

# Who is Studying Italian and Why? Student Responses in the Greater Toronto Area\*

**Biagio Aulino, Cosmo Femia, Damiano Femia,  
Maria Ferlisi**

*University of Toronto Mississauga*

## **The Teaching of the Italian Language in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)**

Teaching Italian has played a significant role in the history of language education in Ontario in Canada, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Before the Second World War, Italian was offered as a language requirement for university admission. Italian classes were introduced in the regular timetable at two Toronto Catholic high schools at the beginning of the nineteen sixties. It underwent a considerable expansion in Toronto area high schools between 1965 and 1980 (Kuitunen 1997: 54), to the point where it was offered in 45 of the 119

---

\* The authors are very grateful to the following for their assistance with the research project: Michael Lettieri (University of Toronto Mississauga) and Anthony Mollica, Brock University for the invaluable suggestions and support offered throughout the research project; Joanna Szewezyk (Administrative Assistant, University of Toronto Mississauga) with her help with Administrative duties of the project; The Ontario Association Teachers of Italian (OATI), Executive members Emanuela Polin-De Luca and Gabriella Colussi-Arthur (York University) for their approval in the completion of surveys at the conclusion of the OATI Italian high school contest. Student participants for their participation in the study as well as Salvatore Bancheri, (Chair, Italian Studies, University of Toronto) for his support in providing the use of classrooms for Parent Information Sessions; the Ontario Ministry of Education –Education Statistics and Analysis Branch for providing the statistical data to help with the research study. Furthermore, we would like to thank Michael Lettieri for financing some aspects of this research.

high schools listed in the Boards of Education of the Greater Toronto Area. In fact, in 1968, a curriculum outline was published by the Department of Education in Ontario (Mollica 1992; Clivio 1971) which prompted the Ministry of Education subsequently to appoint Anthony Mollica as Program Consultant for the Province of Ontario from 1970 to 1978 to overview the Italian program. Mollica resigned in 1978 and his position was never filled. The majority of the students pursuing Italian were either native speakers born in Italy, or first generation Canadians who spoke an Italian dialect fluently (Kuitunen 1997: 56; Danesi 1985: 22-23; Corsini 1975: 424-427). During the 2011-2012 academic year, 1,266 students in the GTA were pursuing an Italian credit course at the high school level, out of a total of 2,526 students in Ontario registered in a secondary level Italian course. This shows that 50% of the students were studying Italian in the GTA area (Lettieri et al, 2012).

### **The Maintenance of Italian Credit Courses at the Secondary Level in the GTA**

In the last 35 years, teacher associations, cultural institutes, school boards, and universities have put in place support systems to preserve and sustain the teaching of the Italian language and culture at the secondary level. In 1983, The Association of Ontario Secondary School Teachers of Italian (AOSSTI) was formed. Since 1991, the Association, which became the Ontario Association of Teachers of Italian (OATI), has hosted an annual province-wide Italian language and poetry contest at various high schools in Southern Ontario, and provided workshops and in-services for teachers of Italian. This Italian language contest has been held and sponsored in a university setting for the last ten years. The contest focuses on writing, speaking and listening skills, as well as the artistic talents that also attract many non-native speakers to the Italian language. An online site called **TISSO** (Teaching Italian in Secondary Schools in Ontario, [tisso.apps01.yorku.ca](http://tisso.apps01.yorku.ca)), created; its main goal was to support the “Concorso di lingua e cultura italiana,” organized under the auspices of OATI.

### **Motivation to Learn a Second Language**

Anthony Mollica, in his book *Teaching and Learning Languages* provides four main reasons for studying languages which can be applied to the learning of the Italian language which Comenius proposed. Mollica (2008: 10) discusses the four major objectives for studying a sec-

ond language, as outlined by Jan Amos Komensky, known as “Comenius”, a Czech writer and humanist (1592-1671),

- Political: to serve the nation’s interests;
- Cultural: to know the culture of other people for one’s personal enrichment;
- Practical: to be able to communicate in the language of foreign speakers;
- Educational: to sharpen the mind and to shale the personality of the learner

In a more recent study, Bateman and de Almeida Oliviera discuss similar to Comenius the students’ motivations for choosing or not choosing to study Portuguese cities the research of Csizér and Dörynei and discusses five additional factors related to motivation in Second Language (L2) learning. The following is a list of these integrative and instrumental factors: (Bateman and de Almeida Oliveria 2014: 265).

