



ICoNLingua Learning Model into Practice: the Case of Ciência sem fronteiras

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Abstract

In this paper, we present a significant case study of the ICoNLingua Online Teaching and Learning Model applied to a project named ICoNLingua – CsF Ciência sem Fronteiras (<http://csf.italicon.it/>) that was carried out in the past three years with over 1.500 Brazilian students.

Ciência sem Fronteiras "is a large scale nationwide scholarship program primarily funded by the Brazilian federal government. The program seeks to strengthen and expand the initiatives of science and technology, innovation and competitiveness through international mobility of undergraduate and graduate students and researchers". In this perspective, the language training plays a key role for the success of the students who come to study in Italy; ICoN was in charge of the language training of these students prior to their arrival in Italy: CsF students with an A1 level of Italian, attended ICoNLingua's online courses in a ten weeks intensive program.

The students were enrolled in virtual classes (15-18 students per class), and each class was managed by a highly qualified teacher specifically trained in the techniques for the teaching of distance learning Italian language courses.

The Teaching and Learning Model applied in this context in made up of three main components:

- *the close-ended activities, i.e. activities supplied with an automatic correction mechanism: these are closed answer activities in which the system provides immediate feedback; the activities can be assigned by the teacher as independent tasks and practice exercises for the students to carry out;*
- *the open-ended tasks: in this case the activity involves a written production task proposed by the teacher in the context of the forum. The open-ended tasks aim to give students practice in written production and in carrying out targeted research on subjects and contents relevant to the lessons. By means of these activities, the students are asked to perform real tasks that require authentic use of language, such as written interaction in Italian with other members of the class, or researching some topic on the web. The open-ended tasks are the result of a carefully designed project drawn up by the community of ICoN tutors; the activities are highly standardized because they are selected from among a range of activities extensively reviewed and validated by ICoN. Among the tasks available, the teacher chooses those best suited to the students' profile and language needs; the teacher may also create new ad hoc open-ended tasks based on the standardized model;*
- *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.*

1. The ICoNLingua model

ICoNLingua is an e-teaching/learning didactic model specifically designed for teaching Italian as a foreign language: it is based on an on-line platform and on the interaction (synchronous and asynchronous) between teacher and students.

The model is the result of longstanding research (still in progress), whose main objective is to reconcile educational (specifically linguistic) needs with the demands of technology.

The model is based primarily on two principles:

- Learning a language through an e-learning platform is a social experience, in a social context, within which teacher and learners establish social relations.
- In order to be effective, stimulate motivation thus preventing student dispersion (the biggest danger of e-learning programmes), the e-learning path must be carefully tailored for the needs of language learners and take into account the specific points of the learning context.

With this in mind, the components of any e-learning path need to be constantly revised and updated.

The ICoNLingua model is made up of 3 components:

- Automatic correction activities: closed-response activities with automatic feedback from the platform. Activities can be assigned to students by the tutor as tasks to be carried out

individually, with timescales and pace chosen by the students themselves based on their needs;

- Open correction activities: in this case, activities consist of written tasks proposed by the tutor within the forum. The aim is to enable students to practice their written language creatively and independently on relevant topics within the course. Generally, activities are real tasks that require authentic use of language and often authentic interaction with other students who share the same research goal. The activities are highly standardised and are part of an archive of activities reviewed and validated by ICoN, from which the teacher chooses those best suited to the profile and linguistic needs of students;
- The community of ICoN tutors: the tutors involved in the language courses belong to the “community of tutors”, whose goal is to create and share materials and debate educational issues related to teaching Italian on-line.

What we have just described is the basic conceptual core of the ICoNLingua model, which then feeds into the e-learning programmes actually delivered.

Precisely for this reason, it is essential to test the model and evaluate its teaching effectiveness.

2. An application of the ICoNLingua model: the case of *Ciência sem Fronteiras*

Over the past 5 years, the ICoNLingua model has been tested many times, with learners from different countries, with different profiles and linguistic needs.

This paper is an overview of an interesting experience, that of *Ciência sem Fronteiras* (henceforth CsF), which allows the development and updating of the model over a period of 3 years to be shown. CsF is a programme funded by the Brazilian government, aimed at University science students spending time in countries abroad, including Italy.

