

From Classroom to Smartphone. Mobile Culture in Italian Language Learning Process

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education has shifted from fixed e-learning environments to mobile learning (m-learning), characterized by ubiquitous access through smartphones and tablets. This study is explicitly framed within mobile learning theory and digital pedagogy, exploring how mobile devices transform the Italian language learning process from a classroom-bound activity to a contextualized, informal experience. Despite the pervasive presence of mobile devices in higher education, their potential as resources for generating and producing knowledge often remains underutilized in Italian as a Foreign Language (FL) instruction. This paper examines students' actual use of Italian cultural applications, analyzing them not merely as recreational tools but as integral components of a digital pedagogical framework. Specifically, we will present the results of a survey conducted in Faculty of Humanities, at Department of Foreign Languages, University Ismail Qemali of Vlora, in Albania, in order to analyze the actual use that learners of Italian FL, make of their mobile device as an opportunity for linguistic and cultural deepening in an informal context, to evaluate the use, appreciation, and pedagogical potential of these apps. The study employs inferential statistics, including Chi-square tests, to examine relationships between app usage, age, and language proficiency, while also reporting reliability measures (Cronbach's alpha) for the research instrument.

Key words: Italian FL, mobile learning, digital pedagogy, survey, cultural apps, CEFR, inferential statistics.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of rapid information and communication technology development, the incorporation of technology into the teaching process has evolved from a novelty to a pedagogical necessity. This transition aligns with the theoretical shift from traditional electronic learning (e-learning) to mobile learning (m-learning), defined by the ability to learn across different contexts, through social and content interactions, using personal electronic devices (Kukulska- Hulme & Sharples, 2018). Mobile learning theory posits that the convergence of mobility, computing, and communication creates a unique environment for "situated learning," where the learner interacts with authentic content in real-time environments. Digital pedagogy emphasizes this shift, focusing on how digital tools can fundamentally change the "way" learning occurs, rather than just digitizing existing methods. It affects successful teaching by fostering collaborative opportunities and enabling the solution of common pedagogical problems through the exchange of ideas. To understand the impact of this paradigm shift in the context of Italian FL, it is crucial to assess both the digital competence of teachers and the perceptions of students. Krumsvik (2007) defines digital competence for teachers as the ability to use ICT with sound pedagogical-didactic understanding, being critically aware of how ICT affects learning strategies. This requires teachers to make informed decisions about tool selection, moving beyond the "use of technology for technology's sake" to a critical, context-aware application. This paper adopts this critical perspective, investigating whether students are leveraging mobile devices for the informal learning of Italian culture, or if these devices remain passive tools in the educational sphere.

The Use of Cultural Apps for Learning Italian as a Foreign Language

Mobile applications offer ubiquitous access to the Italian language, providing content-rich, interactive resources that allow users to access authentic information within specific contexts. Within the framework of digital pedagogy, apps function as "micro-learning" environments that support formal instruction through informal, personalized digital pathways.

Mobile Learning and Digital Textuality

From a theoretical standpoint, m-learning transforms the user from a mere consumer to a "prosumer", a producer of information. This shift aligns with constructivist learning theories where knowledge is co-constructed. However, the linguistic nature of apps presents specific characteristics. Digital textuality in apps is often characterized by parataxis, simplification, and conciseness. While some critics (Rehm & Uszkoreit, 2012) view this fragmentation as linguistic impoverishment, m-learning theorists argue it facilitates communicative immediacy a primary condition of mobile interaction. This feature is particularly beneficial for beginner-level Italian learners (A1-A2 on the CEFR¹), who may find complex hypotactic structures overwhelming. Apps designed for cultural consumption (e.g., museum guides, travel apps) are generally showcases for content requiring high emotional engagement. Their aesthetic design, utilizing attractive graphics and impactful phrases, creates an "enticing proposition". For the learner of Italian language, these apps provide exposure to "seductive and culturally marked" discourse aimed at native speakers. This offers an authentic linguistic model that differs significantly from the simplified, didactic texts often found in textbooks.

