Computer-Mediated Communication and the Italian News: an Integrated Approach to Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract: This paper describes a project which integrated email communication between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) and the Italian daily broadcast *telegiornale (tg)* in the context of foreign language learning. For one semester students of Italian at the University of Wollongong regularly watched the Italian *telegiornale* and met once a week to discuss it with the instructor and the rest of the class. As part of the project learners participated in one-to-one email interactions with selected NS of Italian and discussed a range of topics presented in the news. This paper discusses some of the key characteristics of the project and the implications of this integrated approach in terms of learners' motivation and participation.

Introduction

One of the main limitations that learners of Italian have to face in Australia is the physical distance from the target language country and the lack of direct experience of engaging in meaningful, authentic communication with NS living in Italy. This is especially problematic in a context where the majority of learners may not have the opportunity to travel to or spend a reasonable amount of time in the country where the target language is spoken. This sense of isolation can ultimately cause a decrease in motivation, as learners may feel that they are unable to create a meaningful connection with the target language culture. The need to address the problem of limited direct contact with the target language culture and with Italian NS, especially at post beginner level, provided a reason for considering email as a means of communication with Italian NS and for using the Italian *telegiornale* as a stimulus for the interactions.

Over the past fifteen years, the use of email communication has been successfully integrated into the teaching and learning of foreign languages at university level, creating an interactive, collaborative and student-centred learning environment which offers real communicative goals and improves language skills (Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Chapelle, 2001; Leahy, 2001). Several studies have described the advantages associated with the use of email communication between NS and NNS of a language (Beavois & Eledge, 1996; Gray & Stockwell, 1998; Fedderholt, 2001; Roed, 2003). Stockwell (2003, p.38) summarises these advantages based on previous research. These include increases in motivation, reduction of anxiety, increased L2 proficiency, increased participation and development of learner autonomy, opportunities for authentic communication with a real audience and enhanced cultural awareness.

Research has highlighted the importance of pedagogically sound approaches to intercultural email communication and has indicated that the activities should be carefully designed and integrated into the language curriculum (Warschauer, 1995; Kern, 1998; Müeller-Hartmann, 2000a; O'Dowd, 2001). In his study on the role of tasks in promoting intercultural learning in electronic learning networks, Warschauer (2001) claims that there is a significant difference in educational outcome depending on whether email exchanges are incorporated in the classroom as an add-on process or an integrated process. He comments that the results are particularly beneficial when the email activities are fully integrated into the ongoing structure of assessment and students classroom interaction (Warschauer, 2001, p 210).

A number of studies have described email activities that are not limited to the exchange of personal information between students but also provide participants with the opportunity to be involved in discussion tasks with a specific focus on literature (Müller-Hartmann, 2000a), history (Kern, 1996) or current affairs (Chen, 1998). These studies have confirmed that the type of activities and tasks selected have an important effect on the nature of email communication and that goal-oriented tasks that allow for interaction and collaboration are more beneficial in terms of motivating students and encouraging their participation and involvement in the learning process.

Research into the pedagogical uses of television programs have highlighted the linguistic and cultural significance of the Italian *telegiornale,* and have described certain aspects of the *tg* which are highly relevant to a teaching and learning context. (Balboni, 2000; Diadori, 2000; Losi, 2001; Absalom, 2002). Balboni (2000) focuses on the value of the *telegiornali* as important cultural documents that can contribute to increased learners' motivation and interest in the target language culture. Losi (2001) provides a detailed description of the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of the Italian news and recommends incorporating the *telegiornale* into the language classroom to encourage oral production and stimulate discussion of relevant issues. Absalom (2002), in his report on a pilot project aimed at integrating the *tg* into an Italian third year university subject, describes it as an authentic and always up-to-date resource that allows students to improve their linguistic skills and broaden their knowledge of modern Italian culture as well as reflect on a number of culturally significant issues. He also stresses the importance of meaningfully integrating the *telegiornale* into the structure of the language course and allowing students to actively participate in the learning process.

In the specific context of this project the *telegiornale* not only provided an authentic representation of contemporary Italian language and culture but also served as a stimulus for discussion both in class and through the email on a range of topics relevant to Italian contemporary society. The *tg* also provided students with the opportunity to construct their learning experience (see Laurillard 2002:67-69) by means of negotiating the context of the virtual interactions with their NS correspondents.

Method

Context

In semester 2, 2003 I taught an intermediate Italian language course at the University of Wollongong. The course was divided into thirteen weeks of four contact hours per week. Within each week of teaching, two hours were devoted to develop students' language proficiency and two hours to an exploration and discussion of issues presented in the Italian *telegiornale*. For twelve weeks, both teacher and students watched the Wednesday edition of the *telegiornale*. Students who were not able to watch the televised news had the option of logging on to the Italian web site http://www.rai.it and watch the online version of the news. All students were encouraged to use the Internet to gather information on the relevant items presented in the news. The class discussion took place every Thursday and was led by two or three students selected by the instructor the previous week.

