



Teaching Practice in Pre-Service Language Teacher Education: Challenges of the Transition from Face-to-Face to Online Lessons

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Abstract

The paper concerns pre-service teacher training within a post-degree program in teaching Italian as a foreign language at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. As existing literature suggests, coursework alone may lead to theoretical knowledge about teaching, but not to the day-to-day active understandings that teachers use in their classroom. Without the opportunity for practice, teachers may find themselves unprepared for the realities of language teaching. Therefore, the post-degree program traditionally combines theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge in a blended instruction: 7 months interactive online coursework (including an introduction to computer-assisted learning) and 2 months face-to-face training. However, there are cases where face-to-face training experience is difficult or impossible to accomplish (like during the recent Covid-19 outbreak). In this setting the authentic teaching context that allows practice for pre-service teachers can be provided by an online language course. Consequently, teacher education in computer-assisted language learning becomes a central aspect of the training and it can constitute an example of good practice for the present cadre of Italian language teachers in training. The paper describes the evolution of the course through its transition from a face-to-face to online context, the challenges in its planning, preparation and implementation, as well as the first results of the new online edition and suggests innovative solutions for the design and management of similar training courses.

Keywords: *teacher education, pre-service teacher training, teacher learning in CALL, distance learning, social constructivist perspective, synchronous learning management systems.*

1. Pre-service language teacher training

The aim of this study is to present the model of pre-service teacher training adopted in a first level Master course in Teaching Italian as a foreign language at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. The Master specializes Italian and foreign graduates in Italian, to work in Italy and abroad, teaching Italian to students whose first language is not Italian. The presentation of the teacher training of the Master course allows both for describing a successful model of teacher-learning developed over the years and for evaluating the role of teaching practice in language teacher education, as well as for underlying challenges and difficulties in its realization online. The Master course has been taught since 2004 and has trained around 670 native and non-native Italian speakers from around the world in the field of language education. Students taking the course come from varied backgrounds and experience in teaching, from no teaching experience at all, to those who are currently teaching Italian or other foreign languages. Distance education and online learning are both a theoretical and a practical component of the course, levelling somehow the individual differences in knowledge about computer assisted learning. The approach and the methodology that has been the foundation of the efficiency of the course has remained the same since the first edition. Informed by a social constructivist perspective on learning [1], the course's pillars continue to be interaction and collaboration, combining different pedagogical tools including distance learning activities, delivered through an e-learning platform, assisted with constant interaction between students and tutors and face-to-face educational activities, consisting in lessons, seminars, workshop activities and a monitored internship called Practicum.

Traditionally, most teacher education programs have assumed that teachers can learn everything they need to teach well by completing their programs of study, with limited opportunities for practicing, often equated with passive observation of lessons taught by expert professionals. However, as Egbert [2] states, teachers from these programs might find themselves unprepared for the realities of language teaching and feel stressed and confused once they assume an instructional role and have to apply what they have learned to a culturally situated context. It is thought advisable to include experiential learning, such as internships, in teacher education programs in order to integrate knowledge and theory with practical application and skills. Internship is a controlled work experience, with less pressure and risks compared to the real-life context, that allows learners to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical setting and to gain practical and professional skills [3]. Furthermore, it gives



the pre-service teacher the opportunity to engage in reflective practice (see §2). Thanks to the practical experience, trainee teachers can learn how to act efficiently in the working context and they can identify their own professional potential and limits. In fact, there is a rich evidence suggesting that internship is one of the most important and influential parts of pre-service second language teacher education and specific benefits are reported in a growing body of empirical studies [4]. As far as our Master course is concerned, from the analysis of the 86 participants' evaluation questionnaire referring to previous academic years (2016/17 and 2017/18) the Practicum appears as the "heart" of the course and many of the participants suggest longer practical teaching periods. The three main strengths they underline are the opportunity to put theory into practice, the cooperative work within the group and the utility of feedback they receive from tutors and peers.