1. “Attitude toward the L2 speakers/community” encompasses a student’s desire to meet speakers and travel to their country;
2. “Cultural interests” reflects a student’s appreciation of cultural products associated with the L2 community and conveyed by the media;
3. “Vitality of the L2 community” refers to how important and wealthy the L2 community is considered by the student;
4. “Milieu” refers to the influence that significant others, such as parents, family, and friends have towards the student, which affects their willingness to continue to study a language and how hard they work to learn it;
5. “Linguistic self-confidence” refers to “a confident, anxiety-free belief that the mastery of the L2 is well within the learner’s means” (Clement quoted in Csizér and Döryeni 2005: 20-22).

## **Research Objective**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate what motivates students to study the Italian language at the high school level. Although the research addressed other questions, the present study focuses on the following.

1. What is the profile of the Italian language learner?

2. What is the current enrolment of Italian courses offered at the secondary level in the GTA compared to the provincial level?
3. Which motivational factors influence students' decisions to pursue or not pursue an Italian language course at the secondary level?

## **Participants**

Students of Italian and non-Italian backgrounds who participated in the annual OATI contest at the University of Toronto-St. George Campus were asked to complete a voluntary survey consisting of 30 questions. Prior to obtaining parental consent, an information session was held for parents and students at the University of Toronto a week before the contest. Following the OATI Italian Contest (May 1, 2013), students took between 15 to 20 minutes to complete the survey. The surveys were administered in paper and pencil format as opposed to online due to computer glitches. A total of 34 respondents (8 males and 26 females) between the ages of 18 years of age completed the survey. In all, 70% of respondents were between the ages of 16 and 17, 24% of respondents were between the ages of 14 and 15, and 6% of respondents were between the ages of 18 years and older. Students from Grades 9 to 12 pursuing levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 were invited to complete the survey pending parental approval and approval from the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto. Participants were from the public and Catholic school boards in the GTA.

## **Data Analysis and Discussion**

After obtaining relevant ethics approvals, data was collected from 34 students between the ages of 14 and 18 via student questionnaires consisting of approximately 30 questions. The findings reported that 44% of the respondents were of Italian descent, 14% were of partial Italian descent, and 41% were not of Italian descent. In all, 73% responded that they were born in Canada of Italian parents, 0% indicated that they were born in Italy, and 26% were born elsewhere.

The majority of the respondents were second and third generation Italian Canadians. With regards to the language spoken in the home, 20% of the respondents spoke standard Italian, 38% spoke a regional dialect, and 79% indicated that they do not make use of the language in the home.

## A Review of Past Research

In an inquiry administered in 1977 by the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Toronto on the teaching of Italian language courses at the secondary level, data was collected via a student questionnaire consisting of approximately 50 questions. Questionnaires were distributed to 351 students in the last year of high school and to their respective teachers. The questions requested information about the students' origin and the language used in the home. In all, 75% responded that they were born in Canada of Italian parents, 10% indicated that they were born in Italy, 5% were born elsewhere, and 1% were second generation Italian Canadians. Furthermore, 30% responded that their incentive to study Italian was to learn about their language of origin, while 32% stated that they enjoyed studying other languages (Kuitunen 1997: 56). An important point was brought forth from the data analysis: there was much work to be done to attract students of non-Italian origin to the secondary level. Additionally, the language spoken in the home was a mixture of Italian and English, and among siblings and friends, the common language was English. At the time of the survey, Italian was taught in 45 of the 119 schools in the Metropolitan Toronto (Kuitunen & Molinaro 1991: 66-67).

There was a more recent inquiry by Mollica et al. in 2011 on the teaching of Italian language courses at the secondary level. After obtaining relevant ethics approvals, Mollica et al collected data from 85 students between the ages of 14 and 18 via student questionnaires consisting of approximately 40 questions. In much the same way as the 1977 study, the questions requested information about the students' origin, the language used in the home, and their main incentives for Italian language study. The findings showed that that 86% of the respondents were of Italian descent, 7% of partial Italian descent, and 5% were not of Italian descent. In all, 94% responded that they were born in Canada of Italian parents, 2% indicated that they were born in Italy, and 4% were born elsewhere.

