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Dossier: Current Research Approaches in Humanities through the Eyes of Czech Linguists (2)

Dossier: Innovación para el multilingüismo: E-LENGUA



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**USING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION
TECHNOLOGY IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND
TEACHING: FROM TEACHER EDUCATION TO
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

**EL USO DE LAS TIC EN LA ENSEÑANZA-APRENDIZAJE DE
ITALIANO: DE LA EDUCACIÓN CENTRADA EN EL PROFESOR
A LAS ACTIVIDADES DE CLASE**

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RESUMEN:

Este artículo describe las actividades educativas llevadas a cabo por la unidad de investigación de la Universidad de Bolonia implicadas en el proyecto E-LENGUA. Este proyecto se centra en el uso de las Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (TIC) en la enseñanza de italiano en clases multilingües. El artículo se inicia con una descripción del contexto educativo italiano, caracterizado por la presencia creciente de hablantes no nativos de italiano, teniendo en consideración que las necesidades lingüísticas de los estudiantes con diferentes trasfondos sociolingüísticos suponen un reto significativo para los profesores. Las TIC pueden ser útiles para afrontar esos retos, aunque hay opiniones enfrentadas en relación con su uso en el aula, a partir del desarrollo del sistema de actividades docentes e implementadas en las clases. Estos estudios pretenden examinar el uso de las TIC como un recurso educativo para elaborar guías extrapolables para unas mejores prácticas del sistema educativo italiano.

ABSTRACT:

This paper describes the in-service teacher education activities carried out by the research unit from the University of Bologna involved in the European project E-LENGUA. This project focuses on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in teaching Italian in the multilingual classroom. The paper opens with a description of the Italian educational context, characterised by an increasing presence of non-native speakers of Italian. Taking into consideration the linguistic needs of students with different sociolinguistic backgrounds is a significant challenge for teachers. ICTs may be helpful for teachers facing such challenges, even though there are contrasting opinions about their usage in the classroom. The paper presents some case studies on the use of ICTs in the classroom, developed within in-service teacher education activities and implemented in the classroom. These studies aim to examine the use of ICTs as a teaching resource in order to elaborate generalizable guidelines for best practices in the Italian school system.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Italiano como lengua extranjera, aula multilingüe, TIC para enseñanza de lenguas, gamificación

KEYWORDS:

Italian as a second language, multilingual classroom, ICTs for language teaching, gamification

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1. The challenges of linguistic education in Italy

In the last few decades, the Italian school system faced an increasing presence of students whose first language is different from Italian, the language of instruction. In the year 2015/2016, the number of non-native speaker students was 815.000, corresponding to 9% of the scholastic population; (this percentage is significantly higher in primary education). The increase of non-native speaker students in the Italian school system has been slow, but constant. In fact, the percentage of non-native speaker students is higher than 30% in approximately 5% of the schools in Italy¹.

This situation has implications for some necessary changes in teachers' instructional practices. Teachers are asked to hold linguistic workshops for non-native speaker students, who often speak different first languages and have a different level of proficiency in Italian; to create personalised curricula and to coordinate classroom activities that involve both native speakers and non-native speakers. Furthermore, teachers have to consider that linguistic education interacts with other disciplines in the school system and has to integrate inputs that originate from different branches of knowledge, and from social interaction inside and outside the classroom.

The Italian language teacher has to link and coordinate different aspects of language learning, such as the acquisition of

¹ Data from Ministero Istruzione Università e Ricerca, *Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico italiano a. s. 2015/2016*: <http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2017/Notiziario_alunni_Stranieri_nel%20sistema_scolastico_italiano_15_16.pdf>.

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) identified by Cummins (1979), which are indispensable in social interaction and in everyday communication, and the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), i.e. the acquisition of the language of instruction. The latter concept refers to the written and oral linguistic abilities necessary to engage in cognitive activities (e.g., making inferences, classification, summarising, making judgements) involved in learning various disciplines. Given that language teachers meet such arduous challenges, originating from the need to consider the language of instruction together with a second language perspective, there is a requirement for support from efficient didactic tools. Publishers of school textbooks often disregard this essential requirement. An examination of schoolbooks reveals that the publications dedicated to non-native speaker students (which are expansions of handbooks used in the schools) offer a traditional instruction in grammar, which does not meet the linguistic needs of non-native speaker students. Only a few textbooks have the structure of a curriculum dedicated to non-native speakers, with learning units built one upon another, facilitating the development of linguistic skills².

