

A social constructionist approach to teaching and learning vocabulary for Italian for academic purposes

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Abstract. This study presents the way Parmaxi and Zaphiris's (2015) social constructionist framework was used in order to teach and learn vocabulary in an Italian for Specific Academic Purposes (ISAP) tertiary course. The participants (beginner students) were guided to build in groups an artifact, i.e a specific academic vocabulary collection. To do so, they used *Quizlet*; this online learning tool allows the creation of digital artifacts, such as vocabulary flashcards, games and quizzes, and the sharing of the collections created. The purpose of the creation of the artifact was the learning and sharing of vocabulary in Italian used in the specific area of the students' university fields of study. The data revealed that the social constructionist approach facilitated a more engaged and motivating attitude towards learning, allowing students to work constructively and collaboratively and share their knowledge with the use of new technologies.

Keywords: vocabulary, Italian for specific purposes, constructionism, Quizlet.

1. Introduction

Constructionism is a theory of learning, teaching and design which supports that knowledge is better gained when students construct it by themselves while they construct artifacts that can be shared and probed to the world. The student activities were framed according to a social constructionist framework which highlights three important activities: the exploration of ideas, the construction of an artifact and the

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evaluation of an artifact (see Parmaxi et al., 2013; Parmaxi & Zaphiris, 2014, 2015; Parmaxi, Zaphiris, & Ioannou, 2016). In this study, this triptych was used for the group and collaborative construction of an artifact, an ISAP vocabulary collection, with the use of *Quizlet* for the learning of vocabulary in a mixed fields class. *Quizlet* is an online learning environment as well as a mobile application which permits the creation of vocabulary, flashcards, games and quizzes and the sharing (through Facebook or other applications) of the collections created by the users.

2. Method

In this study a qualitative approach was adopted in order to observe the use of *Quizlet* under the social constructionist approach. The main research question that guides this study is: How a social constructionist approach can guide the use of technology, in this case *Quizlet*, to support the learning of ISAP?

2.1. The setting

The *Italian language and Culture I* course is a four-hour per week, six-credit ISAP course. Its primary goal is to provide the basic communicative skills to students and to enable them to respond to basic daily needs, socially and for specific academic purposes, both orally and in writing. The use of new technologies is an integral part of the learning process.

2.2. Students

The participants were 16 students (13 female and three male), four students were 17-19 years old, nine students 20-22 years old and two students 23-25 years old. Students had Greek as their mother tongue and English as their second language. None of them had any prior knowledge of Italian. They studied different fields: Management and Economics (three students); Communication and Internet Studies (six); Engineering and Technology (three); Geotechnical Sciences (two); and Environmental Management (two).

2.3. The activities

Based on Parmaxi and Zaphiris's (2015) social constructionism framework, students worked and constructed new knowledge through continuous interaction, ideas sharing, and cooperation in groups. The result of this interaction was a vocabulary collection for each group which summarises their knowledge of ISAP.

Parmaxi and Zaphiris's (2015) social constructionist framework involves three dimensions and nine actions:

- exploration of ideas: orientation, brainstorming, material exploration;
- construction of artifacts: outlining, editing material;
- evaluation of artifacts: revising, peer reviewing, instructor reviewing, presenting/publishing.

Students were divided in subgroups based on their field of study (Management and Economics, Communication and Internet Studies, Engineering and Technology, Geotechnical Sciences, and Environmental Management). The five sub-groups contributed to the building of the learning process; they created academic vocabulary collections related to their field of study and related profession using *Quizlet*. One 90-minute lesson was fully dedicated for each one of the five different academic fields of study groups.

Following the constructionist aspirations, knowledge was not presented and imposed to the students by an expert, such as a teacher (Parmaxi & Zaphiris, 2014), instead, students created and co-constructed collaboratively their knowledge in the form of an artifact, an ISAP vocabulary collection. After being introduced to the tool (*Quizlet*) and the activity, they were prompted to brainstorm in groups, explore relevant material (online and/or offline), collaboratively outline and edit the material, and conclude in revising, reviewing and presenting their artifact to the group, following the social constructionist framework.

