

Investigating Linguistic “Features” into Italian Test Performances of Arabic Speakers

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Abstract

Our paper aims at analysing the linguistic “features” produced by Arabic learners of Italian as a foreign language. There are published studies of common errors for Arab students of Italian (Della Puppa, 2006; Giacalone Ramat et al., 2001). However, this study introduces the standardized language assessment, namely the CILS test of Italian, as context of research. The study uses error analysis as a method to improve didactic strategies for teachers considering the detected language needs and profiles of Arabic learners. The data is a representative sample of 200 test takers of CEFR level B2, is the level that guarantees the access to the Italian universities to foreign students. First, the study investigates the test outcomes in the four language skills (listening, reading, written and oral production) and the use of language, and then focuses on the exam scripts, in order to identify different types of errors that occur repeatedly.

Keywords: Linguistic features, Italian test, Arabic, Standardized assessment

1. Introduction¹

This study addresses the “features” in L2 Italian that are characteristic of Arabic learners, detected in their performance in a B2 level proficiency test. There are a number of published studies examining the errors produced by Arab students of Italian as a foreign language (Al-Ali & Al-Oliemat, 2008; Al-Buainain, 2007; Della Puppa, 2006; Vedovelli *et al.*, 2001). However, the current study is the first introducing the standardized language assessment, namely the CILS proficiency test of Italian as a foreign language, as a research tool for data gathering and interpretation. While learner corpora have been used for some time in the study of learning and teaching a second/foreign language, they are only just beginning to impact the field of language testing and assessment (LTA), particularly considering the Italian research context (Callies, 2015). In particular, the error analysis is used as a method to improve didactic strategies for teachers considering the detected language needs and profiles of Arabic learners of IFL. The purpose of this study is not merely to count the error forms, but to analyse the candidates’ performances and interpret the most frequent incorrect forms occurred in order to propose suggestions and hypotheses for specific didactic intervention. First, the study investigates the test outcomes in the four language skills (listening, reading, written and oral production) and the use of language, and then focuses on the exam scripts, in order to identify different types of errors that occur repeatedly.

2. Research context

Italian was in fact one of the colonial languages in the period before the establishment of the Arab nation states (Caubet & Miller, 2000) although to a lesser extent than languages such as Turkish, French, and English. In the last two centuries, the language scenario of the Arab community had more and more conspicuous contact with European languages, especially with English and French, that both through the development of language policies (which concerned most of the Middle Eastern region) and through processes of true linguistic and cultural assimilation (Maghreb region), became part of the language

¹ This article is a work of shared reflection of both authors who together developed the references. However, author1 developed the paragraphs 1; 2; 4.3.4 and 5; author2 developed the paragraphs 3 and subparagraphs; 4 and subparagraphs.

uses of the Arab communities. It is therefore possible to affirm that today the majority of Arabs are perfectly bilingual, pairing French or English with their mother tongue; and possessing the mastery of idioms of the three languages. The language uses of the Arabic-speaking countries are today affected by a good component of plurilingualism, language contact and code-switching: it is in fact a phenomenon of “transglossia” in this geographic area, where the inherited languages from the colonial past are now adopted in idiomatic uses alternately with Arabic regardless of context, unlike the phenomenon of diglossia (Durand, 2009).

Therefore, current Italian language positioning in Arab countries is certainly due to the relevant factors such as the attractiveness that our language has always had, thanks to our artistic and cultural heritage of Italian society, but also to the economic value expected from its learning. The teaching of Italian in Arab schools and universities has a long and uneven history from one country to another; in fact, some countries, such as Egypt (the University of “Ain Shams” celebrated fifty years of the Department of Italian studies in 2013, with over 2.000 students), have a long tradition in teaching Italian (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2014). However, there is a recent strong interest from students in the United Arab Emirates, throughout the Middle East, and also in the Maghreb, where the teaching of Italian language is very much required. Therefore, there is a high demand of teaching Italian both in the Maghreb and in Middle East (Mashreq) and often, due to lack of staff, facilities and resources, they have not always been able to meet this demand. There are also many colleges and universities that collaborate with the various Italian Cultural Institutes (ICI) in Arab capitals, but there are a large number of public and private schools and universities which have no contact with the ICI. Therefore, it is very difficult to make a census of Italian teaching in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2014).

With the introduction of new methods to identify the presence of languages in sociolinguistics studies, Italian, traditionally considered only as a language of an intellectual cultural dimension, can take part to dynamics that include new functions of language and new values identified in language uses that we can observe in public

space. Therefore, in this context, where there are new forms of language diffusion, the coexistence of new and old conditions constitutes a wealth and a heritage capable of placing Italy in a leading position in the “global language market” (Calvet 2002; De Mauro *et al.*, 2002). In fact, Italian seems to have a prominent role also within the urban landscape of Arab cities: *linguistic landscape* studies confirm that Italian is the most commonly spoken idiom after English. The high degree of visibility in the cityscape is strictly correlated to the high attractiveness of identity values exercised by Italian language and culture, such as good taste and creativity, which is very interesting for Arab countries, especially those of the Middle East. However, we must not forget the strong economic relations between our country and the Arab region, which have seen a strong increase in recent decades thanks to the spread of quality Italian companies (Cosenza & Nasimi, 2015; Vedovelli & Casini, 2013).

In this system, characterized by socio-economic relations and processes within the global market, it is interesting to understand the level of internationalization of the Italian university education system. This process is universally recognized not only as a valid indicator of the quality of the system itself, but also as a powerful means of attracting a qualified immigration stream in the country and thus increasing the country's cultural and productive potential. Specifically, it is interesting to focus on current students from foreign countries and from the Arab countries in Italian universities, paying attention on issues related to language skills required for access to the Italian university system.

Statistics from the National Student Register of Ministry of Education - MIUR (extracted in August 2016, updated in July 5, 2016) show that foreign students enrolled in 2015-2016 for the first time in Italy (matriculated) are 13,510; specifically 5,712 completed a diploma abroad, while 7,798 got a diploma in Italy (we have no information of about 465 students). The last data, compared with 2003-2004 academic year data (9,004 enrolled students, with 71.8% of students who obtained a diploma abroad), shows the important change in Italy: Most of the foreign students represent the second generation of immigrants who studied within our public-school program.