In this complex situation, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) may be very useful, offering input for the elaboration of individual curricula which meet the educational needs better than a handbook and allow for an exchange of experiences with fellow teachers and the creation of communities.

² In particular, the analyses of textbooks dedicated to non-native speakers of Italian used in numerous Italian schools, conducted by Braglia (2014-2015), show the limitations of the school textbook publisher. Many textbooks do not follow the guidelines of the *Common European Framework of Reference* and contain «esercizi ripetitivi fondati su frasi svincolate da ogni contesto comunicativo reale» che «portano il manuale [...] a presentare gli stessi limiti delle grammatiche tradizionali» (Braglia (2014-2015): pp. 141-142).

This paper reviews the experiences with the use of ICTs produced for Italian language classes. The exploration examines the use and adaptation of the available e-learning resources and furthermore it analyses the impact of technological resources in the classroom. These case studies were conducted within the E-LENGUA research project, focusing on the professional development of in-service teachers, in collaboration with the Ufficio Scolastico Regionale of Emilia-Romagna and the Fondazione Golinelli.

2. ICTs in the Italian language classes: neither “apocalittici” nor “integrati”

In Italy, discussions on scholastic questions often tend to be polarized, regarding the dichotomous terms, pro or contra, in addition to complex questions that really deserve a much broader approach. The didactic usage of ICTs in the classroom is not an exception – it is an example of many topics that are often reduced to a confrontation between supporters and opponents, both with narrow-minded perspectives.

Several decades ago, amidst the contrasting approaches in the confrontations of mass culture, Umberto Eco, in his famous essay of 1964, incisively denounced conflicts between “apocalittici” and “integrati”, as of those who could see only the negative aspects of changes of that time, and on the contrary, of those who were able to see only the positive aspects without deeper criticism.

An outstanding example, in the broad spectrum of Italian and international publications on this topic, among the “apocalittici” is Adolfo Scotto di Luzio (2015), who in the eloquently named pamphlet *Senza educazione. I rischi della scuola 2.0* (“Without

Education: The Risks of the School 2.0”) is critical of the utilisation of ICTs in didactics: he points out their harmful consequences, and minimises the positive aspects, by reducing the work of skillful teachers³. The “integrati” are represented by those who, in contrast, highlight only the positive consequences of the changes brought about by ICTs; out of many, one could cite, for example Ferri (2008).

Apart from these polarisations, a teacher of the Italian language should strive to obtain the best of what the ICTs can offer, and should always be aware of the fact, that by using them in the classroom, didactic innovations in education are not automatically guaranteed: they are connected to the change in conceptual references regarding the basis of didactic practices, and thus, it is not just about introducing IT tools.

Appropriately, the *European Profile for Language Teacher Education. A Frame of Reference*, by Michael Kelly and Michael Grenfell from the University of Southampton, edited under the auspices of the European Union, dedicates, in the topic of technologies, two items out of forty, that summarise various aspects of knowledge and ability that characterise the teaching of a language teacher, Item no. 17 highlights how the teacher should have «training in information and communications technologies for pedagogical use in the classroom», and it is followed by item no.

³ There is a rhetorical question of Scotto di Luzio (2015: p. 15): «Non è, per caso, che classi in cui insegnanti molto aggiornati fanno cose mirabolanti con computer e Internet funzionavano già benissimo anche prima che si introducessero le nuove tecnologie e che avrebbero continuato a farlo anche senza dispiego di strumenti informatici?». His hypothetical interlocutor might, however, argue, that the argument, that is without contradiction, does not stand up against the opinion of those, who evaluate the didactic potential of using new technologies in the class.

18, which highlights the need to know how to use such technologies for «personal planning, organisation and resource discovery».

