

ITALIAN THROUGH HISTORY OF ART: DELIVERING INTERDISCIPLINARY CONTENT-BASED LANGUAGE MODULES IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT *

Cinzia Bacilieri

University of York, Department of Language and Linguistic Science
Phone: 0044 01904 322670, e-mail: cinzia.bacilieri@york.ac.uk

Abstract. *The paper will describe the challenges of creating and delivering Italian for Art Historians, a bespoke content-integrated language course created for ab-initio Italian language students in History of Art (the majority of whom first-time language learners), and The Role of Art in Italian Society, a second-year language module part of the Italian degree programme at the University of York. Main topic will be the illustration of experimental initiatives aimed to facilitate the acquisition of bespoke specialist language skills essential to the History of Art discipline (beginner level students), and the use of Italian Art as a tool to develop critical thinking skills in a much broader language learning context (advanced level students). The first part will illustrate the challenges faced by the language teacher when planning and delivering an interdisciplinary content-based language module that has to be fully integrated into an undergraduate degree programme. Particular focus will be given to the collaboration between an art historian and a language teacher and its vital role in the creation of bespoke Art-related language teaching material and how this plays a pivoting role in the module planning. A number of case-studies will illustrate the impact that the interdisciplinary nature of these courses had in the applied teaching practice, students' engagement and classroom activities. In particular, how the integration between the module syllabus and other components of the respective undergraduate degree programmes has led students to experience a deeper engagement in the learning process. The paper will also present examples of technology-enhanced teaching (e.g. online personal portfolios, audio and video material) and data analysis on how these were deployed to enhance the quality of the student engagement with pertinent art-related assessment activities, student-teacher interaction and monitoring of student progress.*

Key words: *Art, interdisciplinary content-based language teaching, employability*

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign languages are undoubtedly one of the key components in the current internationalisation strategy and preparation for employment across the Higher Education sector (Corradini, Borthwick and Gallagher-Brett, 2016; HEFCE, 2008). Aiming to embed inter-cultural awareness and language skills alongside academic studies (University of York International Strategy 2014-2020), the University of York is currently offering to its History of Art undergraduates the opportunity to study Italian

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through a specialist language course called *Italian for Art Historians*. The module is embedded within the first year of the BA in History of Art and is purposely designed for ab-initio students of Italian, with a particular focus on first-time language learners. At the present, *Italian for Art Historians* is the only course under the Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) umbrella offered to History of Art and History of Art joint-honours students. The course represents the outcome of a long-lasting fruitful collaboration between two departments: commissioned by the Department of History of Art with the aim to maximise the learning outcomes in relation to Art Studies and a foreign language, the course is in practice delivered by the Department of Language and Linguistic Science through its Languages for All (LFA) programme, the University of York's Wide Language Programme. In fact, a number of research staff in the Department of History of Art specialise in Italian Art, and as a result, the department not only is committed to embed foreign languages into their programme to enhance employability, but also has, undeniably, a strong interest for Italian language. At the same time, the Department of Language and Linguistic Science includes an Italian Language specialist (current Italian Degree and LFA Italian Programme coordinator) who has a research background in Art and Heritage and has worked as a professional archaeologist.

Since its creation in 2010, *Italian for Art Historians* has been consistently the language module choice of the majority (55-85%) of History of Art undergraduates who chose to study a language as an elective in their first year. Of particular note, generally between 50-57% of the students enrolled on the course have previously studied a different language at GCSE or higher level but instead of furthering their studies in the same language, preferred to take up Italian through this LSP course. Undergraduates of the BA in History of Art have also the opportunity to continue their language studies by taking an additional general LFA language course as a 20-credit degree elective, in their second year and, in only a few specific cases, even in their third year (this is, most commonly, the continuation of the same language). Approximately 35% of each *Italian for Art Historians* cohort decide to continue studying Italian in the following year and, some of these, also continue in the third year. Furthermore, for the majority this is on extra-curricular basis, and generally with the plan to subsequently enrol, after the completion of the BA, on a Master programme with a focus on Italian Art. Although the course was originally created for undergraduates, in response to requests by History of Art post-graduates, *Italian for Art Historians* has been offered since 2015 also to selected PhD students, most commonly, those with a research project in Italian Art. Because of its specialist nature and focus, the course has been selected by postgraduates that had already some basic knowledge of Italian, but in general, PhD students taking Italian for Art Historians still represent a distinctive minority (15% or less) of the cohort. This low intake might be partially explained by the fact PhD students have to pay for the course, and at a higher fee than that of a general LFA Italian language course.

