



## **‘Begin at the Beginning’: Teaching and Learning Beginners Italian in a Blended Environment**

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### **Abstract**

*When transitioning to a blended learning environment with our 1<sup>st</sup> year ab-initio Italian beginners’ module in 2020-2021, we were faced with several challenges. We had prepared for a vaguely defined blended learning mode, but in a matter of weeks, a full national lockdown meant that all synchronous provision was moved fully online. Specifically, the issues that we had to contend with ranged from how to integrate effective synchronous and a-synchronous materials to how to promote self-expression, and particularly the development of oral skills in the online classroom. The question of how to meet the intended learning outcome of exposing beginners to culturally relevant content and topics, and how to best guide and support responsible online self-study, while promoting self-reflection, motivation and learning empowerment became pressing. This paper looks at how the careful scaffolding of resources, the emphasis on social presence and community building, and the attendance of Italian guests from different walks of life, all proved to be crucial in the successful delivery of the module. We will also briefly indicate possible ways forward for blended language learning at Beginners’ language level.*

**Keywords:** *Beginners Italian, Blended Learning, Cultural Input, Oral Skills Development, Responsible Self-Study, Community Building*

### **1. The context**

“Blended learning is an approach which takes into account different learning styles and combines different learning environments in a flexible, integrated and complementary way in order to help, support and enhance learners’ diverse needs and provide a successful, efficient and enjoyable learning experience. [...] Blended learning — if appropriately conceived developed and delivered — can support any number of learners, anywhere and anytime” [1]. This view inspired our initial re-design of the beginners’ Italian language module on the first year of our *ab-initio* Italian undergraduate programme in the summer of 2020. The pandemic had already hit. The planned blend of face-to-face synchronous and online asynchronous language learning abruptly turned into a fully online experience in early November 2020, when the UK entered its second Covid-19 lockdown. At this point, the decision was taken at departmental level to continue to provide timetabled synchronous sessions, and to integrate them with asynchronous tasks and materials for self-study.

### **2. Scaffolding**

The first challenge that we had to face was how to guide new students whom we had barely met through the course and how to share with them the pedagogical rationale underpinning its design and organisation. We scaffolded our VLE course site (Blackboard), so that learners could navigate it effortlessly and experience it as their own flexible, adaptable and stimulating space for self-study and self-reflection. We therefore applied the features listed by Van Lier for scaffolding in language learning to the actual design of the Blackboard site. These are:

- Continuity; teachers use tasks which are repeated, and these tasks are connected to one another,
- Contextual support; a reliable learning environment in which the teacher uses visuals, modelling and graphics,
- Inter-subjectivity; collaboration in the learning process to allow learners to teach each other,
- Contingency; teachers help learners to take responsibility,
- Handover/Takeover; learners try to attain achievement without teacher assistance,
- Flow; communication flows in a natural way [2].

Weekly materials were organised in Blackboard Language modules with identical format (principle b, Contextual support). We adopted a flipped or inverted classroom approach in order to promote inclusivity, and autonomy and to reserve online synchronous time to more complex group tasks and



speaking practice. We followed the expert advice to simplify resources [3]. We clearly labelled them as **Before class/In class/After class**: this simple yet effective intuition was praised by students and student reps in both student surveys and staff-student committees and allowed us to gain the group's trust and engagement [4]. Tasks were often repeated (principle a, Continuity) to ensure continuity. Information on how long should be spent on each task was spelt out to reinforce the idea of moving within a reassuringly familiar and clearly signposted learning environment.

A weekly discussion board, where students would post short texts on different topics using a set of grammar points and lexis, is a case in point. Students were required to ask questions on other posts to engage with one another (principle c, Intersubjectivity). Most importantly, tutors also posted an answer in order to model potential achievement. By regularly posting model answers with real information about themselves, tutors contributed significantly to the enhancement of social presence and to the creation of an atmosphere of connectedness [5].