2. Teaching practice in a learning community

Different models of professional experience for language teachers have been implemented around the world. The choice of the model in the Master course is based on the conviction that a circular relationship between theory and practice is essential to develop knowledge and that communities of practice must constitute the core of professional learning for teachers. The main objective of the 2-month Practicum is to strengthen knowledge and basic competences in teaching L2 Italian learned during the 7-month online part of the course. To give an example, in the online part students follow a module about developing teaching materials from authentic texts and during the Practicum they put into practice the skills they have acquired, creating teaching materials for an entire language course. The specific learning objectives of the Practicum include 1) know how to plan an Italian language course for foreigners, taking into account learners' needs and competence; 2) be able to select texts coherently with the level of competence; 3) be able to choose and implement methodologies and teaching techniques coherently with learners' needs; 4) develop ability to reflect critically about his/her own methodological choices and about his/her own and others' teaching actions; 5) develop classroom management skills; 6) be able to assess language learners' knowledge and competence.

The Practicum, which is the strength of this specialization course, is characterized by two phases: the first is guided observation of Italian language lessons at the University of Foreigners of Perugia; the second is monitored teaching practice in specially formed classes of foreign students. During the monitored teaching practice, in small groups (4-6 people), trainee teachers develop the syllabus of a course, lesson plans and create teaching materials based on authentic texts. Trainee teachers are followed by teacher-tutors who encourage collaboration and sharing knowledge between the members of the group. There is a moment where trainee teachers can test themselves individually: each participant teaches at least two language lessons to a class of foreign students. At the end of each lesson the group and the tutor come together to give a feedback to the colleague who taught the lesson. One or both of the lessons are filmed and they become a further occasion for exchange. The individual component is evaluated, but collaborative work with peers and tutors has a much higher value in the course. In fact, the aim is to develop a learning community, where members rely on one another to learn and progress.

Furthermore, trainee teachers are constantly asked to reflect upon what they have learned, what they want to experiment and what they have experimented, via the interchange with their tutor and peers, the feedback and the final discussion about the video recorded lessons (see Fig. 1). In this way all participants become "critical friends", giving each other advice as a trusted "friend" rather than a consultant, in a sympathetic but constructively critical way [5].

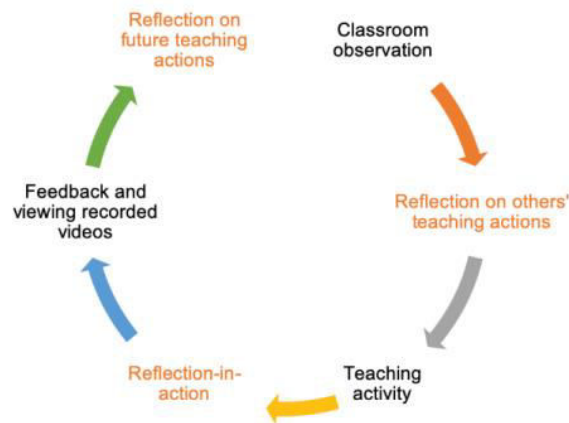


Fig. 1 Reflective practice during the Practicum

Reflective practice has an important role in the educational path because one of the main objectives of the Master is to develop teacher's propensity for a critical attitude allowing them to reflect upon others' and his/her own teaching practice. This ability is considered in the final assessment, as in the Practicum alongside lesson plans and their implementation, the active participation in discussions (feedback) and a report on observations in the classroom are also evaluated (see Fig. 2).

