Traveling the Italian Regions: Teaching Italian to Intermediate and Advanced Japanese Students through Geography

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Abstract

In Japan, teaching Italian as a second language to adults and university students is mostly limited to the teaching of the language with textbooks designed for Western students. Many language schools also offer courses on topics such as art, history, literature, or food, but the primary emphasis of such courses is content, not language. Among such topics, moreover, geography receives scant attention, if not none at all. With this in mind, and in the spirit of the 1995 European Community's White Paper on Education, which listed the acquisition of new knowledge through a foreign language as one of its goals for lifelong learning, in April 2022 I began developing a series of interactive digital textbooks for the adult learners of one of my online classes. The textbooks integrate language and content, teaching language through the geography of Italy. Each one offers short and scalable units on a specific topic that can be used as starting points for conversations and to enhance the lexical competence of intermediate and advanced learners.

My presentation, based on the data collected during the first year of this project, will consider the following points: 1) How to design an effective digital textbook for intermediate or advanced learners; 2) Assessing the reception of interactive materials by adult learners; 3) Exploring the future of content and language integrated learning in contemporary language education in Japan; 4) Addressing challenges and expectations for this project in the near future.

Keywords: *Digital textbooks, Italian regions, Geography, ARCS model, IMMS, CLIL*

1. Introduction

Among all the subjects related to Italy taught in Japan, geography is one of the most overlooked. Language schools and universities offer an extensive array of courses covering art, literature, history, music, and food. However, geography consistently receives less attention. Some of these courses, especially at the higher education level, are integrated into the curriculum of Italian as a second language; in this case, the primary focus is content rather than language.

Despite their proficiency in Italian, many students struggle to identify city names within written texts – except for the most popular ones –, and often ignore the locations of cities and regions.

Such lack of familiarity with Italy's geography also significantly impacts the learning and understanding of various aspects of Italian culture, such as its food and arts. Many students at the beginner or elementary level are unable to locate prominent landmarks such as the Milan Cathedral or Giotto's Campanile (Bell Tower), and their knowledge of Italian cuisine is limited to pizza and spaghetti. This is despite the high number of Italian restaurants offering a wide variety of regional cuisines in the Tokyo-Yokohama area.

For this reason, I wanted to create an interactive textbook on the geography of Italy for the «Practical Italian (Advanced)» course that I teach at my university. The opportunity eventually arose with adult learners from a semi-advanced class I was teaching remotely. They were aware of their limited knowledge of Italy in a broader sense, and asked me to develop a course that would resemble a travel guide encompassing all twenty Italian regions.

Their request also aligned with the criteria of the 1995 European Community's White Paper on Education, which lists the acquisition of new knowledge through a foreign language as one of its goals for lifelong learning.

In 2022 I began outlining the course and the textbook. The objective was to create a structured course that would provide an overview of the Italian regions, similar to what is taught in secondary schools nowadays. This course would be divided into smaller modules, each focusing on specific topics. The modules are designed as concise units to be completed in approximately 20 to 30 minutes at the most, in accordance with microlearning principles aimed to reduce cognitive load on learners. Additionally, each unit is meant to be seamlessly integrated into customizable learning paths that best suit the learner's individual needs.

2. The digital textbook: structure and design

The pros and cons of digital textbooks have been a subject of extensive debate in education for the past decade. The most significant, and still unresolved, issue is that this kind of media should not be regarded as a mere electronic replica of the materials used in traditional face-to-face lessons. The recent pandemic emergency vividly demonstrated the limitations of simple PDF versions of paper textbooks in enhancing the learning process during remote lessons.

Creating a digital textbook compels the author critically to analyze the nature of digital textbooks – what they are, what they should be, and what they can become [1].

The design of digital textbooks must carefully balance the role of the author, the interface, and the user. It must also take into consideration other pivotal factors such as content, expected learning outcomes, and assessment. Only by reflecting on the interplay between interactivity and readability, and considering how the choice of typeface, color, and font size will translate to the user's device, can balanced and consistent materials be developed, leading to a truly innovative and personalized learning experience.

The digital textbooks I have designed consists of series of booklets, each dedicated to a specific region, following a structured arrangement of contents that includes: 1) geographical data and administrative divisions, 2) a brief historical outline, 3) economic activities, 4) sightseeing spots and cities, 5) activities, events and festivals, 6) food and drink. Each booklet also includes an appendix with two short videos that provide additional insight into topics covered in the preceding pages and serve as starting points for further exploration. The iterative use of this consistent hierarchy allows for a two-folded use of the textbook: a horizontal (linear/synchronous) approach where students can explore each facet of a specific region, and a vertical (branched/asynchronous) approach that empowers students to create personalized learning paths by combining modules from various booklets.

Furthermore, I devoted significant attention to the text density displayed on a single page. Research indicates that the scanning pattern when reading on a screen is less intensive and takes more time compared to reading a printed text [2]. As highlighted by Wolf, contemporary society is transitioning from a *reading brain* to a *digital brain*, and during the reading process, the digital brain strives to minimize cognitive effort [3]. Because it is tailored for semi-advanced learners, the textbook is entirely written in Italian. To reduce cognitive load and enhance intake, the linguistic input must be comprehensible or slightly above the learners' proficiency level.