In order to analyse the presence of students with foreign nationality in Italy, we took into account the data for all students registered in the first year (not only matriculates) for the 2015-2016 academic year (Tab. 1), paying attention to student data from Arab countries.

Table 1

Students enrolled in Italy in the first year with foreign nationality (2015-2016 academic year)

	Registered to the first year	% Registered to the total	Registered to the first year on the national total	Males	Females
Total:	23,827	5.03%		10,745	13,082

Concerning students from the Arab countries², the following Table includes data for the total number of registered students to the first year (not only matriculates) for the academic year 2015-2016, with percentages per country on the national total and sex distribution as well. (Table2).

Table2

Students registered in Italy to the first year from Arab countries (2015-2016 academic year)

Arab Countries	Registered to the first year	% Registered to the first year on the national total	Males	Females
Algeria	55	.01%	29	26
Egypt	354	.07%	276	78
Iraq	25	.01%	12	13
Jordan	22	.00%	18	4
Kuwait	3	.00%	--	--
Lebanon	182	.04%	140	42
Libya	50	.01%	44	6
Morocco	752	.16%	326	426
Palestine	35	.01%	29	6
KSA	13	.00%	8	5
Somalia	10	.00%	6	4
Sudan	34	.01%	28	6
Syria	48	.01%	32	16
Tunisia	400	.08%	266	134
Yemen	4	.00%	--	--
	Total: 1,987			

² In this context, we consider Arab countries as all the countries that have Arabic as an official or co-official language therefore taking into account the classification based on the language criterion (Bassiouney, 2009).

The data taken into consideration allows us to have a complete portrait of the incidence of students from 15 Arab countries, but at the same time, we have specific data about each country, which shows meaningful quantities concerning Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Indeed, with reference to the language skills required to international students, in order to have access to an Italian university program, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a special circular interministerial³, specify that the minimum level of linguistic competence to admit foreign students is the B2 level of *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CoE, 2001). For all national university programs, all students are exempt from the Italian language placement test at university if they obtained the Italian language certificates delivered by University for Foreigners of Siena, University for Foreigners of Perugia, Roma Tre University and Società Dante Alighieri.

3. Methodology

Starting from the premise that students' performance errors tend to be systematic and classifiable, the aim is to recognize the main linguistic "features" of Arabic speakers learning Italian as a foreign language. The main research question regards the tendency observable in our sample, according to their level of competence and their repertoire of languages. More deeply, the first hypothesis supposes a specific area of learning in which Arabic speakers could find more difficulties to succeed, among the other skills tested. Secondly, the second research question we intend to answer concerns the weight of the regular development of a foreign language and the frequency of errors appearing, regardless of the mother tongue or the repertoire of languages (Andorno, 2006). Relating to this one, the third research question supposes the correlation between transfer factors and the language "features" developed at this stage of language proficiency.

In this study, the use of the learner corpus follows the 'corpus-based approach', since data are investigated to provide empirical evidence for our research hypothesis (Callies, 2015).

³ Downloadable from: http://www.studiare-in-italia.it/studentistranieri/moduli/2017/Circolare2017_2018.pdf.

The nature of the analysis is both quantitative and qualitative. Mixed methods are especially useful in understanding contradictions between quantitative results and qualitative findings and it has great flexibility. It is adaptable to many study designs, such as observational studies and randomized trials, to explicate more information that can be obtained only with a quantitative research (Creswell, 2003; 2014).

The first phase consisted of a selection of a sample of candidates who obtained a B2 level on the CILS exam in 2015, in order to build a corpus of language performances representative for the main research purpose. The use of a language proficiency test finds a first justification in Saville's studies (2000) and in the assumption that tests provided by major testing agencies and examination boards may have an impact on educational processes and on society in general.

In this study, the international examination assumes descriptive and diagnostic purposes, allowing us to identify the characteristics of the language competence of the specific profile of candidates and to explicate the areas of weakness that need targeted didactic interventions. Moreover, the level selected, CEFR Level B2, representing the higher profile of the *Independent user*, allows us to indicate the progress towards *autonomy* (CoE, 2001).

In the second phase, the focus was on data analysis based on the test outcomes, a selection of descriptive statistics (*mean, standard deviation, range of scores*) and frequencies (*facility values*), in order to investigate and describe the most significant characteristics of the sample (Bachman, 2004; Green, 2013; Pallant, 2011).

The starting point was the average (arithmetic) score, namely the *mean*, which is the most frequently used measurement of central tendency. Then the standard deviation was run to check how much the scores of the group of test takers vary on average from the mean (Green, 2013). Consequently, the focus was on the range of scores, in order to detect the minimum and the maximum scores obtained in our set of data. It is useful to obtain information about the shape (*heterogeneous/homogeneous*) of the population both on each skill and on the total score.

Secondly, the item analysis, through the calculation of the *p-value* provides useful information about the difficulty index of our data set (Pallant, 2011; Green, 2013). First,

we identified which items the test population found easy and which found difficult and then, focusing on the last ones, we investigated reason and tendency in error in comparison with our hypothesis of research and expectations.

The third phase aimed at identifying errors and their classification (Corder, 1967). We adopt *error analysis* as a technique for describing major errors made by Arab Italian as second language learners in their test performance, trying to connect them both to the first language learning or, in general, to their overall linguistic repertoire. The method for qualitative analysis consisted of a contrast and comparison between errors made in the target language and the target language, namely the Italian language (Murad & Khalil, 2015). Through an error evaluation, looking at the candidates' incorrect answers, the purpose was to verify the presence of a list of frequent errors in Arabic speakers within the selected sample of candidates. The method adopted was the separation and classification of errors into the categories, based on the literature both on learning Italian and English as a foreign language (Al-Buainain, 2007⁴; Bernini, 1988; Della Puppa, 2006; Murad & Khalil, 2015; Tresso, 2000) and on the assessment criteria adopted by the CILS certification centre: grammatical control / accuracy; vocabulary control / accuracy; orthographic control (Barni *et al.*, 2009). The list below has no claim to be accurate and has been adapted based on the observations found in the performance analysed; consequently, categories and sub-categories detected in previous studies were not included (i.e. incorrect use of the article; difficulty constructing relative clauses; word order in the Italian sentence; etc.) (Banfi, 1988; Colussi *et al.*, 2014).

