The Evolving Profile of Italian L2/LS Learners in The Digital Age. Reality and Implications for University Language Courses

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Abstract: *The profound transformations that have taken place in the knowledge society, with the introduction of portable devices (smartphones, tablets) as well as new social networks (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) into social life, have fostered a changing profile of students who wish to study Italian as a second or foreign language. This profile was first outlined more than a decade ago, both from educational and technological perspectives. These changes undoubtedly have important implications for the organization of Italian as a second language courses offered at "Ismail Qemali"-University of Vlora in Albania. For a training program to meet the needs of its intended audience, it is essential to shed light on the changing profile of language course recipients. This involves considering their 'technological habits' in learning, noting similarities and differences in ICT use in daily routines, and examining how ICT can add value to complex language training. Needs analysis plays a key role in the design and organization of training programs. Indeed, it is precisely through the analysis of data collected through questionnaires, interviews, and field observations that teachers are able to meet learners' needs by designing specific learning paths and using appropriate tools and methods.*

Keywords: student profile, Italian L2/FL, Mobile technologies, Social networks, ICT in language teaching

1. Introduction

This paper aims to illustrate the results of a study conducted on Italian L2 learners at the University of Vlora, majoring in "Tourist Guides for the Southern Albanian Region", and to contribute to updating the profile of those attending Italian L2 courses at the Department of Foreign Languages at the same university, with regard to their "tourist" profile. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How have ICT entered the lives of university students in this major and how are they used?
- Can Italian L2/LS learners belonging to the digital generation and be defined as digital learners?
- What tools do the digital generation prefer to use to learn foreign languages?

Understanding these evolving profiles is essential for designing language programs that meet the needs of contemporary students in a digital society.

2. Research and Theoretical Framework

This research is part of the needs analysis research and involved the development of a questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions of a biographical and behavioral nature, which was subsequently administered at different times. The questions aimed to investigate the degree of ICT penetration, especially social networks, in students' language learning and their expectations about contemporary learning. Given that the students involved are sometimes very different from each other, research aimed at analyzing the needs of this particular group was essential.

2.1. Methodology

For data collection, a questionnaire was developed consisting of 58 questions divided into three sections: -1-one dedicated to students' biographical information (age, knowledge of foreign languages), -2-another dedicated to previous language learning experiences (attendance of online, blended, or other innovative courses), -3-and finally a third section dedicated to language learning preferences (materials, methods).

The questionnaire was administered in three different periods:
1) In the second semester of 2024-2025
2) In September 2025 and
3) In the first semester of 2025-2026, to ensure more reliable data from all users in the Italian L2 course for the "*Southern Region Tourist Guide*" Program.

The questionnaire was distributed online to facilitate data collection and allow users to respond from the comfort of their homes. This choice was crucial for data collection, as many of those who did not regularly attend classes responded after a period of time. A bilingual questionnaire (Italian and Albanian) was used to ensure clarity for all participants. Finally, the data was automatically collected into spreadsheets, facilitating analysis.

2.2 Data Analysis

The following section illustrates the data relating to the selected sample and the size of the data set. In particular, information is given on user profiles by age and student type. This section then analyzes the data on respondents' digital skills, their ownership of mobile and/or desktop devices, and their use of social networks for study, work, and entertainment. Finally, data regarding previous experiences related to innovative online learning, such as participation in MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), online courses, and language learning through social networks. A total of 64 students who had previously taken Italian language courses were collected. This sample can be considered fairly significant, as it represents 60.2% of the total number of

students enrolled in various majors at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Vlora , studying Italian as their first elective language, which offers 8 credits. The sample collected is predominantly made up of women. They are, for the most part, female students enrolled at our University.

Table 1: Characteristics of the informants of the three surveys

Characteristic	Group-1(ii semester 2024–2025)	Group-2 (September 2025)	Group-3(ii semester 2025–2026)
Number of informants	22	20	22
Sex	F (69.1%), M (30.9%)	F (56.2%), M (43.8%)	F (73%), M (27%)
Average age	24.5 years (19–50)	24 years (19–43)	25.7 years (18–52)
Most representative age group	19–22 (47%)	23–26 (34.5%)	23–26 (46%)
Visiting professors	0.40%	2%	1.25%
Researchers	3.50%	18.70%	2.50%
Other	1.32%	4.10%	3.10%

Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 52, with differences between the three groups.Group 1 has an average age of 24 and, in terms of learner type, is comparable to that found in other similar studies, with a slight increase in age compared to the 2000s, when the average age was 23. Groups 2 and 3, however, have a higher average age, as they include a greater number of researchers and visiting professors. Precisely because of the difference in cultural profiles, students in Group 1 are mostly between 19 and 22 years old, corresponding to bachelor's degree students, while students in Groups 2 and 3 are predominantly between 23 and 26 years old, corresponding to master's degree students. Most young respondents know at least two foreign languages (39.6%), including Italian, while others know three (29.26%) or four (16.35%). This aligns with recent studies on Italian language diffusion.

3. Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Most of the respondents in this research fall between the ages of 23 and 26 (see Table 1). They were therefore young people born in the early 2000s and who entered school toward the end of the 20th century, a time when the internet was already widely used in society. They experienced the shift from early internet use to interactive social networks. Even today, they experience the increasingly widespread use of ICT in managing their daily lives (leisure, entertainment, business, and socializing), particularly thanks to touchscreen devices and countless apps. The development of e-learning platforms (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard) and the delivery of blended learning and massive online courses (MOOCs) have also had significant repercussions on the education sector. Considering the age of the respondents, as well as the technological developments of contemporary society, it can be said that these are, in effect, young people belonging to the digital generation, born with ICT and accustomed to this. However, to understand the extent to which ICT is part of this group's daily life, the questionnaire included several questions designed to capture how Web 2.0, tools were used by the

younger generations. Some of the most commonly used software were selected for each of the following categories: videoconferencing, social networking, podcasting, and messaging, and the respondents were asked whether they used them for leisure, study, and/or work. When asked about free time,63 percent use videoconferencing tools, with Skype most popular. Face-Time and Hangout are used less. However, the percentages of videoconferencing usage are lower than expected. Social networks are used more (82%) than other applications, with Facebook leading the way compared to software such as Twitter and Instagram. Instant messaging systems are used by 67% of respondents, with Whats App in first place (88%), followed by systems like Viber or KakaoTal. Finally, the use of music management software stands at around 53%, with Spotify in first place (49%), followed by iTunes (16%) and YouTube (9.8%). To understand the level of skill in using Web 2.0 tools, we were asked whether they had a public online profile and on which social network. Data analysis reveals an interesting picture (see Table 2): only 4% of respondents do not have an online profile; among the most frequently used social networks, in order of frequency, are Facebook, Google+, Twitter, and Instagram; furthermore, many of the respondents indicated more than one social network in the questionnaire, as they had two or more online profiles.

Table 2: Possession of an online profile

Social Network	Group-1(ii semester 2024–2025)	Group-2 (September 2025)	Group-3(ii semester 2025–2026)
Facebook	93.4%	95.8%	96.8%
Twitter	27.3%	22.9%	15.7%
Google+	33.9%	33.3%	37.1%
Instagram	31.2%	43.3%	–
Other social networks	2.2%	14.5%	6.9%
I don't have a profile	4.8%	4.1%	3.1%

In light of the extrapolated data, it is possible to affirm that the users in our sample are digital natives, given that they use the main Web 2.0 tools in their daily lives and are at the same time also "network inhabitants" since they have one or more "social" profiles.

Table 3: Age of informants without social media profiles

Age Group	% of Total Informants (All 3 Groups)	% Without a Social Media Profile
19–22	39.8%	–
23–26	38.2%	–
27–30	12.9%	–
31 and over	8.9%	–
No profile on social networks	–	7.6% (overall)
Other/ unspecified	–	1.7% (possibly a separate category or typo-related)

The data, in summary, supports the profile of digital native users. This research also sought to observe whether and to what extent "digital social and leisure behavior" had spilled over into the educational and/or professional sectors. Regarding the use of videoconferencing systems (e.g., Skype), a clear reversal of the trend is observed compared to previous data. In fact, only 17% reported use related to professional training and/or studies; social networks are used by 48%, with Facebook leading the way, followed by other

software such as Twitter, and instant messaging systems (WhatsApp) by 45%. These include more "professional" social networks such as LinkedIn or Academia.edu. Therefore, it seems safe to say that the expected shift in the education sector has not yet occurred. Social networks remain largely in the private sphere, less so in the professional/ educational sphere. However, it is expected that in the near future, thanks to the increasingly widespread diffusion of apps related to the world of education and the gradual reversal of the trend that sees social networks like Facebook move from an almost exclusive leisure use to an institutional one as well, as a showcase for not only commercial but also educational activities, the number of people using social networks as a learning tool will significantly increase. Still in relation to the use of ICT in education, one of the questions of this research concerned the type of prior language learning of students of Italian as a second language, and specifically, their experiences mediated by ICT and how they were evaluated by the learners. The first interesting finding specifically concerns attendance at Italian courses before studying Italian at our Faculty. It highlights that the majority of students (95.5%) had had traditional in-person language learning experiences, and only a small number (3.2%) had had blended or online (0.7%) learning experiences.