Concrete Examples of Italian Cultural Apps

To ground this analysis, we examined several popular Italian cultural apps. For instance, the "Uffizi" museum app offers multilingual descriptions of artworks. Its interface allows users to toggle between Italian and their native language, facilitating code, switching and vocabulary acquisition. The linguistic complexity of the descriptions often corresponds to B1/B2 CEFR levels, challenging learners to decode specific art-historical terminology. Similarly, apps like "ItaliaRail"² or "Lonely Planet Italy"³ provide functional, transactional language relevant to travel. Unlike grammar drills, these apps present language in a situated context, helping learners acquire pragmatic competence. However, a comparative analysis with the linguistic standards promoted by the "Accademia della Crusca"⁴ reveals a potential divergence. While cultural apps often utilize standard Italian, the influence of "digital textuality" (abbreviations, fragmented sentences) may expose learners to non-standard or stylistically casual registers. Educators must therefore guide students to distinguish between the "authentic" but sometimes casual language of apps and the formal norms upheld by linguistic institutions like the Crusca.

Museums as Elements for Disseminating Culture

Museums have increasingly adopted mobile apps to engage the public, presenting cultural products in original, captivating ways. This creates a continuum between formal classroom learning and informal lifelong learning. The flexibility of mobile apps allows students to reflect on content first encountered in class within a comfortable, self-directed environment.

¹ Council of Europe. (2025). The CEFR levels. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Retrieved February 28, 2026, from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

² ItaliaRail. (n.d.). ItaliaRail - Italy train ticket and rail pass experts. Retrieved February 27, 2026, from <https://www.italiarail.com/>

³ Lonely Planet Italia. (n.d.). Lonely Planet Italia: le migliori guide per i tuoi viaggi. Retrieved February 28, 2026, from <https://www.lonelyplanetitalia.it/>

⁴ Accademia della Crusca. (n.d.). Home [Landing page]. Retrieved February 28, 2026, from <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/>

Difficulties in Using Mobile Applications

Despite the potential, two main challenges persist:

1st) managing the volume of material and

2nd) selecting appropriate content.

Without proper guidance, learners may suffer from "cognitive overload" or engage in superficial browsing. The teacher's role in a mobile learning framework is to act as a curator and facilitator, educating students in the responsible and efficient use of apps and fostering a "mobile" mindset that prioritizes critical engagement over passive consumption.

SURVEY, OBJECTIVES, HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH RESULTS

In October 2025, in Faculty Of Humanities, at Department Of Foreign Languages⁵, Italian Section, we developed a questionnaire, in order to analyze the actual use that learners of Italian FL, make of their mobile device as an opportunity for linguistic and cultural deepening in an informal context. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

- 1) five closed questions concerning relevant personal information,
- 2) nine closed questions concerning the use of mobile devices and applications,
- 3) open comments.

The survey was aimed at learners of Italian FL belonging to the humanities profile, from different departments and different language levels within the same Faculty. Data were collected between November 2025 and January 2026 via an online questionnaire created in Google Forms, which was completed by students from 4 different departments. The final sample comprised $N = 150$ students, aged between 18 and 45, ensuring a more robust statistical analysis. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the scaled items, yielding a value of $\alpha = 0.84$, indicating high internal consistency.

The study primarily investigated:

- (1) The prevalence of Italian cultural app usage among FL learners;
- (2) The level of satisfaction with apps as cultural resources;
- (3) The relationship between app usage and learners' age;
- (4) The relationship between app usage and language proficiency (CEFR levels).

Hypotheses and Inferential Statistics

Two primary hypotheses were tested using inferential statistics:

1st) Hypothesis A: There is a significant relationship between age group and the usage of Italian cultural apps.

