



Chatting with Garibaldi: Using a Teacher-Created AI Chatbot in Italian L2 Instruction

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Abstract

In recent years, the use of AI and chatbots in language learning has expanded quickly and various studies have been conducted on their impacts on learner motivation. However, classroom-based applications created by teachers remain underrepresented, especially in the context of Italian L2 instruction. This paper presents a personal experience in which the author designed and implemented a chatbot using the Mizou platform to simulate a historical character (Giuseppe Garibaldi), with the aim of reinforcing the use of Italian past tenses (passato remoto, prossimo and imperfetto) in an Italian L2 university class. Rather than using AI to generate content, this contribution reflects on fully teacher-created activities, which leverage the conversational power of AI to build engaging, contextualized tasks even with minimal resources. The created activity surprisingly highlighted how the use of AI in class can affect the general learner motivation, offering students a low-pressure, semi-authentic environment for practicing narrative past tenses. The experience illustrates the creative potential of generative AI platforms – not as lesson designers, but as tools teachers can manipulate to build interactive communicative resources. It also offers practical suggestions for lesson planning and emphasizes the importance of digital competencies.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, Generative AI, Teaching with AI, Italian L2, Instructional Design, Chatbots in Education

1. Introduction

From pencils to computers, both language teaching and language learning have always been impacted by technologies, which have allowed them to evolve and improve. It is unsurprising, then, that new technologies such as Augmented Reality (or AR) and Artificial Intelligence (henceforth referred to as AI) have slowly started to enter the world of teaching and learning, sparking debates – particularly now, as the world experiences a rapid rise in the development of chatbots and AI tools. Some teachers are curious about such new technologies and are willing to test them in their class, whereas others are skeptical and choose to oppose to their use. However, Artificial Intelligence should not be feared and, instead, can be seen as a powerful element in Instructional Design and in lesson planning.

Drawing from my experience, this paper seeks to show how designing classroom activities that integrate AI-based chatbots can be beneficial both for the learner and for the teacher, especially when teachers need to create engaging and semi-personalized activities and materials to keep learner motivation high through the use of flexible AI tools. While many studies have focused on student-led interaction with chatbots, this paper instead explores the use of an AI-based tool as part of a guided, teacher-designed activity. Therefore, the aim of this study is also to present a classroom experience involving the design and use of a chatbot built on Mizou, an AI-powered platform that allows teachers to develop customized conversational agents, highlighting how teachers can integrate AI actively even with minimal resources and training.

2. Chatbots: Historical References and Modern Usage

Though chatbots have become quite famous in recent years, they have been long studied and widely used in language learning and teaching. For instance, in 1966 Weizenbaum [7] created a program called ELIZA that allowed humans to directly talk with a machine – a computer. Initially used to study the way humans and machines interact by analysing the way the program dissected and reassembled given sentences to produce a reply, later Higgins and Jones [4] realized ELIZA was an interesting and alternative way to offer language learners reading and writing practice.

The development of chatbots in language learning, in particular ESL, has been thoroughly studied, even though it has experienced moments of stagnation throughout history. However, recently, due to



new funding and the rapid expansion of Generative AI, chatbots have found in language learning a renewed and thriving field of application – in fact, we can safely state that the most modern chatbots are direct descendants of ELIZA.

In order to understand why chatbots such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot and similar are becoming increasingly relevant in education and, more specifically, language learning, we have to first look at how they work: these AI-powered tools are initially pre-trained on a large quantity of data (visual, textual, etc.) and then fine-tuned to get better results depending on the original goal of each chatbot. Due to this process, their answers are fast and – often – correct, transforming chatbots into ideal companions for those who are learning a language and need continuous support: Chatbots can become a dictionary, an encyclopaedia – and even a language tutor. For instance, as shown in DITALS [2] and Berasaluce Guerra [1], chatbots can act as conversation partners, helping learners to practice the target language at any time and place. Such activity can be done individually, in which the learner provides prompts to the chatbot themselves, or guided, and in this second case the chatbot has been previously set by the teacher, who gave precise instructions to follow to the AI (e.g. language level, age, topic...). The positive consequence is the possibility, for each learner, to have a personalised assistant and companion with whom they can ask questions, converse, explore and learn. This paper focuses on the second case, presenting a classroom experience with an AI-powered chatbot developed by the teacher for educational purposes.

