9 The digital world as a topic: developing digital competences in the Italian language class

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Abstract

According to the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) framework for digital capabilities (JISC, 2013), Information Communication Technology (ICT) proficiency is only one of the elements necessary to equip Higher Education (HE) students to fully engage with today's digital world. On its own, however, it is not enough. As ICT users, students should be encouraged not solely to use digital technologies proficiently, but also to reflect on the digital world and on their experience of it, by considering the impact of ICT in their life as well as in their learning. In this article, I will explain how digital technologies and competences can be used in the Italian language class as a topic. In order to do so, I will focus on a second year module for ex-beginner Italian students – Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) B1/B2 –, describing how, while developing all 'canonical' linguistic skills, students can improve transferable skills, such as working on self-development, shaping their digital identity and reputation, and approaching media literacies and learning. After a brief description of the context, including students' levels and needs, and of the objectives of the proposed teaching unit, I will outline how I designed the activities and approached the topic with the class, analysing the students' responses and outcomes.

Keywords: digital world, ICT proficiency, topics in language learning, transferable skills.

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1.   Introduction

Students currently in HE programmes are part of the so-called 'Y generation', young people who were born and educated in the digital era and have spent their lives surrounded by and using technological tools. Yet despite being considered "digital natives", i.e. "native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1), many have only a partial perception of the potential of the digital world, often limited to the use of technological media such as PCs, smartphones, tablets, and apps (see for example Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, & Gray, 2008, a response to Prensky, 2001). This implies that, although able to use digital 'products', younger generations might not fully engage with their potential, failing for instance to understand the importance of developing media literacies that would help them in and beyond university.

The non-profit organisation JISC – which supports HE by providing advice on digital resources and technology services – has proposed a model for digital capabilities that suggests several areas linked to ICT proficiency in which students should gain appropriate skills to become both intellectually aware of all the implications of the world they live in and fully operational within it (see Figure 1).

As recommended by the JISC framework, ICT proficiency is only one of the elements necessary "to enable people in [HE] to fully [exploit] the possibilities of modern digital empowerment, content and connectivity" (JISC, 2013, n.p.). As ICT users, HE students should then be encouraged not solely to use digital technologies proficiently, but also to reflect on the digital world and on their experience of it, by considering the impact of ICT in their lives and in their learning.

Many papers in this publication deal with how digital competencies can be developed and improved, and with how both class and independent learning can be enhanced via an informed use of technologies. In this paper, I will explore how the digital world can be used in the Italian language class as a topic, informing content while promoting personal development.
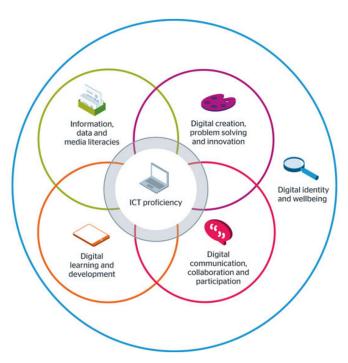
Figure 1.   JISC (2013) framework[2]

To provide an example of this practice, I will focus on a second year ex-beginner Italian module (CEFR B1/B2), describing how, while developing linguistic and digital competencies, students can also improve transferable skills, e.g. by working on self-development, shaping digital identity, and approaching media literacies and technology enhanced learning. In designing the Teaching Unit (TU) that I will discuss, I have considered how media education (or literacy) (Weyland, 2003) is more complex than generally perceived[3]. Teaching *with* the

2. https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-students-digital-literacy

3. My approach in designing TUs follows Balboni's (1994, 2002, 2013) model; in English, see Balboni (2007), a "complex linguistic, communicative tranche, realised by bringing together cultural models, communicative acts, language expressions and language structures, all linked by a situational […] or […] grammatical context"; it is "characterised by three phases that recall the three moments of perception" - globalising > analysing > synthesising – described by the Gestalt psychology as a sequential process, "plus an initial motivational phase and a concluding one of testing and evaluation"; TUs are divided into "learning units, each one lasting for a single session" focussed on the student perception of their own learning (Balboni 2007, pp. 39-42).

media (i.e. using them as tools) and *on* the media (i.e. using them as content) are two approaches of technology enhanced teaching, along with teaching (and learning) *inside* the media (Martini, 2004). This last aspect considers all media, new technologies as well as books, as a normal, integral part of life, each with an area of action and meaning in constant interaction with each other. If, as Margiotta (1997) argues, today's student is a 'multi-literate' person ('multi-alfabeta') who possesses the ability to experience the world through different media, using the different languages employed by such tools, a fuller education must stimulate students not only to use but also to learn about the media and their 'alphabets', to provide concrete experiences of the digital world that can shape their identity.

2. Methodology

2.1. Studying Italian at Liverpool

Before outlining the project that informs this paper, the context in which Italian is taught at the University of Liverpool (UoL) should be described. As in many institutions in the UK, the Italian cohort is divided into two strands for the first two years:

- beginners (ex-Beginners in second year): an intensive pathway which prepares students for reaching level B1/B2 in their first year. This is a successful programme at UoL and constitutes the larger of the two intakes for Italian; and

- advanced: a pathway designed for students with A-level (or equivalent) competence in Italian.

