

Melissa Young
Coluccio Saluti Essay Writing Competition

Timida

Language and culture are inseparable: the definition of one cannot exclude to the other. To me and to many of my peers, understanding Italy's unique combination of the two proved to be the key to bridging that ever-mysterious culture gap. Every student here has faced unique obstacles and found unique solutions. For me to understand the culture I placed myself in, I had to immerse myself into what is truly Italian language.

I spent my first several weeks here in a variable haze, attempting to pin down the details that would be key to surviving the daily life of a Florentine. My first conquest was confidently sidestepping various strikes and demonstrations, catching a bus to school rather than to Fiesole, and completing a block's travel without purchasing an umbrella. The next stage, however, was slightly more taxing. I discovered, at the cost of almost 100 euro in various fines, more than a couple missed trains, and an entire high school education's worth of public embarrassment, that I was going about this in all the wrong way. As a two-year-old learns through trial and error, I learned that the blue, Italian-culture, triangle block was never going to fit in the in the circular hole meant for American culture.

On a random Tuesday in February, it hit me. As I struggled through the crowds in Piazza della Repubblica, I passed dangerously close to two very large, angry men standing about two inches from each other, yelling and wildly gesticulating. I stepped back, anticipating the imminent fistfight. Just as the older man pulled back for the punch, the younger began to laugh, wrapped the former in a hug, and kissed him on both cheeks. I stood frozen. I had, of course, no clue to the topic of the conversation, but as the two bid each other thanks and farewell, I concluded this was likely not a fight over women or money, but more likely a friendly conversation about the weather.

And so I learned, if slowly, that polite conversation in the country does not err towards silence as it does in the States. In this country, to speak loudly, continuously, and simultaneously is simply Italian. To get around, I needed to learn to speak up. While I have never been accused of being shy, as a deaf American I was a particularly frightening notion. I struggled at first, and put up with a healthy portion of under-the-breath

comments about Americans, but I will say that I have not been described as *timida* since. Eventually I learned to speak up during dinner with my host parents, ask for help when the honking of car horns is truly the only means for survival, and even to brave the multitude of oral presentations in my classes here. I became increasingly more comfortable with my oral skills, relaxing in the safety net of Italian conversation. The beauty of this language for an oral deaf is that any mistakes I make slip through the speech of those around me, and my own words become an equal contribution to of the conversation in its entirety.

And thus is the beauty of the language and it's culture for any American. Here, food more than taste, art is more than sight, and music is more than hearing. To an Italian, the loss of one of the senses is not so much a loss as it is an opportunity to tie the other four together into a whole much larger than the sum of it's parts. The Italian language is not a combination of sounds and words to be memorized. It is not a language so much meant to be heard or to be spoken as much as it is to be experienced. Italian language is Italian culture. It is a story of graceful balance between speech, space, and energy. It is a level of expression is much larger than speech, and it has given me back the voice I believed I had lost with my hearing. As it turns out, all I'd ever needed to do was to raise my voice and ask how.