Table 3 shows the categories and the subcategories of the candidates' errors in Italian performances:

⁴ Downloadable from: <https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/001054>.

Table 3
Categories and sub-categories of errors in Arabic speakers learning IFL

Categories of errors	Sub-categories
1. <i>Orthographic control</i> (spelling and punctuation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange of vowels (e / i; o / u) • Addition / omission <h> • Incorrect digraph (ch, gh, ci, gi, gl, gn, sc) / Trigraph (gli + vowel; sci + vowel) • Doubling consonants / Double consonant reduction • Addition / omission of accent • Vowel omission • Incorrect separation between words • Diphthong simplification • No punctuation • Incorrect use or omission of capital letters
2. <i>Morphosyntax</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbs including: wrong selection of the auxiliary verb; omission/addition of verb “to be”; omission verb “to be” / “to have” in compound tenses; errors of agreement in Past participle; • Prepositions including: incorrect use; error in agreement.
3. <i>Vocabulary</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interferences from the language repertoire (French language)

3.1. Test instrument

As this study examined the types of errors committed by the Arab Italian as foreign language learners, a language proficiency test was used to build a representative linguistic corpus (Callies, 2015). The CILS Certification is an international examination, officially recognized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which attests the degree of linguistic-communicative competence in Italian as a foreign language (Law no. 204/1992). The CILS Certification System covers all six levels of linguistic-communicative competence identified by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CoE, 2001). The CILS DUE-B2 test measures the full autonomy of communicative competence in Italian as a foreign language. Level B2 candidate is able to communicate effectively during a stay in Italy for study purposes and in a systematic contact with the Italian company for work reasons (Barni *et al.*, 2009, p. 32). It is also recognized as the appropriate level for various staff figures working at Italian facilities: for example, administrative and accounting staff, archivists, documentaries, social workers and medical staff.

3.1.1 Test content and assessment scale.

The construct of the CILS examination system is based on the *communicative language competence*; consequently, it includes tasks that relate to real-life situations in order to measure the candidate's ability to use the language in different contexts of communicative interaction (CoE, 2001, p. 13). Each test measures the main language and communication skills (CoE, 2001): aural reception (listening), written reception (reading), written production (writing), oral production (speaking), and the use of Italian (linguistic competences; sociolinguistic competences; pragmatic competences).

The Listening section consists of three parts. The format varies between multiple choices and recognition of information. The textual genres proposed are dialogues of daily communication and general topic; telephone conversations, interviews; instructional texts, presentations and speeches addressed to an audience, and broadcast news (radio and television). The Reading section consists of 3 parts. The format varies between multiple choices, recognition of information, and re-ordering of paragraphs. The textual genres proposed are information and dissemination articles, narrative texts, instructions for use, advertising material, etc. The format includes multiple choice and cloze tests. The test content focuses mainly on adjectives and pronouns, verbal forms and tenses, vocabulary, and pragmatic competence. This section of the test, together with the one related to the Written Production, represents the central core of the error analysis implemented according to the reference literature (Della Puppa, 2006; cfr. § 3.1). All exams are centrally assessed at the CILS Certification Centre by trained examiners, who have developed the criteria for assessing the skills and the various types of evidence, and the method of awarding the scores. In the CILS DUE-B2 test the total score obtainable is 100 points; the minimum score for gaining the certificate is 55 (*cut score*). Each skill is given an equal weight and gets an independent score on a scale from 0 to 20; the cut score is set on 11 points. Candidates who do not reach the minimum score in all skills are issued a *capitalization certificate*, which shows the skills passed and those failed. The last can be recovered within 18 months.

3.2 Participants

The sample includes 120 candidates taking the CILS exam level B2 in December 2015. The subjects of the study are Arabic speakers studying Italian as a foreign language. Their ages range from 14 to 53 years. Most of the candidates (56.6%) are in the age group of 16 to 25 years, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in Dec 2015: Year of birth

Year of birth	N
1960 - '69	1
1970 - '79	2
1980 - '89	48
1990 - '99	68
2000 - 2010	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>120</i>

The nationalities represented in our sample are: Algerian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Moroccan and Tunisian, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in Dec 2015: Nationality

Nationality	Total
Tunisian	92
Egyptian	14
Algerian	5
Moroccan	5
Lebanese	4
<i>Total</i>	<i>120</i>

The CILS exam provides two sessions per year, one in June and one in December. The examination session, covered by our study, dates back to December 2015. Most candidates (87 out of 120), as can be seen from the data in tab. 6, started their path towards the CILS certification in June 2015, when they capitalized some skills.

Table 5
Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in Dec 2015: Date of their first CILS exam

First CILS exam	Total
05/06/2014	3
04/12/2014	2
11/06/2015	87
03/12/2015	28
<i>Total</i>	<i>120</i>

Looking at the data more in detail, the test outcomes show that:

- 28/120 took the CILS exam (Level B2) for the first time in the December 2015 session (11 *pass*; 11 *capitalization certificates*);
- 37/120 started the exam in June 2015 and 2/120 in June 2014 and obtained the certificate (*pass*) in the December 2015 session;
- 50/120 started the exam in June 2015 and 1/120 in June 2014 and obtained the *capitalization certificate* in the December 2015 session;
- 2/120 started the exam in June 2014 and did not obtain the certificate (*fail*) in the December 2015 session⁵.