The teacher of L2 Italian can use in the first place what the internet offers in their didactic work, including real online courses with plenty of exercises on various and specific levels⁴. It represents an enormous resource of materials that may be utilised for the classes and for assignments⁵.

Apart from real online courses, there are numerous applications available for studying the Italian language by the means of the web and mobile phone (operating systems iOS, Android and Windows Phone), for instance, Duolingo, Babel, Memrise, Busuu, just to mention a few of them. Though there are numerous criticisms, mobile learning represents without any doubt the realm that needs to be explored, especially because of the stronger invasiveness of mobile phones in everyday life⁶.

⁴ Notable among numerous others available are: Impariamo l'italiano <<http://www.italiano.rai.it/>>; Dire, fare, partire! <<http://cursosextenso.usp.br/course/view.php?id=131>>; Vivit. Vivi l'italiano <<http://www.viv-it.org/>>; 3,2,1, via! <<http://www.321via.ch/>>; e-LOCAL <<https://e-localcourses.unibo.it/>>; ICoN - Italian Culture on the Net <<http://www.italicon.it/>>.

⁵ Studies on validity and limits of e-learning are now numerous, especially in the international topics; among others, see Jafrancesco (2010); Trentin (2008); Villarini (2010). However, for Italian language in particular, there is a lack of studies that offer a global view on the situation and would suggest validation of e-learning. For this reason, one week of studies, from 12-16 December, 2016, in Bologna, took place with the title “Esperienze di e-learning per l'italiano: bilanci e prospettive” (Experiences of e-learning of Italian language: scales and prospectives), which put together experts and operators from this sector to confrontation <<http://www.ficlit.unibo.it/it/eventi/settimana-di-studio-e-lengua>>. The initiative was organised in the field of activities of the Bologna research unit of the project E-LENGUA - E-Learning Novelties towards the Goal of a Universal Acquisition of Foreign and Second Languages, which sees many European universities that are engaged in the problems of using the information and communications technologies in language teaching of young and adults from different social background <www.elengua-bologna.eu>. An online resource review for Italian language L2/LS is available also in Bartalesi-Grafl (2016).

⁶ Regarding mobile learning for language teaching, see out of many others, Fratter (2016); Shuler & Winters (2012).

Unquestionably, social networks also represent a specific example of available technologies from a didactic point of view, as they have a strong potential to create dialogues between users via chat or video; therefore, putting their linguistic abilities into practice⁷.

Many sites and applications (Hello Talk, Tandem, Rosetta Stone) allow, together with many other things, the opportunity of chatting among users from the perspective of learning a second language.

There are multiple possibilities. Moreover, these technologies penetrate into the lives of students, and schools cannot ignore this fact, and are obliged to develop teaching methods which utilise these instruments, integrating them into formal instruction.

3. A few case studies on the use of ICTs in improving classroom teaching within the E-LENGUA project

3.1. A first look at the impact of ICTs in language teaching

In addition to promoting the sharing and recycling of resources, using ICTs in Italian lessons within multilingual classrooms is a distinct field of experimentation, a field in which even applications not created specifically for language learning can have unexpected results when properly used by the teacher in

⁷ Concerning the theoretical classification, there is a broader discussion on the topic of social networks in didactics of Italian language, see Cotroneo (2013) and (2016); Addolorato (2009); Fini (2009).

specific language learning exercises and can bring L1 and L2 Italian students together.

In particular, ICTs can have numerous impacts on language teaching. For the sake of simplicity, it is possible to isolate three specific objectives that, although not mutually exclusive, can be placed in a hypothetical sequence of increasing intensity: firstly, ICTs can have an impact on the motivational aspects which lie at the basis of language acquisition⁸, secondly, they can improve the organization of the tasks at the foundation of teaching activities, and lastly, they can significantly improve the type of linguistic skills involved in these activities.

If we take the impact on motivation to hold true, we can isolate four distinct ways in which ICTs intervene in teaching, as shown in the figure below.