The majority of the respondents were second and third generation Italian Canadians. With regards to the language spoken in the home, 21% of the respondents spoke standard Italian, whereas 46% spoke the language less frequently, and 33% indicated that they do not make use of the language in the home. Moreover, 21% reported that they spoke an Italian dialect mixed with English, 44% stated that they spoke a mix from time to time, and 35% did not make any use of the dialect. An interesting point

that emerged from the data was that 8% reported that they lived in Italy for six months and 4% lived in Italy for a longer duration.

Overall, not much has changed in the last 35 years in the GTA. Italian high school courses continue to attract mainly students of Italian origin. Yet, a great deal of work remains to encourage all students, regardless of background, to study Italian at the secondary level.

In all, 97% of the respondents reported that their main reason for studying Italian at the high school level is motivated by Italian cuisine. Students enjoy learning about different regional dishes. A majority of Italian courses at the high school level include a unit on Italian cuisine, where students are offered the opportunity to prepare their favorite dish or their family's favourite recipe. In all, 83% of the respondents indicated that the Italian language is very important to them.

It is interesting to note that there has been a change since the study conducted at University of Toronto (Kuitunen 1997) and the Mollica study (2011), which showed that the majority of the students were of Italian origin. In the present study, it is evident that 44% of the respondents indicated that they were of Italian origin. Another change to note from the University of Toronto (Kuitunen 1997) and Mollica (2011) study was that most of the students spoke standard Italian or a regional dialect. In the present study, as reported in Figure 1, only 21% speak standard Italian at home.

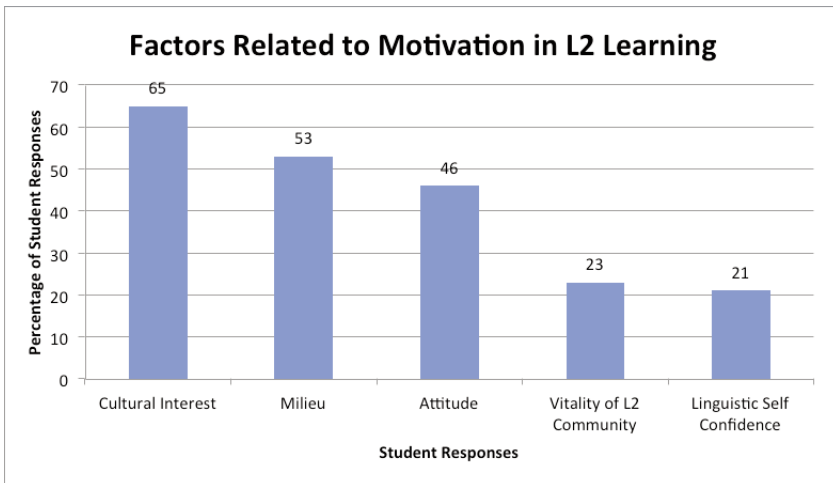


Fig. 1: Factors Related to Motivation in L2 Learning addressed the question regarding students' motivational factors to pursue or not to pursue an Italian language edit course at the high school level.

In all, 50% of the students reported that they are not studying the Italian language at the secondary level because it is not relevant to their career. Further research needs to be carried out in this area. Additionally, students should become aware of the benefits to knowing the Italian language in the workplace.

In this study, different groups of orientations were reported in the data analysis: cultural identity, travel, employment, instrumental, and integrative, according to previous studies conducted in the following languages Arabic, French, Spanish and Chinese by Husseinali (2004, 2006); Ossipov (2000); Speiller (1988); Dörnyei (1994); Wen (1997).

The data in Figure 1 reports findings according to Csizér and Dörnyei's factors (i.e., "cultural interests", "milieu", "attitude", "vitality of the L2 community", and "linguistic self-confidence") related to student motivation in learning the Italian language at the high school level. Figure 1 reports that students' primary motivations to learn the Italian language is due to cultural interests (65%) and milieu (53%). Students' attitudes (46%), vitality of the L2 community (23%), and linguistic self-confidence (21%) were reported at lower rates as factors related to motivation. Similar studies by Pratt, Agnello and Santos (2009) and Pratt (2010) examined students' decisions to study the Spanish language at the high school level and beyond. More recent studies by Bateman and de Almeida Oliveira revealed students' motivations for choosing or not choosing to study the Portuguese language at the university level.