Table 6
Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in Dec 2015: Test outcomes

Test outcomes (Dec 2015)	Total
Pass	53
Fail	2
Capitalization certificate	62
Absentee	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>120</i>

As reported in tab. 7, the 44.1% (53 out of 120) passed the examination and obtained the CILS certificate of the level B2; 2 candidates did not pass the exam; and 3 were absent. The 51.6% have passed the examination partially, obtaining a *capitalization certificate* valid for 18 months (see Table 8).

Table 7
Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in Dec 2015: Skills with insufficient score

Skill (Dec 2015)	Number of candidates
Listening	9
Reading	9
Use of Italian	38
Written production	30
Oral production	16

⁵ This means they have passed the expiration date (18-month) to be able to retrieve skills failed in previous sessions (cfr. 3.1.1).

The skill on which candidates have experienced greater difficulty is the Use of Italian (38 out of 120). This data confirms a trend observed previously in other studies analysing specific public or validating the test itself (among others: CILS Internal report on young students of Italian as a foreign language; 6th ALTE International Conference paper presentation on the performance of children living in Italy and learning Italian as a foreign language), and the first research hypothesis as well.

4. Findings and discussion

In the current section a selection of relevant findings followed by a discussion of the main results obtained will be presented.

4.1 Sample characteristics

Starting from the sample of candidates (No. 120), we have selected those who initiated their path to language certification of level B2 in the June 2015 session (No. 87). Among them, there are 3 candidates of Egyptian nationality, 1 Moroccan, and 83 Tunisians. Only 2 out of 87 have taken the exam in Italy; one of them in Cairo and 84 in Tunis. Their age ranges between 20 and 38. They are 13 female and 74 male candidates. The values in Table 9 indicate the number of capitalization certificates delivered per each skill of the CILS exam in the session of June 2105.

Table 8

Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in June 2015: Skills with insufficient score

Skill (June 2015)	Number of candidates
Listening	3
Reading	12
Use of Italian	34
Written production	29
Oral production	43

4.2 Data analysis: measurements of central tendency

Once data entry was complete and the data file has been checked for errors, the following measures of central tendency were calculated. The results are shown in tab.10.

Table 9
Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in June 2015: Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St. deviation
Listening	87	12	8	20	16.29	2.69
Reading	87	14	6	20	13.90	3.16
Use of Italian	87	13	5	18	11.62	3.04
Written Production	87	20	.00	20	12.00	3.34
Oral Production	87	17	.00	17	10.87	2.40
Total	87					

The mean values vary from 10.8 points for Oral production test to 16.2 for Listening test. The standard deviation in the total scores of each skill shows scores that are more similar and more clustered around the mean in the Listening and the Oral Production tests. On the contrary, for the Reading test, the Use of Italian test and the Written Production test, the standard deviation shows that the test scores are more widely spread both above and below the mean (Bachman, 2004; Green, 2013). The actual shape of the distribution of scores for each group has been checked using *histograms*, where a reasonably straight line suggests the presence of a normal distribution (Pallant, 2011). Fig. 1 shows the representation of the lowest value for the standard deviation detected in our data set.

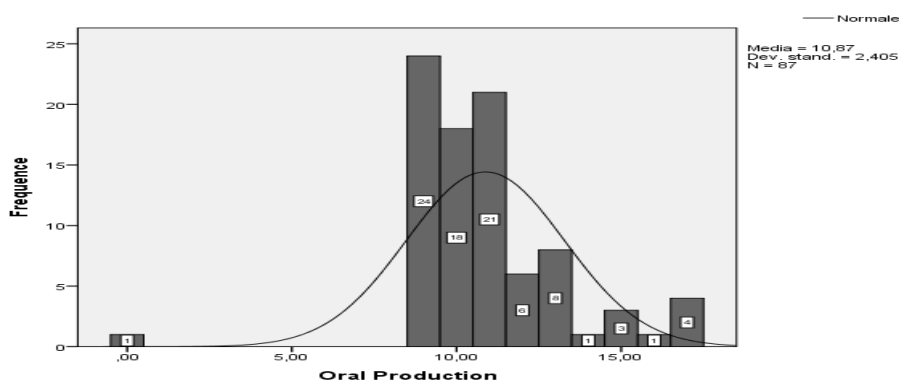


Figure1. Candidates of CILS exam (Level B2) in June 2015: st. deviation value of Oral Production test

The range values vary from 12 points (Listening test) to 20 points (Written Production), as Table10 shows. This observation can be combined to the calculation of the minimum and maximum values, showing a score of zero only for productive skills (written and oral).

4.3 Item analysis: facility value

The following analysis is intended to describe in detail the candidate's achievements in the individual skills of the exam. The presentation of the data was organized according to the two individual sections of the exam that measure the receptive skills and the section addressed to the Use of Italian. An analysis of the results obtained will be followed by a reflection on items that have created greater difficulty and a discussion of the main errors found in comparison to the official guidelines for the CILS exam (Barni *et al.*, 2009).

4.3.1 Listening test.

The first analysis concerns the facility values obtained in the Listening test, divided into the three part of the test, as reported in tab. 11.

Table 10
CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 - Listening test: Facility values
Listening test

	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3 ⁶
Item 1	92.0	33.3	95.4
Item 2	90.8	90.8	4.5
Item 3	86.2	87.4	83.9
Item 4	90.8	72.4	87.3
Item 5	71.3	78.2	2.2
Item 6	82.8	89.7	6.8
Item 7	92.0	82.8	95.4
Item 8	-	-	5.7
Item 9	-	-	59.7
Item 10	-	-	13.7
Item 11	-	-	12.6
Item 12	-	-	82.7
Item 13	-	-	35,6

⁶ The information contained in the text they listen (*key*) are: item 1, 3, 4, 7, 12, 13.

In the Listening test the item showing the lowest p-value is number 1 of the Part 2 (33.3% - 29 candidates out of 87). The Table 12 shows the number of candidates per each option.

