The UTGM Italian Language Course: new possibilities for language teaching and learning

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Abstract—The study of a foreign language is an integral component of education in our globalized society as it gives the opportunity to broaden learners' perspective and understanding of the world as well as helping them to develop a more positive attitude towards foreign cultural backgrounds.

Traditional teaching and learning methods have had to adapt to keep up with communication development in modern society. In this framework the new Information and Communication Technologies have improved the didactic possibilities of teaching and learning by giving rise to new methodological processes.

The web turns out to be a very efficient way to learn a language, thanks to the possibility to share experiences and knowledge in a multicultural environment.

An example in this sense is the Italian Language Course which is an entirely online didactic training path developed by the Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi”. The aim of the course is to spread the knowledge of the Italian language, not only as a cultural language, but also for business, taking advantage of the didactic possibilities offered by ICT.

The platform offers extremely flexible didactic activities and evaluation assessment thanks to the support of a tutorial system and effective web communication tools.

The attractiveness of this learning solution is given by its innovative features that stimulate new forms of knowledge construction in the user, who is considered as an active participant interacting with the contents.

This new scenario is possible thanks to the hypertext that allows the reader to construct his personal path developing his language competencies in both formal and informal way, thanks to digital communication tools such as chats, forums and blogs. The traditional way to study is not time or place bounded anymore and acquires a new dynamic structure oriented towards individual learning needs.

Differently from what happened in the traditional language courses, the student also develops a high level of self-control and self evaluation.

All this represents a very interesting attractive for many different users as the teaching methods are equally appropriate to the needs and objectives of various target groups: now young students as well as busy professionals can benefit from this self-paced learning methodology, studying anywhere and anytime they want.

Moreover every learner will have the constant support of an online tutorial system, useful to coordinate the didactic activities needed to reach the objectives of each level course. Online conversation classes with teachers are also offered, in order to ensure that the learner is individually monitored during his online language course.

The course provides exercises, which guide the user through the activities of reading, listening, speaking and writing with the help of a vocal and tone recognition system able to analyse and correct the user intonation and pronunciation.

Another interesting aspect of the course is its multidisciplinary character achieved through the culture and civilization section which provides geographic, historical, artistic, social and cultural elements of the Italian life-style. By integrating traditional or “formal” subjects such as grammar, vocabulary, glossary, with more informal ways of teaching, the course provides a very efficient methodology to improve students motivation in achieving their learning objectives.

Index Terms—Italian Language Course, Virtual Platform, Tutoring, Multidisciplinarity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of a foreign language is an integral component of education in our globalized society as it gives the opportunity to broaden learners’ perspective as well as their understanding of the world, offering them the possibility to develop a more positive attitude towards different cultural backgrounds. Education in general is nowadays a key factor for social and economic development but also something valuable in its own terms if we look at it as condition and means to development.

In addition to this, multilinguism makes a real difference also in economic terms by improving
access to foreign markets for companies and by fostering competitiveness and employability for individuals. Traditional teaching and learning methods have had to adapt to keep up with communication developments in modern society in order to reach this goal. As a matter of fact, when comparing traditional learning methodologies with ICT-based ones, we can easily identify the improvement of the didactic possibilities offered by the latter in terms of accessibility, flexibility, usability, timeliness and quick distribution. In this context, the web turns out to be a very efficient way to learn a language thanks to the opportunity it gives to share personal experiences and knowledge in a multicultural e-environment.

In order to guarantee language learning efficiency and to make it more attractive to learners, some important initiatives have been undertaken European-wide for the definition of multilingual policies. In this framework, the main aim is to promote the analysis of second language learning ICT-based methodologies by providing support for Multilateral Projects able to improve the access and dissemination of innovative language learning resources and content models. Multilinguism is of fundamental importance in Europe. Speaking more than one language not only opens a number of possibilities in terms of employment, training, communication and business but most of all it leads to freedom and understanding. Languages are core elements of our identity therefore being able to speak more than one allows people to enter a different culture and to adopt a different perspective. In this way it is possible to overcome intolerance and racism. This is why in November 2005 The EU approved a New Strategy for Multilingualism.

