

che BELLE SCARPE!

SECONDO ME la
FIDANZATA
lo inganna

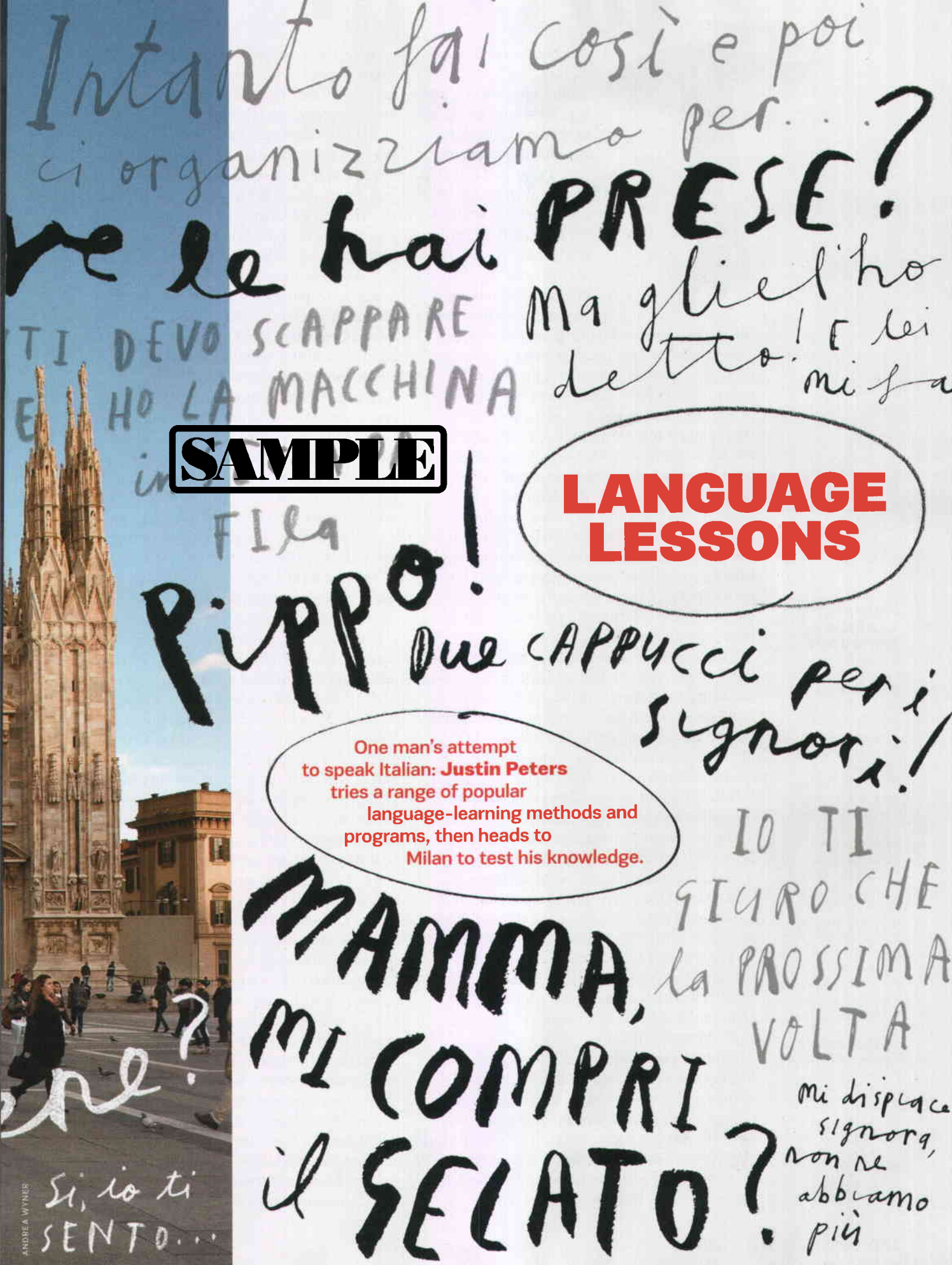
Ma i nostri
in difesa
SONO
SCARSI,
un BRANCO
di ZOPPI

SAMPLE

pronto?

PRONTO?
mi senti?

Ci Mettiamo d'accordo, sto
weekend, va bene



SAMPLE

LANGUAGE LESSONS

One man's attempt to speak Italian: **Justin Peters** tries a range of popular language-learning methods and programs, then heads to Milan to test his knowledge.

MAMMA,
MI COMPRI
IL SELATO?

mi dispiace signora, non ne abbiamo più

Si, io ti SENTO...