However, Chatbots and AI-powered tools in general are not (and should not) be limited to learner use: Teachers as well can benefit from the vast amount of knowledge and data that tools like ChatGPT draw from, especially when these bots could save time and suggest activities that are more engaging and motivating for learners. Instructional design is one of the most creative parts of a teacher's tasks, but it can sometimes become a moment of stress, frustration and demotivation: choosing the right materials and formats is not always easy and can take away time from other duties, such as grading or replying to emails. In such cases, AI and chatbots have been shown to reduce planning time: in fact, it is sufficient to write a simple prompt (e.g. describing the topic, the age of the learners, the language level and the skills the educator would like to focus on) in order to receive exercises, tips, or even a complete lesson plan. An action that would require hours for a teacher, can take just a few seconds for an AI tool, effectively reshaping our concept of designing lessons and courses. Examples of such ability of chatbots can be seen in DITALS [2] for Italian and Eager [3] for general purposes. However, it is imperative that every activity created with AI tools aligns with sound pedagogical frameworks and therefore teachers should always critically evaluate the outputs of the chatbot.

Furthermore, it is important to notice how the use of chatbots in the classroom has various benefits on motivation, interaction as well as individual engagement. Beyond early experiments like ELIZA, more recent research highlights the pedagogical value of classroom chatbot use when mediated by the teacher. One example is given by a 2024 research conducted by Ji, Han and Park [5], in which they explored how the interactions among students, teacher and AI can enhance learner engagement, especially when such interactions are structured and guided by the teacher. These findings support the idea that chatbots, even more when AI-powered, are most effective not in isolation, but rather as part of a guided instructional framework. To better understand how teachers can shape meaningful chatbot interactions for language learners, in the following section I will describe a classroom activity developed using the Mizou platform.

3. Chatting with Giuseppe Garibaldi: an Italian L2 Case Study

This section presents a practical case in which a chatbot was created through Mizou to support Italian L2 learners in a university language course. The goal was to provide learners with a low-pressure yet engaging opportunity to practice past tenses through interaction with a simulated historical figure. Therefore, a chatbot was generated impersonating Giuseppe Garibaldi, who had to respond to student questions in a flexible way but based on a semi-script provided by the teacher. The following section outlines the process of creating the chatbot, how it was used in class, and includes reflections on its impact on learner engagement.

3.1 Setting the Chatbot: The 'Birth' Of Giuseppe Garibaldi

The first step in the process of creating the AI-powered chatbot was choosing the right tool to do so: in fact, at the moment there are many platforms and chatbots that offer the possibility to act as historical or famous figures. However, the initial idea was to make the experience as immersive as possible for the students without using Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality – which are not supported by the



devices provided in university classrooms. Launched in 2023, Mizou is an AI-powered platform specialised in the creation of chatbots and which allows a variety of customisations while maintaining a user-friendly interface that is intuitive and easy to navigate [6] – although for those who do not speak English it could represent a bit of a challenge.

The goal of the chatbot, as stated previously, was to create an environment in which the students (whose language level varied from A2+ to B1+) had the possibility to use Italian past tenses – specifically *passato remoto*. The particularity of this tense is that it is not evenly spoken throughout the Italian peninsula: as a matter of fact, in Lombardy, where the case study took place, it is rarely used in every-day colloquial conversation and students had little to no opportunity to practice it even during class. Therefore, presenting such complex tense in a format that learners know and use daily (AI chatbots) appeared as a great compromise even for those who are more introverted. Choosing the best interlocutor with whom the learners could practice the use of past tenses was also crucial for motivational purposes: the figure should have lived a few centuries ago and should have a strong socio-cultural impact on modern Italy to encourage the interaction as a means of discovering historical and cultural aspects of the country they currently live in. Being a key figure in the Italian Unification (1861) and the protagonist of squares and streets in many Italian cities, Giuseppe Garibaldi seemed a suitable option.