In the light of these considerations, Università Telematica “Guglielmo Marconi”, has developed the “Italian Language Course” and the “Italian Language and Culture Course”. They have both been designed and conceived to meet different second language learners’ needs and to overcome the limits of cd-based distance learning. The experience achieved by “Guglielmo Marconi”, in offering high-quality courses based on innovative learning methodologies, started in 2004 by developing research strategies for the adoption of advanced technological solutions able to integrate traditional teaching models with ICT communication tools. The Open mode of UTGM is based on the application of net-learning methodologies and represents an effective scenario of professional placement becoming, at the same time, a propelling factor of the information society.

In this way it would contribute to the competitiveness of the economic system.

In this framework the “Italian Language Course” and the “Italian Language and Culture Course” have been thought to enlarge the didactic offer of the University on an international level taking advantage of the flexible web platform “Virtual C@mpus”. The courses were initially conceived to meet the needs of some South American countries such as Argentina, Colombia and Brazil where the Italian language has always been considered of utmost importance for historical and cultural reasons. Distance education methodologies allow a strict connection between the Italian culture and those Italian families abroad. In this way the second generation Italian migrants will have the chance to keep and develop a strong link with their home land obtaining at the same time a vocational qualification in working fields that would deal with both their motherland and their country of adoption. The Colombian “Fundación Universitaria Manuela Beltrán”, the “Italian Culture Institute” of Santiago del Cile and Argentina and the CEBI – Consultoria Empresarial Brasil Italia – were the first institutions that chose to introduce the Italian UTGM online courses in order to meet cultural, social and economic community requirements. Thanks to an academic agreement established with Saint Leo University of Tampa (Florida USA), the courses are currently attended also by American students interested in experimenting new language teaching and learning solutions. Because of our heterogeneous target of users we had to differentiate the introduction section and tailor the course guidelines by creating specific instructions in the students’ original languages: Spanish, Portuguese and English. Attending this innovative course represents also an unprecedented opportunity to students who do not have the possibility to move to Universities or official language learning centres. The methodological approach at the base of the course is also meant to provide learning opportunities for people of all ages, including those who want to improve their professional skills and competences through the new lifelong learning solutions. Today an updated training strategy in based on a continuity model that goes through one’s own professional life together with the introduction of two new elements: individuality (as an answer to the need of knowledge and competences) and self-determination (in terms of choice between a plurality of options).

>From a pedagogical point of view the Italian Language course takes advantage of all the possibilities the web gives respect to web-based classes merely focused on grammar rules and
lexicon aspects already available by using traditional teaching methods and classical books.

E-learning is considered as a social process fundamentally oriented towards the active construction of a new knowledge through group interaction and peer to peer discussions. In this sense the role of internet changes consistently since it turns from an initial database into a sophisticated communication system in which an innovative collaborative and cooperative learning takes place. The cognitive and social functioning of the internet can be divided into three different activities that are strictly connected with some psychological theories:

- the first activity is a cognitive activity meant as an information processing. In this case the internet represents a mere database;
- the second activity is a communication activity meant as an information transfer. In this case the internet is an interpersonal communication space;
- the third activity is a mediation activity meant as construction of an artificial environment for human activities. In this case it is possible to find a cultural psychology perspective. This activity includes both the first and the second and the internet is a medium connecting human activity to the physical and social environments.

The Virtual Campus, a flexible Virtual Learning Centre, is designed to support a whole range of learning activities, allowing to improve the personal and creative response of students by favouring the development of a context of free expression and continuous information and communication exchange.