⁸ Motivation is a central part of language teaching: refer to the leading textbooks of the discipline for an overview on the subject and a review of studies and research. On the relationship between technology use and motivation in the language classroom, see, amongst others, Lombardi (2013); Barak & Watted & Haick (2016); Buckley & Doyle (2014); Sheila & Inkoom (2014); Mariani (2012).

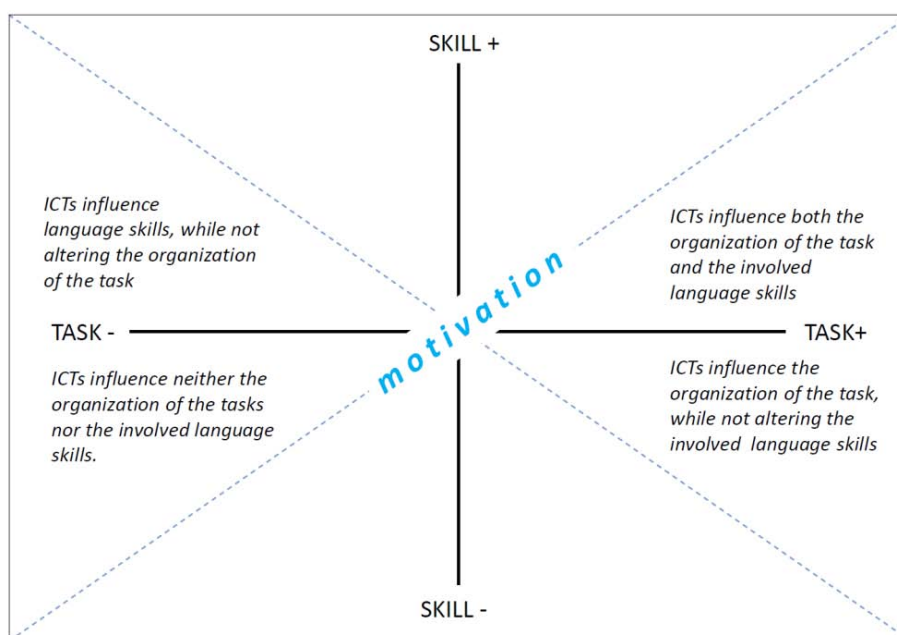


Figure 1: Classification of different types of ICTs impact on language teaching.

The following paragraphs will explore a few examples of different case studies from experiences discussed, designed and implemented within Teacher Education Activities carried out under the framework of the E-LENGUA project, in partnership with the Fondazione Golinelli of Bologna and with support from the Ufficio Scolastico Regionale of Emilia-Romagna. Experimentation starts with teacher training, in which participants of the professional development activity learn to use the technological tool, discussing its pedagogical potential, and eventually leads to classroom work involving students. This process allowed us to collect data and observations which could then be used to verify the effectiveness of the proposed tools. The various class experimentations allowed for the collection of data and an initial validation of the tools through class observations, questionnaires, and interviews with involved students and teachers.

3.2. Motivating the class by introducing ICTs

An example in which the use of ICTs impacts the motivation to carry out a task without significantly impacting the organization of the activity or the nature of the language skills, are applications that create conceptual maps such as Popplet, MindMeister, Mind Mapping, Mindomo, and SimpleMind.

Another example is represented by the administering of quizzes with the app Kahoot!, which allows students to answer questions using their own tablet or smartphone. The experimentation carried out shows involvement of students at all levels of schooling, unthinkable with the traditional method of administering a normal multiple-choice test⁹.

In these two examples, the nature of the tasks and language skills that come into play with the use of these applications are no different than those that emerge when carrying out these same activities in a traditional paper format (building a poster board or giving a test). The use of ICTs does, however, affect the motivational aspects of these activities. Creating a conceptual map on the computer to summarize the contents of a text or to plan a project is usually more enjoyable for students and often results in a final product that is graphically superior. Similarly, as was seen through experimentation, the use of tablets and smartphones to answer questions with Kahoot! dramatically changes the perception of the task at hand and the consequent involvement of the students.

