Tasks for building a grammar e-book:
an application in the Albanian context

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Abstract

The question "how can students learn grammar and have fun doing so?" prompted us to adopt a task-based approach to learning Albanian literature and language, on a course offered within a virtual learning environment. Twelve Italian students who were beginner-level Albanian Language learners participated in the study in which students used digital tools to complete tasks that mainly involved the development of comic strips and cartoons in which the characters spoke Albanian. Each task-cycle began with a pre-task where the teacher exemplified the linguistic structures. For example, a cartoon in which the teacher presented himself provided the students the necessary syntactical chunks to create their own introduction-cartoons: the teacher's video thus provided a scaffold by modelling both the language and the expected cartoon product. During the second phase of learning when students created their artefacts, they used Pearltrees as a learning notebook to compile ideas, keep notes on their own progress and catalogue sites which contained useful learning material. This enabled students to work autonomously yet creatively and also made it possible for students to view the work and progress of others, provide suggestions, request clarification and collaborate when they wished to. As the course progressed, each student came to occupy a branch of Peartrees which grew as the course proceeded, thus becoming an e-portfolio of each student's learning progression. The third, post-task phase involved the use of focus on form activities to draw attention to various aspects of Albanian grammar. In this phase, the teacher called upon students to reflect on the language forms which they had used to complete their tasks and invited them to demonstrate their understanding of various grammatical rules by creating a series of related grammar exercises. The students worked in collaborative groups to co-construct sequences of grammatical rules which formed branches of Pearltrees. These branches were selected and gathered in an e-book of Albanian grammar using the epubeditor software . The creation of an e-book thus made it possible to not only conserve the student's artefacts which had been created during the course but also obliged students to reflect on the grammar forming the various branches on Pearltrees. This way of organizing grammar information offers meaningful and authentic opportunities for students to speak about and thus internalize their understanding of the grammar and the language at hand. The final exam confirmed that all the students had successfully learnt the necessary Albanian grammar even though they were "having fun". We are currently transferring the learning processes developed from this elementary-level Albanian language course into a blended intermediate-level course of Italian as a second language.

1. Introduction

This study offers a description of the learning environment set up as part of a Workshop in Albanian Language and Literature and the specific tools used in order to favour language acquisition. In particular, the chosen format for learning focuses on an open project, adopting a learning path which is both participatory and flexible, the pedagogical aims of which are: to stimulate learners' autonomy of planning, metacognitive strategies, negotiated construction of meaning and cooperation among students through the distribution and alternation of roles. [1].

A learning environment that stimulates autonomy, united with a play format appears to facilitate the passage from explicit knowledge of language rules to an implicit form of knowledge. At the point at which learning becomes procedural knowledge, students are then ready to transform their linguistic knowledge into metalinguistic competence. Effectively, the example to follow is that of learning rules so as to do something, such as, for example, driving a car: after a phase of explicit instruction in which the learner drivers needs to remember each passage in a sequence of actions, there follows a phase of complete autonomy in which the short term memory is freed of the obstruction of ideas to be remembered. Only after reaching this phase will the driver be ready to instruct someone else [2]. The students were asked to carry out tasks with the aim of learning the grammatical rules and to reproduce them through the creation of activities.

Our starting hypothesis was that to make the study of the rules of a foreign language or of a second language more appetising, it is important to involve learners in the construction of its grammar. The process is inductive, guiding the student towards the discovery of rules, and heuristic, formulating hypotheses on how language functions. In this manner, students enjoy numerous advantages in the learning of grammar rules, it no longer being the mnemonic application of grammar and syntax rules, but rather a search for contextual clues in order to comprehend how words function within complex expressions [3].

In particular, we decided to deal with some morphological and syntactical issues in Albanian, making use of web tools freely available online and easy accessible to students. The study is divided into four phases: 1. Task creation; 2. Development of the e-portfolio; 3. Focus on linguistic forms; 4. Production of an e-book. All of the work produced by students was collected systematically to be contained in the e-book focusing on the interactivity of the learning paths and activities.

2. Methodology

The project was conceived within the sphere of a course in Albanian Language and Literature, which for several years has involved an institutional part, face to face teaching, and an online workshop implemented in Moodle. In the online section, a syllabus was prepared including materials and activities for practice in Albanian and it is here that it was decided to collect the materials created by the students to be included in the e-book of Albanian grammar.