Table 11

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 - Listening test 2: Distractor analysis (Item 01)

LIST2IT01

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1.1	1.1	1.1
A	4	4.6	4.6	5.7
B (key)	29	33.3	33.3	39.1
C	26	29.9	29.9	69.0
D	27	31.0	31.0	100.0
Total	87	100.0	100.0	

1. All'inizio della trasmissione radiofonica, il presentatore parla di un modo nuovo per

- A) selezionare ristoranti che servono cibi genuini.
- B) mangiare in una città sconosciuta.
- C) cercare buoni ristoranti a prezzi bassi.
- D) conoscere persone che si interessano al cibo.

Figure 2. CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015: Listening 2 Item 01

4.3.2 Reading test.

Table 13 shows the facility values obtained in the Reading test, divided into the first two parts of the test⁷, the re-order paragraph has not been included in the facility values.

Table 12

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 - Reading test: Facility values

Reading test	Part 1	Part 2 ⁸
Item 1	35.6	66.6
Item 2	94.3	68.9
Item 3	93.1	79.3
Item 4	75.9	34.4
Item 5	83.9	9.1
Item 6	79.3	72.4
Item 7	58.6	6.8
Item 8		75.8
Item 9		27.5
Item 10		42.5
Item 11		4.5
Item 12		5.7
Item 13		40.2
Item 14		0
Item 15		37.9

⁷The re-order paragraph has not been included in the calculation of facility values.

⁸ The information contained in the text they read (key) are: item 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 13, 15.

In the Reading test the item showing the lowest p-value is number 1 of the Part 1 (35.6%-31 candidates out of 87). The Table 14 shows the number of candidates who indicated each option.

Table 13

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 - Reading test 1: Distractor analysis (Item 01)

READ1IT01

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1.1	1.1	1.1
A	29	33.3	33.3	34.5
B (key)	31	35.6	35.6	70.1
C	6	6.9	6.9	77.0
D	20	23.0	23.0	100.0
Total	87	100.0	100.0	

1. Gli studenti del liceo "Visconti" di Roma possono vedere dal vivo il restauro di un quadro del '600 perché
- A) il quadro si trova da molti anni nell'aula magna del liceo.
 - B) il liceo partecipa a un'iniziativa per far conoscere l'arte ai giovani.
 - C) la scuola ha una sezione di restauro di opere d'arte.
 - D) lo studio di restauro si trova nello stesso edificio del liceo.

Figure 3. CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015: Reading 1 Item 01

4.3.3 Use of Italian test.

The Use of Italian test consists of 4 parts⁹. Part 1 requires the candidate to complete the text by entering the correct form of the pronoun or the correct adjective. This procedure can provide a margin of error resulting from incorrect transcription of the word, regardless of the identification of the correct form (*key*). According to the assessment procedures, officially recognized by the CILS Centre, only the forms that do not show spelling mistakes are considered correct. Table15 shows the facility values obtained in the Part 1; the Table includes the key and the corresponding translation in English.

⁹ Part 4 will not be discussed here since it is out of the scope of the research.

Table 14

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 1): Facility values

Use of Italian n. 1			
	Key	English translation	Facility value
Item 01	<i>mi</i>	me	83.9
Item 02	<i>nostri</i>	our	75.9
Item 03	<i>io</i>	I	74.7
Item 04	<i>gli</i>	him	55.2
Item 05	<i>loro</i>	their	83.9
Item 06	<i>qualche</i>	a few	52.9
Item 07	<i>tutte</i>	all	64.4
Item 08	<i>tuoi</i>	your	77.0
Item 09	<i>te</i>	you	54.0
Item 10	<i>tutti</i>	all	87.4
Item 11	<i>questo/ciò</i>	this / it	58.6
Item 12	<i>quali</i>	which	59.8
Item 13	<i>ti</i>	you	70.1
Item 14	<i>noi</i>	we	70.1
Item 15	<i>ogni</i>	every	56.3
Item 16	<i>li</i>	them	54.0
Item 17	<i>tutti</i>	all	60.9
Item 18	<i>quello</i>	that	56.3
Item 19	<i>gli</i>	him	52.9
Item 20	<i>mi</i>	me	69.0

The first item showing the lowest p-value is number 6 (52.9%); this means that 46 candidates out of 87 have identified the correct form. The second item showing the same p-value is number 19. The errors found for these two items reveal two different levels of interpretation. In the first case, the spelling of the word and the interference of the French language, present in the candidate's linguistic repertoire, may have conditioned the presence of wrong forms (Table 16).

Table 15

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 1, item 6): frequency of answers

Use of Ita 1 IT06	Frequency
QUALCHE	46
QUALQUE	7
QUESTO	7
UN	6
QUEST'	3
DUECE	2
QUALCHI	2
QUALQUI	2
QUEL	2
QUELL'	2
QUACHE	1
QUALE	1
QUELCHE	1
QUESTI	1
QUSTO	1

In the second case, the error may find a first justification in the wrong recognition of the form of the personal pronoun and in the frequent confusion between the direct and the indirect form of the pronoun in learning Italian as a foreign language (*gli/li*, Eng. *him/them*). Moreover, the wrong presence of other forms of direct personal pronoun (*la, le, lo*) denotes in addition an overall lack of comprehension of the text itself¹⁰.

Table 16

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 1, item 9): frequency of answers

Use of Ita 1 IT19	Frequency
GLI	46
MI	12
LO	6
TI	5
LA	4
LE	4
LEI	1
LI	1
NI	1
SI	1
SOLO	1

The third hypothesis, regarding the influence of the language repertoire caused to the similarities between the two Romance languages (French and Italian), can be confirmed

¹⁰ Further confirmation of this interpretation of the error is provided by the very low facility value found for item 16 that requires the identification of the direct personal pronoun.

so far. On the other hand, the linearity with the standard development of language proficiency, at an intermediate level, can be confirmed as well (Andorno, 2006).

Part 2 requires the candidate to recognize the correct verbal form indicated in brackets to the infinite mode and write the designated form in the appropriate answer sheet. This procedure may provide a margin of error resulting from incorrect transcription of the word, regardless of the identification of the correct form. According to the official assessment guidelines, only the forms that do not show spelling mistakes are admitted and considered correct. Possible sources of errors concern agreement, verb tense, omission verb to be/to have in compound tenses, wrong selection of the auxiliary verb (Al-Buainain, 2007). Table 18 shows the facility values obtained in the Part 2; the Table includes the key and the corresponding translation in English.

