

## Lote@home

*Peta Lowry 27 October 2007*

In 1997, my husband and I spent eight weeks travelling around Italy on a motorbike and we both fell in love with this amazing country and its truly wonderful people. We decided then that we would one day return to Italy to live for a couple of years and, since having a family, this dream has become even more important. We both feel passionate about sharing our wonderful experience of Italy with our boys, and exposing them to a totally different way of living.

With neither of us being bi-lingual and our only other language experience having been from our own school days -- mine with just one high school year of Italian and my husband's with a couple of high school years of French -- we understand how difficult it is to learn another language later in life. I am a full time business professional as well as mum of two young boys and, throughout my career, I have travelled to many different countries and worked with many bilingual colleagues, finding not being able to speak another language a challenge. All this makes us even more determined to support our children's second language learning, as well as motivating us to begin our own journey of learning Italian.

So after researching different avenues, I decided the best way to go was for me to enrol in a basic Italian language course at a local language centre, hoping that this would help start our boys with their Italian. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but what it actually meant was that I was spending time in a classroom and studying on my own, which wasn't really the idea! My textbooks were too complex and advanced to use with them, and their reading skills and my language skills weren't developed enough for me to be able to use these textbooks to work with them. So I found myself skipping class and not studying enough because I wanted to spend more time with our family.

This led me to search for learning tools that I could easily integrate into our everyday family environment and not compromise the scarce 'quality time' with our boys. Scouring all the local language bookshops and local Italian language resource centres worked for a while, but purchasing children's Italian books, videos and CDs, et cetera, was very expensive. Borrowing these items from the Italian resource libraries also worked for a while but, again, finding the time to spend reading the books with the boys, and keeping their attention as they struggled to understand the stories (and my lack of pronunciation skills), or getting to sit quietly with them to watch the Italian videos or listen to the CDs was difficult, as neither of us had the ability to understand the language and therefore got frustrated in trying to follow the stories.

So when our oldest son started at the local primary school in 2004, we were very excited to learn that his Language Other Than English (LOTE) would be Italian. I began thinking again about what we could do to build on the Italian LOTE lessons that could also provide me with an opportunity to learn and work with our boys. This led to me developing tools within our home and everyday life that were easy to implement and use on a daily basis. I started with how I could teach myself more Italian. Going to classes and studying text books wasn't working. It was just reducing my 'free time'. And since I'm a visual learner and don't enjoy 'hitting the books', I decided to bring the language into our home. As in a classroom environment I started by sticking up posters with grammar rules, vowels, consonants, verbs, days, months, numbers, et cetera, around the home to assist me in building the foundations of Italian.

This then led me to sticking little yellow post-it notes on items around the home to help me build my Italian vocabulary and to also act as a memory jogger to be able to remember the Italian word for these items. I started using the Italian words for the items mixed in with my English. I'd say things to our boys like, 'Would you like a

glass of *latte*?' instead of using the word, 'milk'. Our youngest son, now four, only ever calls his milk *latte*.

This method was working and I was gradually remembering more and more Italian words and being able to build these into sentences. Our boys were really enjoying the added level of communication and began picking up on the words, not understanding what they were, but being able to use them anyway. I'd say things like: 'Please close *la porta*, and our eldest son would close the door. When I asked him to tell me what the Italian word for 'door' was, he couldn't, yet when I asked him to close the door, using *la porta*, he understood.

So, I began using this methodology more and more and over time decided that this was an excellent way for me to not only support our children learning another language, but that it was also a really simple way of helping me to learn a new language too. Thinking this experience through, I began to understand that what I was doing was immersing our family in the Italian language. Just as you would if you were to go and live in another country, you are being constantly exposed to the language. By using the language at home, I was creating an 'in country' experience where we could practise and develop our language skills in a relaxed family environment.