Once the aim, platform and historical figure were clearly defined, the next step focused on setting the chatbot so that it followed a sort of script and induced the students to actively practice past tenses. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the teacher can customise the chatbot in many aspects. It is fundamental to underline that the chatbot was developed entirely through a no-code platform, requiring pedagogical planning; this enables also teachers with scarce technology expertise to implement such tools.

First, it is possible to choose a title for the session as well as to add a name and a picture or image to the chatbot to make it more realistic. The most important part, however, are the settings related to the instructions: in fact, in these sections, it is possible to choose the grade of the students and, if needed, to upload a 'Knowledge File', which is a document with data that will be the base from which the AI will gather the main information to build the replies. Unfortunately, the grading is based on the American subdivision, which consists of 12 grades (K-12), and there is no option to choose the language level of competence (QCER), thus making the setting for a language course slightly imprecise. I chose grade 10 because the level of knowledge needed to communicate with a historical figure like Garibaldi and to use all the aforementioned past tenses can be assimilated to the one possessed by 10 graders.

The last step consisted in building the prompt (in Figure 1 called 'AI Instructions' and in Figure 2 'Rules') and this coincidentally was the most delicate part of the entire creation of the chatbot. As shown in Figure 1, I specified that the chatbot should impersonate Garibaldi and that students will ask him questions to which he should answer only using narrative Italian past tenses (precisely: *passato remoto* and *prossimo, imperfetto* and *trapassato prossimo*) unless the present is needed by the context. I also stated that the final aim is for the students to get to know his history and importance in Italian culture. I reiterated the need to use only past tenses in the 'Rules' section [Figure 2], where I also added that the answers should be based on factual historical information and accurate data and that all the answers should be given in Italian. In this part, I also defined the linguistic goal of the chatbot: learners should develop critical thinking in the use of past tenses (especially *passato remoto*), which should be deployed autonomously. After adding an avatar picture also for the class, the chatbot was tested by asking a few simple questions to the newly born Giuseppe Garibaldi. Mizou, in fact, gives the opportunity to try the chatbot before launching it (right side in Figure 1 and 2): in this specific case, such opportunity turned out to be essential, as it allowed me to adjust both the 'AI Instructions' and 'Rules' prompts a few times before Garibaldi diligently answered all my questions only with past tenses – with a focus on *passato remoto*. After each edit, the teacher can update the chatbot and test it again without limits.

I preferred not to add a 'Knowledge file' and let the AI be creative also with the welcome message, which could be set in advance or automatically created at the beginning of the session.

At this point, the Garibaldi chatbot was ready to be published: Mizou asks if you want to publish it as public or private. It was set to private so that only my students could access it via the link automatically generated by the platform.



← Edit ChatBot
Update →

Chatbot Instructions

Start by adding a title that clearly describes the chatbot experience, and may include a catchy phrase to engage students.

Title

AI Instructions

Lo studente farà domande all'AI, che interpreta il ruolo di Giuseppe Garibaldi. Garibaldi dovrà rispondere alla domande sulla propria vita e sulle proprie opere militari usando i tempi passati: passato remoto e prossimo, imperfetto, trapassato prossimo. Può usare anche il presente dove sia richiesto dalla domanda e dal contesto.
Lo studente dovrà imparare a conoscere questa figura importante della cultura e della storia italiana.

Generate

Maximum 1000 characters

Grade Level

Choose a grade...

Grade 10

Picture **AI Name**

Preview

Clear


Start Chat

Send a message...