The degree of acceptability or adequacy of the facility values may depend on several factors, such as the purpose for which the test was administered or the candidate target group (Bachman, 2004; Green, 2013). In a proficiency test, as in the case of CILS examination, facility values of below 20 per cent suggest that most of the population is answering the item incorrectly; consequently, this reduces the chance to gather useful information about their performance or level of competence (Green, 2013, p. 27).

Table 17

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 2): Facility values

Use of Italian n. 2			
	Key	English translation	Facility value
Item 01	<i>nasconde</i>	It hides	77.0
Item 02	<i>ha scelto</i>	It chose	54.0
Item 03	<i>ha permesso</i>	It allowed	29.9
Item 04	<i>protegge</i>	It protects	39.1
Item 05	<i>diventino</i>	They become (<i>present subjunctive</i>)	2.3
Item 06	<i>stimolino</i>	They stimulate (<i>present subjunctive</i>)	2.3
Item 07	<i>aspettavamo</i>	We expected	33.3
Item 08	<i>ha avviato</i>	he started	34.5
Item 09	<i>era</i>	It was	73.6
Item 10	<i>facevano</i>	They did (<i>past subjunctive</i>)	28.7
Item 11	<i>abbiamo lavorato</i>	We worked	12.6
Item 12	<i>si trovano</i>	They are	32.2
Item 13	<i>garantisce</i>	It guarantees	25.3
Item 14	<i>tornano</i>	They return	26.4
Item 15	<i>sopravviverebbe</i>	It would survive	9.2
Item 16	<i>seguono</i>	They follow	20.7
Item 17	<i>ha ricevuto</i>	It has received	47.1
Item 18	<i>consentano</i>	They permit	14.9
Item 19	<i>diventasse</i>	It became (<i>past subjunctive</i>)	34.5
Item 20	<i>ci fosse</i>	There were (<i>past subjunctive</i>)	35.6

Starting from this premise, at this level of data analysis the focus was on the items that reveal the lower *p-value*, namely item 5, 6, 11, 16 and 18.

The main error that emerges from the conceptual approach concerns the mastery of the subjunctive forms set forth in the CILS guidelines at level B2 (Barni *et al.*, 2009), but not yet acquired and consolidated by the sample of candidates in question. Table 19 also shows the frequency index of the forms entered by the candidates. This data allows us to notice an error category, the *spelling*, which will be resumed with more detail in the following paragraph on the types of error.

Table 19

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 2, item 5, 6, 18): frequency of answers

Use of Italian Part 2					
Item 05 (Key: <i>diventino</i>)	Frequency	Item 06 (Key: <i>stimolino</i>)	Frequency	Item 18 (Key: <i>consentano</i>)	Frequency
DIVENTI	36	STIMOLI	29	CONSENTANO	13
DIVENTA	8	STIMOLA	8	CONSENTA	13
DIVENTASSE	5	STIMOLARE	7	HA CONSENTITO	5
DIVENTAVA	4	HA STIMOLATO	5	CONSENTONO	5
DIVENTE	4	STIMOLAVA	5	CONSENTI	4
È DIVENTATA	6	STIMOLANDO	3	CONSETA	2
HA DIVENTATO	3	STIMOLE	3	CONSENTE	2
DIVENTINO	2	STIMOLANO	2	HA CONSENTATO	1
HA DIVENTATA	2	STIMOLASSE	2	È CONSENTITO	1
DIVANTI	1	STIMOLERÀ	2	CONSTRA	1
DIVENTANO	1	STIMOLINO	2	CONSENTIVA	1
DIVENTAREBBE	1	SIMILA	1	CONSENTISSIRO	1
DIVENTASSERO	1	STIMALI	1	CONSENTIRESTI	1
DIVENTERA	1	STIME	1	CONSENTIRESSE	1
DIVENTERÀ	1	STIMOLAREI	1	CONSENTIREBBE	1
DIVENTEREI	1	STIMOLASSERO	1	CONSENTINO	1
DIVENTIRÀ	1	STIMOLATI	1	CONSENTATO	1
DIVENTISSE	1	STIMOLAVANO	1	CONSENONO	1
DIVENTREBBERO	1	STIMOLENDO	1	CONSENIREBBE	1
DIVINTI	1	STIMOLERA	1	CONSENE	1
È DIVENTATO	1	STIMOLONO	1	CONOSENTI	1
E DIVENTUTA	1			CONOSENTE	1
È DIVETETA	1			CONORENTE	1
SIA DIVENTATA	1			CONESENTONO	1
				ABBIA CONSENTO	1

The spelling error is particularly apparent and recalled from item 16, which falls among those that have obtained a p-value within the limits considered acceptable (20.7%). The incorrect forms indicated by the candidates are reported in Table 20.

Table 20

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 2, item 18): frequency of answers

Use of Italian Part 2	
Item 16 (Key: <i>seguono</i>)	Frequency
SEGUONO	22
HA SEGUITO	7
HANNO SEGUITO	6
SEGUINO	6
SEGUIONO	4
SEGUANO	3
SEGUE	2
SEGUIRANNO	2
ABBIANO SEGUITO	1
AVEVANO SEGUITO	1
HA SEGITO	1
HA SEGNITO	1
HA SEQUITO	1
HA SGUITTO	1
SCGURO	1
SEGONO	1
SEGUANO	1
SEGUI	1
SEGUIANO	1
SEGUIE	1
SEGUIRA	1
SEGUIRO	1
SEGUISSE	1
SEGUISSERO	1
SEGUITO	1
SEGUIVANO	1
SEGUNO	1
SEGUORO	1
SGUIONO	1
SUGUANO	1

The incorrect forms indicated for item 11 reveal both an error type already discussed, regarding the spelling, and another category concerning interference from the French language that could justify the presence of impersonal forms such as, for example, *si è lavorato* translated by the French *On a travaillé*.