With the scope to overcome cd-based interaction limits the UTGM Italian Language Course aims at improving communication between teachers and learners as well as between learners coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, by introducing a very efficient motivational and interactive tutorial system. From a certain point of view the Italian Language Course has achieved such goal first of all through a systematic monitoring of teaching-learning processes and a continuous on-line interactive feedback that allows to improve didactic material and instruments while using them. Secondly UTGM course has managed to overcome the dichotomy between in presence and distance activities. The on-line learning communities that are characterised by cooperating subjects represent the synthesis between the virtual and the real. E-learning environments are the most recent expression of distance learning since they privilege combined systems and can be implemented only under special conditions (potential users, available hardware, etc…). The self-management component is particularly stressed within the learning communities (or “communities of practice”) formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour. The strategy of this new form of Computer Supported Cooperative Learning (CSCL) is based on a collaboration and coordination of a group of people who is involved in the same virtual training context.

In this framework it is necessary to point out that learning is a global experience implying also emotional and motivational aspects. Learning is a personal experience, it is subjective and global at the same time therefore each individual activates personal processes and strategies involving rational and emotional components of every human being.

All the communication tools like phone, emails, videoconferences, blogs, forums and chats are used to build up a solid relationship tutors to learners and learners to learners in order to personalize their learning paths according to specific and individual training needs and objectives. Computers mediated communication provides a virtual environment where second language learners can transcend the special and temporal confines of the classroom via asynchronous (internet, e-mail) or synchronous communication (chat).

Tutors act as coordinators of didactic activities by grading online tests, sending newsletters, organizing synchronous and asynchronous study sessions and activating discussion forums related to different section courses’ contents. Thanks to detailed courses guidelines and tutorial support, the learners are able to acquire the proper instruments to individually “move” throughout the different activities and to manage their study time without any space and time constraints.

On line learners take their own responsibilities for their own course of studies and mature into individuals for whom learning and accomplishment are highly valued. In this way the learner becomes a main actor in his learning path. Thus UTGM Italian Language course helps learners to develop their self-control and self-evaluation throughout their learning process by increasing motivation and interest in the study subject. In this framework one of the greatest points of strength of an on-line second language course is that of offering a less stressful environment as well as more equitable discussions; especially for minorities or non-assertive personalities.

In order to help learners to strengthen their self-assurance it is also necessary to create functional study environments (Learning Circles, Community of Learners etc…) in which they cooperate and share ideas, discuss upon relevant issues and solve problems with the help of an available support. Knowledge production becomes an active process since it derives from metacognitive processes oriented toward the acquisition of learning...
Multimediaility is conceived as the possibility to use a plurality of integrated technical means such as printing material, audio, video, CD-rom, etc... The use of different communication media allows to overcome the one-way relationship teacher-student that is a typical feature of traditional teaching methodology (face to face) determining an interaction that activates social processes of knowledge construction (constructivism).

Accessing multidisciplinary and multimedia contents the learners experiment an active and self-centred learning process that improves their possibilities to achieve the expected results. Within each course level there is a dedicated culture section focused on different Italian aspects such as geography, history, art and literature integrating at the same time more specific texts for each area. Traditional or “formal” subjects such as grammar and vocabulary are combined with more informal learning objects which can better stimulate the learners.

The latter can take advantage of pop-ups linked to didactic contents such as Italian language and culture-related web sites where it is also possible to read original articles from Italian newspapers and magazines and to watch and listen to TV and radio programmes.

This new scenario is given by the introduction of hypertexts that let the readers develop their second language skills in a more “informal” way. Learners are the main actors of a self-centred learning process that leads them towards a creative and dynamic application of linguistic formulas especially beyond the course environment. Differently from any traditional cd-based language course, UTGM Italian Language Course students are facilitated in the learning process thanks to the use of suitable designed internet-based materials that can make a significant contribution to autonomous learning. Since every single student has his own cognitive and learning style, he can definitely benefit from teaching techniques that appeal to his individual style (Brown & Liedholm 2004).