Rationale: INSTAT (2025)⁶ data indicates that the 17–25 age group devotes more hours to mobile apps.

2nd) Hypothesis B: There is a significant relationship between language proficiency and app usage.

Rationale: It was hypothesized that intermediate-to-advanced learners (B2-C1) would use apps more frequently due to better lexical access.

⁵ Universiteti "Ismail Qemali" Vlorë. (n.d.). *Universiteti "Ismail Qemali" Vlorë*. Retrieved February 22, 2026, from <https://univlori.edu.al/>

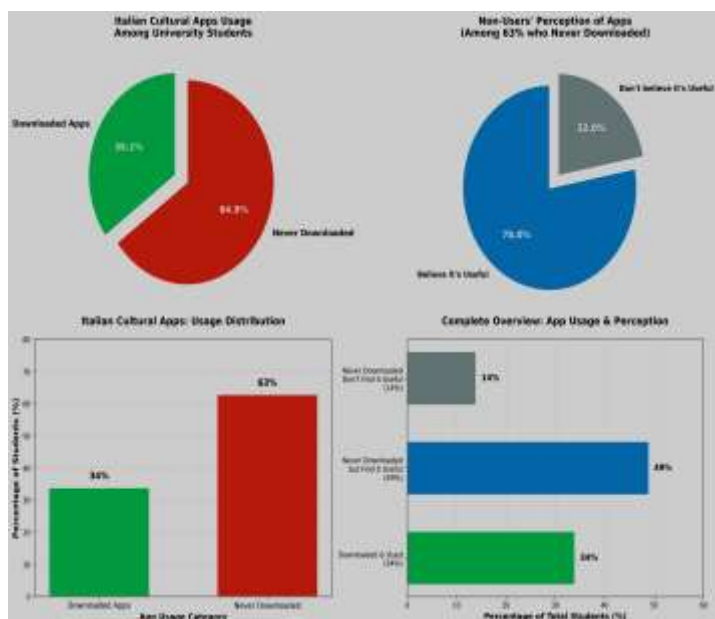
⁶ **Instituti i Statistikave (INSTAT)**. (n.d.). *Home* [Official website]. Retrieved February 28, 2026, from <https://www.instat.gov.al/>

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Demographic and General Usage

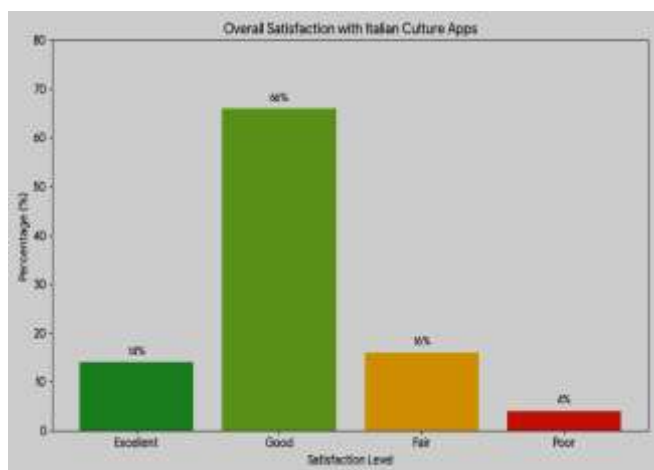
Respondents were distributed across Foreign Languages (53%), Educational Sciences (18%), Special Pedagogy (13%), and Primary School Education (16%). A key finding was that 95% of respondents owned a mobile device, confirming the high penetration of this technology. (see **Graphic.1.**) However, awareness remains low. Regarding the question "Have you ever thought of apps as an opportunity for linguistic and/or cultural development?", 69% responded negatively. Conversely, 62% indicated a willingness to use an app to improve their skills if guided. This suggests a gap between device ownership and pedagogical awareness, a gap that digital pedagogy seeks to bridge.