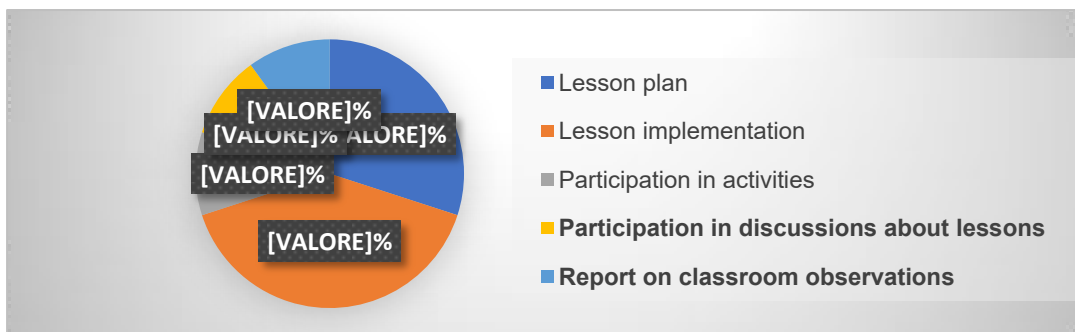


Fig. 2 Evaluation of the Practicum

The activities of the Practicum are monitored by means of various tools. Trainee teachers fill in a questionnaire about their needs and expectations at the beginning of the Practicum and a semi-structured evaluation questionnaire at the end. Teacher-tutors are also asked to fill in a survey composed of open-ended questions. Monitoring and evaluation of activities allow for taking appropriate decisions aimed at improving the effectiveness of the training course. In fact, in order to realize an efficient internship a good course design is not sufficient: great efforts are required in its management, in its evaluation and in its eventual reorganization.

3. Professional experience in a synchronous computer-mediated context

In the 16th edition of the Master course, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the course had to be transformed from the mixed format to a fully online format. In this setting the authentic teaching context is provided by an online language course organized with the support of Microsoft Teams and classroom observations are carried out by watching videos recorded online and face-to-face classes. The structure of activities and evaluation criteria remained unvaried, while some of the learning objectives were necessarily modified. In the current edition, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) becomes a central aspect of the training, since trainee teachers need to learn how to plan an online Italian language course, how to implement online methodologies and teaching techniques coherently with learners' needs, how to manage a live online classroom and how to assess language learners' knowledge and competence online. Teacher learning in CALL is a very significant area within the field of teacher education in Italy due to the critical need for in-service and pre-service language teachers to become more technologically knowledgeable. In fact, the questionnaire administered at the beginning of the Practicum of the ongoing academic year (2019/2020) shows that almost 90% of



the teachers have never taught through video conferencing systems and about 80% have never participated in courses/lessons taught in video conferencing; in addition several participants indicate explicitly that they expect to be trained to implement and manage an online language course, to use new instruments and resources, to apply teaching methods and techniques able to create a relaxed and co-constructive distance learning environment and to understand advantages and disadvantages that online learning offers to learners. In response to these needs, specific knowledge and skills are developed during the Practicum, under the tutors' supervision, including the usage of technologies offered by the synchronous learning management system (such as videoconferencing, text chat, file co-editing and desktop sharing), design of tasks appropriate to the online environment, design of activities "addressing social and affective factors such as community building in 'disembodied' computer-based environments" [6]. The development of CALL knowledge and skills is realized at both technical and pedagogical levels [7], since trainee teachers directly apply their understandings and abilities in teaching practice. Fig. 3 shows an example of how trainee teachers manage an online classroom, controlling simultaneously the learner group on sub-video windows and teaching materials on Microsoft Word, sharing the computer screen.