⁹ The analysis of student evaluations of linguistic activities with Kahoot! was conducted by Murino (2016-2017), who also tested an interesting variant of the activity, which let students directly create tests to then give to other teams of students, stemming from specific lexical problems from the point of view of gamification. About the role of gamification, see Buckley & Doyle (2014); Kapp (2012); Petrucci (2015); Sheila & Inkoom (2014); Zichermann & Cunningham (2011); Zichermann & Linder (2013).

3.3. Creating comics with ToonDoo as a tool for metalinguistic reflection

In other cases, the use of ICTs can have a considerable impact on the execution of a required task, even while leaving the substance of the language skill that the activity draws upon essentially unchanged, no different than if carried out using a traditional method. Examples that fall into this category are activities that aim to create comic strips with the use of specific applications (ToonDoo, WittyComics, StripGenerator, Pixton). The use of certain apps to create comic strips – in particular, in the case here described, the use of ToonDoo – focuses students' attention on the textual component and on specific aspects of linguistic reflection. By using software, the activity becomes more enjoyable and avoids wasting too much time on the design of the comic strip, by eliminating the unnecessary emphasis associated with this aspect of the project.

In professional development activities, teachers from various levels of schooling first learned how to use the ToonDoo software so that they could eventually illustrate firsthand, in their own classrooms, how it works; then, they discussed the possibilities of integrating this software into language teaching in multilingual classrooms, coming up with a number of tasks that would connect the creation of comics with the development of conceptual nodes of language reflection. In particular, work on the linguistic registers of Italian through a specific task which considered how a certain linguistic form (for example, asking for information) can be carried

out, from a linguistic point of view, in two different communicative situations¹⁰.

The following experimentation of the classroom activity in first and second year secondary schooling allowed for the observation of how students carried out the task and for the gathering of a sizable quantity of comic strips to analyze in order to verify whether or not the learning objective could be considered successful. Figure 2 shows an example of a comic strip created by a non-native speaker student in the second year of a professional institute (16 years old). The student, even while demonstrating certain limits with various normative aspects of the Italian language (uncertainty with word boundaries and punctuation are indicative of an interlingual level that is still basic), completed the task properly, showing to have understood which type of language is appropriate in formal and informal situations and changing the courtesy pronouns accordingly.

¹⁰ The creation of comic strips activity with ToonDoo in the participating classes and the gathering of student work and considerations were conducted by Bononcini (2016-2017).



Figure 2: An example of a comic strip created by a non-native speaker student focusing on two different communicative situations (in the upper part, an informal situation, and in the lower part, a formal situation).

More generally, observations of the work in the classroom and interviews with the participating teachers revealed an overwhelmingly positive reaction from a motivational standpoint, even in situations that are normally problematic. In a concluding questionnaire, participating students gave highly positive assessments of the activities carried out, both for their motivational aspects (creating a comic strip from scratch with designated applications), and in recognizing the value of their metalinguistic implications.

The following responses shed light on the general opinion of the students while providing specific examples of student feedback: one student, in the first-year of secondary schooling, notes for example, that the activity, as compared to those usually carried out

in class, is «più divertente: puoi vedere le cose a seconda delle immagini; anche se può sembrare banale non lo è ed è molto istruttivo, più che leggere un testo nell'antologia». Another student points out that the activity «è molto divertente, creativo e si stacca dalle noiose attività scolastiche». A second-year student of secondary schooling highlights, among the positive aspects, that «si usa la tecnologia (...) e si usa molto la creatività; impari nuove cose con la produzione di testi brevi uniti a immagini».

This activity has proved promising and deserves to be reached by a larger number of students and expanded to achieve other linguistic goals.

3.4. ICTs and the learning process: a new way of thinking about writing with Google Drive

Simultaneous collaborative writing using Google Drive applications (or Google Classroom) can be considered a case in which the use of ICTs significantly changes not only the way in which a task is carried out but additionally the very essence of the language skill in question, i.e. writing. As has been confirmed, writing on one single file, shared in a “Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) group activity in which each individual uses their own computer, tablet, or smartphone, emphasizes the social dimension of the writing activity while focusing attention on the process at the basis of creating a text¹¹. Such an emphasis on the writing process and not, as is traditionally promoted at school, on the final product, is full of valuable ideas from a pedagogical point of view and has a

¹¹ On collaborative writing in language learning and relevant bibliographic references, see Bellinzani (2014).

large impact on the learning and evaluation processes. This cooperative mode of working, simplified by the use of technology, makes peer-to-peer collaboration possible and is useful in productively bringing together native and non-native speaker students with varying levels of linguistic competence.