The participants were 12 Italian students at beginner level in Albanian and the chosen learning approach was that of task-based learning. The hypothesis on which teaching was based is that students whose attention is not directed towards the effort required to reproduce the target language accurately will be more able to increase their fluency and self-confidence. In this study, we adopt the definition of task offered by Skehan [4], which is based on four points: 1. Meaning is primary: learners concentrate on what they have to say rather than on how to say it; 2. "learners are not given other people's meanings to regurgitate", learners need to be stimulated to make use of their linguistic resources in L2 without worrying about grammatical accuracy but rather ceding to their desire to make themselves understood without apprehension about making too many mistakes; 3."there is some sort of relationship to comparable real world activities; 4. "task completion has a sort of priority"; 5. "the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome: evaluation is based on the realization of the task and not on its formal accuracy.

The aim is to develop student self-confidence and the desire to express themselves in L2. For the teacher this means abandoning the idea of controlling linguistic form. What is the best way, therefore, to leave the learners themselves to create activities in which they put their linguistic resources into practice without any control in class? Since we were dealing with highly educated adult learners, we decided to work on tasks. The learners were divided into group and each group was assigned a task, or rather, the planning and realization of an activity such as a cartoon or a comic strip. The time established for each activity was, on average, one week.

The students were asked to plan and construct tasks in which they had used the foreign language, seeking to exploit their capabilities. The realization of the cartoons and comic strips is to be considered in didactic terms as tasks in which the target language is used by the learner for communicative aims so as to obtain a certain result [5]. We adapted a teaching approach for e-learning tasks which includes a pre-task phase in which the teacher gave an example, such as introducing oneself with a cartoon, so that students had, on the one hand, an idea of how to create a cartoon, and on the other, the necessary language forms for introducing themselves.

In the during-task phase, students freely chose the type of activity to carry out and the teacher assisted them in the planning phase, but only if asked to do so. The students often prepared a written version, shared with the group and the teacher so that it be discussed among peers in order to obtain language and organizational suggestions regarding the presentation. In this phase, the learners paid attention to the task, but at the same time their attention was also focused on the language. In effect, they often asked how better to express a given concept. The help requested was offered by the teacher as scaffolding, but the greater part of the work was done by the learners, who sought to identify the best expressions from their own repertoire.

The students worked autonomously yet creatively and it was possible for students/tutors to provide suggestions, request clarifications: fig. 1 shows a tutor's comment on the correct spelling of the word "*Kycin*" in the comic strip:

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Këtu është dollapi me kyçin tuaj. Thuhet dollapi dhe kyçi.Pjesa tjetër e fjalisë shumë mirë. -::- Si dice dollapi e kyçi. Il resto della frase va bene!

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Fig.1. Tutor's comment "You say dollapi and kyci. The rest of the sentence is ok!"

The teacher's task was to re-model learner's phrases so as to make them clearer, interacting with them. It is probable that which was offered by the teacher in response to specific learner requests will presumably have become intake. The work realized by the students was gathered in a sort of electronic exercise book, in which they included their work and their notes. We can consider each of these exercise books to be an e-portfolio for each learner. The third, post-task phase involved the use of focus on form activities to draw attention to various aspects of Albanian grammar. In this phase, the teacher called upon students to reflect on the language forms which they had used to complete their tasks and invited them to demonstrate their understanding of various grammatical rules by creating a series of related grammar exercises.

Once the work activities and the collaboration to co-construct a series of grammar rules, identified from notes in the electronic exercise book, were completed, the students collected all of the material in an e-book. This collaboration is to be understood as a continuous exchange of roles among the learners, in the sense that each of them is from time to time either learner or teacher. The role of the teacher is therefore that of the by now tried and tested figure of facilitator in the learning of a language [6], limiting intervention to real requests and needs which come from the learners.

2.1 Tools

The students created their learning artifacts using different free Web 2.0 digital tools. These tools are fun and easy to use, engage the students in the process of planning, writing, designing original work in a creative process leading to procedural knowledge, and put learning control into students' hands.
We used the following digital tools:

- pixton (http://www.pixton.com/) a software to create a comic strip to tell a story drawing the scenes sequentially and with the emphasis on writing skills (fig. 2).

