ICoNLingua, a New Language Teaching Model

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Abstract

In this paper, we give an overview of a new language teaching model, the "ICoNLingua" model, to teach and learn Italian as a foreign language.

The components of the ICoNLingua model are:

-   ICoNLingua Italian language online courses: six courses (from level A1 to level C2 of the Common European Framework for Languages), based on the concept of learning by doing. Each course consists of about 1000 activities with automatic correction: students make exercises such as dragging and dropping words, writing sentences, filling a table or a grid, matching words with images and so on. The main focus of the activities are texts - either written or spoken - that belong to a wide variety of types and genres. Courses can be used both in self-learning and in tutor-assisted learning.

-   ICoNLingua virtual classes: within the ICoNLingua-ADA e-learning platform, students are signed in a class with other students of the same level and are guided by a tutor. Students have access to the ICoNLingua online course, carry out interactive tasks, find help for any difficulty. Tutors answer questions about language online courses and assign further tasks to the students; these tasks are aimed at practicing the specific abilities not covered by the online courses. Activities carried out in the class are highly structured, and consist of communicative tasks, webquests and writing tasks, selected according to the linguistic needs of the learners. Tutors give individual or collective feedback, as well as stimulate students to communicate among themselves in the virtual class.

-   ICoNLingua tutor community: tutors engaged in the courses belong to the "ICoNLingua community", mainly aimed at sharing teaching materials, exchanging views on language teaching issues and implementing a common teaching philosophy. Tutors are specialized teachers of Italian as a second or foreign language and are especially trained in specific online teaching issues such as: effective methods of distance interaction, motivation of distance students, designing of online learning activities, management of forum, chat and other interactive tools, use of tracking tools to monitor and improve students' performance, management of the ICoNLingua-ADA e-learning platform.

1. Introduction

ICoNLingua is a new language learning and teaching model specifically designed for e-learning and blended learning courses. The model is currently used in the teaching of Italian as a second or foreign language, but can be applied to any other language. In this paper, we aim at giving an overview of the ICoNLingua model, by describing the components and the different perspectives of application in e-learning and blended learning courses.

Finally, we show an application of the model in two very different situations.

2. The components of the ICoNLingua model

The components of the ICoNLingua model are:

    a. ICoNLingua Italian language online courses
    b. ICoNLingua virtual classes
    c. ICoNLingua tutor community

In the following paragraphs we outline the main features of each component.

2.1 ICoNLingua Italian language online courses

The online materials are organized in six courses, from level A1 to level C2 of Common European Framework for Languages. Each course consists of about 1000 activities with automatic correction, and is based on the concept of learning by doing and on the inductive method: students learn not by reading a text in a passive way or studying a grammatical explanation, but they learn by doing activities of growing complexity.

Most of the activities is based on input stimulus, i.e. written texts, oral texts, videos or images. Both input texts and activities have been designed for covering a wide variety of language uses and registers, according to 4 domains: personal, professional, educational and public; language structures

and topics are proposed recursively, so as to follow the natural progression of learning, and to allow the creation of alternative learning and teaching paths, focused on the real linguistic needs of the students.
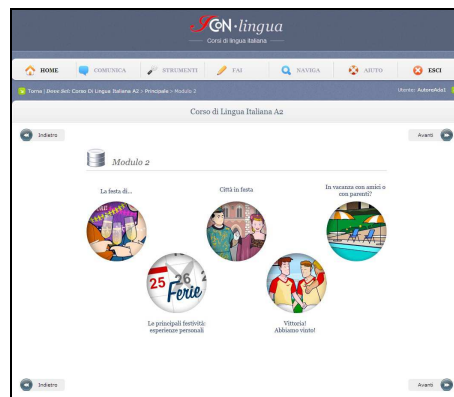

Fig. 1 Cover of a module, with the outline of topics

Activities belong to 11 different types (some of them with the possibility to chose among four different developments: drag and drop, combo box, writing, check) implemented by a web application (Scorm editor) specifically designed for language learning:

I. Fill in the blanks in texts or in single sentences (by drag and drop, combo box or writing);
II. Replacing the words in texts or single sentences (by drag and drop, combo box or writing);
III. Matching words, images, audios within two columns (by drag and drop or writing);
IV. Matching words, images, audios within three columns (by drag and drop or writing);
V. Reordering words, sentences, paragraphs, images (by drag and drop or writing);
VI. Embedding words or sentences within a text (by drag and drop or writing);
VII. Filling grids and tables (by drag and drop or writing)
VIII. Single and multiple choice;
IX. Rewriting words or sentences starting from a given pattern;
X. Highlighting words or sentences within texts;
XI. Deleting words or sentences within texts.