Coherently with these principles the exercises and assessments are not conceived just as mere questions with fixed solutions but rather as interactive and dynamic activities that take into account the free and arbitrary production of each learner.

The dynamic assessment of each unit introduces different kinds of exercises which are:

- true/false;
- multiple choice;
- hotspot images;
- drag&drop;
- fill in the blank;
- conceptual maps.

Among the above, UTGM has given particular attention to the design of hotspot images, drag&drop and conceptual maps, which seem to better respond to second language training requirements.

The hotspot images allow students to associate images and texts. They have "hot areas" to which clickable links can be associated and where the information is shown in form of dynamically created floating panels. In the image hot-spot exercise the user is required to identify an area on an image by clicking on it. Feedback will be given based on hitting the correct target areas, incorrect target areas and missing the targets altogether. The drag&drop can be divided into the following three different typologies of exercises that maintain their inner conceptual value unaltered; even if, at a graphic level, they could look differently from the drag&drop model.

- **1 Text filling**: the users are presented with an incomplete text that they need to recognise first and then match the lacking sentences or words properly. The list of the latter needs to be of a higher number than the blanks: distracters are necessary to avoid the learners getting the right answer by following the exclusion principle;
- **2 Table filling**: the user is presented with a table where the only elements given are the column heading, the line heading or both. Plus the student will be provided with a series of elements that need to be properly located in the cells following the specific criteria indicated in the instructions. Even in this case the number of the elements to be inserted in the table has to be higher than the blanks;
- **3 Correspondence**: given two series of words or concepts, the student needs to link each element of the first series to each one of the second.

Conceptual maps: a conceptual map is a diagram showing the relationships among concepts. Concepts are connected with labeled arrows, in a downward-branching hierarchical structure. Students have to make up the content of each box by properly selecting the correct element out of a whole list that needs to contain also a few distracters.

The “philosophy” standing behind a conceptual map follows that of a geographical map that is a visual representation of an area upon a flat surface. As we use a geographical map to get directions in a territory, a conceptual map is very useful to
construct, elaborate and spread knowledge since it shows connections between ideas.

Thanks to the new ICTs, conceptual maps have become a dynamic tool that can utterly exploit the computer interactive potential. The conceptual map is another instrument that can help students to plan and manage their own learning and self-learning experience as well as to assess their own cognitive strategies. Conceptual maps can help students a great deal in this sense.

Thanks to an immediate response system, the results of the performed exercises are given in percentage allowing users to evaluate the relevance of their mistakes. The system also provides the correct answers to each exercise giving personalized help and feedback. Every single learner has a personal portfolio which records all the exercises they do and their results, so that the tutor can monitor their advancements and advice them on how to proceed with their own learning process.

UTGM second language training has been conceived to give an immediate feedback on learners’ understanding of specific linguistic issues, benefiting from the relationship with tutors and other learners. The developed exercises are designed to help learners discover the language themselves. This natural language acquisition method more closely reflects the way children in every culture learn their own language. With this approach, learners are able to build the basic experience, attitudes, habits, skills and learning strategies that make an efficient progress possible.

II. UTGM ITALIAN LANGUAGE COURSE: A DESCRIPTION

The course is structured in three different didactic levels (Basic, Intermediate and Advanced) each one made up of four units:

- Didactic Units
- Systematic Grammar
- General Vocabulary
- General Glossary

Each Didactic Unit includes 8 different sections: Lessons, Exercises, Evaluation, Grammar, Phonetics, Glossary, Vocabulary and Culture. The Lessons section is structured in four activities, which refer to reading, listening, speaking and writing. The related exercises offer a constant interaction between texts, sounds and images, enabling learners to progressively develop essential abilities and competencies to have basic conversations in Italian.

The Grammar section goes through some of the most important grammar structures of the Italian language, examining basic, intermediate and advanced learning rules and applying them to a waste range of concrete examples.