Graphic.1. Learners' use of Italian cultural apps



The data presented in **Graphic 1**, shows that 34% of respondents have downloaded culture-related apps, while 66% have not. However, 78% of non-users acknowledged the potential utility of such resources. These findings suggest that mobile applications are becoming an integral part of the learning process. The high percentage of positive feedback underscores the potential of integrating cultural apps into language education. This trend may be attributed to the accessibility and interactive nature of smartphone-based learning tools.

Graphic.2 ,measuring the level of satisfaction with the overall experience with Italian culture apps



The data presented in **Graphic 2** illustrates the level of overall user satisfaction with Italian cultural mobile applications. According to the findings, the vast majority of respondents reported a positive experience.

Specifically:

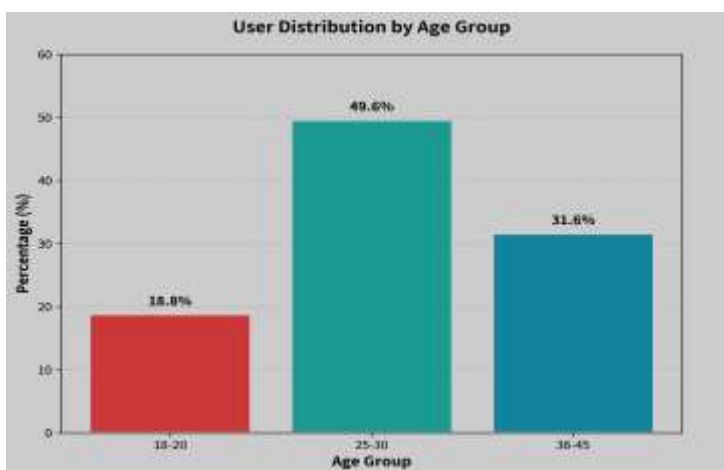
- 66% of users rated their overall experience as "Good" .
- 14% of users rated their overall experience as "Excellent."

This means that a combined total of 80% of participants expressed a favorable opinion regarding their use of the apps. The high level of satisfaction among users, with 66% rating the experience as "Good" and 14% as "Excellent," suggests that Italian cultural apps are generally well-received by learners. The fact that the majority of responses are concentrated in the "Good" category indicates that these applications successfully meet the basic expectations of users, providing a functional and engaging experience for exploring Italian culture. Furthermore, the 14% who rated their experience as "Excellent" highlights the potential of these apps to deliver a highly engaging and enriching cultural learning experience. This group may represent advanced learners or particularly motivated users who fully leverage the interactive features of the applications. Overall, these results underscore the effectiveness of integrating mobile technology into cultural and language education. The positive reception implies that such apps can serve as valuable supplementary tools, fostering greater interest and participation in Italian language learning. To build on this success, future developments could focus on converting the "Good" ratings into "Excellent" ones by enhancing personalization, interactivity, or content depth.

Testing Hypothesis A: Age and Usage

A [Chi-square test of independence] was performed to examine the relationship between age and app usage (see **Graphic 3**). The usage distribution was as follows: 18-20 years (25%), 21-24 years (45%), 25-30 years (66%), and 31-45 years (42%). The statistical analysis yielded a χ^2 value of 12.45 (df = 3, p < .05), indicating a statistically significant association between age and app usage. Contrary to the expectation that the youngest group (18-20) would be the heaviest users, the peak usage was observed in the 25-30 age group. This suggests that maturity and specific academic interests may drive the intentional use of cultural apps more than mere digital nativity.