Table 18

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 2, item 11): frequency of answers

Use of Italian Part 2	
Use of Ita 2 IT11 (Key: <i>abbiamo lavorato</i>)	Frequency
HA LAVORATO	15
ABBIAMO LAVORATO	11
LAVORA	9
LAVORAVA	9
HANNO LAVORATO	3
HO LAVORATO	3
LAVORANO	3
SI È LAVORATO	7
LAVORAVANO	2
LAVORAVO	2
SI LAVORATO	2
SIA LAVORATO	2
ABBIANO LAVORATO	1
HOLAVORATO	1
LAVORANNO	1
LAVORARE	1
LAVORI	1
LAVORIAMO	1
LVORAVANO	1
SIE LAVORATO	1

Part 3 is a cloze test and has the purpose of measuring vocabulary competence by identifying the correct word to be selected the available completion proposals (fig. 4).

Hanno tra i 21 e i 24 anni i sei studenti, cinque ragazzi e una ragazza, che hanno vinto la Rotman International Trading Corporation, la gara⁽⁰⁾ di finanza applicata che si svolge a Toronto. Tanto per far capire quanto sono _____⁽¹⁾, la squadra dell'Università romana ha vinto per il secondo anno _____⁽²⁾ ed ha superato squadre provenienti da atenei _____⁽³⁾. È l'unica non americana che abbia mai conquistato il trofeo.

0.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A) gara	B) contesa	C) concorrenza	D) rivalità
1.	A) bravi	B) attivi	C) efficienti	D) buoni
2.	A) successivo	B) seguente	C) continuo	D) consecutivo

Figure 4. Use of Italian – Part 3

Table 19

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian test (Part 3): Facility values

Use of Italian – Part 3	
Item 1	94.3
Item 2	57.5
Item 3	75.9
Item 4	85.1
Item 5	29.9
Item 6	74.7
Item 7	70.1
Item 8	70.1
Item 9	50.6
Item 10	18.4
Item 11	71.3
Item 12	54.0
Item 13	74.7
Item 14	77.0
Item 15	78.2
Item 16	75.9

The item on which we will focus attention is number 5, which shows an obvious example of French language literacy in the selection of the answer.

Table 20

CILS exam Level B2 in June 2015 – Use of Italian 3: Distractor analysis (Item 01)

USEOFIT3IT05				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	2.3	2.3	2.3
A	10	11.5	11.5	13.8
B (key)	26	29.9	29.9	43.7
C	25	28.7	28.7	72.4
D	24	27.6	27.6	100.0
Total	87	100.0	100.0	

In the case of item 5, 27.6% of the marked responses are detected in correspondence of the distractor D (*questione*). That wrong selection can be justified by the interference from the French language “*question*”, while the key is “*domanda*”.

4.3.4 Types of errors.

In this paragraph, we intend to present the most frequent linguistic “features” into Italian test performances of Arabic speakers, according to the error categorization made in literature in previous similar studies (Della Puppa, 2007; Al-Ali & Al-Oliemat, 2008; Colussi et al., 2014). In particular, the analysis examines the errors in Use of language test

and Written Production committed by candidates; we focused on the items that revealed low facility values and written performances with low total score.

Many of these errors could be common to all non-native users of Italian, but we intend to detect the ones that occur repeatedly and seem systematic (Corder, 1967). Some of the reported errors are common in the language varieties of the first learning stage, but were included in this review since in the case of arabophones it is possible that they are caused by the interference of the mother tongue (Bernini, 1988; Mion, 2007). The following presentation will not discuss frequency of errors since it is out of the scope of this paper.

The data gathered were organized in the three main categories identified in our study and reported in the following Tables (24-25). The presentation includes the original spelling taken from the candidates' exam paper, the correct form in Italian and the corresponding English translation.

Table21

Orthographic control: list of errors

1. Orthographic control (spelling and punctuation)			
	Incorrect form	Correct form	English translation
	emparato	<i>imparato</i>	learned
	deventa	<i>diventa</i>	he/she becomes
	telefonata	<i>telefonata</i>	phone call
	dici	<i>dice</i>	he says
	padri	<i>padre</i>	father
	simpre	<i>sempre</i>	always
	el	<i>il</i>	the
	credotu	<i>creduto</i>	believed
	ginitore	<i>genitore</i>	parent
	piuo	<i>più</i>	more
	relazioni	<i>relazione</i>	relationship
	mi	<i>me</i>	me
Exchange of vowels (<i>e / i; o / u</i>)	grazzi	<i>grazie</i>	thank you
	facultà	<i>facoltà</i>	faculty
Incorrect digraph (<i>ch, gh, ci, gi, gl, gn, sc</i>) / Trigraph (<i>gli + vowel; sci + vowel</i>)	volio	<i>voglio</i>	I want
	protedgira	<i>proteggerà</i>	he will protect
	sognio	<i>sogno</i>	dream
	ongi	<i>ogni</i>	every/each
Doubling consonants / Double consonant reduction	habiamo	<i>abbiamo</i>	we have
	ricordi	<i>ricordi</i>	you remember
	mallissimo	<i>malissimo</i>	very bad
	ho incontrato	<i>ho incontrato</i>	I met (someone)
	alloggio	<i>alloggio</i>	accommodation
	pazzienti	<i>pazienti</i>	patients
	aventura	<i>avventura</i>	adventure
	è cominciata	<i>è cominciata</i>	it has started
	infati	<i>infatti</i>	indeed
	gettano	<i>gettano</i>	they throw
Addition / omission of accent	papa	<i>papà</i>	dad
	citta	<i>città</i>	city
	perche	<i>perché</i>	why/because
	piu	<i>più</i>	more
	permettà	<i>permetta</i>	it allows
	tornera	<i>tornerà</i>	he/she will come back
Vowel omission	nn	<i>non</i>	not
	trasferito	<i>trasferito</i>	transferred
	ggi	<i>oggi</i>	today
	ttenzione	<i>attenzione</i>	caution
	proposto	<i>proposito</i>	purpose
	facessro	<i>fecessero</i>	they did
	lvoravano	<i>lavoravano</i>	they used to work
Uncorrect separation between words	tisscordo	<i>ti scordo</i>	I forget you
	in questomodo	<i>in questo modo</i>	in this way
	adestra	<i>a destra</i>	to the right
	dellavoro	<i>del lavoro</i>	about work
	holavorato	<i>ho lavorato</i>	I worked
Diphthong simplification	scula	<i>scuola</i>	school
	bune	<i>buone</i>	good (feminine)
	ha segito	<i>ha seguito</i>	he/she followed
	qello	<i>quello</i>	that
	qusto	<i>questo</i>	this