SAMPLE

The book made it sound so easy. *Teach Yourself Italian*, it was called, and for two years it sat on my desk, silently mocking my inability to do just that. I'm not sure why I thought an obscure book from 1947 would do the trick; still, I dutifully studied its archaic instructions on railroad etiquette and talking to porters and boatmen.

But after two years of halting, ineffective study, I could barely even remember how to say "porter," let alone command one to carry my steamer trunk. Thanks for nothing, *Teach Yourself Italian*.

The lesson here: learning a language the traditional way is hard—endless vocabulary lists and translation exercises can make anyone's brain glaze over. But now there are numerous programs on the market that promise to make it easy—even fun. From audio courses that eschew tests and memorization to comprehensive online lessons that incorporate games and hilariously stilted chat sessions with bona fide native speakers, there have never been more options for the aspiring polyglot. But do any of them actually work?

I decided to see for myself. I gathered several of the most prominent language-learning programs and tested them out, evaluating them on how well I remembered the lessons and how engaging I found the teaching methods. I followed their instructions, force-feeding my brain verbs, nouns, and unfamiliar accent marks, in hopes of fulfilling my long-deferred dream of learning the Italian language. Then I traveled to Italy and did my best to go native. I practiced for a month before the trip, which I figured would be enough time to get a sense of how these programs work (and whether they work) and to learn enough Italian to hold my own. If not, I could always fall back on enthusiastic grunts and hand gestures.

The grunts came in handy. Basically, you shouldn't trust any system that claims you can actually learn a language in a week, or a month, or any other ludicrously short time span. I had studied very hard before my trip, and my first day in Milan was still a wreck. I was unable to find my way out of a railroad station, was too intimidated to ask for change for a €50 note, and flubbed my first real conversational gambit so badly that my interlocutor switched to English out of pity. Needless to say, in the short term, these programs won't give you fluency unless you have some experience with the language already.

What these programs will do, with varying degrees of efficacy, is give you a baseline familiarity with the Italian language. Each program approaches this task differently. I had the least success with those courses that emphasized situational vocabulary—phrases and words that might prove handy in a restaurant or hotel, for instance. With these, it felt less like I was learning a language and more like I was just memorizing foreign phrases that I would inevitably forget when it came time to use them.

Take the online service Livemocha, which was recently purchased by Rosetta Stone, but which, as of this writing, continues to operate as an independent site. There are plenty of nice, progressive things about it, such as its robust online community of native speakers and language learners, who correct your assignments and occasionally send you brief and confusing e-mails. But at its core, Livemocha is an old-fashioned course, offering a series of traditionally structured lessons that begin with a video of two Italian speakers performing everyday tasks, such as ordering coffee. Then it delves into the vocabulary and themes from the dialogue and concludes with a vocabulary quiz.

I passed all of Livemocha's tests, but I retained few of its teachings and developed little of the conversational flexibility that would make them useful in real life. My first day in Milan, for example, I wandered into an authentic-looking restaurant and fumbled my way through ordering what I thought was some sort of meat-centric entrée. (The menu description had the word *prosciutto* in it, after all.) Instead, I got a molded cauliflower dish called *sformato di cavolfiori*—half soufflé, half custard, 100 percent confusing. Though I had been studying restaurant vocabulary for a month, I had no idea how to say, "I did not expect this cauliflower casserole." So instead I grinned weakly and tried to enjoy it.

I had greater success with the programs that took a more innovative approach to vocabulary building. I sampled the Rosetta Stone Totale online service, and it's hard to imagine a more comprehensive language-learning software suite. You can use it to play language-related computer games, talk with a live instructor over video link, and converse with fellow language students in a chat room. It's extraordinarily immersive.

But those things are all add-ons; the core of the Rosetta Stone experience is its unique instructional method, which teaches grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation through sight and sound. Rosetta Stone displays a series of photographs—a little boy (*un bambino*) and a little girl (*una bambina*), for example. You match the word *bambino* to the boy's picture, and vice versa;

HOW TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

7 Program Options

BBC LANGUAGES

Free online courses that provide introductions to 40 languages. A decent overview of the basics, but they won't take you very far on their own. bbc.com/languages.

LIVEMOCHA

Online course offering a community of native speakers with whom you can exchange messages or talk to in video chats. A good way to test burgeoning language skills in a conversational setting. livemocha.com; modules from \$2.