Fig.2. Comic strip "Në Shkollë"

- Go!animate (www.goanimate.com) – a software for creating animated videos, which lets you tell a story using your voice with the emphasis on speaking skills (fig. 3).
- A simple word processor for writing grammar rules.
- Pearltrees (http://www.pearltrees.com/) - a software which enables the addition of web pages, files, photos and notes, and their organization in a visual and collaborative library to share easily.
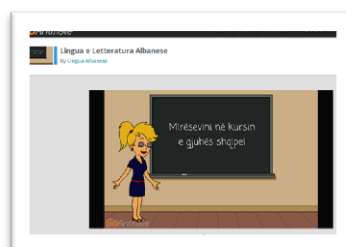

Fig.3. Cartoon "Introduce yourself"

Each student used the Pearltrees software as a learning notebook to compile ideas, to make notes on their own progress and to catalogue sites, which contained useful learning material. The students worked in collaborative groups to co-construct sequences of grammatical rules which formed branches of Pearltrees, Everyone had the opportunity to choose the digital tool they wished to perform the task, and to see the work and progress of others navigating around the topics using hypertext links. We created six different teams on topics such as Glossary, Verbs, Pronouns, Nouns, Greetings. The students organized 19 items generating 3,800 views (fig. 4).

Fig.4. Pearltrees' dashboard

As the course progressed, each student came to occupy a branch of Peartrees, which grew as the course proceeded, thus becoming an e-portfolio which gathered the collection of digital artefacts that represented the student's learning progression in terms of effort and achievement throughout the course (fig. 5).

Fig.5. Students' branch of Peartrees

The collections of student artifacts were selected and gathered in an e-book of Albanian grammar. Writing is an activity that helps consolidate learning, but the student content is also an important factor. We used epubeditor (http://www.epubeditor.it), an online environment for creating easy ebooks in epub3 format.
The e-book was structured into nine lessons. Each of these begins with an Objectives page and concludes with the exercises file.
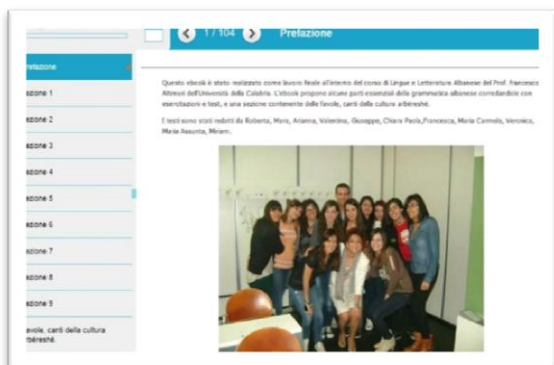
Fig. 6. Examples of the e.book

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3. Results

Through task-based teaching, the students learned to work in groups, to interact and manage their own learning, assigning each other tasks to be completed. They learned to manage a project respecting fixed deadlines and they learned to manage their own emotional responses. Through co-participation the students exploited the benefits of shared construction, in terms both of coming together and the socialization of knowledge. The learners, furthermore, used the language in written and oral form.

Given that the course participants were adult university students, used to engaging in linguistic reflection, the construction of a grammar point facilitated the passage from declarative to procedural knowledge. In effect, the students on the Albanian Language and Literature course at the University of Calabria showed in their final examination that they had reached an A2 competence level (fig.7). Moreover, alongside the development of grammar rules, the students had the opportunity to learn the use of different types of web tool and social media, reinforcing some of the key competencies and becoming "active creators" of knowledge, experience and best practices.

As a future development of this experience, we are planning a blended learning course for Italian L2 on the basis of the Albanian course model. This includes the idea of beginning with a planned task-based syllabus to be proposed to students at an intermediate level in Italian.
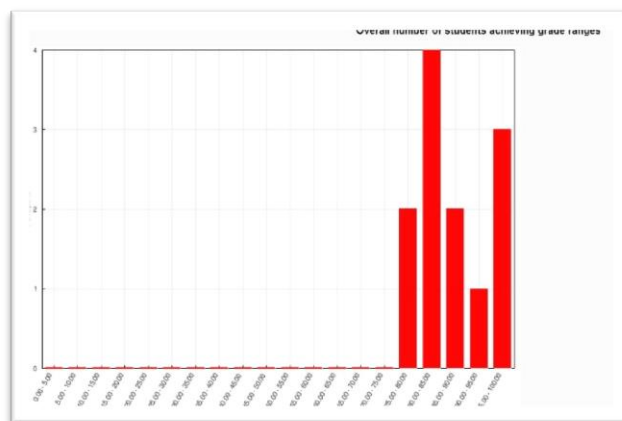

Fig. 7. Final examination

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