The Vocabulary and Glossary sections offer a summary of all the keywords of the Didactic units thematic, explaining them through the use of a picture and of a translation in the students’ mother tongue.

The Phonetics section, through intonation and pronunciation analysis, provides a general description of the Italian Phonetic System and how to relate the different combinations of phonemes in order to learn the pronunciation of the words that contain them.

A vocal and tone recognition system is also able to analyse and correct the user’s intonation and pronunciation thanks to the inclusion of sound files for phonetic.

A guide to the correct use of didactic materials introduces each Unit and gives, other than a tutorial system also a practical help to easily and effectively move along the different sections.

Accordingly to the users’ needs it is possible to go through the Didactic Unit from a dialogue to another, from a Lesson to the Vocabulary or from Grammar to Glossary by simply clicking on the icons on the right down part of each page. In this way learners can deepen the same topic by completing all the related sections.

Through a natural progression that goes from simple rules and grammar structures to increasingly complex ones, the course leads the learner through an academically tested path, building language skills from basic to advanced and beyond. This path adapts to personal lesson plans to ensure consistency of direction and flow with related areas of content, including cultural backgrounds and detailed grammar instructions.

Using original written texts and thousands of real-life images, the course teaches learners to think in the new language from the very beginning, resulting in fast and effective learning without tedious translations and traditional grammar drills. The learner then liberates himself from an interlanguage stage to achieve higher proficiency in the target language.

Once the course has been completely fulfilled, the learners will have to take a final exam in videoconference mode that will verify and testify their achievement for each language level: basic, intermediate and advanced.

The application has been designed to be as usable as possible in order to develop a system which is easy to learn, effective, user-friendly and sufficiently motivating for users to work with. For
this reason the courses can be easily modelled on demand of the academic, public and private sectors.

III. QUALITY ISSUES

With regard to quality issue aspects the course proves to achieve a perfect balance between learning needs and technological systems, also taking into account the creative possibilities that the latter offers. The quality evaluation of the didactic resources is undertaken by the University through questionnaires and surveys administered and implemented into specific sections of Virtual C@mpus. The user can answer to questions related to quality issues while the University analyses the resulting data, monitoring and supervising the responses from the design phase to the fruition of the Course into the platform. Teachers, Content Editors, Tutors, Graphic and Computer Engineers are all involved in the process. The level of efficiency has been evaluated in consideration of the results achieved not only from a quantitative point of view but also from the qualitative one.

The course gave evidence of having completely fulfilled the parameters for quality standards provided by UTGM model, that are:

- The learning quality, which includes the quality of didactic materials contents (audio and video lessons, conceptual maps, interactive exercises, etc); the quality structure of the formative path (the design of the subjects, preparatory aspects, etc); the quality of participation (interest and motivation, numbers of accesses into the Platform, numbers of activities done, number of virtual classroom meetings attended, etc); quality of students result (not only the final examination but all the intermediate stages previously designed and performed);
- Teaching quality, which includes quality of teachers and of tutors competences (knowledge, ability and skills, etc);
- Learning environments quality, which includes technological equipment quality (presence of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, download areas, etc); Interface quality (ergonomics standards, texts, images etc); Infrastructures quality (is it fast enough?); Logistics services quality (help desk and time to resolution of the technical problems); Feedbacks quality;
- Interactions quality, which includes tutors and students interaction quality (skills, preparation and capacity to create social and communication moments, etc); and students interaction quality (do they interact with each other? In which way?).

By respecting these learning qualities principles, UTGM was able to produce flexible didactic materials based on dynamic and suitable architecture to different learners’ needs.

In order to enhance the didactic efficiency and to improve the production of didactic material, UTGM is changing its traditional approach, from a systemic one, based on a rigid model, into a proactive one; flexible and able to evaluate the many factors that influence the achievement of the results. The level of development and satisfaction achieved so far by the users of the course makes us believe that this kind of model can be successful in terms of expected results for both users and promoters.

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