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2008

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Publication Details

This conference paper was originally published as Leone, S, The use of new technologies in advanced Italian classes, Proceedings of the Emerging Technologies Conference, University of Wollongong, 18-21 June 2008.

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This conference paper is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/etc08/14

emerging technologies
CONFERENCE
Supporting a Learning Community

The use of new technologies in advanced Italian classes

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Introduction

The widespread embracing of new technologies in education has been mediated by a necessary process of innovation in methodology both in teaching and learning.

The benefits of incorporating online elements in face-to-face classes have been multifaceted: more flexible customised and self-paced learning environments; the capacity to increase students' engagement, to enhance critical analysis and reflection and to promote the social construction of knowledge as well as the creation of virtual collaborative learning spaces; efficiency in managing contents, people and communication.

Technology added value stands in improving the learning experience, making it more authentic, facilitating the transfer of skills from the classroom to the workplace. However, the point of departure can't be technology, but learning. The benefits arising from the introduction of ICTs in the learning curriculum have to be evaluated within the learning experience, the usefulness of learning and its enhancements. A simple access to contents doesn't make students learn. They learn if they are motivated, if what they are learning has a relevance to their lives, if they can use what they are learning in real life situations, if they are aware of the benefits gained through the effort of learning.

Consequently, major issues are: how do people learn and how is learning enhanced and/or affected when ICTs are integrated into the learning environment? How does the teacher's role change when technology is used? How does the learner's way of working change when such technology is used? Which learning strategies are useful in technology-enhanced environments? What are the changes and the expectations when conventional class activities are, partially or completely, shifted into a technology-rich learning environment? How should the learner's efforts in learning with technology be supported?

This paper analyses the experience of integrating new technologies and tools into the third year of Italian language and culture (ITAL351) at the University of Wollongong and demonstrates how they can be easily and efficiently incorporated into meaningful online learning tasks, without making light of the difficulties which have occurred.

Theoretical framework

Over recent years Italian research literature has underlined a need for a new theoretical interpretation of teaching and learning methods in tertiary education (Annacontini, 2007; Avallone, 2006; Catarsi, 2007; Colapietro, 2007; Cusmai, 2007; Marconato, 2003) to support the new educational models that are being introduced in the light of the technology-enhanced language learning paradigm:

- flexible delivery, with a modular approach (multiple options for scheduling, location and modes of learning);
- increasing self-directed learning, to suit individual learning goals and needs;
- constructivist learning methods, including experiential learning and problem based learning;
- the teacher acting as an expert and a facilitator, providing a well-designed learning environment to promote active and involving learning experiences.

Italian researchers (Alberici, Catarsi, Colapietro & Loiodice, 2007; Varisco, 2002) have highlighted the necessity to look at the learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Jonassen & Land, 2000; von Glasersfeld, 1998) as the suitable framework to support an effective implementation of new technologies in tertiary education. The passage from the traditional instruction paradigm, in which the time of learning is held constant and learning varies, to the learning paradigm allows to give emphasis to the learner's needs and to the learning process, rather than to the teacher as a repository of knowledge and to teaching itself. In this context, the teacher is increasingly becoming an interpreter of strategic aims; the educator's professionalism is widening from knowledge transfer towards an overall view of organizational development and human resources (Mezzadri, 2001).

The mission is to produce learning, to create powerful learning environments and to elicit student's discovery and construction of knowledge (Cusmai, 2007; Mezzadri, 2001). Success is measured by student learning and achievement outcomes, learning growth and the quality of arousing students' interest.

Although this type of provision is emerging in response to a new model in know-how construction, it nevertheless poses new problems related to the synthesis of blocks of knowledge, to the design of well-constructed education project on the part of the individual (Jonassen & Land, 2000).

New learning environments are focused on the individual and on small groups, supported by new data communication and the Internet. ICT is enhancing interaction in learning and teaching processes and a new psychological approach is being developed (Anacontini, 2007.

In this perspective, numerous experiments have recently been conducted. In many cases experiences haven't been carried out in response to shared strategic choices (Marconato, 2003; Marconato & Litturi, 2005), but rather for individual teachers' interest in exploring new teaching relationships, or in order to improve communication with students, facilitate the distribution of material, create links between split campuses.

Blended learning systems, intended as the combination of face-to-face instruction with computer mediated one (Calvani & Rotta, 2000), have been adopted. According to many researchers (Calvani & Rotta, 2000; Cusmai, 2007; Mezzadri, 2001; Trentin, 2001), the most common reason for adopting blended learning is that it combines the best of both environments. In particular, they have underlined that blended learning approaches increase the level of active learning strategies, peer to peer learning strategies and learner centered strategies used. It provides a balance between flexible learning options and the high touch, human interactive experience. In addition, blended learning systems provide an opportunity for reaching a large, globally dispersed audience in a short period of time with consistent, semi-personalised content delivery.