The email discussions took place from week 2 of the semester and consisted of a series of interactions with selected Italian native speakers living in Italy on relevant items presented on the Italian news. Students were required to complete at least 10 dialogic exchanges in the target language during the course of the semester.

Subjects

In the present study 16 second-year students of Italian were assigned to 16 Italian NS. The students, twelve female and four male, had all completed at least three semesters of formal Italian language study either at university level or at secondary school level and had therefore developed a good level of competence in the target language.

The NS participants agreed to participate in the project on a voluntary basis were selected by the instructor on the basis of their personal characteristics (including age group, gender, profession and interests) and their willingness to actively participate in the exchange and interact with their Australian partners. Eight of the NS participants were high school students aged between 17 and 19 and eight were adults between 25 and 40 years of age.

Key characteristics of the project

Choice of participants

In one of his studies on sustainability of email exchanges, Stockwell (2003) indicates that, in order for students to benefit from participating in the interactions, the email sequences should be continued for the entire duration of the semester. He also argues that, when communication is engaging for both participants, the likelihood that interaction continues for a longer period of time increases considerably. Research also suggests that establishing a positive personal relationship with the correspondents is vital in order to maintain a viable electronic partnership (Müller-Hartmann, 2000a; Belz, 2002).

In order to increase the likelihood of sustained interactions and continuity throughout the semester and to keep participants motivated and interested in the exercise, the NS correspondents were chosen and matched with their NNS partners on the basis of their potential to carry out meaningful and engaging communication. Rather than limiting the selection of participants to high school or young university students, it seemed appropriate to involve in the exchanges a broader cohort of NS. One of the reasons behind this decision was that, among the 16 Australian participants, there were a number of mature age students who expressed the desire to communicate with NS belonging to a similar age group with compatible interests and attitudes.

Themes

As Laurillard (2002:67-69) points out, an important aspect of meaningful learning relates to the active participation of students, not only in learning but also in constructing the environment for their learning. In the case under examination, students negotiated the content of the interactions with their correspondents and selected relevant issues for the class discussions with little intervention from the instructor aside from the requirement that the topics discussed were relevant to the Italian current situation.

At the beginning of the project students were provided with a list of guidelines and suggestions for composing and interpreting messages as well as various examples on what was considered to be successful participation. However, the fact that the choice of topics to discuss was left up to the individual student allowed for greater flexibility and spontaneity. Participants had the freedom to focus the discussion on a range of topics that were not limited to a specific list of pre-determined items but significantly covered their interests, experiences and opinions.

Integration

The integration of intercultural email communication and the Italian TV news into this subject combined the benefits associated with the use of both media as a support to other teaching and learning activities. It provided students with maximum stimulation and with the opportunity to listen to different voices and reflect on different perspectives as well as engage and connect with the target language culture at various levels.

It also assisted them develop a greater variety of linguistic and analytical skills. As well as regularly watching the *telegiornale* students were required to reflect on and discuss specific issues arising from the broadcast in two different contexts: the written context of email communication with NS and the oral context of the class presentations and discussions.

Results and Conclusion

In order to find out about students' attitudes in relation to the Italian *telegiornale* and the email discussions, I administered two questionnaires (see Angelo & Cross, 1993; Absalom, 2002). A first questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of the semester while the second was administered during the final week of the course. A number of comments revealed an increase in confidence in the use of Italian and an increase in motivation for learning the language and learning about the culture. Students reported that before the course they felt anxious about discussing issues presented in the *telegiornale* in front of the class and with their Italian correspondents. They also commented that the *telegiornale* was often hard to understand because of the speed of spoken Italian and because they were not familiar with the context of the news.

At the end of the semester, students reported a change in their attitude towards the *telegiornale* and the discussions both in class and with their correspondents and generally proved to be more confident and motivated. They observed that the routine of watching and discussing the *telegiornale* greatly improved their language skills and noted that at the end of the

semester they were able to understand more and express themselves more effectively both in oral and written form. They also commented that writing to the Italian NS and analysing their answers helped them becoming familiar with the topics discussed in class and encouraged them to participate more actively and effectively in the oral discussions. Students also appreciated the opportunity to communicate with partners that had similar interests and belonged to a similar age group. Most students reported to be able to establish a positive rapport with their partners and continued the correspondence after the end of the project.

The analysis of the data collected shows a general increase in the amount of text produced by the NNS and in the variety of topics discussed over the duration of the exercise. Contributions generally became more sustained and wider ranging in content with messages that invited dialogue rather than just simply request information and provide answers to the questions posed by the NS. As students became more familiar with the topics and the cultural context of the *telegiornale*, they also started to develop a greater interest in current events in Italy and to participate more actively in the oral discussions.

The integrated approach detailed in this paper had a positive effect on students' motivation towards the subject and contributed to an increase in confidence and participation over the duration of the exercise. Supporting students' learning through the use of different media and integrated activities represented a significant added value. It not only enhanced students' understanding of modern Italian culture and society and improved their language and analytical skill, but also assisted them in becoming independent and confident learners.

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