Maximising on staff's expertise, the Language and Linguistic Department is also offering *The Role of Art in Italian Society* as one of the second year optional modules in its Italian Degree Programme. Started in 2014, this content-integrated language course has been successfully running with a very high percentage of students (ranging between 85-100% of the cohort) selecting it as one of their options. Designed for more advanced language learners (Post Ab-initio students of the 'Italian and Another Language', or 'Italian and Linguistics' BA Programme) than its LSP counterpart, *The Role of Art in Italian Society* aims to consolidate students' existing language skills and improve

proficiency in the target language. For this, case studies on the conservation and management of historical cities and archaeological sites in Italy are used to develop students' critical thinking on different aspects of the modern Italian society. Through the course, students are able to acquire knowledge of Italian Art while reflecting on the centrality of its role in the Italian culture, gain a better understanding of recent government policies in heritage protection, and learn how centuries of intricate relations between the Vatican and the Italian State shaped modern day conservation studies in Italy. Without doubt, the popularity of both these art-themed language courses among students of different disciplines shows a strong correlation between the inclination for studying Italian language and an interest for the country's Art and Heritage. This fact is also demonstrated by the Department of Language and Linguistic Science's *Serate Italiane*, a series of talks, the majority of which are in Italian language, dedicated to aspects of Italian culture and society. Since the first mini-conference in the series back in 2012, audience participation (ranging between students of Italian language - from the University's LFA and Italian Degree Programme, and from other local language providers - and members of the public with knowledge of Italian) has consistently been recorded at its highest in the Art-themed talks in the series.

1.1. The birth of Italian as a Language for Specific Purposes at the University of York

The establishment of Italian through the media of Art in York is the result of an initial five-year trial period (2004-2009) when History of Art students were given the opportunity to learn Italian on an extra-curricular basis through *Italian Reading Skills for Art Historians*, an LSP course offered under the LFA provision. This pioneering bespoke 19 week-long language course focused largely on reading, translation and summarising skills on the topic of Italian History of Art. At the end of the trial period, the popularity of the course among History of Art students was interpreted as a sign of keen interest for Italian in the context of Art Studies and, as a result, the course became accredited in the academic year 2010–11. During the accreditation process, aiming to better meet the History of Art department's expectations and History of Art students' needs, *Italian Reading Skills for Art Historians* was transformed into a newly designed LSP called *Italian for Art Historians*. During this process, a new syllabus was created with the following objectives: a) to enable ab-initio students to carry out research in History of Art in Italian, and b) to help students to maximise the benefits of future study trips to Italy. As a result, oral and listening skills relevant to both History of Art and real-life context were added alongside reading skills. Furthermore, to facilitate the development of the content-integrated aspect of the course, as well as collaboration with History of Art, the course was developed and is still currently taught by a lecturer in Italian with a research background in Art & Heritage Studies. Even more, *Italian for Art Historians* is also the result of an ongoing teamwork between a language professional and History of Art research-active staff with a native or near-native command of Italian. In the context of LSP the scenario in York is undeniably a rather exceptional circumstance. Most commonly, a language teacher working on LSP very rarely would have in-depth knowledge of or professional experience in the specific discipline targeted by the language course (such as Medicine or Mathematics, for instance). As a result, it can be argued that one of challenges faced by the LSP teacher is that of having to design a

course syllabus and develop bespoke teaching material with somehow limited familiarity of the recipient professional field. And even when a collaborative approach between the LSP teacher and professionals in that specific recipient discipline might be in place, the language teacher would often lack that added layer of professional expertise in the specialist field. As a result, effective communication with the specialist, identification of the specialist's needs and ability to adapt the teaching accordingly could become a challenge for the teacher. On the other hand, the professional collaborating with the teacher, for instance a doctor or a scientist, might not have a proficiency in the target language or a familiarity with the language learning process. As a result, he/she might find somehow difficult to efficiently assist with the course design or provide input to the teaching material development. For these reasons, in the context of LSP teaching the background of expertise revolving around the creation, development and delivery of *Italian for Art Historians* is undeniably a rather unique circumstance.

