



Vision, courage and teamwork – our journey of growth with Cambridge

Elisamarzia Vitaliano, Principal at Istituto Comprensivo Nitti



Istituto Comprensivo Nitti in Rome (IC Nitti) is a public school for students aged 6 to 14. The school welcomes over 1000 pupils and offers an educational pathway that includes primary school (ages 6 to 10) and lower secondary school (ages 11 to 14).

Principal Elisamarzia Vitaliano introduced the Cambridge Pathway at the school to support students to learn English, giving them the opportunity to improve their linguistic skills in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and to develop new opportunities internationally.

Here, Principal Vitaliano shares her experience of this approach.

You have been working with Cambridge for several years to improve your students' English skills and create new international opportunities. How did you achieve this?

Our motivation to offer the Cambridge Pathway dates back a long way. We are a relatively young comprehensive school, which was established in the 2012 to 2013 academic year, following the merger of a primary school and a lower secondary school.

Below is a summary of the most significant steps in our journey, focusing on English language development.

2012 to 2013 – First goal: Identify our strengths and vision

In our first year, our priorities were to:

- compare the different approaches to education and teaching of the two schools – primary and lower secondary – and highlight their strengths; and
- build a common identity.



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2013 to 2014 – Second goal: Develop English language skills

We found that developing English language skills was a key strength of the lower secondary school, based on:

- consistency in teaching methods across the teaching staff;
- training with native speakers (those whose first language is English) for Italian teachers of English; and
- promoting Cambridge English Qualifications for students with particular abilities.

As a result, we introduced language certification (formal recognition of students' language skills) in primary school as well. Educational planning included creating departments to define a curriculum that is in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

2014 to 2015 – Third goal: Strengthen English skills to improve continuity in teaching

To strengthen English skills and improve continuity between primary and lower secondary education, we put the following measures in place.

- Introduced our Native Speaker Project in primary school.
- This project included three hours of English study with a native speaker in the 40-hour weekly schedule. The overall framework for English was as follows.

Year 1: one hour of English with an Italian teacher plus three hours with a native speaker

Year 2: two hours of English with an Italian teacher plus three hours with a native speaker

Years 3, 4 and 5: three hours of English with an Italian teacher plus three hours with a native speaker

- Strengthened how both parts of the school shared best practice by creating an English department that included Italian teachers of English and native speakers. The main goal was to encourage the primary and lower secondary schools to work together and develop an effective teaching model.
- Analysed student enrolment data for upper secondary schools. We looked at students' choices after lower secondary school and found that most of our students enrolled in Cambridge-affiliated high schools in the area.

2015 to 2016 – Fourth goal: Become a Cambridge International School

After considering all these factors and discussing them at the Teachers' Council, in June 2016 we decided to apply for accreditation as a Cambridge International School for lower secondary education.

After gaining accreditation, we told parents of Year 1 students about the Cambridge Lower Secondary programme and invited them to choose this pathway for their children. A total of 97 out of 154 parents responded positively.



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2016 to 2017 – Fifth goal: Introduce Cambridge classes in more subjects

In 2016, four Cambridge classes were launched for the first year of lower secondary school.

In the same academic year, a pilot programme was also introduced in Year 1 of primary school.

Two extra hours of English with native speakers were also added for all Year 2 and Year 3 primary classes, following parents' requests, which were immediately approved by the school board.

2025 to 2026 – Where are we now?

Today, almost all families choose the Cambridge Pathway when enrolling their children. Results from the Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione (INVALSI) English test show high scores for our students. Every year, several students are chosen to take CEFR Level B1 and B2 certification exams.

As one of the first national schools in Italy, it was a challenge to adopt the Lower Secondary programme from Cambridge. We embraced this challenge with enthusiasm and extra work, driven by the need to improve our students' future educational and career opportunities through a substantial improvement in English – no longer optional, but essential.

We can now offer a state middle school programme with six hours of English (three with native speakers) compared with the traditional three hours. Our Italian teachers' communication skills are enriched and expanded through contact with native English speakers, and our students benefit from highly skilled and up-to-date educators.

What challenges did you meet along the way?

We overcame many challenges thanks to a team that supported an innovative idea!

The main difficulties were:

- **internally**, with a small number of subject teachers (who felt the hours dedicated to the Cambridge curriculum affected their own teaching time) and some curriculum English teachers (who saw native speakers as 'intruders'); and
- **externally**, with some parents not fully convinced of the need for innovation.

What advice would you give to a school leader starting to work with Cambridge?

I have already mentioned the importance of having a strong team, but a team needs a good captain who:

- leads with a long-term vision of the school's role in a constantly evolving society, characterised by increasingly complex educational challenges;
- creates a positive culture of innovation that allows the school to test and learn from new initiatives;
- supports both curriculum English teachers and native English speakers so they work together in dedicated departments;
- adapts the English syllabus model to the Italian school system;
- presents the Cambridge programme to parents as a key part of the school's annual educational plan); and
- builds a network with local schools offering the Cambridge Upper Secondary programme to create a smooth path to future learning opportunities.



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How would you summarise your journey with Cambridge?

To become a Cambridge school, you need to show that your teachers are motivated and organised, united by team spirit and mutual respect. You need to be able to anticipate difficulties, identify them when they arise and deal with them promptly. This requires additional training, internal meetings with native speakers and using the excellent online training tools on the Cambridge website.

Establishing the Cambridge programmes in maths and English as a second language requires careful planning. They are structured differently from Italian programmes over the three years, so you must carefully read and study the syllabus and schemes of work, compare them with your own plans and combine them into a single framework for the three-year cycle. This requires effort and commitment from the curriculum teacher working alongside the native English speaker, who becomes a partner in planning and teaching. Partnering with native

English speakers brings new perspectives that enrich our curriculum teachers' professionalism, while fostering language skills not only in students but also in our curriculum teachers through the regular use of English.

When organising the three-year middle school curriculum, it is essential to remember that the first year is a **foundation year**, during which students – often beginners in the language – must learn, understand and use vocabulary, communication skills and grammatical structures that they often do not yet know and that traditional classes cover in the first two years. So, the Italian programme needs to be condensed and completed in a shorter time (in our case, we completed two years' worth of content in one), and students need to use English constantly, both in lessons with the native speaker and with the curriculum teacher. This will help them learn essential listening comprehension and speaking skills sooner.

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