The low number of blended/online experiences could be due to two reasons:
a) Most respondents may have voluntarily chosen to learn Italian traditionally with a teacher;
b) The most innovative training offerings using ICT for Italian are very limited. However, data from another questionnaire item about online or blended courses contradicts this idea. Contrary to expectations, the most popular online language courses were in Italian (55.1%), followed by English (34.6%). Overall, the choice to learn a language online is still quite limited, with only 17.8% of the sample having had some experience in this regard.

15.6 percent were very satisfied, 46.7 percent fairly satisfied, 28.9 percent only slightly satisfied, and 18.8 percent not satisfied. Among those who viewed online learning positively, the reasons cited included the ability to:
a) Practice listening skills more,
b) Manage their learning independently,
c) Find materials suited to their learning style.

Among those who reported being slightly or not at all satisfied (8.8%), the following reasons emerged:
a) Lack of direct contact with people in general
b) Lack of development of speaking skills

Finally, data extrapolated from the open-ended questions suggests that the online courses they attended were primarily based on grammatical objectives and were often not at all motivating. In short, we have to say that the fact that online courses are not considered to have added value compared to language training leads to reflection on their design format and the choice of pedagogical model offered. These courses, despite the use of constructivist LMS platforms, are likely packaged as courses with a presumably behaviorist pedagogical framework, leading to "isolated" learning. Finally, it should not be overlooked that online learning requires significant learning organization skills, a high level of autonomy, and time management, as it leaves learners free to organize their study "anywhere and anytime".

4. Language Study Materials

The final question this research seeks to answer concerns the identification of preferred language learning tools. In addition to traditional paper textbooks, materials are now also available in digital format, ranging from e-reader books to "liquid" books, which transform in color, font, and size according to the user's needs. This study sought to identify learners' preferences regarding language learning tools; factors such as the flexibility of materials and the availability of electronic versions were considered, which relate to pedagogical aspects, as well as financial considerations, such as the cost of online and paper materials. The questionnaires asked respondents to rank their preference for studying using paper, PDF, e-reader, and online materials (see Table 4).

Table 4: Preferences for language learning materials

Age Group	Paper (Carta)	Online (Web/digital resources)	PDF (Digital documents)	e-Reader (e.g., Kindle, etc.)
19–22	70.00%	24.80%	18.49%	10.98%
23–26	71.00%	30.10%	27.10%	16.80%
27–30	57.10%	28.37%	41.00%	14.20%
31 and over	74.30%	38.40%	23.00%	12.80%

The survey data once again shows a different picture than expected: students, even the youngest, declare they prefer paper-based materials for studying foreign languages (70% - 71%). In general, the reasons for preferring paper-based materials primarily concern the order of the content, its sequencing, and the ease of completing the activities. Paper-based books still seem to offer greater security not only in terms of content organization but also physically; indeed, "holding," "completing," and "underlining" are considered essential for learning. Those who expressed a negative opinion about using paper-based materials cited primarily economic and functional reasons. Preference for paper increases among those who like PDFs, as these can be printed for specific sections, reflecting an ongoing interest in paper. An unexpected result also emerged regarding the choice of online multimedia materials. The greatest interest came from older informants, who valued integrating courses with extra online materials. The question required the indication of a preference order (from 1 to 4) for the different material formats. Those who gave a negative opinion on the use of online multimedia materials (7.2%) justified their choices as follows: "Not everyone has internet," it's easier to learn with a book, and people are lazy and don't pay attention to the online content. In general, however, online multimedia materials are seen as something "in addition to the course." Digital students still prefer paper textbooks or materials that can be printed, with online resources as supplements for independent study.

5. Conclusions

University students of Italian as a second language (L2/LF) have a diverse profile. Generally, they are a highly educated audience (undergraduate and graduate students, doctoral students, researchers, and visiting professors). All these

different profiles share the knowledge of at least two or more foreign languages, primarily studied in person. Regarding the first research question, it can be stated that ICT, and social networks in particular, are part of the daily lives of foreign students of Italian as a second language, even those over 30. This is not usually passive use; most experience the Internet directly. Almost all have social profiles, but their use varies by age. Those aged 27 and above often have 'academic' profiles, showing a more professional approach online. Regarding the second research question, although from a digital perspective, this audience effectively belongs to the digital generation, as they experience the Internet firsthand, however, contrary to expectations, this type of student cannot be defined as digital learners, as ICT has not formally become part of their standard learning tools and supports. Data shows that social media use is still largely confined to leisure and entertainment, much less to study or work. In a few years, we will likely see seamless integration between the various areas of study/work and entertainment, thanks in part to the widespread availability of mobile devices. Finally, the answer to the third question provides further insight into the concept of digital learners, as it emerges that Italian L2/LS learners prefer paper-based materials or materials that, if necessary, can be converted to paper by being printed. Younger students also appear to be the most traditional in their choice of blended learning and in their preference for in-class learning with the teacher and classmates. What makes the difference are the group dynamics through the relationships established in the classroom and direct contact with people from other academic fields.

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