1.2. Designing the LSP curricula: the collaborative approach

Joint-honours BA in Italian and History of Art have always been a very popular combination and are currently offered in many universities across the UK (e.g. Edinburgh, Warwick, Reading and Bristol). In general, the Italian component offered in joint-honours programmes spans different aspects of Italian culture, history and society, but, even when multi-disciplinary in nature, it is often carried out with little or no integration with the modules taught in the History of Art side. At York, *Italian for Art Historians* not only is embedded within the BA Programme but it is also the product of a collaborative approach between two departments with teaching staff that complement each other's expertise. At the initial stage of the module design, essential crossover points with the existing BA Programme were identified and authentic material related to History of Art was embedded into the language course syllabus (Fig.1). For instance, the existing curricula focuses on the study of biographies of the most important Italian artists and their work, ranging from Medieval to Baroque Art, such as Giotto, Raffaello, Michelangelo, Caravaggio and Bernini. In addition, it also includes the translation of original sources such as Vasari's *Le Vite*, Palladio's *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, extracts from the *Touring Club Guide*, or contemporary art critiques in Italian. Artists, monuments and selected texts echo some of those that are taught in other modules in the BA.

This unique collaboration between a language teacher with a background in Heritage Studies and History of Art staff members with knowledge of Italian has also led to the creation of highly relevant, bespoke teaching material. The collaboration and staff expertise are undeniably the elements that define the uniqueness of this pioneering teaching approach. Exercises such as role-plays and speaking practice are all in a current History of Art context, pivoting around topics such as 'Giving or asking for directions' at the London National Gallery, or 'Visiting monuments and museums' such as San Vitale in Ravenna, which students also study in other modules (Fig. 2). The process is greatly facilitated by the presence of art historians who are aware of the language learning process or are native speakers of Italian, which helps to maximise the use of authentic material for teaching, as well as to set realistic targets. Since the students' career-focus is biased towards History of Art and not modern languages, at the initial planning stage particular attention was paid to identify a) the proficiency level of Italian needed by Art Historians for their future studies or careers, and b) the highest achievable language competence that a History of Art student can reach in a year.

1.3. Applied teaching methodology

The teaching of LSP in the field of English as a foreign or second language has been developed since the 1960s (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998), despite being primarily or almost exclusively concentrated in the area of English for Academic Purposes (Hyland, 2002). Studies and publications related to Italian through the media of Art are instead much more recent in date (Gobbis and Paoli Legler, 2011) and, unquestionably, the most important work emerged in 2006 with the publication of *Italiano attraverso la storia dell'arte* (Angelino and Ballarin, 2006). Purposely created to develop Italian language through History of Art, this volume can be used as a subsidiary course book in a general language course, or as a main resource for the study of Italian with a focus on History of Art. Biographies of Italian artists and descriptions of artworks are followed by guided exercises that facilitate the acquisition of technical vocabulary and grammar structures commonly found in History of Art context. However, as for the majority of the existing teaching material related to Italian through Art (ADJ, 2013), the volume targets extremely advanced students of Italian, between B2-C2 level according to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 1998).