With regard to punctuation and textual organization, within our sample we have shown little control of the punctuation signs. At this point, there is a tendency towards the over-utilization of connective forms and the presence of long and complex periods. In addition, repetitions are very frequent, since they are considered in Arabic a highly sought-after stylistic element. Incorrect use or omission of capital letters denote a difficulty in managing a spelling rule associated with different writing styles, namely uppercase, lowercase, printed, and italic (Bernini, 1988; Colussi *et al.*, 2014; Della Puppa, 2007; Tresso, 2000).

Table 22
Morphosyntx: list of errors

2. Morphosyntax			
a. Verbs			
	Incorrect form	Correct form	English translation
Wrong selection of the auxiliary verb	sono finito	<i>ho finito</i>	I finished
	sono cercato	<i>ho cercato</i>	I looked for
	ho andato	<i>sono andato</i>	I went
	mi ho piaccuti molto	<i>mi sono piaciuti molto</i>	I liked them a lot
	siamo ballati	<i>abbiamo ballato</i>	we danced
	ha diventata	<i>è diventata</i>	it became
	ha sopravvivuto	<i>è sopravvissuto</i>	he/she survived
Omission/Addition of verb <i>to be</i>	la mia richiesta per un lavoro [...]	<i>la mia richiesta è per un lavoro [...]</i>	My request is for a job [...]
	laureato in economia [...]	<i>sono laureato in economia [...]</i>	I graduated in economics [...]
Omission verb <i>to be/to have</i> in compound tenses	creduto	<i>ho creduto</i>	I believed
	gli detto	<i>gli ho detto</i>	I told him
	[...] che allegato	<i>[...] che ho allegato</i>	[...] which I attached
	[...] che apparso	<i>[...] che è apparso</i>	[...] which it appeared
Errors of agreement in Past participle	siamo ballat <u>i</u>	<i>abbiamo ballat<u>o</u></i>	We danced
b. Prepositions			
Incorrect use of prepositions	Incorrect form	Correct form	English translation
	di tunisia	<i>della Tunisia</i>	of Tunisia
	<u>del</u> casa (<i>masculine</i>)	<i>della</i> casa (<i>feminine</i>)	of the house

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 26, interference from linguistic repertoire (Weinreich, 1953) concerns mainly the French language, confirming the third hypothesis. A plausible explanation concerns the features of our sample, which includes candidates of mainly Tunisian origin and therefore schooled in French (Durand, 2009).

Table 23
Interferences: list of errors

3. Interference from linguistic repertoire			
Incorrect form	French form	Correct form	English translation
accidente	accident	<i>incidente</i>	accident
possibile	possible	<i>possibile</i>	possible
facilmente	facilement	<i>facilmente</i>	easily
esperienza	expérience	<i>esperienza</i>	experience
deklarazione	déclaration	<i>dichiarazione</i>	declaration
tournavo	tourner (Eng. <i>to turn</i>)	<i>tornavo</i>	I came back
reunione	réunion	<i>riunione</i>	meeting
come ho lavorato	comme	<i>visto che ho lavorato</i>	since I worked
persona	personne	<i>persona</i>	the person
idèale	idéale	<i>ideale</i>	ideal
a traverso	à travers	<i>attraverso</i>	through
abbiamo preso dei fotti	on a pris des photos	<i>abbiamo scattato delle foto</i>	we took some pictures
gentile	gentil	<i>gentile</i>	kind

5. Final considerations

The results of this survey show that students' performance errors are systematic and classifiable: it implies that both teachers and learners must see errors as the key to understanding and solving accuracy problems in L2 Italian writing scripts. In fact, the purpose of this study was not merely to calculate the error forms, but to analyse the candidates' performances and understand the most frequent incorrect forms occurred in order to propose suggestions and hypotheses for specific learning paths addressed to arabophones who represent a prominent group of Italian university programs. In particular, this study would like to use error analysis as a method to improve didactic strategies for teachers considering the language needs and profiles of Arabic learners of Italian as a second language. First of all, it would be recommendable to take into consideration their plurilingual repertoire, caused to a sociolinguistic variety of their language of origin, which has an impact on the development of their communicative language competence. In particular, this feature could be detected in their written performances, as investigated in our analysis of the Use of Italian test part 1 and 2 (Colussi *et al.*, 2014).

Secondly, considering the detection of representative evidence of exchange of vowels (*e / i; o / u*), as confirmed by other previous studies on that field (Della Puppa, 2006), it would be advisable to share and inform the role of the 'distinctive feature' of

vowels in Italian. Among the others, the use of dictation activities or spelling exercises would be helpful to identify and distinguish the traits of the Italian vowel system. Although an incorrect use of orthographic rules is generally detected at basic levels of competence, e.g. incorrect use or omission of capital letters, our sample reveals the maintenance of this linguistic “feature”. Teachers should consider the impact of this trait extended to the (mis-) use of punctuation, and intervene with exercises based on the insertion of capital letters or punctuation (Colussi *et al.*, 2014).

Consequently, teachers could take into account errors’ analysis to adopt, modify or even develop remedial procedures and techniques that can minimize the learner’s errors in order to improve and increase the students’ level of language competence. Students should always be encouraged to do remedial exercises in order to improve their writing ability.

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