



Blogging and writing in Italian as a second language: reporting an experience at the University of Genoa

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Abstract

This paper describes a teaching experience carried out in the Academic Year 2008/2009 in Italian language and culture courses for foreign students on mobility projects and held at the University of Genoa. Using a class blog as a tool for sharing information, the texts produced by the learners and the links and online resources are the main elements of this investigation. A retrospective analysis has revealed the critical points of the planning and has suggested a way of working not only based on sharing but also on the collaboration of the participants.

1 Introduction

Italians were involved in a great migration that exported our language and culture throughout the world and this encouraged the creation of a dense network of associations, organizations and schools with the aim of preserving and spreading the Italian language (Santipolo, 2006). Immigration has characterized Italy over the last two decades, so teaching Italian in our country has had a great expansion as foreign people's knowledge of the linguistic code is an instrument for social integration, education and work. Education technologies, in such a varied panorama, have a great importance: software, Web sites and CMC media have increased the opportunities to get L2 input and to produce L2 output (Diadori *et al.*, 2009). Today, the traditional dichotomy Italian as a second language, studied in Italy, and Italian as a foreign language, studied abroad, has been overcome. Through the net, the foreign language context, traditionally characterized by a certain physical and mental distance from Italy, gives access to authentic oral and written texts as well as numerous opportunities for interaction and practice through e-mails, blogs, chat rooms, forums, virtual realities, social networks etc.

This paper will focus on a teaching experience carried out in the Academic Year 2008/2009 at the University of Genoa, with foreign students on mobility projects: learners of different origins and nationalities included in three Italian L2 classes of intermediate/advanced level¹, used a blog as a virtual place to practice their written skills and share online information and resources.

2 The didactic project

As Tassalini points out «[...] *di fronte all'attuale, variegato panorama di supporti alla didattica della lingua straniera il problema che si pone all'insegnante non è forse tanto in termini di reperimento delle risorse, quanto della scelta appropriata e dell'utilizzo significativo ed efficace per l'apprendimento*» (Tassalini, 2008, p. 211). Deciding what was the most appropriate technological resource to use meant at first to analyse the related learning situation and then to set the goals to be achieved at the end of the Italian courses.

2.1 Learning situation and learners' needs

The Italian classes considered in this study case were scheduled for 40 hours each, divided into 3 sessions (two hours) per week. A placement test identified learners' needs: practice and development of writing skills. Given the CEF descriptors in creative writing and production of reports and papers

¹ The Italian classes considered in this case study were destined to B1/B2 students (first investigation) and B2/C1 students (second investigation) of the Common European Framework of Reference (Consiglio d'Europa, 2002).

(Consiglio d'Europa, *op. cit.*), a series of writing activities was proposed to the participants; they were closely linked to cultural items and morphosyntactic elements introduced during the class, to be performed autonomously. Educational technologies have been the turning point in the design phase of these activities.

2.2 Reasons for using Educational Technologies

In the design phase, age and motivation were mostly influential among the different factors that influence the language learning process (De Marco, 2000). As Prensky says, the young-adult learners involved in this project were Digital Natives, using technologies with easiness since birth. So, if we use technologies in our classes, we can talk the same language as theirs and look at the world with their own eyes: «[...] the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language» (Prensky, 2001, p. 2).

Using technologies increases motivation, which is closely related to activities that are planned (Mezzadri, 2001). Considering acquisition, technologies offer more opportunities to activate brain bimodality than traditional education. As Danesi's theory explains (Danesi, 1988), language affects both brain hemispheres, in different ways, and learners have a disposition towards one or the other. Learners with a right way disposition, for example, have a greater ability to receive verbal input; those with a left disposition have a greater ability to perceive visual input. Traditional education has always favoured the first type of student; education technologies, thanks to their multisensoriality, balance the different systems of representation and stimulate, in fact, different types of learners (Fratton, 2004; Mezzadri, *op. cit.*).