During the initial development of *Italian for Art Historians*, it was felt that teaching material at such advanced level was much more similar in nature to that of original sources written by art historians. For this reason, an experimental teaching methodology has been developed pivoting between two components (Fig. 3). On the one hand, a progressive language learning path, aimed to develop language structures as in a general language course, is applied exclusively to role-plays and real-life situations focusing on listening and speaking (approximately 30-40% of each class time). On the other hand, the majority of the teaching is spent on developing specialist language skills exclusively through History of Art-related material. Grammar, vocabulary and language structures are primarily acquired through authentic sources or purposely-created teaching material for advanced level learners (CEFR B2-C1), much more similar in nature and complexity to that of original sources. Reading skills, grammar and vocabulary are thus developed from the outset on material way beyond ab-initio level, this with the aim to develop Italian language competence whilst gaining familiarity with the original material used in the discipline. Analysis of students' feedback (period 2012-18) has shown that such a split between general language teaching, with material that progressively increases in complexity, and specialist language teaching, deployed through original sources or advanced texts from the outset, is perceived as being extremely beneficial for learning. In fact, such diversity in the applied teaching material seems to be particularly effective in helping students to increase self-confidence when approaching original sources in Italian used for discipline-related studies outside the class. This is particularly relevant to PhD students enrolled into the course who are often working on original sources in Italian for their research, or undergraduates who choose to read articles in Italian for other modules. From a language teacher's perspective, of particular note is the extremely fast development of specific reading skills essential to the work of an art historian: for instance, the ability to extract key information from Italian art critics' elaborate descriptions, or to confidently associate Renaissance style Italian (e.g. extracts from Palladio's work) to modern Italian or English translation equivalent. At the same time, the general language teaching approach, similar to that of a beginner level Italian class, undeniably helps students to develop an active use of the language in context. This is a factor that sets *Italian for Art Historians* apart from its predecessor, which focused solely on reading skills.

According to feedback, the development of speaking and listening skills seems to be, consistently, a pivotal motivation factor in the learning process. It appears that gaining familiarity with a range of real-life scenarios (such as providing personal information, ordering food or asking for directions) and producing increasingly more elaborate conversation patterns as the course progresses, help students to recognise progress with their learning and motivate them to progress further with their language studies. For this reason, bespoke role-plays in History of Art context are used to maximise the LSP side of the learning (for instance, going to the café at the Uffizi Museum or asking for information and student discount at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice), but particular attention is also paid to illustrate the transferability of such acquired language skills. For instance, after having learnt how to describe colours, composition, background, clothing and characters' physical description in a painting, students are asked to apply the same vocabulary and language structures to describe friends or family photos in a much more contemporary context. Through this specialist-to-general and general-to-specialist language learning, students seem to efficiently recognise practical applications and consequently appreciate the usefulness of newly acquired language structures in Italian.

The teaching also uses experimental initiatives aimed to facilitate the acquisition of specialist language skills: technology-enhanced teaching (e.g. online personal portfolios, audio and video material) is used throughout the year to enrich students' engagement with art-related assessment activities, student-teacher interaction, and monitoring of students' progress. As an example, by the end of the course, students are able to create audio files and videos in which they proficiently describe masterpieces such as Botticelli's *Primavera* or Piero della Francesca's *Battesimo di Cristo* in Italian, and with a technical vocabulary appropriate to that of an art historian. The Virtual Learning Environment site and the Students' Portfolio on a Blackboard platform are shared across staff from the two departments to efficiently monitor students' learning progress and create the opportunity to identify issues, discuss possible improvements or highlight achievements. This is a vital component in the course syllabus revision process aimed to continuously adapt the course content so to enhance its integration with the BA Programme. Furthermore, videos produced by students on a formative basis for their Portfolio are used as a marketing tool to illustrate the benefit of studying Italian through this LSP course. Examples of language production created by students who attended *Italian for Art Historians* seem to be particularly effective in motivating and persuading first-time language learners to take up the study of a foreign language. In addition to students' feedback, this is also confirmed by the students' response to the 'LFA Programme Introductory Talk' delivered to first-year students in History of Art at the beginning of each academic year. Here, a number of students (percentage may vary depending on the size of the cohort and attendance), usually first-time language learners, after attending the talk where videos made by their peers were shown, consistently each year ask to enrol into the *Italian for Art Historians*.