For the aforementioned reasons, I chose a highly readable font such as Montserrat Light, 12 pt. as the typeface. Each text section consists of a maximum of three lines written in a concise language with carefully selected words. This feature is designed to enable students to shift their focus from language to content, as approximately 80% of words and expression are expected to be familiar with the reader. The remaining 20% of the lexicon comprises of words related to the specific areas into which the textbook is divided and is intended to enrich the students' vocabulary and enhance their lexical competence in various fields, promoting an active engagement in conversations with the teacher and their peers.

Interactivity features were also carefully selected to align with the targeted readers and the intended educational goals, which include enhancing vocabulary in a more extensive and varied manner, as well as improving competence and confidence in the target language. To provide a responsive, yet not-stressful experience for adult readers, interactivity was streamlined to commonly used features: image galleries, hyperlinks, and videos. Images galleries were employed to depict the mountains, rivers, and animals of each region. Hyperlinks were utilized to pinpoint city locations or landmarks on the reader's device, and to connect with the homepages that showcase local activities, events, and festivals. The two videos at the end of the textbook, as previously mentioned, serve as supplemental materials to encourage active inquiries by students. This minimalistic approach to interactivity was also conceived to honor the original request of my students, who wanted a sort of travel guide unlike the ones available in bookstores. The textbook can be easily accessed on a portable device when traveling in Italy, utilizing images, hyperlinks, and videos as reference.

The textbooks were created using Pages and then exported in both EPUB and PDF formats to ensure an optimal multiplatform experience. This approach also enables students unfamiliar with the EPUB format to access the contents seamlessly. When a file is exported from Pages as a PDF, it becomes an interactive PDF file, granting access to all the interactivity features found in an EPUB, with the exception of image galleries.

3. Assessing the textbook and its reception

To evaluate the effectiveness of the textbook and gauge its reception among students, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted. The quantitative analysis involved a straightforward survey in which students were asked to rate each section of the textbook on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing the lowest score and 10 the highest. The objective was to determine the sections or topics that captured the students' greatest interest.
For the qualitative analysis, the approach was based on the Instructional Materials Motivation Scale (IMMS) developed by Keller [4], with the implementation of its reduced version (RIMMS) as proposed by Loorbach et al. [5]. The decision to use RIMMS was motivated by its consisting of fewer items in comparison to IMMS (12 as opposed to 36), as well as its balanced approach whereby each of the four constructs of (A)ttention, (R)elevance, (C)onfidence, and (S)atisfaction is assessed through three items. The intention behind this choice was, naturally, objectively to measure the students' response to the digital textbook and their overall learning experience. Both surveys were administered anonymously to a small study group of five members.

3.1 The quantitative analysis

The results of the quantitative survey showed that the preferred sections of the book were, unsurprisingly, «sightseeing spots and cities» and «food and drink», both of which received a full score of 10. The «brief historical outline» of the region and «activities, events and festivals» earned second place, both scoring 9.6. The section dedicated to «economic activities» finished third with a score of 9.4 and «geographical data and administrative divisions» was the least liked, with 9.2 points.

3.2 The qualitative analysis

The RIMMS was administered in both Italian and Japanese translation, to minimize misunderstandings, following a Likert-type scale based on five levels: 1 = Not true, 2 = Slightly true, 3 = Moderately true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Very true. The minimum score for each item is 5 and the maximum is 25, with a midpoint of 15. For each construct, the minimum score is 15, the maximum is 75, and the midpoint is 45. The scores for each subscale were as follows: (A) = 72; (R) = 70; (C) = 61; (S) = 72. One noteworthy result is the relatively low score for confidence. The reason for this can be attributed to the items selected in RIMMS to measure confidence, namely 13C05, 25C07, and 35C09. Item 25C07, which asks whether the student feels confident to pass a test on the subject, received the lowest score (14/25) among all survey items. This result is not surprising because the textbook and the lessons didn’t include any form of assessment, leading to a lack of confidence among the students. This assumption is further supported by 35C09, which states that «the good organization of the content helped me be confident that I would learn this material», which received the second-lowest score of 22/25. At first glance, this could be interpreted as a flaw in the textbook design, but a comparison with 13C05 («As I worked on this textbook, I was confident that I could learn the content») with a full score of 25/25 seems to demonstrate that the low level of confidence can be attributed to both internal factors such as the lack of an assessment system and to external factors such as the characteristic low self-assessment esteem among Japanese learners.

4. Conclusions

The data and feedback directly collected during the first year and a half of this project have shown a significant interest in Italian geography, broadly defined, among Japanese students. The results from the quantitative analysis have demonstrated that their interest covers nearly every area, from food and drink to geographical data. Therefore, geography can be utilized as an extremely versatile subject for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) based classes, particularly when aiming to enhance the learners’ lexical competence, as it spans a wide variety of disciplines such as history, architecture, art, economics, and food, among others.
Additionally, the qualitative analysis also appears to confirm that carefully designed and well-crafted digital textbooks can exert a substantial impact on the learning process of adult students. However, these materials must be appropriately contextualized within a holistic strategy for lifelong learning. The findings from RIMMS emphasize the necessity of implementing an assessment system to bolster reader confidence and promote self-esteem. This issue can be readily addressed by incorporating a series of quizzes at the end of each section using a tool like BookWidgets, which provides a high degree of personalization and feedback options. Moreover, it's important to note that the current booklet series only covers five out of Italy’s twenty regions, and further testing on a larger study group is required to confirm these preliminary findings.

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