

iBooks in the Classroom: Creating Digital Tools for Learning Italian in a Japanese University

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Abstract

In this day and age college students are both producers and consumers of digital contents. For this reason, language instruction at the university level now requires a multilayered learning environment that goes beyond the traditional classroom lecture and is accessible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Widely used by college students, smartphones and tablets are the ideal platforms to teach foreign languages in a way that is both active and engaging.

Starting in April 2013, two of the "Italian for beginners" courses offered by the Italian language program that I coordinate at the Open Education Center of Waseda University in Tokyo began offering students a variety of digital tools to enhance the learning process.

Most prominent among these is a course for iTunes U that showcases a full set of 15 digital booklets created with iBooks Author. These booklets facilitate a gradual learning of elementary Italian in a way that addresses the specific needs of Japanese students. The course integrates audiovisual and interactive elements with exercises to test the learner's language proficiency.

Using data collected during the first six-months of this innovative experiment, I will focus on the following points: 1) How to create an effective environment to learn foreign languages by way of iTunes U; 2) the pros and cons of creating digital textbooks with iBooks Author; 3) How to use widgets to create meaningful and creative contents for language learning; and 4) Issues and expectations for the near future.

1. Introduction

On January 19th, 2012 Apple announced the release of a set of applications and software that would bring a digital revolution to the field of education. These included iBooks Author, iTunes U, and iBooks 2. iBooks Author, a program for Mac OS X, creates and designs digital (text)books which can be read with iBooks 2 Apple's viewer for eBooks (ePub and PDF format supported), a program that also enables access to the iBookstore. From an educational standpoint, the most relevant feature of iBooks 2 is its integration with iTunes U, an application that creates courses that can be delivered on hardware running iOS, which is to say mainly iPads.

Digital books created with iBooks Author are called "transformative contents" because they showcase features that go well beyond those found in regular eBooks, such as text highlighting or note-taking. Based on the ePub format, contents designed with iBooks Author and viewed in iBooks can be linked to a host of media and can implement ePub with a full set of HTML5-based multi-touch capabilities. Such capabilities include multiple-choice tests with immediate feedback within the text, the possibility of consolidating one's notes and highlights into a single location as study cards, the ability to create glossaries for a specific set of words and to access them as note cards, to create swipe-through image galleries, to add interactive image captions, to explore embedded graphics and 3D animations, and much more.

Traditionally, instructors of foreign languages have struggled to create engaging platforms that enhance the learning experience by offering contents that integrate audiovisual and interactive elements with tests aimed at measuring the learner's proficiency.

To investigate the full potential of Apple's new tools, in April 2013 I began developing an "Italian for beginners" course specifically designed for Japanese learners. The course relies mainly on a set of digital booklets created and designed with iBooks Author; in the first semester of this academic year I delivered the contents on iTunes U in the form of a private course for the students of my two classes. Because not all of my students have access to iPads, I have also uploaded the same contents on the LMS developed by Waseda University organizing them in different formats: .pdf for the textbook, .m4a for the audio, .csv for the exercises, and so on. Students using this platform had access to same exact contents of those following the course on iTunes U via their iPads, but they could not experience the



interactivity of the iTunes U + iBooks ecosystem and could not study using a single integrated textbook.

1.1 Inspiring and creating a circular learning model

Through the iTunes U Course Manager, a browser-based tool, iTunes U allows teachers to create courses based on their individual syllabi and to customize the learning path by adding a variety of materials such as audio, video, presentations, documents, PDFs, iBooks textbooks, ePub books, iOS apps, and Web links. Instructors can also interact with their students by posting notes to the application, creating assignments therein, or answering questions from the students. Students can access and download full courses from the Apple's iTunes U section on iTunes and view them in a user-friendly manner, navigating through the course outline or through the menu of posted materials. Each time the course is modified or new materials are added to it the application automatically sends a notification to the students' devices. The application offers many of the same features of a traditional LMS, allowing students to choose a hierarchically structured learning or to select specific topics of choice.

To create an effective language-learning environment on iTunes U it is critical to start with a clear picture of the function each single material will play within the economy of the course. When moving from a paper-based course to a digital, cloud-based one, many instructors tend to "attach" to the new platform the materials with which they are familiar without making any change. This choice, unfortunately, makes for a disjointed and inconsistent course and for a poor visual layout that inevitably fails to engage and motivate the students. While numerous universities are already using iTunes U, most courses still rely heavily on one-shot videos of lectures or text materials that could be embedded in a more appealing way, for example in an iBook.

One of the most remarkable features of iTunes U is the possibility of adding iOS applications to one's course, introducing the students to a revolutionary, interactive approach to language learning. For example, one of the first challenges Japanese students of Italian encounter is the correct pronunciation of vowels and consonants. This challenge can be tackled in a number of ways: through an iBook that embeds audio in a clickable image — e.g. a picture of the manner of articulation; through a Keynote presentation showing an interactive grid of the Italian alphabet (when a student clicks on a letter, a new word accompanied by its IPA transcription appears, accompanied by an audio of its pronunciation); or by combining all of the above.

The above-mentioned techniques refer the knowledge the instructor imparts to the learner, the input phase of the learning process. However, intake and output are also critical in helping students successfully to process and form a full understanding of the L2. [1] Intake and output can also be enhanced, for example through the use of speech recognition applications like Dragon Dictation. Using their portable devices, students can practice by reading a text aloud or by giving vocal instruction and seeing whether the software recognizes them. The same approach can be used in class during role-play sessions in which the students record their conversations. When they do not succeed, they can simply check on the iTunes U materials and practice more using a single device. "Italian for beginners" uses Dragon Dictation for speech recognition, Voice Dream Reader Lite for text-to-speech recognition, Quizlet for vocabulary study sets, and such reference tools as the Japanese-Italian dictionary application by Shogakukan.