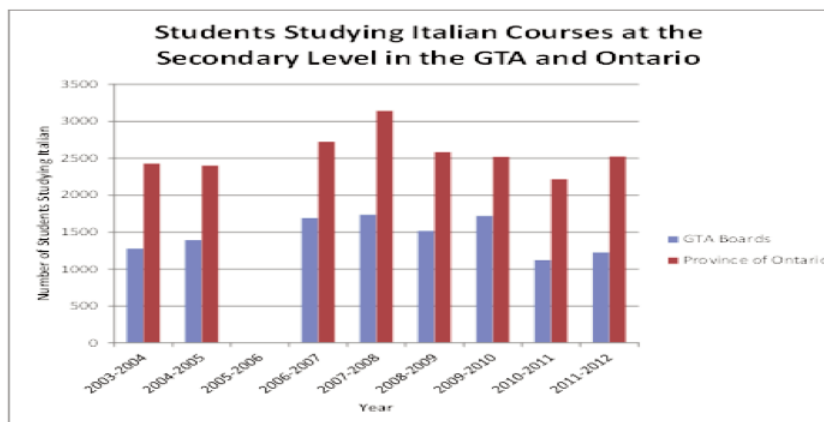


Fig. 2: Students Studying Italian Courses at the Secondary Level in the GTA and Ontario

In Figure 2, statistics are reported from 2003 to 2012. Data was collected by the Province of Ontario. The data reports the overall number of students registered in Italian courses at the high school level. The course enrolment in the GTA is as follows: 2003-2004 (1,277); 2004-2005 (1,393), 2005-2006 (enrolment figures not available); 2006-2007 (1,695); 2007-2008 (1,738); 2008-2009 (1,515), 2009-2010 (1,723); 2010-2011 (1,123); and 2011-2012 (1,266).

### **What is the enrollment of Italian language courses in the last decade in the GTA compared to the province of Ontario?**

Figure 2 addresses the questions of student enrollment in the GTA from 2006-2012 compared to the overall enrolment in the province of Ontario. Data was collected by the Province of Ontario. The data shows the overall number of students registered in Italian courses at the high school level. The course enrolment in the GTA areas are as follows: 2006-2007 (1, 695); 2007-2008 (1,738); 2008-2009 (1,515); 2009-2010 (1,723); 2010-2011 (1,123); and 2011-2012 (1, 266).

The peak of enrolment in Italian courses at the high school level was in 2007-2008 for both the GTA and the Province of Ontario. For the GTA, it was reported that 1,738 students were enrolled in an Italian course, while at the provincial level, 144 students were enrolled. However, 2009-2010 saw a peak in enrolment only in the GTA, which reported a 68% of student enrolment compared to the provincial level, which reported only 32% of students pursuing the language outside of the GTA. The numbers have steadily dropped at the provincial level; however, in the GTA, numbers have slowly increased. In 2005, the number of students remained relatively stable with a slight decrease of 116 students in the GTA and 24 students for the Province of Ontario. Although the number of students enrolled in Italian at the secondary level has dropped quite drastically at the provincial level to 205 students, since its peak in 2007-2008, for the GTA the number has seen a minimal drop of 16 students (Mollica 2008; Aulino & Ferlisi 2009, 2010). Since 2010-2012, the numbers have increased at the provincial level.

It is evident from the 2010-2012 statistics that there is a balance of the number of students pursuing Italian both in the GTA area and at the provincial level. In short, it is clear that the numbers have remained relatively healthy in the GTA when compared to the provincial level.



## Growth Trends

Italian at the secondary level in the GTA, Italian enrolment has gone through some changes from its traditional school setting in the mid-sixties. Some of the factors that have contributed to this change have been the following educational reforms.