Activities are designed to keep students' attention and motivation high, avoiding repetition of the same types and guiding students through an authentic language production and use.
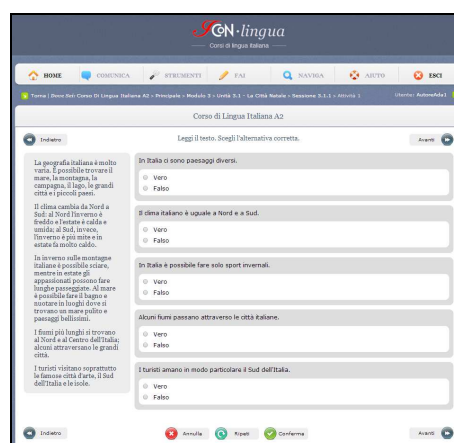

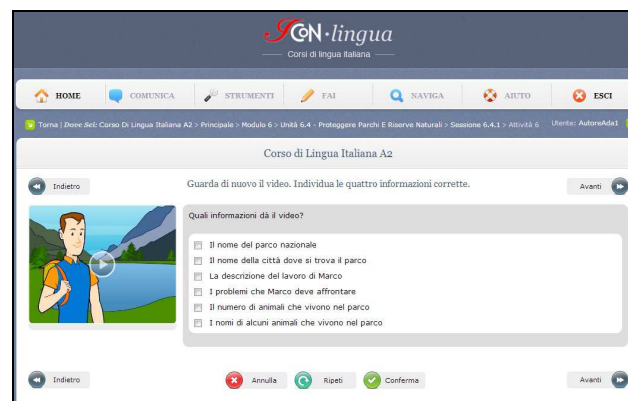Fig.2 A single choice activity from a written text

Fig. 3 Multiple choice from a video

2.2 ICoNLingua virtual classes

Courses can be used both in self-learning and with the help of a tutor. In tutor-assisted learning, activities with automatic correction (outlined in § 2.1) are linked to the interactive tasks of the virtual class.

The very core of teaching and learning through ICoNLingua virtual class are the so called Class Activities, i.e. highly structured activities proposed by the tutor, consisting of communicative tasks, webquests and writing tasks, selected according to the linguistic needs of the learners. Each Class Activity is related to the topic and the linguistic structures of the part of online course carried out by students in a given moment.

It is essential that Class Activities are interesting and motivating for the students.

All Class Activities are designed, reviewed, tested and validated by the ICoNLingua tutor community (see § 2.3); each Class Activity follows the same information structure and contains:

- a short introduction, aimed at introducing the activity and motivating students;
- detailed instructions to carry out the activity;
- a text or an example, that students can use as a model.

The class tutor introduces the task, assists students while they work on it and gives a feedback, individual or collective, according to the features of the class and to the linguistic needs of students; tutor decides which errors to highlight and the modality of correction: inviting students to individual self-correction, publishing a collective explanation about common errors, quoting and commenting examples taken from texts published by students, inviting to peer review, and so on.

The main tool of the virtual class is the forum, a public space in which and through which tutor communicates with students (vertical communication) and encourages communication among students (horizontal communication).

Students are invited to write in Italian since the very first moments of their learning: tutor always provides a model students can refer to, and it makes students feel comfortable even when their written competence is still very low.

For example, the first day of the A1 course, tutor presents himself with a very short text, and invites students to present themselves starting from the model of self-presentation given in the message.

Tutor
Ciao, mi chiamo xxxxxx, sono italiano.
Sono nato a Roma il 15 maggio 1972: ho 40 anni.
Sono un insegnante di lingua italiana.

Students
Ciao.
Mi chiamo xxxxxx. Io sono 20 anni e habito in Germania.

Ciao.
Mi chiamo xxxxxx, sono australiana.
Sono nata a Perth, il 1 febbraio: ho 26 anni.
Sono studente e supervisore delle funziono.

Ciao,
MI chiamo xxxxx, sono Americano. Sono Salt Lake City, Utah, il 29 dicembre 1969, ho 42 anni. Sono un'insegnante una banca.

Cio mi presento , sono xxxxxx , sono nato in Tucuman il 02 di Febbraio di 1982 , sono 31 anni . io lavoro di amministrative , sono esposata a Sofia , sono molto felice en mia casa .

Mi chiamo Gabriela, sono italoparaguaianna. Sono nata a Asuncion, il 3 giugnio 1995: ho 18 anni. Sono un'estudentesa di psicologia.