### **3. Oral practice and intercultural communication: guest speakers**

One of the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for this module is:

"To be able to express oneself accurately in spoken Italian on the topics studied during the semester, and to be able to engage in conversation with others about those topics using relevant grammatical structures and vocabulary in accordance with the requirements of the A1 level of the CEFR".

Providing opportunities for constructive and culturally relevant speaking practice online was the biggest hurdle we faced. Throughout the year, we encouraged speaking practice in asynchronous independent work - asking the students to prepare short audio tasks, ranging from open-ended descriptions to short dialogues created in pairs. In class, we worked on this aspect primarily with the breakout rooms feature and the chat feature of the Microsoft Teams platform. We often asked students to post a relevant picture in the chat or indeed a short answer as a prompt on which to build a spoken response.

In designing these activities, we combined the module language objectives with aims in intercultural education, to emphasise the educational purposes of the language practice [6]. Drawing from curriculum development theory combining language education and intercultural education, we designed a module that could support the development of students' role as 'social agent', able to use the language in processes of discovery about the self and a foreign culture, and to critically engage with the language-culture nexus to master communication for creating relationships [7].

We designed activities that could promote occasions to 'interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural backgrounds' [8], for instance, the *O"spiti in classe"* initiative. The accessibility of videoconferencing platforms made it possible for us to have surprise and planned guest speakers, who joined us from Italy or other parts of the world to engage with students in presentations and Q&A sessions. We aimed for inclusivity and diversity in language representations and experiences, covering a variety of topics on different aspects of life in Italy or opportunities coming from speaking Italian abroad. Technology helped to bring the World inside the virtual classroom, and acted as a catalyst for authentic and meaningful exchange in the target language. Digital tools clearly facilitated oral practice and promoted real-life use of the target language, with the intention to 'break not only language but also cultural barriers' boosting 'students' understanding of culture as a broader whole and [...] necessarily interwoven with the language learning process' [9].

### **4. Teaching presence and community building in blended learning**

Existing literature indicates that teaching presence is clearly associated with student perceptions of learning, satisfaction and connectedness. The visibility of the teacher in the online learning environment is generally measured in terms of design and organization, facilitation and direct instruction [10]. In addition, sharing clear communication guidelines can support learners' development of their own 'social presence', which corresponds to a higher degree of peer interaction and student-teacher interaction, ultimately promoting a sense of community belonging [12].

In the building of our blended Beginners Italian course, we very much identified as both actors and constructors [13]. We have already briefly illustrated the design and organisation of our course. The scaffolding of good and accurate materials resulted in a clear, efficient and accessible structure. The choice of topics (for instance topics linked to issues of citizenship and sustainable learning) also reflected well the tutors' personalities and teaching styles.

The effective use of digital tools in the classroom was essential to promote a positive communicative environment which also favoured community building. This was especially significant for our Beginners course, where - despite being digital natives - students were using these tools in an academic context



for the first time [14]. As the development of digital communities can be ‘challenging but not impossible’, success relies on the knowledge and awareness of medium and tools and a negotiation of norms between the instructors and the learners at the forming stage, involving ‘the initiation of and participation in discussions about goals, liabilities, and communication style’ [16].

Students’ social presence in the online classroom is demonstrated by ‘the use of personal form of address, acknowledgment of others, expression of feeling, humour, social sharing, and the use of textual paralinguistic symbols’ such as emoticons and capitalisation [17]. In this sense, we especially encouraged the constructive use of the chat function in class, with exchanges focusing on course contents as well as personal communication. We agree that instructors and learners share the responsibility ‘to make community happen’ [18]. Student feedback was encouraging, with 66% agreeing that they felt part of a community of staff and students. These indicators confirm our positive experience of the course from our “instructors’ view”.

## 5. Looking to the future.

The global health crisis has provided us with an unforeseen opportunity for creative re-design and lateral thinking [19]. The role of students as co-creators of knowledge and the importance of community building and social presence have gained central stage and will result in fundamental changes to both online and face-to-face delivery. As language practitioners, we have been in the exceptional position to innovate in unprecedented times. Institutional commitment to invest in change will be necessary to make these practices the “new normal” in language teaching and learning.

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