1.2 iBooks Author: rethinking the (text)book

Interest in Italian language is strong in Japan; however, with the exception of a few printed texts recently published by some language schools, there is no such thing as an organized set of texts specifically tailored for Japanese learners. Most of the texts published in Japan consist of grammar manuals, wordbooks, or simple conversation guides to use while traveling in Italy. The "Italian for beginners" course on iTunes U is an experimental project that intends to fill this gap. Additionally, it exploits the full potential of new technologies and portable devices to teach language in a way that is both active and engaging.

As mentioned above, the course consists of a set of digital booklets created and designed with iBooks Author. A series of objective observations led to the selection of iBooks Author as the software of choice for creating these booklets. First, the software has a user-friendly WYSIWYG interface. Teachers are notoriously pressed for time, and can only benefit from an uncomplicated yet reliable publication design tool that enables them to create their course materials efficiently and in the shortest time possible. iBooks Author's interface is almost identical to that of Pages and Keynote, which will be



familiar to Mac users, but at the same time it allows to import Microsoft Word documents directly and with no need to modify the style of the original document.

Second, iBooks Author has customizable templates that allow for the creation of a professional layout. Studies have shown that a clean layout, font size, and a clever use of color play a key role in the learning process and are therefore essential features of a successful textbook. iBooks Author offers nine different templates for books that are to be viewed in landscape orientation and six for books in portrait orientation.

Third, iBooks Author allows for the inclusion of enhanced contents that stimulate interactive and immersive learning. The feature that sets iBooks Author apart from other ePub based editing software is the possibility of adding a series of interactive objects — the so-called widgets — to enhance the reading and learning experience. There are nine different modifiable default widgets in the program: Gallery, Media, Review, Keynote, Interactive Image, 3D, Scrolling Sidebar, Pop-Over, and HTML. At a first glance, these objects may appear more suitable for contents intended for an audience of young learners, such as elementary, middle, or High School students than for linguistic contents aimed at more mature readers. However, this is not the case, and they can in fact be used to create meaningful and powerful contents.

Thanks to its caption customization function, Gallery can be used in the early stages of the learning process to introduce new words with the aid of images or to summarize a set of words used in a dialogue. Media is obviously a crucial widget for language textbooks and can be exploited in a variety of ways thanks to the possibility of playing audio by clicking on an image, as in the case of the pronunciation exercises mentioned above. Keynote presentations are invaluable in that they allow visually to convey contents (for example, grammatical rules) that are generally difficult to understand only through text. By blending text with animations the same information is conveyed twice, making it easier to remember. Interactive images can be added each time there is a need to introduce, say, specific information related to geography — e.g. the location of a city — or to create visual dictionaries. The scrolling sidebar is very effective when used in combination with a movie clip in listening and comprehension exercises. The captions for the clip are hidden in the invisible part of the sidebar, so that readers are stimulated to hone their information-gathering skills while retaining the option to take a peek at the transcript if they feel the need to do so. Pop-over — an overlay (with text, images, and shapes) that opens when the reader taps on an image — is useful to introduce specific expressions and idioms or to let the learner know which words were used in an audio clip. Review offers a sequence of interactive multiple-choice or drag-to-target questions. The former can be used for checking the reader's proficiency when it comes to articles, plural forms, or word-formation, while the latter is useful for exercises that request the ability to put words in the correct order.

From the standpoint of language acquisition, these two features in and of themselves are not enough to improve the output skills of the reader for they offer only one set of structured and predictable answers. To create a coherent environment that combines the features of a textbook and those of a workbook other exercises such as "fill in the blanks" or free answers are also necessary. Their inclusion requires the use of third party websites such as Bookry (<http://bookry.com>) or Book Widgets (<http://www.ibook-widgets.com>). Both websites allow users to personalize their widgets from a collection of configurable interactive templates. At present Bookry includes 37 different templates while Book Widgets has 20. Advanced authors can also create their own original widgets using iAd Producer, Apple's developers tool.

Last but not least, in choosing my software I took into account iBooks Author's integration with iTunes U and with the App Store and the advantages offered by a circular learning model.

In conclusion, iBooks Author can be an invaluable tool for language teachers willing to develop meaningful learning platforms. At the same time, iBooks Author can present a few challenges, for example forcing the author to take a hard look at what eBooks are, what they should be, and what they can be.

When it comes to this kind of media common mistakes include being too conservative or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, too enthusiastic. Conservative authors see digital textbooks as mere electronic replicas of the materials they use in the context of face-to-face lessons in a traditional learning environment. They fail to understand that they are in fact dealing with a revolutionary medium and end up producing eBooks that are simply versions of .pdf or Word documents already available as standalone formats for tablets or smartphone and make them accessible via a portable device. Enthusiasts, on the other hand, do not take the user into account and end up filling their books with too many interactive features. Cramming video, audio, animation, and 3D graphics into the same platform is not the same as creating a digital textbook.



To create harmonious digital textbooks one must weigh the role that each element plays in the learning process; only by doing this can one strike the right balance between interactivity and readability. Striking such balance results in an innovative, personalized learning experience that fully demonstrates how eBooks can take the narrative experience to entirely new heights.

The preliminary results of my experimental project confirm this hypothesis. In the final exam, the students who followed the Italian language course on iTunes U via their iPads scored on average 4 points more than the students who used the same materials posted on the University LMS.

References

- [1] Bill VanPatten, *Input Processing and Grammar Instruction in Second Language Acquisition*, Ablex, Norwood, 1996.