It is fundamental that teachers first familiarize themselves with the Google Drive learning environment so that they can take advantage of its potential as a teaching tool (for example, the possibility of inserting comments in real-time or at the end of a specific activity in order to guide the review and evaluation of the work produced) and critically discuss the completion of ad hoc writing tasks in light of an actual collaborative writing experience of this kind, lived first-hand.

In the subsequent experimentation, carried out in first-year secondary school classrooms with experienced teachers¹², students of the participating classes were divided into homogenous groups and were given a writing exercise, for example, creating a fable from a given incipit or producing an argumentative text. In this collaborative and generally participatory climate, it is observed that the classroom becomes a sort of “gym”, a workspace that allows each student to grow and develop their own writing skills while also comparing themselves with others. Since this activity is no longer solely individual, it is rare that students are burdened by writer’s block. Planning, which must be discussed and its responsibilities shared amongst group members, each interacting at the same level with the text, takes on a central and strategic role. The text can constantly be changed, revised, and corrected, and the teacher can

¹² Pedagogical experimentation related to the use of technology in writing was conducted by Lenoci (2014-2015) and is the subject of certain experimentations currently underway within the Bologna unit of the E-LENGUA project.

remotely follow the project and the students' progress, including the role of each individual contributor: every single action of each individual user leaves a trace and therefore the entire writing process can be rebuilt and evaluated at a later time, thus making it completely transparent and analysable. Corrective interventions by the teacher take the form of comments on the work in progress, sparking further elaboration by the individual and the group and no longer being limited to final corrections on the completed assignment (figure 3). In such a scenario, the teacher takes on a scaffolding role in the activities and becomes a supervisor of the work in progress.

Il mio animale preferito è il coniglio che oltretutto ho in casa(nella foto il mio coniglio TIPPETE). E' molto simpatico e gli piace giocare tutto il giorno, se lo accarezzi è come se stessi accarezzando una nuvola o dello zucchero filato. Non fa versi tranne ringhiare e fare "GU-GU" mentre ti gira intorno che però io non ho ancora sentito ;). Tippete corre come un pazzo per casa ed è un po' difficile da prendere. Il suo nasino è di colore marrone e fa sempre su e giù tranne quando è rilassato.

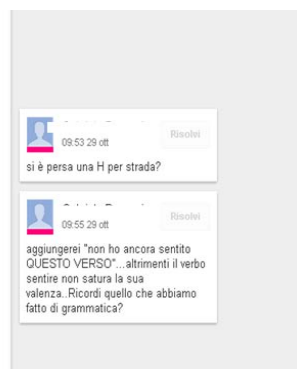


Figure 3: An example of a teacher's corrective intervention using the unresolved comment function.

Such an organization of activities does not solely impact student motivation, although it is worth noting that students, even when not required, continued to access texts outside of regular school hours in order to continue and to perfect their work. The organization of the task draws positive advantages, as well: one student points to the fact that «i compagni possono vedere i tuoi errori e quindi imparare da essi» as a positive aspect, highlighting the possibility of a continual exchange. The recipient of the final

text is no longer solely the teacher, but the entire class. Each individual, therefore, becomes a potential reader of the work produced by his/her classmates. Furthermore, this allows for shared work between native and non-native speaker students and, in general, promotes and improves integration between various members of the class.

Beyond the above-mentioned examples, the use of ICTs in the classroom, which can greatly add to the dynamics of language learning activities, is a field of experimentation full of potential in which nothing should be taken for granted. In-service training and the critical and purposeful exchange of knowledge, experience, and materials provide the best path forward to improve language teaching and to reach greater effectiveness in the development of language competence in students. This research path is one that the University of Bologna unit of the E-LENGUA project has promoted and will continue to promote with conviction.

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