Fig.4 – Example of a Class Activity focused on self-presentation

Tutor helps students carrying out activities with automatic correction as well; tutor designs a very detailed timeline of all the activities and proposes a pace of individual study, if needed. Moreover, tutor answers questions about activities with automatic correction and provides insights about language use and grammar, according to students' linguistic needs and interests.
Another essential component of the ICoNLingua model is the synchronous audio tool, through which students can practice oral production skills, under the guide of the tutor: during synchronous sessions (the length is about one hour for each session), students talk among themselves in small groups and with the tutor through communicative activities designed for the purpose.
The synchronous tool is equipped with an interactive whiteboard, used by the tutor to write sentences, upload and share documents needed to carry out the proposed activities.

2.3 ICoNLingua tutor community
Tutors engaged in the courses belong to the ICoNLingua community, mainly aimed at sharing teaching materials, exchange views on language teaching issues and implement a common teaching philosophy. Tutors are specialized teachers of Italian as a second or foreign language and are especially trained in specific online teaching issues such as: effective methods of distance interaction, motivation of distance students, designing of online Class Activities, management of the forum, chat and other interactive tools, use of tracking tools to monitor and improve students' performance, management of the ICoNLingua- ADA Learning platform.

3. Application of the model: *Learning Italian in a virtual class* and *ICoNLingua-CsF program*
The IConLingua model is the product of more than ten years of experience in the field of distance education and language learning and teaching. The ICoN Consortium is devoted to the promotion of Italian language and culture in the world through e-learning technology; this means that ICoN language courses are used by students belonging to very different profiles, and this fact explains the essential role given to the tutor who has the difficult task to redesign the learning path according to the specific needs.
The model is currently applied in many different programs. We here only mention *Learning Italian in a virtual class*, in cooperation with the Provincia Autonoma di Trento, addressed to descendants of

Italian emigrants, in particular from Trento region, all over the world; and *ICoNLingua CsF*, in cooperation with several Brazilian and Italian institutions, addressed to Brazilian university students.

Learning Italian in a Virtual Class started in 2003 and offers a three-year study program to students of any age from all over the world. Almost 500 students already attended or are attending this program; most of them come from Latin America and Europe, but we also have students from Usa, Canada, Asia and Africa. They study Italian for very different purposes in their spare time, so we held an extensive program with an estimated time of study of about three hours per week. Students are signed in a virtual class, and over one year they complete a full level so that at the end of the program they have accomplished to complete three levels.

IConLingua – CsF (http://csf.italicon.it/), on the contrary, is an intensive program started in 2012; the second edition was held from June to August 2013 and was attended by 837 university students from Brazil. They were divided into 47 classes and over 10 weeks, under the guide of a tutor (one for each class), they studied Italian to prepare for a period of study at an Italian university (planned for the academic year 2013-2014).

They all attend a scientific faculty, and received a scholarship from the Brazilian government to study abroad. This scholarship also provides e-learning courses in Italian language, arranged by ICoN.

According to the program, students continue Italian language training in traditional courses at the Italian University of destination and continue to have access to the self-learning online course. At the end of the online training, universities receive a detailed documentation and a complete student portfolio concerning evaluation and achievements of each student.

The online courses ended in August 2013, and are a good example of how e-learning tools interact with traditional courses, each learning modality keeping its own features and specificities; besides, within virtual classes (each class had about 15-18 students), students could interact with the tutor and with other students, and could build interpersonal relationships which most likely they will keep during the Italian period too. The great value of the experience is also testified by the appreciation of the students:

"Mi è piaciuto il corso di italiano, è stato possibile apprendere in modo lieve ascoltare e scrivere quello che più sarà utilizzato nel nostro arrivo in Italia. Mi piace il forum e le attività. Voglio ringraziare la insegnante xxxxxx per la gentilezza e la pazienza con noi, sempre attenta e con buon umore.
Spero di applicare il mio apprendistato in Italia a godere di tutto ciò che questo bel paese ha da offrire!"

"Ciao, cara tutora!
Come stai?
Sono molto contento di aver iniziato a imparare l'italiano qui, in questo corso! Ringrazio a te per la tua attenzione e simpatia!
Ho pensato che sarebbe più difficile da imparare, ma mi piaceva ogni attività. È un corso dinamico perchè le attività sono correlate con il nostro quotidiano futuro in Italia!
Mi è piaciuto di più le lezioni del forum che possiamo scegliere i personaggi e i dialoghi; ad esempio, le attività
"Incontri tra personaggi famosi" e "La famiglia". Ma anche mi piacciono i dialoghi, suggerimenti sui film e alcuni curiosità sul Italia!"

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