Although there is extensive research done on blended learning, there is little practice reported or research conducted into its application in learning Italian.

New technologies and language learning

In the educational landscape, language learning seems to have been more receptive than other fields to the application of information and communication technologies to face-to-face classes, thanks to the dynamics which characterize the subject and to the communicative approach currently used (Mezzadri, 2001). Moreover, today's learners are technologically aware and use ICTs to interact socially (Trentin, 2001). However, if the information and communication technology curriculum integration offers powerful tools to enhance language learning, in terms of greater emphasis upon flexibility, transferability, individualisation, modularisation, mobility and interaction, it also creates critical points which require an attentive evaluation to make the impact on teaching and learning significant. Which tools should we use and for what purpose? Can we exploit these technologies to increase the level and quality of interaction in the language classroom? How can we overcome the new methodological challenges we are facing? Many language teachers are asking themselves these questions (Pachler, 2002).

New roles for students, teachers and knowledge are being identified. A coherent framework should include the adoption of the constructivist paradigm within the communicative approach in language teaching/learning (the construction of activity-based learning environments, the use of new technologies as cognitive tools, cooperative learning and assisted self-learning) (Chapelle, 2001; Cusmai, 2007; Ellis, 1999; Jonhassen & Land, 2000).

Providing students with contemporary, up-to-date learning experiences/authentic material in language learning is a current challenge for language educators. Undeniably, much commercially available material, especially education material for Italian learning, is dated or presents language in an idealised and decontextualised way (Rizzi & Absalom, 2007). Audio/video-streaming provides a large number of resources, on an extremely wide range of topics, which may enrich contents and resolve these issues. Teaching and learning materials can be easily downloaded from selected websites and are accessible in podcasting. Moreover, students can improve their communication skills in the foreign language with native speakers, within authentic socializing contexts, by joining virtual communities

and using one-to-one emails, mailing lists, forums and chats to interact.

Background

Italian Studies at the University of Wollongong

The motivations which lead an increasing number of students to enrol in Italian Studies every year at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Wollongong have not a common matrix. The results of the language survey usually carried out among new students (both in first and second year) show that they decide to study Italian language and culture for various reasons, more than in the past. In particular, for the descendants of Italians who are resident in Australia studying Italian means first of all looking for their roots and their families' cultural identity. Other reasons include general culture, tourism, education, work, and human relationships. On the whole, these students' motivation appears strong.

The Italian program at UoW offers a broad study of the language, literature and culture and has lately been supported by the adoption of some new ICT tools with the aim of enhancing students' language skills through a more aware and active learning process.

METHODOLOGY

The blended pedagogical model of Italian Language and Culture classes

Italian Language and Culture in third year (ITAL351 and ITAL352) aims to achieve a B-2 (independent user) to C-1 (proficient user) competence level, in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Modern Languages and lasts a total of two academic semesters at the university, with a compulsory face-to-face weekly three-hour lecture. Students enrolled in ITAL351 were seven, a small group, but a suitable number of people to start the experience. The blended learning pedagogical model combined:

1. learners' independent work with CALL tasks and materials for developing language skills in an online web-based interactive multimedia environment;
2. online and face-to-face tutoring by the Italian native speaker teacher-tutor who was able to see students' progress at firsthand and write a feedback on the language tasks carried out. Learners' assignments included oral and written works as products of computer supported individual and collaborative learning tasks;
3. face-to-face classes with the Italian native speaker teacher-tutor, which were entirely held in Italian. These sessions encompassed communication-based activities designed to give learners practice in the main thematic, intercultural, functional, grammatical, and vocabulary-related topics of the online contents. The face-to-face classes served as an opportunity to check learning outcomes, to provide feedback and to emotionally support learners helping them build their personal confidence to feel comfortable and self-assured speaking the language.

The web-based interactive multimedia for learning Italian

The web-based interactive multimedia gathers all the CALL materials, task-based activities, and ICT tools learners were provided with at the beginning of the semester (Autumn 2008). Learners were handed out the subject outline where explicit objectives, contents references and guidelines of what they were expected to do to achieve their language learning goals were defined. In particular, the outline contained:

