In Italia con Giacomo:
Developing a Blended Learning Course
in Italian Language and Culture

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Abstract

This paper describes the context, structure, content and creation process related to a novel blended learning course on Italian culture, language structures and communication skills developed for beginners enrolled at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The course is delivered through a combination of two hours in class per week and an app available online through fixed and portable digital devices for ease of access and flexibility. The in-class component focuses on oral and written production, fostering the development of individual language and communication strategies. The app component, 'In Italia con Giacomo', takes learners on a linguistic road trip of Italy with Giacomo, a 2018 model electric Vespa. Giacomo acts as the learner's travelling companion and language guide, and as they travel together the learner encounters the language and culture of key Italian destinations. The paper also explores considerations in relation to assessment of blended learning courses within the confines of a very structured and limiting university course assessment system.

Keywords: *Blended learning;*

Introduction

In recent decades, the experience of teaching and learning languages has changed dramatically, and one of the strongest drivers of this change has been the recognition of the role that intercultural communicative competence plays in successful linguistic interactions [1]. The established goal of communicative language teaching – an effective interchange of information – has been augmented to include 'the ability to decenter and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior' [1, p. 42]. Krasner demonstrated that linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language [2], and Peterson and Coltrane showed that learners need to be aware of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, disagree with someone, express gratitude or make requests [3].

As foreign language teaching has evolved in this direction, the expectations on teachers have increased, such that they are now encouraged to contextualise a 'foreign linguistic code' against 'the socio-cultural background associated with the foreign language and to promote the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence' [4, p. 92). Foreign language teachers therefore need additional knowledge, attitudes, competencies and skills to support the intercultural learning process [5].

In recognition of these developments and in order broaden the scope of my teaching practice, in 2017 I applied for and received a small grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The funding was to enable the development of a pilot blending learning course to be offered alongside the two existing first-year 'Italian Language for Beginners' papers at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. As well as overseeing the development of the course, I have designed the course structure and content, and am writing the course materials. As the pilot course has an app-based component, I have enlisted a code writer, an audio-visual technician from the university, and a graphic designer to assist me. The new course will be taught for the first time in the first semester of the next academic year (beginning March 2019) and as such is currently a work in progress.

The pilot course will be the second blended learning course in a foreign language to be developed in-house and introduced by the School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Auckland. The first, entitled 'Introductory French', was first taught in 2015 and has proved to be a highly successful didactic offering. One of the many advantages of blended learning is it can be tailored to suit many contexts, and the Italian context differs from the French in that the language is not taught in New Zealand schools, and there is comparatively little awareness of contemporary Italian language and society. The pilot course described here differs from Introductory French in two crucial aspects: (1) learners can access the app component, called 'In Italia con Giacomo', on all fixed or

portable digital devices; and (2) 'In Italia con Giacomo' uses a narrative structure with a protagonist who accompanies the learner on a virtual tour of Italy.

Blending Narrative with Blended Learning

The importance of using narratives and storytelling when teaching a foreign language is well established [6]. According to Daniel, 'Narrative is the natural way in which humans organise information, and storytelling is the most immediate (and fundamental) means by which that narrative is communicated' [7, p. 3]. When a teacher narrates a story, ideal language learning conditions can be created because the story functions as a springboard for a variety of language learning activities [8].