- The implementation of Ontario Schools Intermediate and Senior (OSIS) in 1984 increased the compulsory credits to 16 and excluded foreign languages.
- In 1991, the government permitted students to fast-track through high school in 4 years instead of 5, which in turn made it difficult for students to pursue an international language course.
- In 1999, the new Secondary School Reform was put into effect, eliminating the Ontario Academic Credit (OAC), and thus removing the two senior level courses (LWI OAC and LWJ OAC). In addition, the requirements for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) changed. Students were required to pursue 30 credits, 18 of which are compulsory. Among the 12 existing elective courses, students must satisfy specific requirements in three groups of courses, leaving little opportunity for any study of languages, including French.
- The changing population and community needs of the particular schools have affected the study of international languages and in particular the study of the Italian language. For instance, administrators now face significant scheduling challenges with the recent mandate of compulsory schooling until the age of 18 or graduation, credit recovery courses, English as a Second Language (ESL), and English Language Learner (ELL) and other specialized programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) and pathways, as well as gifted programs and high school majors.

## Conclusion

Further research is warranted in the area of growth trends along with students' motivating factors for studying or not studying the Italian language at the secondary level. The following research questions should be addressed: How can we attract non-Italophone students to pursue Italian language courses? Are Italophone students motivated to

pursue Italian language courses at the university level? What are the gender differences in students' attitudes towards learning the Italian language? This study concluded that students of Italian language courses at the high school level reported an interest in "culture", "milieu", and "attitude toward the L2 speakers and community" (Csizér and Dörnyei). Participants at future annual OATI Italian high school contests will be invited to complete a questionnaire. It is the objective of the investigators that further research be conducted in order to examine the factors that motivate high school students' decisions to study Italian.

### Works Cited

- Aulino, Biagio and Maria Ferlisi. "Failures and Success in Education." Unpublished Paper. 6<sup>th</sup> annual Italian Canadian Youth Conference Toronto, 2010.
- Aulino, Biagio and Maria Ferlisi "Present Status of the Teaching of Italian at the Secondary Level in Ontario". Unpublished paper. *Conferenza sull'insegnamento della lingua italiana in Ontario*. University of Toronto, May 6, 2009.
- Bateman, Blair and Desiree de Almeida Oliveira. "Students' Motivations for Choosing (or Not) to Study Portuguese: A Survey of Beginning-level University Classes". *Hispania* 97.2 (2014): 264-80.
- Clivio, Gianrenzo. "L'insegnamento dell'italiano e gli studi di italianistica in Canada particolarmente nell'Ontario". *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 27.4 (1971): 12-19.
- Corsini, Maria Vera. "The Student of Italian: Who is he?" *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 33.4 (1975): 424-427.
- Csizér, Kata and Zoltan Dörnyei. "The Internal Structure of Language Learning Motivation and its Relationship with Language Choice and Learning Effort". *Modern Languages Journal* 89.1 (2005): 19-36.
- Danesi, Marcel. *Teaching a Heritage Language to Dialect Speaking Students*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1985.
- Dörnyei, Zoltan. "Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom". *Language Learning Journal* 3 (1994): 273-84.
- Dörnyei, Zoltan. "Understanding L2 Motivation: On with the Challenge". *The Modern Language Journal* 78.4 (1994): 515-23.
- Dörnyei, Zoltan. "Motivation in Second and Foreign Language Learning". *Language Teaching* 31.3 (1998): 117-35.
- Husseinali, Ghassan. "Who is Studying Arabic and Why? A Survey of Arabic Students' Orientations at a Major University". *Foreign Language Annals* 39 (2006): 395-412.
- Husseinali, Ghassan. "Why are you learning Arabic? Orientations, Motivation and Achievement". *Texas Papers on Foreign Language Education*. Austin: University of Texas, 2005.