2.4. The instruments

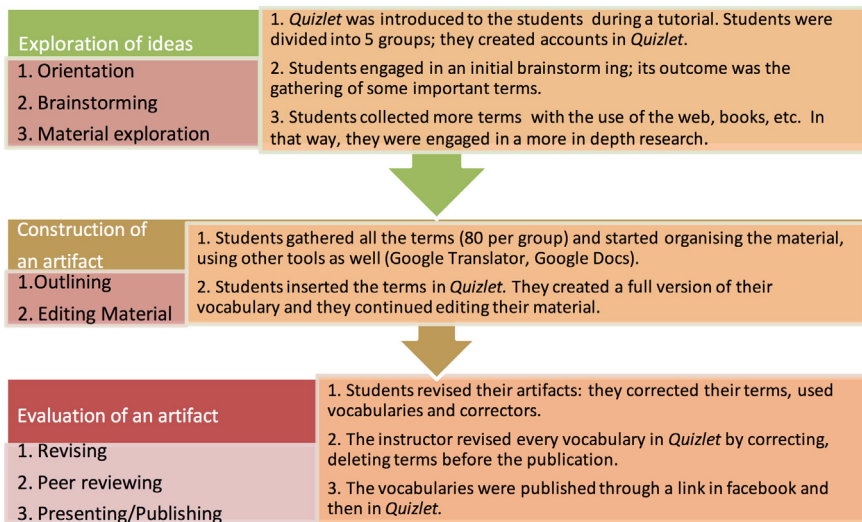
The instruments used were two focus groups and a final questionnaire.

3. Results

For the construction of their artifact, students initially met to decide which words were important to be included in their ISAP vocabulary collection, searched terms and then found their meaning in Google Translator and other online dictionaries; finally, they inserted the terms in *Quizlet*. The groups consisted of two to six students. This was based on their field of study. Two groups followed the procedures given to them. However, some differentiations were noted in the rest of the groups:

in the three member groups, only one person of the group inserted the words in *Quizlet* (in other groups all students added words in their *Quizlet* online collection); in the six member group, due to its size, each student conducted a smaller research in order to reach the word limit for the creation of the vocabulary. One group used Google Docs as well before inserting the terms in *Quizlet* just to keep a record of each person’s contribution. The three dimensions and how they were applied in combination with *Quizlet* are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The three dimensions and how they were applied in the present research using *Quizlet*



With regards to the difficulties that students encountered during the social constructionist approach, two out of the five teams reported that they only found difficult translating ISAP terms; the two member team stated that because they were only two, they had to do more work regarding the material they had to gather, and the terms they had to find; two teams reported that they faced no problem at all. Two teams stated that due to the fact that they were smaller groups (two or three persons), it was more convenient for them – even though they worked more, they worked better.

Overall, students replied positively to the activity as it allowed them to find the words themselves and construct their knowledge of the vocabulary. This fostered students’ knowledge in their specific fields of study; students found conducting the specific research with this method and the use of technology more interesting. The

knowledge of the ISAP vocabulary made the student's learning of the specific fields easier. Students also highlighted the importance of the intervention of the instructor at the end of the group work. Finally, students valued the cooperation between the members of the team and the group work as a way to improve themselves in ISAP.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study presented the implementation of a social constructionist approach for developing an artifact with the use of *Quizlet* that aimed to develop students' vocabulary in ISAP through sharing ideas, constructing and evaluating knowledge. The findings regarding students' attitude towards the implementation of the social constructionist framework (i.e. exploration, construction, and evaluation) indicated positive results. According to students' responses, they appreciated the three-step process, the independent learning nature of the activity, the collaborative group work, and the use of the particular technology (*Quizlet*). Students stated that their learning was motivated by this activity. Moreover, they stated that they did not only understand the vocabulary related to their field of study better, but also that of other academic fields. Finally, the findings were consistent with those of [Parmaxi and Zaphiris \(2015\)](#), demonstrating that the students appreciated the process and the steps followed.

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