ICT Tools Supporting Language Learning for Adult Immigrants

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Abstract

In analogy with what has been observed in other European Union Member States, over the last decade the foreign population residing in Italy has tripled. The Italian law provides that, in order to obtain a long-term EC residence permit, foreigners must pass a test of knowledge of Italian language. In this context, the initiative 'Teach Italian for a better welcome' ('Alfabetizzare per accogliere') was born, sponsored by District 2050 of Rotary International, with the patronage of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of the Internal Affairs. This initiative has led to the creation of a multilingual guidebook aimed at carrying out and passing the test of Italian language knowledge. In order to foster the engagement, the interaction and the motivation of participants, to enlarge the availability of resources, and to build a specific learners' community, the Rotary International District 2050 eClub, in collaboration with the University of Pavia, has enriched the initiative by creating an online digital environment (https://www.alfabint.org) with multilingual user interface (Arabic, Chinese, English, Italian, Russian, Spanish), that exploits ICT technologies and open source tools for e-learning.

1. Introduction

The population of the European Union (EU) is affected by significant flows of migrants so that, at 1 January 2009, 31.8 million people, or 6.4% of the population, lived in states other than those of origin; out of these individuals, two-thirds came from non-EU states [1]. Confirming the increases already ongoing since the 1960s, in 2010 the EU population has increased by approximately 1.4 million people, of which 63.2% resulting from a new immigration phenomenon [2].

The 15th General Italian Population and Houses Census showed that, as of 9 October 2011, the resident population stood at 59,433,744 units, with an increase compared to 2001 (56,995,744 residents) of 4.3% arising solely from immigration flows [3]. Over the last decade, the foreign population residing in Italy has tripled: starting from a little more than 1 million 300 thousand individuals in 2001, it has grown to more than 4 million in 2011.

The above mentioned data highlight the relevance of developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all the integration strategies, policies and measures focused on third-country citizens, in order to achieve social cohesion and economic development.

As recognized by the fourth of the eleven Common Basic Principles concerning the subject of EU integration [4], fluency in the language of the host country is an a key factor for the integration of immigrants and can radically affect their ability to access basic services, employment, education, as well as social and community networks.

Regarding Italy, Article 9 of Legislative Decree 25 July 1998, n. 286, as amended by Article 1, paragraph 22, letter i) of Act no. 94/2009, provides that, starting from 1 December 2010, in order to achieve the EC long-term residence permit, foreigners coming from non-EU countries must pass a test of knowledge of Italian language.

In the general framework described above, the initiative 'Teach Italian for a better welcome' ('Alfabetizzare per accogliere') was created, sponsored by District 2050 of Rotary International, with the patronage of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of the Internal Affairs. In spring 2012, this initiative led to the creation of a multilingual guide [5] aimed at carrying out and passing the test of Italian for individuals in need of the long-term residence permit.

Since the paper version of the document imposes the constraints implicit in the materiality of the support (printing, binding, distribution, update, etc.), the Rotary International District 2050 eClub, in collaboration with the University of Pavia, has enriched the initiative by creating an online digital environment (https://www.alfabint.org) with multilingual user interface (Arabic, Chinese, English, Italian, Russian, Spanish), that exploits ICT technologies and open source tools for e-learning.

2. Skills for integration and ICT tools

Today the integration of immigrants requires the acquisition of communication skills in three domains increasingly indistinguishable: language skills, ICT skills and competencies needed for everyday life [6].

Regarding ICT domain, the Digital inclusion has been recognized as a priority by the Digital Agenda since it allows members of disadvantaged social groups to better participate in social life [7].

Regarding language skills, the creation and delivery of courses for adult immigrants is a complex process [8; 9] and the use of ICT for this purpose is an issue affecting more intervention areas at the EU level, as provided by the Europe 2020 strategy for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth [7].

Regarding ICT skills and tools, some studies have shown that these elements are already part of everyday life of many migrants [10], and therefore they do not represent a critical point. For this reason and on the basis of the experience conducted by other EU Member States, the District 2050 of Rotary International, in collaboration with the University of Pavia, has found it useful to provide e-learning services to facilitate and verify the level of learning of the Italian language by migrants.

In accordance with the recommendations provided within the EU [6], the selected technologies used to achieve the online version of the service 'Teach Italian for a better welcome' ('Alfabetizzare per accogliere') take into account the following aspects:

- common and easy to use tools and applications;
- service reachable through different devices (PCs, smartphones, tablets, and the like) commonly available and not requiring specific technical skills;
- possibility to build multilingual user interfaces easily.

Taking into account the above-mentioned criteria, the Open Source Learning Management System Moodle 2.4 was chosen was chosen as to implement the service.

3. From paper to digital: new features

The paper guide 'Teach Italian for a better welcome' ('Alfabetizzare per accogliere') contains, in its first part, information that clarifies the legal framework of the initiative and describes how to complete the comprehension tests, both oral and written, and written interaction. In the final part, the paper guide offers practical examples in order to allow candidates to train in concrete cases. All information is available in Italian, Arabic, Chinese, English, Punjabi, Russian and Spanish. During the migration "from paper to digital environment", problems were experienced for the Punjabi language, since it does not have any native support in the current distributions of Moodle software.

Some other difficulties arose, but were overcome, with Arabic language.

In both cases, the materials have been published as images. The most significant innovations coming from the potential of the digital environment have been carried out in the simulations of the tests.

Audio texts in Italian language were prepared as listening comprehension tests as well as online questionnaire with true/false questions, giving an immediate feedback of the results obtained.

Again, audio texts in Italian language were prepared as reading comprehension tests; after their readings, applicants have to link each text to the right, pertinent, image.

As regards writing tests, short texts in Italian language have been proposed: users are required to formulate simple sentences (i.e. communications, information plaque, etc.). Users have the opportunity to write down the text and compare it with the right formulas.

The service (Fig. 1) is active and reachable at the following web address: http://www.alfabint.org, and it is freely accessible to the whole community, both nationally and internationally.

Fig. 1 - Service home page

4. Conclusions

Integration and acquisition of the language of the host country are two interrelated processes, in which the second is a consequence of the first one, and vice versa [11].

Based on these assumptions, a research conducted in 2011 [12] surveyed major digital resources which in various formats (online, CD, DVD, smartphone applications, video, TV, etc.) have been developed to support the language learning process in EU Member States (Tab.1).

Tab. 1 - Number of digital resources for language learning

State	Digital resources number
Belgium	1
Denmark	4
Finland	2
Germany	2
Italy	1
Norway	1
Netherland	11
United Kingdom	6
Spain	1
Sweden	7
Pan UE	5

The most active Member States were The Netherland, Sweden, United Kingdom and Denmark. Regarding Italy, the highlighted resource is 'Io parlo Italiano' (RAI EDUCATIONAL); at a later stage of the survey 'Cantieri d'Italia – Basic Italian language to build up citizenship" was created and joined in

the list. The service now made available from District 2050 Rotary International eClub is therefore the third digital online Italian resource and the only one clearly aimed at supporting, carrying out and passing the test of Italian by applicants interested in obtaining permission to long-term residence.

From a technical point of view, the Open Source Software Moodle has fully met the project expectations, confirming itself as very flexible and effective tool in the management of multi-language user interfaces.

5. Thanks

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