- a list of Italian language coursewares (www.bbc.co.uk/languages/italian/lj/; www.bbc.co.uk/languages/italian/issimo; www.italica.rai.it/lingua/corso.htm), Italian national broadcasters' sites (www.rai.tv/mptvindex, www.radio.rai.it/radio3/podcast), international broadcaster site for Italian communities in Australia (www.radio.sbs.com.au), Italian online newspapers and webtvs (www.repubblica.it, www.larepubblicatv.it);
- a multimedia module about the contemporary Italian writer Alessandro Baricco (the author's short story "Seta", the brand-new cinematic version with the same title, an audio interview to Baricco drawn from Fahrenheit/Radio 3, the students' interaction in the community of the site of Baricco's fans www.oceanomare.com, a video interview to Baricco drawn from www.larepubblicatv.it; the audiobook "Novecento", a play in monologue, later issued in a film which was part of the module, "La leggenda del pianista sull'oceano", by the director Giuseppe Tornatore that the students had already appreciated last year; finally a concert and a video interview to Stefano Bollani, Italian pianist – as Baricco is - known worldwide);
- four language and cultural modules exploiting the text book.

Each module included language learning activities and tasks which provided the students with opportunities to learn by doing, to develop autonomy, to work at their pace exploiting multimedia contents and online synchronous (chat) and asynchronous communication (one-to-one emails, mailing lists, forums). Ongoing activities and assignments were assessed on the basis of interaction, participation, fluency, vocabulary and grammar appropriateness.

The theoretical framework of reference draws from cognitive, sociocognitive and interactionists' perspectives (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Cusmai, 2007; Ellis, 1999; Jonassen & Land, 2000; Varisco, 2002; von Glasersfeld, 1998), methodological principles for task-based language teaching in distance learning (Avallone, 2006; Calvani & Rotta, 2000; Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2004), and a range of teaching methodologies for networkbased language teaching and e-learning pedagogy (Absalom & Marden Pais, 2004; Catalano, 2000; Chen, & Looi, 2007; Pachler, 2002; Rizzi & Absalom, 2007).

Learners were exposed to foreign language input through audiovisual material depicting real characters which allowed for multimodal content delivery to reach heterogeneous learning styles. Students interacted with Italian communities in communicative tasks which engaged them in socio-cognitive processes and gave them opportunities to be in touch with a real audience.

Special attention was given to issues of online pedagogy, such as providing a more human-like dimension for positive and corrective feedback, giving students the sense of belonging to a learning community, and helping them develop their self-confidence as they worked on their language skills through individual practice, communication - both through CMC and face-to-face- and collaboration.

Implementation

Before the beginning of the first semester 2008, I designed an elearning environment for the third year of Italian Studies to be implemented in eLearning space in the UoW site, but a software incompatibility, which would have compromised the smooth applicability and the effectiveness of the plan, forced a different method of delivery to be adopted. Moreover, in the recent past, those students in Italian Studies who lived on campus had experienced difficulties in downloading educational material because of the poor Internet connection.

A successful alternative consisted in collecting the authentic material selected on a cd and in distributing a copy of it to each student. They still needed an Internet connection to work with these contents and to use CMC tools, but at least they wouldn't have had problems in downloading. The students' initial frustrating impact with an intense use of new technologies was overcome and in the following steps they appeared to be involved and motivated.

In week one, learners were handed out the subject outline. I illustrated language, cognitive and cross-curriculum objectives, contents references and guidelines of what the students were expected to do to achieve their language learning goals working with the CALL materials and the ICT tools proposed. At this stage, part of the lesson was dedicated to the homogenization of the students' ICT knowledge and to the integration of the necessary basics.

Most of the students were unfamiliar with cooperative learning and with social interaction, as part of their cultural background, and they were at their very first experience of online community. This required a thorough and sensitive construction of an emotionally favourable learning environment to reduce their affective barriers and support learning, through scaffolding, mediation, focus on achievements, positive reinforcement, peer assessment and self assessment.

The blended learning pedagogical model was implemented on a compulsory face-to-face weekly three-hour lecture, on additional optional e-tutoring for an average of two hours per week and on an average of four hours per week of self-learning, online and offline. From week two to week ten, all the planned activities were carried out successfully, students were more and more motivated and self-confident and ongoing assessment showed an outstanding improvement in their language skills, interaction and participation.

At the end of week ten, a survey was submitted to the students to have their feedback about the impact of the use of new technologies in Italian classes. The survey consisted of five open ended and one multiple choice questions aiming to highlight the overall impact on the participants, the difficulties arisen, the advantages of adopting new

technologies in Italian classes, the outcomes in terms of creation of networks and cooperative learning. The results are reported below.

Outcomes

The students' overall perception appears to be extremely positive, despite initial difficulties.

Technical problems occurred in downloading the video streaming software and with firewalls. Since none of the students was familiar with troubleshooting, they pointed out that carrying out the tasks became extremely difficult, quite frustrating, and it required outside assistance. Sometimes their Internet connection was slow or unavailable, and this was time consuming.

