Chapter I
Australasian Language Learners and Italian Web Sites: A Profitable Learning Partnership?

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ABSTRACT

A theoretically driven and technology enhanced approach to second language acquisition at beginners level is illustrated through the description of an iterative learning design process implemented at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The study draws on three areas of current literature: SLA/FLA, the use of authentic tasks and integration of subject specific and generic skills. Beginners enrolled in Italian language courses engage with authentic media, public service and entertainment web sites. Through this engagement, learners are guided in the acquisition of a range of language structures, vocabulary, cultural knowledge and communication skills. Evaluation data gathered over a five-year period provided the basis for continuous improvement and is presented here as evidence of effectiveness of the learning design and teaching strategies involved.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning of Italian language in the context of the Australasian classroom presents unique challenges. Isolation from the target culture limits learners’ exposure to authentic language and cultural input, and thus risks rendering the classroom a sterile or artificial study environment. Considerable effort is devoted to avoiding such potentially negative influence on learner
interest, motivation and performance. Beginning in 1994, a number of theoretically driven, technology supported learning initiatives have been leveraged to address these challenges (Brussino, 1996, 1999; Gunn & Brussino, 1997). Advances in multimedia, information and communication technologies have made valuable additions to the teacher’s toolkit (see e.g. Sinyor, 1998), and they now facilitate both mediated and direct access to authentic sources of information that can be integrated into language learning activities.

This chapter focuses in detail on one such initiative, where an online research and reporting task is a key activity for students taking a first year program. Italian media, fashion industry, popular music, weather reports, and public transport Web sites are identified as information sources for an assessed task. Learners are required to read, interpret, and re-present information, then to reflect on the strategies of language and culture learning they engaged with during this process. Overall performance on task together with invited feedback received over a five-year period support the initial hypothesis that guided exploration of Internet sites can foster independent learning as well as development of effective language learning strategies. These activities are effective in promoting deep understanding of the target language structures, as well as providing insight into key aspects of the culture and representing a stimulating and profitable learning experience.

In addition to language learning outcomes, there are opportunities for students to acquire technology skills that are a key component of the institution’s generic graduate attributes. These skills are required in practically all areas of professional life and their integration into subject-based courses aligns with current beliefs about effective learning of generic skills in technology rich environments. The chapter aims to outline an appropriate theoretical basis for design of this type of activity with integral use of technology tools, and to offer a detailed description of the iterative development process for the online activities, including annual evaluation and improvement cycles. The overall purpose is to present evidence that technology tools do indeed offer unique opportunities for second/foreign language teachers to articulate theoretical concepts for the benefit of their students.

BACKGROUND: THE PROGRAMME OF STUDY

The beginners’ Italian program at the University of Auckland consists of two courses: Italian Language for Beginners A and B, taught over consecutive semesters. Students enrolled in these courses may have studied Italian at night school, though evidence shows that the majority of learners have no prior knowledge of the language or culture. The courses are based on an integrated approach in which the following components interlace: interaction in class; study of a textbook; a tailor-made CALL laboratory designed to provide practice and reinforcement opportunities and to contextualize the learning that takes place in class; and a Web-based research and resource development project where new resources are produced by the learners in collaboration with their teacher.

Aims of the beginners’ program are:

- Development of effective language learning strategies
- Fostering independent learning
- Raising awareness of the sociocultural context surrounding language.

Learning objectives are:

- Effective communication in the most basic day-to-day situations and contexts
- Ability to describe oneself, one’s family, work, interests, and studies