3. ILLUSTRATIONS

| Dates | Grammar | Reading/writing | Topics |
|----------|--|---|---|
| LESSON 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ use of <i>preferire</i> ▪ Grammar: <i>passato prossimo</i> (intro) | Unit 18: <i>Preferire</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bernini and Bramante bio (p93*) and architecture; Piero della Francesca bio (<i>passato prossimo</i> and <i>presente</i> – intro) ▪ FIRENZE: listening exercise ▪ Express preferences (p100) ▪ Piero della Francesca Translation exercise |
| LESSON 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ use of pronome indiretto <i>mi</i> ▪ use of <i>più</i> and <i>meno</i> (superlativo relativo) ▪ Grammar: <i>passato prossimo</i> | Unit 33: <i>cosa hai fatto ieri?</i> Al museo (Part 1) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ At the museum/art gallery ticket office (intro); San Vitale at Ravenna ▪ Visit at Napoli and Firenze Museums: enquiring about guided tour and student discounts at the museum ▪ Reading ex: Description Botticelli <i>La primavera</i> (p39*); ▪ Bernini Description <i>Estasi di S Teresa</i>; <i>Plutone e Proserpina</i> |
| LESSON 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Preposizioni <i>da</i> and <i>per</i> ▪ more on the use of <i>vorrei</i> + object ▪ translating Italian original sources: Palladio's Italian (Renaissance Italian) | Al museo (Part 2) Unit 29 Al ristorante | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Transation: Palladio <i>I quattro libri dell'architettura</i> and bio ▪ Making a comparison of paintings Beato Angelico <i>Annunciazioni</i>; (p56* and 88*) ▪ Asking and giving information at the station ▪ Beato Angelico bio verbs practice ▪ Listening practice: video Piero della Francesca <i>Battesimo di Cristo</i>; BBC video ristorante/bar; ▪ Making a comparison of style: Tiziano v Tintoretto (p 84*; p80*) |
| LESSON 8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ verbs: <i>presente</i> and <i>passato prossimo</i> (verbi regolari and irregolari) review | Unit 33: <i>Che cosa hai fatto ieri?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Travelling to Firenze and Rome: Italian touring club guides ▪ talking about past events (p194) intro ▪ Critic of a painting (review): Tintoretto <i>Ultima Cena</i> (p84*) ▪ Guido Reni and Annibale Carracci bio: <i>presente storico</i> and <i>passato prossimo</i> |

Fig. 1. Course design

The collaborative approach between an art historian and a language teacher is used to create, develop and amend an appropriate scheme of work tailored to the students' needs:

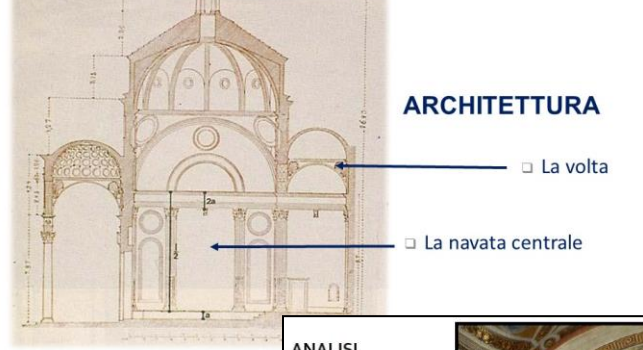
- a) Language learning objectives and Art-related topics are agreed between the language teacher and art historians.
- b) The purposely designed Scheme of Work helps managing students' expectations of language learning outcomes (in particular for first-time language learners).
- c) Art-related topics are seen in a language-learning context and can be discussed with students and between cross-department staff involved in the module planning.



ITALIAN GRAMMAR

Singular: **Il capitello IONICO**

Plural: **I capitelli IONICI**




ARCHITETTURA

□ La volta

□ La navata centrale

ANALISI

1. Composizione
Schema
compositivo
sfondo
2. Tonalità e luce
3. Personaggi
principali e
descrizione
4. Tema del dipinto



Raffaello, *La scuola di Atene*, 1509-1511 circa, Affresco, Musei Vaticani, Città del Vaticano

Turn the following sentences from the singular into the plural form

1. Nel 1494 **l'ingegnere** idraulico **si occupa** della bonifica della tenuta **nella** campagna.
2. Questo **lavoro** diventa **l'oggetto** del suo studio.

1. Nel 1494 **gli** ingegneri idraulici **si occupano** delle bonifiche delle tenute **nelle** campagne.
2. Questi **lavori** diventano **gli** oggetti dei suoi studi.

Fig. 2. Teaching material

Authentic material is used throughout the course from the outset, and elements of Italian grammar are learnt together with technical vocabulary related to History of Art. Speaking skills are developed with a focus on employability in History of Art context with purposely-designed role-plays, such as asking for directions and information at the museum.

