demonstrates that PT can be applied to classroom contexts and that it promotes more efficient language development in child-learners within existing school Italian L2 program time and resources constraints. This work also revealed that focused feedback is effective in promoting acquisition and accuracy in L2 production. This classroom-based quasi-experimental longitudinal study was supported by the Australian Research Council and Industry partner CoAsIt, a provider of Italian language education services. This work on researching practice shows the critical interrelation between theory construction and the investigation of practice itself. A sample of my contributions to professional journals exemplify the need for a continuing dialogue between research and professional practice.

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Introduction

This is a contextual thesis comprising 13 papers concerning the acquisition and teaching of Italian as a second language within the framework of Processability Theory (Pienemann 1998), as well as some contributions to the theory itself. These papers, all written between 1998 and 2006, have been selected as those that best represent my contribution to the field of second language acquisition. Thus, while during and before this period I have written other papers in this same field, several of those included here have been written in collaboration with other researchers working in the field of second language acquisition and sharing the same theoretical framework.

My interest in second language acquisition (SLA) grows out of my own migration history, which includes secondary schooling in Caracas, Venezuela, learning English (and surviving) as a young man in the unrepeatable Sixties in London, followed by undergraduate education in linguistics and anthropology in Australia. After graduating in the mid Seventies, an early stint at SLA (not yet known as such) brought me to work as a research assistant to Bill Bonney and Helen Wilson, at the then New South Wales Institute of Technology, in a project investigating the way in which immigrants to Australia from various, and typologically different, language backgrounds learned English.¹ My role in this project was that of periodically interviewing recently arrived refugees from Chile and Argentina, transcribing their spoken production phonetically (!), and then helping the team with the analysis. My most important realisation at the time, from attempting to analyse words produced by early learners, was that it was difficult or irrelevant to attribute a grammatical category such as “noun” or “verb” to singly produced words in the L2 such as, e.g., *work*, which seemed to enclose the potential for either outcome whenever the learner managed, eventually, to create a greater linguistic context for it.

Language teaching, including translation, and a perhaps naïve passion for language and the cultural rights of immigrant communities occupied much of my academic activities

¹ This was probably the first substantial research project in Australia on second language learning. It hoped to investigate in depth and longitudinally the development of English in immigrants from three typologically different L1 backgrounds: Spanish, Turkish and Polish. Malcolm Johnston joined the project with the role of following Turkish and Polish. This could have been Australia’s counterpart to the ZISA project in Germany, but lack of government interest in such investigations at that time eventually grounded the project.