- Kuitunen, Maddalena. *From Caboto to Multiculturalism: A Survey on the Development of Italian in Canada (1497-1997)*. Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies, Toronto, 1997.
- Lettieri, M, Aulino, B, Femia, C, Femia, D , Ferlisi, M & Mollica, A. "The Importance of Preserving and Promoting the Teaching of International Languages (IL) in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)" Paper Presented at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences 2012, Canadian Society for Italian Studies Conference, St. Jerome's University / University of Waterloo, 2012.
- Mollica, Anthony. "L'insegnamento dell'italiano in Canada". *L'insegnamento della lingua italiana all'estero*. Torino: Fondazione Agnelli, 1992. 163-192.
- Mollica, Anthony. "L'insegnamento dell'italiano in Canada." *In.It* . Supplemento al 21 (2008): 10-16.
- Mollica, Anthony, Aulino, Biagio, Femia, Cosmo, Femia, Damiano & Ferlisi, Maria. "The Maintenance and Promotion of the Italian Language at the Secondary Level in the Province of Ontario". Unpublished paper. 2011.
- Ossipov, Helene. "Who is Taking French and Why". *Foreign Language Annals* 33.2 (2000): 157-67.
- Pratt, Comfort, Mary Frances Agnello & Sheryl Santos. "Factors That Motivate High-School Students' Decisions to Study Spanish". *Hispania* 92.4 (2009): 800 -13.
- Speiller, Judith. "Factors That Influence High School Students' Decisions to Continue or Discontinue the Study of French and Spanish after Levels II, III, and IV". *Foreign Language Annals* 21.6 (1988): 535-45.
- TISSO (Teaching Italian in Secondary Schools in Ontario). [tisso.apps01.yorku.ca](http://tisso.apps01.yorku.ca)
- Wen, Xiaohong. "Motivation and Language Learning with Chinese". *Foreign Language Annals* 30 (1997): 234-51.

**APPENDIX: SURVEY**

- 1) What is your gender?  
Male  
Female
- 2) Which age category do you belong to?  
14-15  
16-17  
18 & older
- 3) What is your place of birth?  
Canada  
Italy  
Elsewhere
- 4) Are you of Italian descent?  
Yes  
No  
Partial
- 5) Are you currently enrolled in Italian Studies at your high school?  
Yes  
No
- 6) Which was the last Italian course you were enrolled in?  
Elementary  
Credit Courses  
Never
- 7) Did you study the Italian language at the elementary level? For how many years?  
Less than 3 years  
5 years of more  
Never
- 8) Are you part of an Italian club/association/federation at the High School level or outside of high school?  
Yes  
No
- 9) Have you ever visited Italy?  
Yes  
No
- 10) Do you speak Italian at home?  
Yes  
No
- 11) Do you understand/speak a regional dialect to your parents or grandparents/family?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

12) Specify the regional dialect.

- Northern
- Central
- Southern

13) Do you enjoy listening to Italian music?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

14) Do you have an interest in Italian art (For example, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raffaello, Donatello)?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

15) Do you follow Italian sports (For example, soccer ...)?

- Yes
- No

16) Do you enjoy eating Italian cuisine?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

17) Do you participate in Italian traditions and celebrations?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

18) Why are you studying Italian?

- I like the Italian language.
- I want to enhance my knowledge of the Italian language.
- So I can communicate with my Italian grandparents, uncles, aunts, relatives, etc...

19) Do you communicate through social media in Italian or dialect?

- Yes
- No

20) Do you communicate with youth in Italy using social media?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

21) Do you feel that the study of Italian language is important?

- Yes

- No  
Not sure
- 22) Are you planning to study Italian in high school?  
Yes  
No  
Maybe
- 23) If you are not planning to study Italian at day school, why?  
Not relevant to my career  
Not offered at my school  
Taking Italian (Saturday School/Night School)
- 24) What would you like to see emphasized in the Italian language courses?  
Language practice  
Customs and traditions of the Italian culture  
Cultural exchange programs
- 25) How do you maintain your Italian culture and traditions?  
Language  
Cultural events/traditions  
Travel  
Diet  
All of the above
- 26) Were your parent(s) born in:  
Italy  
Canada  
Elsewhere
- 27) Do you consider your parent(s) to be:  
Italian  
Italian-Canadian  
Canadian
- 28) Do you consider your grandparent(s) to be:  
Italian  
Italian-Canadian  
Canadian
- 29) Do you think future generations will show an interest in Italian studies in the high school level?  
Yes  
No  
Not sure
- 30) What initiatives can you take to promote and preserve Italian language courses in your high school and community?  
Enrol in language courses  
Partake in extra/co-curricular activities/clubs  
Initiate/partake in a cultural exchange program