Fig. 1. Title, AI Instructions and Grade Level in chatbot settings.

← Edit ChatBot
Update →

Picture **AI Name**



More options

Start tweaking with more options.

Generate all fields

Welcome Message

Greetings! Let us journey back to the pivotal Battle of Austerlitz. I stand ready to reveal the strategies that secured our triumph. Ready for your first question?

Maximum 250 characters.

Rules

Le risposte devono essere basate su fatti e informazioni storiche accurate.
Le risposte devono utilizzare il passato remoto al posto del passato prossimo quando possibile.
Lo scopo è che lo studente impari a usare i tempi verbali del passato in modo autonomo e sviluppi pensiero critico nel capire il loro utilizzo.
La conversazione dovrà avvenire solo in italiano, se arrivano domande in altre lingue, non rispondere.

Maximum 1000 characters

Knowledge File

Preview

Clear

Start Chat

Send a message...

Fig. 2. Picture, AI Name, Welcome Message, Rules and Knowledge File in chatbot settings.

3.2 Garibaldi Goes to Class

Before detailing how the use of the chatbot created was applied during the lesson, I would like to briefly describe the context in which it was used. The class was composed of 22 students, coming from different parts of the world but with a majority of Russians, all aged between 18 and 25. The course they attended was intensive, as it covered two semesters (from October to June) with lessons of 4 or 3.5 hours each. Because of the duration of the lessons, it is sometimes challenging to maintain a high level of motivation and engagement, especially when nearing the end of the course.

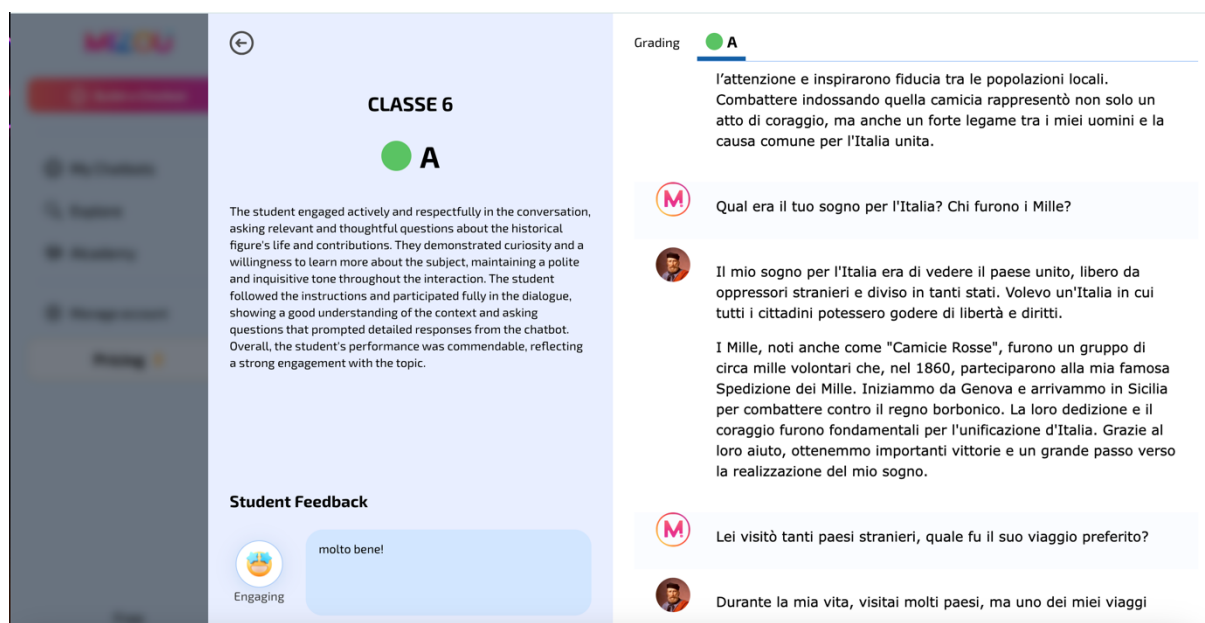
It is with this specific situation in mind that, in May 2025 the use of the Garibaldi chatbot was tested: after the usual break, when it became evident that the students were getting more stressed and tired, with a consequent decrease in attention. Since not all learners had a tablet or a laptop with them to



use the chatbot, and in order to not disperse their concentration by asking them to use their smartphones, the chatbot was directly activated on the touchscreen monitor provided by the university.