A second set of difficulties for some of the participants arose in understanding a lot of the authentic material promptly, as they were used to standard Italian in a classroom setting. However, they stated that technology was essential in giving them direct access to the Italian language and that eventually the use of authentic audio and video streams bettered their listening skills and provided them with a deeper understanding of Italian culture, much more than the textbook cds had done before.

On the whole, they appreciated the challenge of being exposed to a richer and more demanding learning environment, a new learning environment for them. Learners defined as "challenging" learning how to use new technologies, but definitely worth it for the know-how they have acquired. In their opinion, "it was just a matter of getting used to a different way of learning".

They judged it as "a very useful know-how, with a great impact: a broader perspective on topics, an easier way to communicate and collaborate ideas and points of view". They felt to have learned more about the Internet and online interaction.

All the students were already familiar with the Internet, a few were already aware of the use of technologies in a different manner and context (podcasts, forums and communities), but still, before this course, some preferred not to use technology. Only two of the seven students had had previous experiences, and with WebCT eLearning space, which they rated respectively good (since having access to the lecture slides and material provided by the teacher "is fantastic", but there was a lack of communication because many students didn't really seem to make use of the forum) and excellent. One of them had had prior familiarization with listening to interviews streamed from the Internet and she rated it excellent because she was able to learn more about the topic immediately. In their opinion, the advantages of being connected to the Internet during Italian classes allowed them to easily access different language tools, further information and resources, as a complement to the contents proposed in class. Classes resulted more interesting, easy to understand the different topics, easier to communicate with other peers.

At the end of the ten weeks of work with new ICT tools, they felt a little more at ease with technology and they realised that it is vital to keep up with technological advances and be able to use them in order to effectively work.

> It was an interactive experience, and enabled us to learn in varied ways which kept our interest. It introduced us to new things and widened our ideas of what is available and useful in a classroom. We were provided with an opportunity to interact with not only our classmates, but with other people around the globe. It was also accessible at home and you could submit it with the click of a finger. The technologies were a great idea!

Discussion

Podcasting, the use of captured streamed audio from the Internet and the many forms of innovative technology that are available for teachers to use to build community are still unfamiliar territory in Italian teaching and learning environments. The growth in the production and use of mp3 players (especially amongst young consumers) is still not fully recognised by most higher education providers; moreover, technology is often considered as the only solution to a still partially rigid and remote education system. I agree with this concept and I believe in the implementation of instructional technology as a profitable way for students to acquire a deeper sense of the language and culture they are studying, but I also concur that the systematic use of new technologies in language learning should be accompanied by preliminary research, testing, training and top-down support. The adoption of the latest technology cannot alone carry any durable, regular and efficient improvement to teaching and learning. Noticeably the use of emerging technologies needs to be supported by a marked pedagogical change in which teachers' skills and role need to be redefined. Teachers need to develop intercultural and technological skills that represent a substantial change to the more traditional teaching and learning system.

The results obtained from the integration of new ICT tools into face-to-face Italian classes show an important positive impact on different aspects: the learners' language skills, especially in listening and speaking, management of ICT tools, satisfaction levels with the contents proposed, as well as on cross-curriculum objectives such as developing autonomy, building learning confidence, creating networks, promoting collaboration, a positive attitude and motivation towards learning a foreign language and about its culture, results which come to support the effectiveness of the blended-learning model implemented. My next goal is to implement the program in first and second year. The first objective is to evaluate the technical usability and then the effectiveness of the pedagogical model in such a context.

Conclusion

The implementation of new technologies in education has engendered a deep innovation in teaching and learning processes, in language learning in particular, for its dynamic and communicative approach. However, if the ICT curriculum integration offers powerful tools to enhance learning, in terms of greater emphasis upon flexibility, transferability, individualisation, modularisation and mobility, it also creates critical points in terms of the impact of new educational models that are being introduced in the light of the technology-enhanced language learning paradigm.

The analysis of the outcomes of a blended learning strategy which has recently been adopted in advanced Italian classes at the University of Wollongong has highlighted a few initial technical difficulties; on the other hand, important positive results have been obtained: improvement of the learners' language skills, students' management of ICT tools, satisfaction levels with the contents proposed, as well as on cross-curriculum objectives such as developing autonomy, building learning confidence, creating networks, promoting collaboration, a positive attitude and motivation towards learning a foreign language and about its culture, results which come to support the effectiveness of the blended-learning model implemented. In the students' words, "the technologies were a great idea!"

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Cite paper as: Leone, S. (2008). The use of new technologies in advanced Italian classes. In I. Olney, G. Lefoe, J. Mantei, & J. Herrington (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Second Emerging Technologies Conference 2008* (pp. 120-129). Wollongong: University of Wollongong.

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