As an instructional methodology that leverages technology to provide a more personalised approach to learning, blending learning gives students control over the time, place, path and pace of their learning [9]. By combining the use of narrative with blending learning, 'In Italia con Giacomo' gives learners the ability to insert themselves into the narrative in a way designed to maximise their engagement. Giacomo is a 2018 model electric Vespa who accompanies the learner on an exploration of Italy and the Italian language. Giacomo and the student travel Italy from north to south, making 11 stops on the way. Starting from Aosta, they visit Torino, Vernazza, Bergamo, Ravenna, Urbino, Assisi, Viterbo, Salerno, Lecce, Reggio Calabria and finally Palermo. When the pair arrive at a new destination, Giacomo takes the learner on a 5-minute visual tour of the city. Through the language interactions that take place between Giacomo and the learner over 11 weeks, Giacomo shares insights into the dynamics of his family and the personalities of his relatives. The narrative draws on the historical and cultural context of Vespas in Italian society, cinema and everyday life, which helps to establish an intercultural communicative connection between the learner and Giacomo. The learner gradually becomes conscious of the sibling rivalry between Giacomo's brothers and sisters; the strong protective affection that characterises Giacomo as the oldest child; the highs and lows of travelling; and the small family achievements and events such as birthdays and school tests that punctuate family life. But most of all, Giacomo is able to share the pleasure of discovery and encourage the learner to see Italian places and people through his eyes, those of an insider.

Over 30 years of foreign language teaching have reinforced in me the belief that deeper learning is achieved when learners are encouraged to develop a degree of personal and emotional involvement with the material they engage with. In the past, I've often struggled with resources developed for the American or European market that address learner needs, characteristics and beliefs that do not reflect those of the students in my classes. I have therefore been developing my own context-specific resources for many years. Given the fact that Auckland, where I teach, is nearly 20,000 kilometres from Rome, it is more difficult for my students to experience Italy in the flesh than it is for most learners of Italian. The wide-ranging innovations of the digital era have had a profound impact on how I approach my teaching, and the advances in app technology have enabled me to realise a long-held dream with 'In Italia con Giacomo'.

Course Structure and Assessment

Like the two existing 'Italian Language for Beginners' courses, the blended learning course will cover the language structures and communication skills of the A1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. While the two existing papers require a total of 4 class hours weekly, usually once a day, students who enrol in the new blended learning course will be required to attend class for just one 2-hour session per week. The in-class component focuses on individual learning needs, leading to production through task-based activities and a portfolio.

The remainder of course learning will take place through the online app-based component accessible from all fixed and portable digital devices. Each week the learner needs to complete all the activities in the 4 lessons in order to get 3 points and take Giacomo to his next destination. The learner also needs to complete a weekly online quiz, which tests the material covered in the 4 lessons. Completing the quiz successfully 'recharges' Giacomo with enough electricity for the next leg of the trip.

My original intention was that the nature of assessment for this blending learning course would contribute to 'improving how we deal with content, social interaction, reflection, higher order thinking, problem solving, collaborative learning' [10, p. 248]. However, I had to justify and reframe my assessment proposals many times in order to meet the university's requirements and secure permission to teach the course. Most of all, I had to justify my use of formative assessment (i.e., with marks attached) related to the online material and in-class production.

Ultimately, the following assessment structure was approved, which in my opinion puts rather a heavy burden on the learner:

- 12% 2 × 50-minute in-class written tests
- 10% Portfolio, made up of weekly written in-class production
- 33% 11 × 4-hour online interactive activities (within app)
- 15% 10 × 1-hour summative digital tests
- 10% Final 10-minute oral exam
- 20% Final 2-hour written exam

Passing the course will allow students to progress to the next level of Italian language acquisition at the University of Auckland. The course will be formally evaluated through university channels, alongside other blended learning courses already in existence within the School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics of the Faculty of Arts.

The Journey Continues

As noted in the Introduction, the pilot blended learning course is currently a work in progress, and is on track to be launched at the start of the next academic year. The development has progressed alongside my normal teaching workload and, despite taking up nearly all of my spare time, has been and continues to be an immensely rewarding experience. In terms of course content, I have sought to do justice to both the traditional and innovative aspects of contemporary Italian society, which Giacomo, as an electric Vespa, is intended to embody. Interweaving the language skills development that occurs in the in-class component with that in the app has been both challenging and stimulating. Whether or not I achieve all my objectives, there is no doubt that embarking on this journey has breathed new life and inspiration into my teaching.

Acknowledgement

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