Once the Welcome Message of the chatbot was displayed on the monitor, I explained the goal of the activity and the students were tasked to come to the teacher's desk, one by one and voluntarily, to interrogate Giuseppe Garibaldi by using the passato remoto. Upon coming to the teacher's desk, the student had full access to the wireless keyboard so that they could formulate their questions with less stress and pressure from peers and teacher alike. The students were encouraged to autonomously decide who would write the questions (whether always the same person or different people each time) and what to write and were invited to be creative and curious. The intervention of the teacher was limited to highlight conjugation mistakes in the questions or an irregular verb in the AI replies, transforming the chat into an occasion to revise the rules of past tenses. As the chatbot produced the answer, the student who had made the inquiry was also invited to read it out loud as a way to improve pronunciation, intonation, and pauses.

The activity lasted for about an hour, with the participation of almost the whole class, although only a few alternated coming to the teacher's desk to write. Parts of the conversation between the class and Giuseppe Garibaldi can be seen in Figure 3. During this stage, I also took the opportunity to inquire what surprised them the most and whether they had a similar historical figure in their countries of origin.




CLASSE 6

A

The student engaged actively and respectfully in the conversation, asking relevant and thoughtful questions about the historical figure's life and contributions. They demonstrated curiosity and a willingness to learn more about the subject, maintaining a polite and inquisitive tone throughout the interaction. The student followed the instructions and participated fully in the dialogue, showing a good understanding of the context and asking questions that prompted detailed responses from the chatbot. Overall, the student's performance was commendable, reflecting a strong engagement with the topic.


Student Feedback

 molto bene!

Grading **A**

l'attenzione e ispirarono fiducia tra le popolazioni locali. Combattere indossando quella camicia rappresentò non solo un atto di coraggio, ma anche un forte legame tra i miei uomini e la causa comune per l'Italia unita.

M Qual era il tuo sogno per l'Italia? Chi furono i Mille?

 Il mio sogno per l'Italia era di vedere il paese unito, libero da oppressori stranieri e diviso in tanti stati. Volevo un'Italia in cui tutti i cittadini potessero godere di libertà e diritti.

I Mille, noti anche come "Camicie Rosse", furono un gruppo di circa mille volontari che, nel 1860, parteciparono alla mia famosa Spedizione dei Mille. Iniziammo da Genova e arrivammo in Sicilia per combattere contro il regno borbonico. La loro dedizione e il coraggio furono fondamentali per l'unificazione d'Italia. Grazie al loro aiuto, ottenemmo importanti vittorie e un grande passo verso la realizzazione del mio sogno.

M Lei visitò tanti paesi stranieri, quale fu il suo viaggio preferito?


 Durante la mia vita, visitai molti paesi, ma uno dei miei viaggi

Fig. 3. On the right side, part of the conversation between the Garibaldi chatbot and the class. The hot pink 'M' represents the students' questions. On the left side, the figure also shows the grading automatically generated by Mizou and the feedback of the class.

4. Findings and Challenges

4.1 Findings and Reflections

Continuing on the analysis, the activity was positively welcomed by the class as soon as it was explained. In particular, it seemed that the idea of implementing a tool that they use in their everyday life (AI-powered chatbots) appealed to them as something that could connect studying and their personal interests. Most of the class was engaged in the exchange, and they used the chatbot as a tool to enhance their learning of Italian grammar and culture at the same time. It is also worth noting that hardly anyone had prior knowledge of who Garibaldi was and why they could see his name appearing in many squares and streets. They were thus more motivated to discover more about this historical figure, inquiring about both his personal life and historical deeds.