ICoN has been entrusted with the language training of students seconded to Italy, through an intensive e-learning programme carried out during the 10 weeks before arrival in Italy.

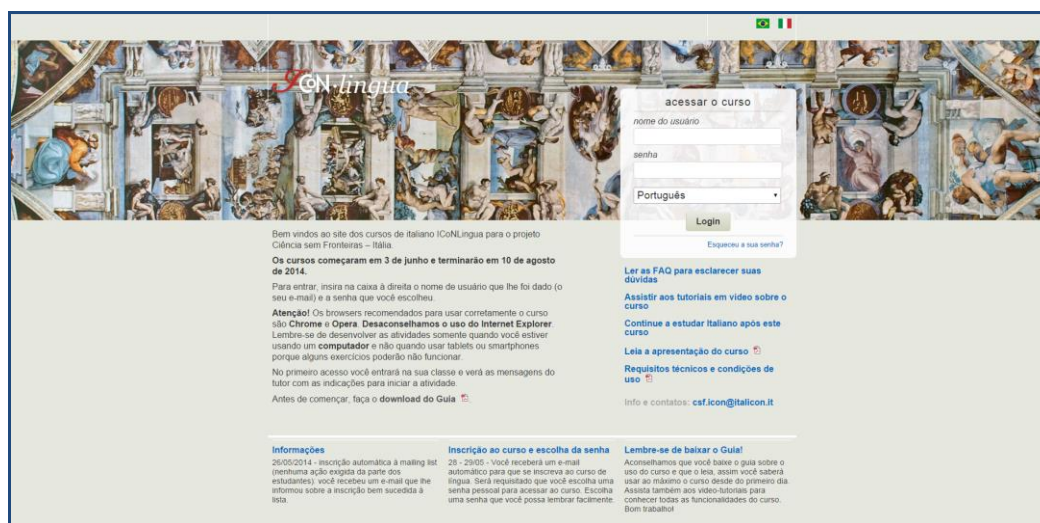


Fig.1. CsF home page

The programme has been repeated for 3 editions: the first edition (2012), was attended by 85 students, the second edition (2013), 827 students, the third (2014), 645 students, up to a total of 1557 students.

The profile of students can be delineated as follows: these are University students from various parts of Brazil, attending a level A1 Italian course before arriving in Italy, in virtual classrooms, each consisting of about 15-18 students.

Since the classes have been formed on the basis of the destination University, the interesting feature of this profile of learners is that, in the CsF programme, the virtual classroom is the first socialisation space between students who do not know each other, but who will likely meet in person and establish relationships in the destination city and universities.

From one edition to the next, the ICoNLingua model has undergone revisions and updates, geared towards improving the effectiveness of the e-learning programme.

The most substantial part of the revision and updating concerned the open correction activities proposed by the teacher in the forum: over the course of the 3 editions, many open correction



activities have been proposed to students, new activities have been created and, given the substantial size of the project, it is possible to draw some general conclusions on the effectiveness of the model and the improvements made to it over time.

In the first two editions, standard open correction activities were proposed, belonging to the archive of the community of ICoN tutors and tested over the years: as we have already said, these are activities whose final output is the production of a written text (a letter, a story, a brochure, but also a table, etc.), which may be the result of a search for information on the web, or discussion with other students, if the activity is proposed, not individually but to groups of students. The standard activities are offered to the entire class, and are chosen based on the contents of the unit of the course the students are on at any given time.

These activities are typically very demanding, as they require students to put in a considerable effort to research and develop information, to manage the interaction with their classmates, and to produce the actual written text. Given also that the course is concentrated into just 10 weeks, the pace of study and alternation between the performance of closed correction and open correction activities is quite tight.

Generally, these activities have been judged by students to be very demanding but useful; activities focused on motivating topics and tasks that are actually useful for students (writing a review of their favourite book) or fun tasks (writing an invented recipe) have been particularly successful.

Despite the effectiveness of the teaching activity being confirmed on the one hand by students' approval, and on the other by the actual progression of competence in Italian, during the first two editions of CsF two issues emerged that required an expansion and updating of the open correction activities:

- Given that in the CsF classes, not all students had the same level of competence in Italian, the activities proposed were often either too easy or too difficult, in both cases compromising the degree of student motivation.
- Regardless of the level of competence in Italian, it is not easy for many students to carry out the activities within the given timescales (usually very tight) and sometimes even to publish the text of the activities in the forum, a public space by definition.

