



The future of AP Italian: A letter to all teachers and students, and their parents.

Berardo Paradiso and Anthony J. Tamburri (January 14, 2009)



The discontinuation of the Italian AP exam is only a temporary setback. Now is a time to work together, and to make the best out of our common resources, so that we will be proudly prepared to restore it.

We are certainly all disappointed by the College Board's discontinuation of the Italian AP exam for 2009 - 2010.



However, neither we, Italian and Italian American organizations and foundations, nor you, teachers and your students, and their parents, should take it as a defeat, or think that Italian will be a second-rate language, or that it will disappear because of what should only be a “temporary” setback!

On the contrary, the Italian language, one of the latest seriously re-inserted into our schools’ curricula, is healthy and growing steadily. Statistics are here to prove it.

So, let us keep things in perspective and analyze the state of the Italian language, the real facts behind the recent College Board’s decision, and the solutions that lie ahead.

For our encouragement, the College Board itself says in its announcement letter that it will not exclude the re-introduction of the program if conditions are met after 2010. It also recommends (a) that schools keep offering their capstone courses in Italian, (b) that they give the same GPA weight to them as to other AP courses, and (c) that they not change anything beyond removing the AP designation. The letter further specifies that “the SAT Subject Test in Italian continues to be offered each December,” giving students the possibility “to demonstrate their proficiency to colleges and universities, and possibly earn placement into intermediate and advanced courses.”

The College Board had to discontinue AP Italian for economic reasons.

Credit and recognition, in the meantime, should be here given to the ILF (Italian Language Foundation), initiated in July 2008 to raise the funds necessary for the College Board to continue the AP program. Unfortunately, the general economic crisis thwarted the ILF’s goal.

Ambassador Castellaneta, in his article in “America Oggi.” reminds us that Italian has transformed overtime from an “ethnic” to a “language of culture.” representing the “Italian way of life.” As a matter of fact, the promotion of Italian language and culture has been one of the priorities of the Italian government and its foreign policy (President Silvio Berlusconi himself is personally committed to the future of the AP language), through its consulates, education authorities and cultural organizations, alongside Italian American organizations, and numerous other groups and dedicated individuals.

For instance, the Italian American Committee on Education (IACE) has been active in promoting the Italian language in public schools for thirty-two years, the American Association of Teachers of Italian (AATI) has been around since 1924, the Italian Heritage and Culture Committee Month (IHCCM) for thirty-two years, etc.

With its more than 120,000 students of Italian of different levels, Italian is 4th among the studied languages. There has been an increase of more than 60% in Italian high school and college courses since 1990. Two hundred and fifty colleges and universities have Italian Departments or offer Italian courses.

Josephine A. Maietta reminds us that in her “district alone, on Long Island, there are 750 elementary kids studying Italian.” Italian teachers have large classes “all over the Island” she continues, and “there are courses after school and on Saturday mornings, while many other groups have formed privately.”

With the IACE’s cooperation, a very exciting and promising initiative has just launched a bilingual program in the New Rochelle elementary schools.

In the Tri-State area, IACE serves about 40,000 students in the first to seventh grades. But unfortunately, most of these students cannot pursue studying Italian in High School or at AP level, simply because programs and teachers are missing.

And that is the other reason why the College Board has discontinued AP Italian: the economic question is directly linked to the number of AP students.



The history of Italian immigration and language in this country accounts for the still limited number of students reaching an AP level at this time. Contrary to more recent immigrants who, like Hispanics or Asians, still speak their native languages at home, Italian immigrants, at the turn of the 20th century, dismissed their various Italian dialects in order for their children to blend more easily into the "New World." That is why, among the 25 million Italian Americans, i.e. 8% of the entire population in the US, very few today can speak Italian. It is only recently, a little more than a decade ago, and at the third generation, that a renewed interest in their Italian background and language has resurfaced.

Moreover, Italian, now "the language of culture." is also attracting a significant number of students who are not necessarily of Italian descent.

Therefore, for these students of Italian to reach the fluency and level of difficulty of an Advanced Placement language exam, our school system needs to start them early in intensive, rigorous programs with prepared and qualified Italian teachers. It can be done, and we have already laid down solid foundations. We are on the right track. We have to keep planting the seeds, as in the New Rochelle program, or in the Long Island elementary schools, or in the IACE's pre-school Italian library downtown Manhattan.

It is not an overnight project. It needs time.

We should focus more on the formation and ongoing education of our teachers, emphasizing the importance of student exchanges between the US and Italy, working with colleges to have visiting native Italian teachers, for example.

We now have to face this new challenge!

Requesting money from the Italian government is not our only option. Of course, it will be most welcome if the funds are available.

But let's not forget that the 25,000,000 Italian Americans who live in the US and take pride in their Italian culture are also a resource to look to: they could, indeed should, also share in some of the responsibilities to reach the goals we pursue.

We welcome the help from the Italian authorities, from the Italian American associations, from anyone who is sensitive to the Italian culture and ways of living.

Now is a time to work together, respecting each and everyone's expertise and role, and to make the best out of our common resources, so that we will be proudly prepared to restore the Italian AP.

Sincerely Yours,

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