3 Using the computer to write: the evaluation of resources and the choice of using blogs

Using the computer to write does not mean writing with a simple and flexible typewriter. Deletion, revision and displacement of text blocks encourage analytical thinking and authorial detachment. The editing function allows to give greater attention to the review and spell checkers and multimedia dictionaries represent useful tools to get a more accurate text. In this writing process the roles of author, creator and reader come together and we find all the ingredients of the game: freedom of action but also rules, fiction, uncertainty and unproductivity (Ferraris, 1998; Maragliano, 1994). In collaborative writing systems, either used individually or in groups, the chronology tracks all the

writing phases, allowing a more authentic evaluation. CMC systems favour the sharing and dissemination of textual products.

3.1 Evaluating available resources

When analysing technologies we considered the peculiarity and potential use of:

- software: by using courseware and short or isolated programs, students can practice overall communication skills or individual portions of language, in self-learning environments or in language classes. Author programs, instead, make it possible to design multimedia exercises. Other resources, such as the word processor, are not explicitly educational but can be easily used in language classes to improve writing skills (Fratter *op. cit.*; Porcelli, 1988);
- internet: providing so much authentic material, students find textual models that can be analysed and reproduced. The use of WebQuests develops particular skills in writing (Mezzadri, *op. cit.*). Course management systems deliver online courses and create collaborative environments through the use of CMC instruments for written communication, such as forums, and collaborative writing systems, like Wikis;
- blogs: like miniaturized websites, economical and easy to be created and managed, they may belong to different categories (Banzato, 2006). They can be used as directory blogs, collecting textual models, personal blogs, reporting personal experiences and events, topical blogs, focussing on topics of interest or even advertising blogs, advertising an author's texts.

3.2 The choice of using blogs

Why did we choose blogs? Firstly, blogs are easy and quick to use. Blogs are also free for access and creation. The three blogs employed in this research were created by Blogger, a blog creator run by Google where users, either the reader or the author, only have to get a Google account. What were the functions envisaged for the class blog? Italian language courses were destined to the whole University and blogs could spread information and class news to every language course. The archive system of the blog highlights new posts and lets you find old posts easily: researching messages in a blog is easier and faster than in a forum or in a mailbox and updating news is very fast. Blogs could also become virtual classes to practise written skills and students could post messages about lesson topics, events not related to Italian classes or personal interests using online dictionaries, grammar resources and other

kind of materials for improving language competence. Both the teacher and the students could post messages as “collaborators”: blog building was shared and open to contribution from everyone. To analyse message functions, we included the following categories: didactic, communicative, extra curricular, social and technical messages (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Posts and comments functions

Funzione dei messaggi	
Didactic	To improve: they explain grammar, lexical or cultural aspects through texts, links etc. To give tasks: they give instructions about activities to do and they are an input for writing texts To share materials: they share materials and could be an input for writing texts To inform: they share information related to the Italian language course To write texts: they are answers to the teacher’s input (descriptive, narrative, argumentative, expository, regulative, theatrical texts) To correct texts: they are comments on written texts
Communicative	To end the interaction: they close a communicative event To feedback: they answer posts and they do not have a particular function
Extra-curricular	They inform about extra-curricular events
Social	They help socialize: they are not related to didactic or extra-curricular events
Technical	They explain how to use blogs and blog gadgets

4 The class blog

4.1 The first investigation

The first investigation took place during the first semester, involving two Italian language classes: group 1 had 25 students while group 2 had 28 students. 28 students agreed to use the class blog and 11 contributed at least with one message. The messages were 65: 40 by the teacher and 25 by the students. In the Group 1 blog, the teacher’s posts (11) were intended to stimulate the practice of written skills by suggesting, through specific questions, topics to be developed (5) or provided information on the course (3), shared materials (1) or referred to the extra-curricular activities (2). These posts had comments from either the teacher (1 to correct students’ texts, 1 with an extra curricular function) or the students (2 to produce written texts). The posts of the students which answered the teacher’s requests (3 written texts) had comments from the teacher (3 to correct students’ texts, 2 to improve grammatical or cultural

aspects) and from students (1 to produce written texts and 1 to end the interaction). There were no messages with a social function. In the Group 2 blog, the teacher posted 12 messages: some were aimed to solicit the written skills by offering, through specific questions, topics to be developed (12), or provided information on the course (1), or shared materials (3) or also referred to extra curricular activities (2). These posts had 6 comments by the teacher (3 to correct students' texts, 3 to improve grammatical or cultural aspects, 1 referred to the extra curricular activities and 1 had a social function) and 3 by the students (3 to produce written texts, 1 with a social function). The 9 posts by the students answered the teacher's requests (8 to produce written texts and 1 with a social function) and had 11 comments from the teacher (7 to correct students' texts, 5 to improve grammatical or cultural aspects, 1 with a request, 1 with a social function) and 1 from a student (to produce a written text).