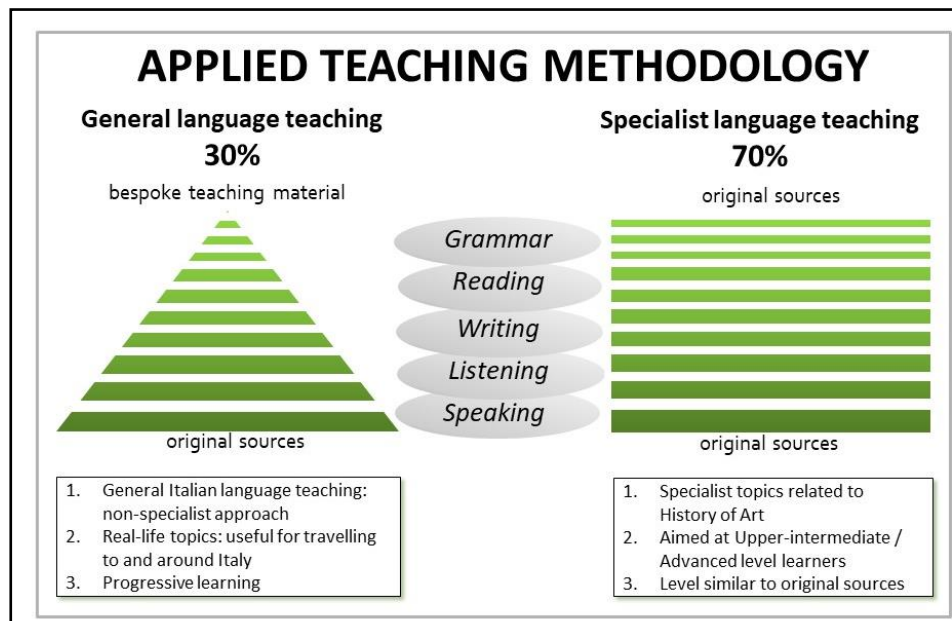


Fig. 3. Applied teaching methodology

Use of material and teaching methodology applied to an Italian for Art Historian showing progress over time, from students' basic knowledge at the beginning of the course to proficiency level. Progressive learning on bespoke material (approximately 30% of class time) is used alongside specialist language learning from authentic material or purposely-created material targeted to advanced level, very similar in complexity to original sources (approximately 70% of class time). A dual teaching-material approach is used throughout the course: alongside authentic material and bespoke material developed by the language teacher, a specialist text book on the theme of Italian Art (advanced level, CEFR B2/C2) and a general Italian language course book (beginner level, CEFR A1/A2) are used in the teaching.

3. CONCLUSION

Following its growth and development since 2010, *Italian for Art Historians* is currently the most popular module among the University of York History of Art's first-year students who want to study a language as an elective. The course is chosen by first-time language learners and also by students that appear to prefer a specialist module instead of continuing to study another language previously learnt in school. The success and popularity of *Italian for Art Historian* appear due to its art-related content-integrated nature, and the fact that the course aims are purposely tailored to the History of Art discipline. In particular, students seem to appreciate the crossovers between the course syllabus and components of the History of Art undergraduate Degree Programme. The specialised nature of this LSP course has enabled students to become more deeply engaged in both disciplines, allowing committed students to reach CEFR B1 level (above

the threshold of the equivalent general LFA Level 1 language course set at CEFR A1/A2) and enrol on and successfully complete the Erasmus Programme in Italy. Furthermore, it has been noted that students who are not strong language learners still have a keen interest in the course content and this seems to act as a strong learning motivation factor. The latter is particularly relevant to PhD students taking the course, who are generally also actively researching and working on Italian Art, or undergraduates who are planning to focus their future studies on Italian Art.

Italian as a subject appears to be in decline nationally in the UK, or recruitment is stable but very low in number (Kelly, 2016; AULC-UCML, 2018; internal LLS and LFA statistics 2012-2018). Furthermore, at the present Italian is also rarely offered as a GCSE or A-level subject in UK secondary schools and often only on an extra-curricular basis (HEFCE, 2008). Taking into account that the majority of the language students in Higher Education major in other disciplines and study a language as an elective or on extra-curricular basis (Marshall, 2001; Coleman, 2004), the success of *Italian for Art Historians* clearly demonstrates that there is still a strong demand for Italian as an LSP in the field of History of Art.

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