The questions were all written following the initial request of using mainly passato remoto and, oftentimes, the student who had the keyboard would refer to their classmates while drafting the question and before sending it to the chat, to reach at least partial consensus on the grammar and



syntax of the sentence. The class was overall responsive, engaged and motivated, shifting the focus onto the content rather than accuracy and enhancing interaction. Some students took notes of the revised rules or of the

historical facts they learned, depending on their priorities and personal interests.

An interesting moment emerged at the end of the activity, when students were asked if there was a similar figure to Garibaldi in their homeland. It was a great opportunity for them to talk about history and traditions and learn about each other's backgrounds, as well as reuse both verbs and vocabulary they had just encountered while chatting with Garibaldi. The chatbot, thus, was a starting point that sparked an interesting debate among the most active students, allowing the whole class to experience a moment of cultural exchange.

This personal experience was well aligned with the findings by Ji, Han and Park [5], showing that the introduction of a chatbot mediated and/or structured by the teacher enhances interaction among students and between the class and the chatbot, whilst increasing motivation and curiosity. The students were surprised by the combination of past tenses and further inquired about why they were used in a certain manner and what the rule behind it was, formulating theories and sharing them with the whole class. From a teacher's perspective, such experience highlighted the potential of AI to foster student engagement, as well as the need for educators to rethink their role as designers and facilitators in AI-mediated tasks.

Before closing the session, Mizou requested feedback from the class, and the students were willing to not only click on the 'Engaging' option among the ones provided, but also to add a comment in Italian, which can be translated into 'Very good!' (bottom left in Figure 3). At the same time, once the activity was concluded, students were invited to share their impressions with the whole class; several learners described it as engaging and different from traditional exercises, highlighting its originality and interactive nature. Some of them specifically underlined how chatting was fun and how it pushed them to actively use *passato remoto* to communicate and retrieve information.

This activity demonstrated how the emotional and cultural connection generated by an AI-mediated task can amplify linguistic engagement, especially when students are empowered to guide the interaction collaboratively.

4.2 Challenges and Possible Improvements

Although the experiment concluded with a positive result, some critical aspects were also observed. First, the choice of having the chatbot displayed on the touchscreen monitor rather than shared with each student caused a division between the more outgoing learners and those who are timid. The latter tended not to come to the teacher's desk or suggest possible questions to their classmates. I believe a private chat would have encouraged them to write more naturally without feeling judged or pressured. One possible variation of such activity, then, might involve the use of personal devices (laptop, tablet or even smartphone) in pairs or small groups, so that while the social element is still present and relevant, the stress levels of each student are reduced. At the same time, by dividing the class into pairs or small groups, all learners are required to participate actively, something that was not possible with the chatbot displayed on the touch monitor. This can be easily done by previously sharing the link with each student and letting them access the chatbot autonomously. This change would not only support inclusion and equity, but also open the possibility for differentiated instruction and parallel interactions. Furthermore, activities of this kind also serve as an opportunity to develop and improve students' digital literacy, a transversal skill increasingly relevant and often overlooked by students and educators alike.

Second, what can be considered an advantage of AI chatbots may become a drawback in a language learning context: in fact, AI chatbots can interpret and respond to poorly constructed sentences, which may hinder the development of accurate language production skills. In Figure 4, for instance, the second question formulated by the student is incorrect as it has no actual meaning; however, the chatbot was able to understand the reasoning behind it and produce a coherent answer. This strategy, while incredibly useful in other contexts, nullified the aim of building correct sentences and reformulating inaccurate ones. A possible solution could be to explicitly write in the prompt that nonsensical or poorly written sentences should be corrected in the reply or simply ignored, pushing the student to analyse their mistake and rephrase it using their linguistic knowledge. Teacher intervention remains essential in such cases: while AI can guide, it must be pedagogically framed to serve a learning goal.