Analysing the number of messages and posts, the use of the blog does not seem to have been particularly successful. The few questionnaires filled by students at the end of the course make it possible to sketch a profile of the students: they were young adult students with some experience of media education, but not of blogs. Questionnaires suggest that the participation was influenced by the fact that the course was optional and without the attribution of CFU and that if half a class wrote at least one message, they desired to improve their language skills. Thinking about this first investigation allowed us to identify critical points and gave us interesting ideas for a future, enhanced use of blogs. It is necessary to reduce their uncooperative use, including new Google gadgets, such as surveys and feedback messages, extending to the blogs some Social Network attitudes.

4.2 The second investigation

The second investigation took place in the second semester and involved 33 students, 24 of which agreed to use the class blog. 16 students wrote at least one message, and the overall messages were 63: 28 were posted by the teacher and 35 by the students. The 23 posts of the teacher aimed at improving written skills by suggesting, through specific questions, topics to be developed (8), provided information of the Italian language course (2), shared materials (4), improved grammatical or cultural aspects (6) or referred to the extra curricular activities (4). 1 post had a rather technical function - to clarify the inclusion of new gadgets. These 23 posts were followed by 2 students' comments (1 to produce written texts, 1 to give a feedback). The 30 posts of the students were mainly intended to write on topics of interest (25 to produce written texts), to share links (4 to share materials) or to inform about events (1 referred to the extra curricular activities). These posts had 5 comments by the teacher (3 with

a feedback function, 1 to end an interaction and 1 to share resources) and 3 students' comments (3 with a feedback function).

Considering the number of posts and messages we can envisage a more productive use of the blog than in the previous case: more than half the class produced at least one message and the most productive student posted 6 messages, 5 personal messages and 1 message to share a text produced in cooperation with classmates. The Italian language proficiency of these learners may have favoured the use of blogs, despite the contexts analysed were too limited to generalize this hypothesis. In this case, the blog was not only a virtual place to post personal written texts or to share materials, but also a way to share text produced in cooperation with classmates. Texts were read in the classroom, after distributing a handout to the authors and reflecting all together on the most common mistakes, including those who did not use the class blog. The students were also asked to replace the teacher when he was unable to access the network to post informative messages. 25 students filled in the final questionnaire, thinking about the use of the blog and its potential. According to the students, the blog was chosen by the teacher to increase communicative and written skills, using some web resources: according to the majority of respondents, the use of the blog would have a positive teaching impact for what concerns the morphosyntactic, lexical and textual aspects of language.

Conclusion

At the end of this teaching activity a reflection is necessary: "*writing texts on the blog is the same as writing texts on paper*", one student said. Is this true? From a certain point of view, writing messages in a blog is not like writing on a sheet: it is possible to delete, move and revise texts leaving no trace of changes; with a simple click students can access online resources that are useful for writing; the learners can share their texts with all classmates in a fast and simple way and can receive feedback, comments and reviews visible to everyone. Analysing the writing process, writing on a blog is like writing on paper: the students write their texts alone, the reader has a finished text without information about the writing process. How can we work on the writing process? How can we optimize the use of technology resources and enhance learning? The blog may be the place to post learners' written texts, but it will be through teamwork and through the use of a collaborative writing tool such as a Wiki that learners can share texts but also the writing process, working together on different kinds of texts. The presence of the three elements that characterize learning communities (mutually engaged learners, a shared repertoire of patterns and texts, a shared objective), as Midoro says (Midoro, 2002), should permit to redesign a future investigation based more on sharing

and on cooperation.

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