In the first two editions, we tried to respond to the needs of classes with uneven levels of competence by proposing individual “differentiated paths”, offering students a separate path from that of the class and hence different open correction activities. The advantage of this strategy was that it allowed tutors to personally follow students and enhance the one-to-one relationship. However it often resulted in an “isolation” of students within the forum, which in some cases threatened to turn into a timeline of completely separate discussion threads, the expression of a personal two-way relationship between tutors and individual students.

3. The expansion of the model: targeted activities

On the basis of these considerations, in the third and final edition of the programme we created a new type of open correction activity, which we called “targeted activities”, characterised primarily by a new kind of relationship between student and teacher and between students themselves, arising from the desire to respond to the linguistic needs of students whilst preserving the precious status of the forum as an environment in which multiple and layered social relations are developed and cultivated.

Targeted activities consist of tasks proposed individually to a single student (or small group), which must then involve the whole class, according to the instructions given by the teacher. They are divided into two types:

- Recreational activities, in which the selected student involves the whole class in a game: recognition of a place or character, participation in an auction etc.. In this case, students themselves “manage” the game within the forum and also manage the interaction with other students.
- Research activities, in which the selected student (or students) performs an on-line search and develops a product (Word document, video, PowerPoint presentation and the like) which is then shared with the whole class.

The tutor first contacts the chosen student (or students, in case of a group activity) individually (by e-mail or messaging platform) and illustrates how to conduct the activity to be published in the forum, asking for the student's co-operation. The tutor chooses one student as group leader, responsible for the organisation of the work and the publication of the final version of the work.

In a second message, addressed to the whole class, the teacher publishes on the forum the complete delivery of the activity, indicating the names of the students who have already joined. The message is

preceded by a warning to inform students that this is a complex activity aimed only at those who feel able to do it.

In a third (private) message, addressed to the selected student or group of students and those in the class who may have joined, the tutor provides feedback structured to the work carried out, reporting any corrections to be made and giving instructions for the publication of the final text of the activity in the class forum.

This third message is optional and therefore at the discretion of the teacher, who can also choose to invite students to publish the fruits of their labour directly on the forum.

The activity structure just described involves the alternation between a “public” interaction in the class forum space and private exchanges between teacher and student (or group of students), despite the fact that the essential nature of being public and sharing with the whole class is indispensable.

The concept of “targeted activity” proposed in the third edition of the programme seeks to address the need to enhance the skills of individual students, giving them greater freedom in the organisation and in the methods for developing the learning path, whilst never losing sight of the need to share their achievements.

A good example of targeted activity proposed in the third edition of the CsF programme is “Guide to Florence”, proposed to students who would be going to study in that city: the tutor asked a small group of students to draw up a small guide to the city to which they would soon move for the CsF programme. The main features of the activity can be summarised as follows:

- The tutor provides the initial instructions for drafting the guide (sites and documents from which to draw information)
- The tutor assigns each student a section of the guide to write
- The tutor appoints a group “leader”, who collects the contributions of the group members (published in the forum itself) and compiles the final version of the text.

As you can see, this is a very complex task, which involves different language and non-language skills (reading documents, reviewing information, managing written interactions with classmates) which students have nevertheless carried out enthusiastically, especially because it had an authentic goal and was thus inherently highly motivating.

The guide was published in the forum and presented as a “gift” that the students in the group gave to the whole class.



Fig.2. Guide to Florence’s cover, published as pdf by a group of students of Class CsF 26

4. Conclusions

The structure and example of targeted activity we have described is the natural evolution of the open correction activities traditionally proposed on ICoNLingua courses, and constitutes a new type of task particularly suited for virtual classrooms with the following characteristics:

- Same level of schooling
- “Real” common objectives

BUT

- Different levels of expertise in Italian



The CsF programme, with its three-year duration, has allowed us to test the ICoNLingua model on the same profile of learners over the medium term, and to fully develop its potential.

In particular, the expansion of the open correction activities has allowed us to:

- experiment with new ways of managing tutor-student relationships, by both enhancing collaboration among peers and introducing forms of asymmetrical relations even among students;
- ensure greater student involvement;
- respond in a personalised way to the linguistic needs of students with uneven levels of language proficiency.

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