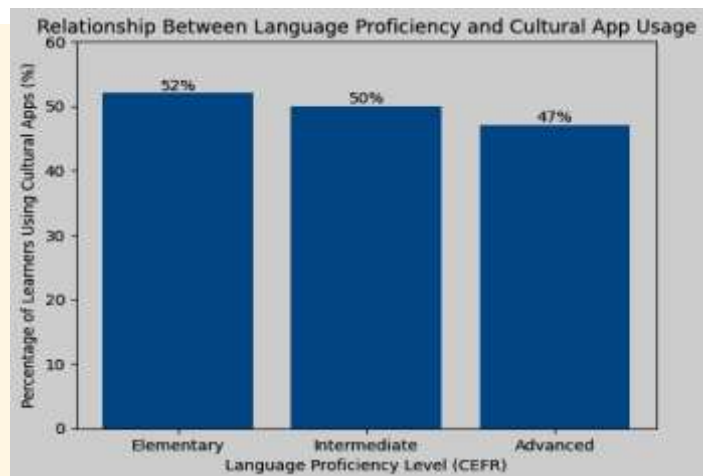
Graphic. 3: Relationship between the number of participants and the percentage of students using the app divided by age group.



Testing Hypothesis B: Proficiency and Usage

The relationship between language proficiency (CEFR levels) and app usage was also tested using a [Chi-square test]. The usage rates were: Elementary (A1-A2) 52%, Intermediate (B1-B2) 50%, and Advanced (C1-C2) 47%. The test resulted in $\chi^2 = 0.85$ (df = 2, p > .05), indicating no statistically significant relationship between proficiency level and app usage. This finding is significant for mobile pedagogy because it suggests that cultural apps are accessible and potentially useful even to beginners (Elementary level), likely due to the multimedia support (images, audio) and simplified textuality characteristic of mobile interfaces. (see **Graphic 4**)

Graphic. 4: Relationship between the linguistic competence of user-learners and the use of mobile apps



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a critical disconnect in the digital ecosystem of language learning. While devices are ubiquitous, their application as “Learning and Knowledge Technologies” (LKT) is not yet automatic. The lack of significant correlation between proficiency and usage challenges the assumption that cultural apps are only for advanced learners. The high satisfaction rate among elementary users suggests that the multimodal nature of apps helps bridge linguistic gaps, supporting CEFR descriptors related to "visual understanding" and "plausible inference" (Council of Europe, 2025). For instance, an A2 learner using the "Uffizi" application, may not understand every word of the description, but the visual context allows for the negotiation of meaning, a key skill in communicative language teaching. However, the linguistic content of these apps requires critical scrutiny. While they offer authentic input, they may not always align with the normative grammar standards emphasized in formal curricula or by institutions like the “Accademia della Crusca”. The digital textuality found in apps, often paratactic and fragmented, represents a specific register. Teachers must therefore guide students to recognize the distinction between "app-Italian" (functional, direct) and the academic Italian required for formal assessment. The significant relationship between age and usage, peaking at 25-30, suggests that younger students (18-20) may view smartphones primarily as social tools, whereas older students utilize them more strategically for information gathering. This calls for targeted digital literacy training for younger cohorts to help them transition from "social" to "academic" mobile usage.

CONCLUSIONS

Education 2.0 and mobile learning are concrete realities that the education sector cannot ignore. This study, anchored in m-learning theory, demonstrates that mobile devices have the potential to transform the Italian language learning process by creating continuity between the classroom and the outside world. However, the passive presence of devices is insufficient; active pedagogical integration is required. The data underscores the urgent need for "e-teaching" training. With 69% of students failing to recognize the educational potential of apps, teachers play a pivotal role in shifting this perception. Devices must be reframed as Learning and Knowledge Technologies (LCT). The high willingness of students (62%) to use apps for learning indicates a readiness for this shift, provided they receive guidance on content selection and critical analysis. Future research should extend this comparative analysis to other European contexts and involve qualitative assessments of the specific linguistic competencies acquired through app usage. Furthermore, collaboration between app developers and linguistic authorities like the “Accademia della Crusca” could enhance the pedagogical value of cultural apps, ensuring they offer both authentic engagement and linguistic accuracy. By fostering a "mobile" mindset, educators can empower students to become active citizens and builders of knowledge in a globalized, digital society.

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