Taking this idea further I sat down and thought about what other items we used in our everyday family environment that we could convert to Italian, thus growing the use of the language on a day-to-day basis. My focus was on creating a 'little Italy' in our home, like changing our regular calendar to show the months, days and dates in Italian and using this to record our weekly family events. Learning the translation for everyday phrases like, 'I love you', 'Time for bed', 'Have you cleaned your teeth?', et cetera, and using the Italian translation instead of saying it in English. And instead of playing games like, 'I Spy', with our boys, we now play, *Come si dice?* in *Italiano*. Our older son now really enjoys challenging us with different words and phrases, and of course keeping a score on who knows more Italian!

This immersion process began nearly four years ago and was as a result of our older son starting school and beginning Italian lessons, so I thought the focus of learning Italian was more around him than our younger son, as our older son could read and understand what we were trying to do. However, this year, our younger son started formal Italian lessons. After the second lesson, the teacher (a native-born Italian) approached me and asked me where in Italy I was from? I was surprised by this question and told her that I was not from Italy, but was Australian and currently struggling to learn Italian myself. She was very surprised as she had assumed that I must have been Italian, because our son had so much Italian vocabulary! Wow, this meant that even though our immersion process at home was focused on our older son, our youngest son had picked up on the language like a sponge, he was actually learning the language from just being around people speaking it. This was a great excitement and brought home the fact that it doesn't matter how young you are when you begin learning another language, just like learning to speak English, you have it around you all the time and it just happens.

This realisation has motivated us even more and we are now also working on being able to implement 'Italian Tuesdays', where we'll have a house rule that every Tuesday you can only speak in Italian, no English! In fact when we thought about it there are many, many other ways that we can work on embracing our second language and we have found that working with our family this way has created another level of communication as well. It's fun and really easy to implement and doesn't have the stigma of homework or study or having to sit still to be able to read or listen or watch, to learn.

Because of the success of this experiment I decided to develop a pack that could be offered through schools to families interested in supporting their children's language

studies. I called this pack LOTE@HOME, because it enables you to bring your Language Other Than English into your home. About a year ago I approached the principal and the Italian teacher at our local primary school and proposed a trial. Luckily, the school really loved the idea and supported the initiative. By putting a flyer in one of the school newsletters we found fifteen families willing to trial the packs. As it was only a trial and I intended to make all of the components of the packs by hand, we decided to offer the packs for only a limited time. The calendar was for three months: October, November and December, 2006; there were fifty flash cards, a body parts card game (using fifty-two cards), four conversation cards - - converting everyday family phrases into Italian -- and six traditional Italian recipes.

The trial proved very successful and a survey of the families who used the packs provided very positive feedback and some great ideas on improving the concept. A lot of the parents weren't from Italian backgrounds, so struggled to master the correct pronunciation of a lot of the words. They suggested that pronunciation guidelines be put into the pack. As a result of this, I worked with Italian language teachers and we considered putting phonetics on the cards. This was a good idea but that then meant that you had to understand phonetics as well as being able to read English and learn Italian. Discussions with a number of translation specialists suggested that we just use the pronunciation guide so I decided to put the pronunciation guides for each of the words onto each of the components of the pack.

The enthusiasm and positive feedback from this trial supported my intentions to take the concept to the next level. So I launched a 2007 Italian pack earlier this year and LOTE@HOME packs are currently being developed for 2008 in a number of other languages including Chinese (Mandarin), German, French, Japanese and Indonesian. As well as that, the LOTE@HOME concept will see the pack being offered as ESL@HOME (English as a Second Language) to support families whose children are attending schools and building on their English-language skills, but with the families still speaking their own language at home. This will enable these families to continue to use their mother language in the home and will support the initiatives of groups like Community Languages Australia who encourage families to teach their children their native languages.

*ABC Radio "Lingua Franca" program 27 October 2007*

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2007/2071046.htm>

For more information about the Lote@home initiative and its range of resources, visit the website <http://www.lote-at-home.com.au/>