LIVING LANGUAGE

Live, focused classes taught by an online instructor. The best feature is a mobile app, which offers lessons, games, and "flash cards" for on-the-go learners. livinglanguage.com; from \$99. →

you say *bambino* and *bambina* out loud through a special headset that lets the program judge your pronunciation, and so on. By the end of a unit you'll have developed an abiding hatred for half of the models in the stock photos, but, that aside, the method works. You will remember the words and phrases that Rosetta Stone teaches you.

But it doesn't do as good a job showing you how to use that vocabulary in casual conversation. I can't speak to the program's long-term efficacy, but in the short term at least, Rosetta Stone gave me the bricks to build a house but not enough cement to put it together.

I had the greatest success with the Pimsleur method, a series of audio lessons that barely bothers teaching vocabulary at all. You learn how to speak in sentences with Pimsleur, and you do so organically. You spend each 20- to 30-minute audio lesson focusing on a few words and phrases. The instructor will ask a simple question, something like "How would you say, in Italian, 'I don't understand Italian?'" You answer it, then the instructor asks variations on the question again and again, and you answer again and again. Occasionally he'll ask about words and phrases you've learned in earlier lessons. It's 20 to 30 minutes of constant drilling—and it works. The grammar and sentence structure seep into your long-term memory. To me, it seemed like a very natural way of learning a language.

Most of my successes in Italy came as a result of the Pimsleur method. (A quick note: given that I was testing multiple language-learning methods at once, my findings, needless to say, should in no way be construed as scientific. Follow my layman's advice at your own risk!) I found that,

if you're learning a language for travel purposes, you don't really need a huge vocabulary, but rather the ability to adapt to unpredictable situations. When I got sick halfway through my trip, for instance, I felt comfortable entering a pharmacy and getting the medicine I needed, despite not knowing the words for "nose," "throat," or "medicine."

But I think it's notable that most of these successes came after I had been there several days, immersing myself in the language and the culture. On my second day in Milan, I contacted Lorenzo De Feo, a local tutor I discovered on the Internet, and arranged to meet him at a café in the Palazzo Reale near the Duomo. The lesson proved how 90 minutes of effective, in-person instruction can trump days spent with a computerized course. With a pen and a few sheets of yellow paper, we worked through the basics of Italian conversation: what to say, what not to say, and where and when to say or not say it. It was exactly what I needed.

Obviously, this session didn't make me fluent, either, but De Feo's advice and encouragement made me much more comfortable in real-life situations. This was perhaps the best lesson of all: no matter where you go, confidence and enthusiasm are the better parts of communication. If you enter a new country with a base of learning and an open mind for learning more, you will pick things up as you go, and you will have a better travel experience. I took that lesson to heart.

On my last day in Milan, I moved through the city determined not to be ashamed of my limited language ability. When two Italians stopped and asked me the way to the Duomo, I was able to help them out: "*È proprio là,*" I said confidently, pointing behind me. (I didn't say they were great directions.) When I came across an open-air market in the piazza outside the Santa Maria delle Grazie church, I decided to engage in a little haggling. I went to a tent selling foods from the Alto Adige region of Italy and, fixing my eyes on a delicious-looking Linzer tart, bargained the proprietor down from €3 per slice to €2.50. And as day turned to night, I treated myself to a meal at an obscure little trattoria near the place where I'd been staying—exactly the sort of place I had dreamed about visiting during my failed two-year odyssey with the *Teach Yourself Italian* book. As I entered, the host sized me up. "English menu?" he asked. "No," I said, without stumbling once. "I speak a little Italian." +

MICHEL THOMAS METHOD

Audio-based course that uses a question-and-answer process to teach the basics of conversation without rote memorization. It's the most entertaining of the courses sampled, but it doesn't deliver on its extravagant claims to effectiveness. michelthomas.com; from \$108.

PIMSLEUR

This series of audio lessons focuses on embedding the language in the learner's long-term memory, and excels in teaching conversational flexibility. While vocabulary building isn't emphasized, users should be able to hold a basic conversation by the end of a 30-lesson unit. pimsleur.com; from \$120.

ROCKET LANGUAGES

An online audio course that teaches situational vocabulary and phrases that may be needed in a pinch. Instructors are engaging, but too much banter between hosts cuts into practice time. Still, it's useful to consult for a last-minute vocab refresher before walking into unfamiliar situations. rocketlanguages.com; from \$99.

ROSETTA STONE

This extremely comprehensive program hits your brain from all angles. In addition to the basic course work, its Totale software suite offers one-on-one sessions with an instructor via Skype. If you don't make significant progress while using Rosetta Stone, you're doing something wrong. rosettastone.com; from \$179.—J.P.