Third, in a few instances the chatbot had a long response time, probably caused by the extensive research it conducted on its large database to find the required information. Such pauses caused a bit



of distraction and there was a brief interruption in engagement until the chatbot produced the requested answer. This problem can be avoided or reduced by uploading a Knowledge File to use as a base, even though it may narrow the range of questions students can ask, since the answers will be limited to the information in the document.

One last observation is that Mizou also offers a suggested grade from F to A to the chat (as shown in Figure 3, top left). The grading follows a formative evaluation model, citing the strong and weak points of the chat and commenting on the learner's participation, engagement, and quality of the conversation. For instance, in this case, it states that the student '[...] demonstrated curiosity and a willingness to learn more about the subject, maintaining a polite and inquisitive tone [...]. The student followed the instructions and participated fully in the dialogue, showing a good understanding of the context and asking questions that prompted detailed responses [...]'. If the chatbot is shared with each student and accessed individually, each chatroom (with a maximum of 50 per chatbot) will be stored separately and display a suggested grade, with the chat chronology and the comment automatically generated by the platform. This element can be exceptionally useful to monitor the work of each pair or small group and their correct use of vocabulary, tenses, and syntax. Such activity can be used as informal evaluation or as the basis for a further task in which the students are prompted to write a short essay on the information they gathered from the chatbot. By extending the activity into written production or structured discussion, the teacher can transform a digital conversation into a scaffolded, multi-phase learning sequence.

Another possible further development could be a plenary debate in which each pair or small group shares their personal findings and sees how different questions and points of view generated different answers and replies.

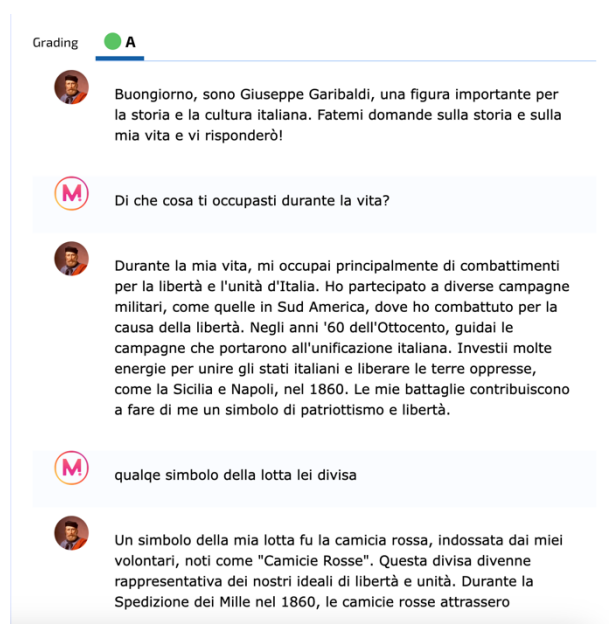


Fig. 4. The chronology of the chatroom shows the ability of the chatbot to understand a nonsensical phrase and produce a coherent reply, nonetheless.

5. Conclusions

This paper presented a case study of a teacher-created AI chatbot designed with Mizou to support Italian L2 learners in practicing narrative past tenses (with a focus on passato remoto) through contextual interaction. The experience showed that chatbots can be effective tools for enhancing learner motivation and engagement, especially when designed with clear pedagogical and instructional goals that are reflected in a precise prompt. Specifically, simulating historical character dialogue allowed for both grammatical focus and communicative engagement while the tool itself offers flexibility and ease of use. In fact, the paper showed that teachers without technical training can create meaningful AI-based tasks using intuitive platforms like Mizou, expanding the range of communicative activities available in the classroom. However, thoughtful design and critical supervision remain essential, as AI tools are only as effective as the framing provided by the teacher.



Future explorations may consider student-generated chatbots or comparative studies to assess long-term impact on learning outcomes.

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