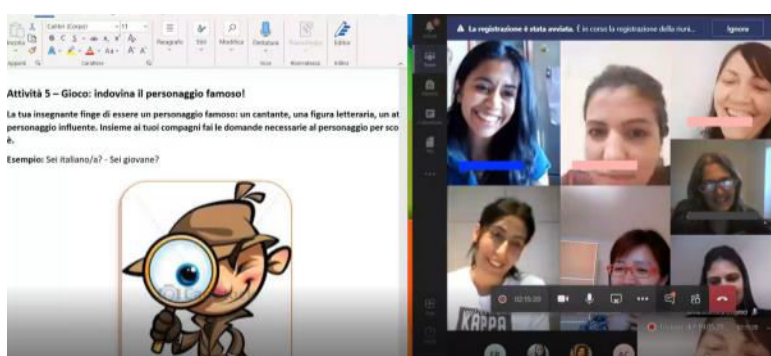


Fig. 3 Teaching practice on Microsoft Teams

In the questionnaire some participants underline the importance of classroom interaction, complaining about the absence of physical interaction with students and describing possible difficulties in managing the affective component of interactions. From these considerations we can deduce that our trainee teachers consider interaction in face-to-face contexts as beneficial to L2 development, coherently with the theories of the interaction approach to second language acquisition [8]. Nevertheless, they have doubts about the relationship between interaction and learner outcomes within a computer-mediated environment. According to the interaction approach exposure to input, opportunities to produce output, feedback on learner's production through interaction and production of modified output are likely to lead to L2 development. Both text-based and voice-based synchronous computer-mediated communication might provide each of these components, allowing active learner participation, as well as great quality of language production and corrective feedback. A recent meta-analysis [9] demonstrates that there are no significant differences between synchronous computer-mediated communication and face-to-face contexts, suggesting that the mode of communication has no statistically significant impact on the positive developmental benefits associated with interaction. Based on these theoretical assumptions, the online language course taught by our trainee teachers is provided through the Microsoft Teams platform which allows for chat, video conferencing and audio calls (complete with document sharing and other useful features for teaching and learning), usable on computers as well as on mobile devices. The disadvantages related to Microsoft Teams, such as limitations of computer or mobile equipment or Internet connection, are minimal compared to the benefits, similarly to other voice-based synchronous resources, such as Zoom or Skype [10]. The same platform provides the conditions for a rich interaction between trainee teachers and their tutors, essential for collaborative work, in the above-mentioned social constructivist perspective. We leave it to future research to examine changes in preservice teachers' beliefs about classroom interaction in a computer-mediated environment and to document attitude, motivation and identity changes after their professional experience in CALL.

4. Some proposals for teacher training course design

Summing up, the main issues that have been raised during planning, preparation and implementation of the online teacher training course are linked to questions regarding classroom interaction,



collaborative work between trainee teachers and online teaching skills. As we have seen, in order to provide a teaching experience comparable to face-to-face classroom, the online course must allow for a rich teacher-student and student-student interaction. It is then necessary to instruct pre-service teachers how to plan and manage activities to involve participants in an ongoing dialogue, considering interaction as “the main ingredient in establishing and maintaining a vibrant online knowledge and learning community” [11].

Social interaction is fundamental not only in the classroom, but also between trainee teachers and their tutor. In our online teacher training course voice-based synchronous computer-mediated communication provides the conditions for co-construction of meaning in an environment where all participants mentor each other and have several occasions to collaborate, discuss and reflect about their own and the other’s teaching practice. Using the term of Wang, Chen and Levy [12] a “cyber face-to-face” teacher training program is an environment that can reproduce these specific components of physical face-to-face communication.

Finally, language teachers need specific skills to teach online and these skills must be developed throughout the training. During the meetings with their tutors, trainee teachers receive both technical and pedagogical training in CALL, integrated with one another, and during the language classes they necessarily connect CALL education to authentic teaching settings. Distance training in this case is an example of situated learning where participants can try the tools they learn about [13]. However, in order to lower stress and anxiety, in future online editions it would be advisable to add an online platform training before the Practicum to introduce participants to the synchronous learning management system (Microsoft Teams).

“The growth of the Internet and proliferation of computers in school and home setting has led to a significant expansion of the use of technology in foreign and second language instruction. Increasingly, both language teachers in training and practicing teachers will find themselves at a disadvantage if they are not adequately proficient in computer-assisted language learning” [14]. The actual organization of the Practicum is filling this gap, helping future Italian language teachers learn to teach with technology, immediately applying academic knowledge about computer use to the contexts of professional activity and it can constitute an example of good practice for designing similar online training courses destined for foreign language teachers.

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