After a year spent abroad, the two groups merge in their final year. Since the 2014-15 academic year, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences have launched a flexible programme of study, Honours Select (HS), which allows students to combine subjects offered in the Faculty, choosing how much weight

they have in their degree course. Currently, Italian can be studied at 100%, 75%, 50%, or 25%, thus constituting a component in a number of Joint or Major/ Minor programmes[4]. With the introduction of HS, the number of students enrolling in the Beginners pathway has increased further. Since HS students can start Italian with no previous linguistic training (i.e. an A-level or equivalent in another language), there is now a wider variety in competences and expectations with consequent impacts on motivation and retention, so choosing topics that are relevant to the students' lives is paramount.

2.2.   The Italian Beginners and ex-Beginners class

In the first and second year, students in the Beginners pathway take a module per semester, each comprising of four hours of class instruction and structured independent learning organised in activities available on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Blackboard. Each teaching semester is 12 weeks long.

Weekly seminars are designed around thematic topics which focus on the engagement with the target culture and on the development of 'canonical' linguistic skills, both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing). I will refer to the weekly seminars as follows:

- *Grammar*, based on the discovery and acquisition of linguistic structures;

- *Texts*, focussed on the development of reading and writing skills;

- *Lab*, focussed on listening comprehension skills; and

- *Oral*, designed to enhance speaking and communicative skills.

All skills are practised in every seminar, although with a varied emphasis.

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4. For more information on HS, see https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/italian-ba-hons/overview/. For the structure of programmes with an Italian component and for Italian modules available at UoL, see https://www. liverpool.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/honours-select/.

2.3.   Bringing the students' world into the class: the digital era

Second year ex-Beginners modules are organised around several themes chosen to enhance student motivation and engagement. Each theme relates to Italian culture and society with an intercultural approach. Topics vary, and alongside migration, politics, the world of work, and life in Italy as a (foreign) student, can include 'new media'. Each topic is explored in a three-week long TU made of a Learning Unit (LU) for each seminar, for a total of 12 class hours.

The TU dedicated to new media was created as follows. In the first LU (Texts), as a motivational introduction to the topic, a short video on digital competences was viewed in class[5] (see supplementary material[6], parts a, b, and c). Students, divided in small groups, were subsequently asked to elicit their previous knowledge and opinions about the topic and then, with the help of the transcription of the video, to analyse the text, its content, and its language and medium.

The video introduced Prensky's notions of digital natives and immigrants[7], so students were also invited to reflect on their status vis-à-vis this definition.

At this stage, a reflection on the language used was encouraged, and examples of new media were elicited from the students for an active reflection on the world they experience. Then a new text was introduced, divided in smaller units and accompanied by different exercises[8] (see supplementary material[9], part d-e). Part (d) was meant for skimming for information, to confirm or correct students' views (e.g. the definition of 'new media' and the origin of the term), while part (e) – a more complex excerpt – was meant to make students reflect on

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5. http://www.treccani.it/webtv/videos/pdnm_della_valle_nativi_digitali.html

6. https://research-publishing.box.com/s/frpyh0k2dg0i2a8rzrf7pazbu6ihtf4k

7. While digital natives are "native speakers" of the digital language, digital immigrants are "those […] who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many aspects of the new technology" (Prensky, 2001, pp. 1-2).

8. http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuovi_media

9. https://research-publishing.box.com/s/frpyh0k2dg0i2a8rzrf7pazbu6ihtf4k

the characteristics of the new media, introducing concepts such as 'variability' and 'transcodification'.

At the end of this first LU, students were provided with a list of new media including CDs, DVDs, chatrooms, blogs and so on, and asked to consider how these can be used for communication (see supplementary material[10], part f).

This phase made the class rethink their personal use of technologies, with room to propose creative ways of using them. Independent learning was also organised, with more related articles and vocabulary links (e.g. Quizlet[11]) available on the VLE. At home, students also worked on English expressions commonly used in Italian, looking for possible translations. These activities created the basis for the introductory phase of the next Texts seminar LU.

Meanwhile, during the LUs in the Lab seminars – held in a room equipped with Sanako software[12] that allows students to access the audio/video resource at their own pace and to interact with the tutor – other authentic materials (from YouTube and/or Italian newspapers) were used to explore the theme and to encourage a reflection on its presence in our everyday lives.

For the Oral seminar, designed to put into communicative practice the linguistic and cultural elements discovered in the week, the focus was on a specific aspect of digital competence, 'online reputation'. The expression was introduced to the students, prompting them to analyse its meaning, and once it was clarified, the class was led to consider the importance that building a strong online reputation can add to a personal and professional life. As homework, students worked on a practical task: verifying and assessing their presence on the web by using a website linked to an Italian TV programme (*Reputescion*[13]), and producing a short show and tell on their online reputation for the class.

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10. https://research-publishing.box.com/s/frpyh0k2dg0i2a8rzrf7pazbu6ihtf4k

11. https://quizlet.com/

12. http://www.sanako.com/

13. https://www.my-reputation.it

In the second week, the Text seminar started with a recap based also on the extra materials available on the VLE to encourage students to engage with them during their independent learning. The new text analysed in class[14] (see supplementary material[15]) focussed on the importance of creating and maintaining a good web identity, with practical advice. Broken into smaller units with comprehension and reflective questions, the text favoured active reading.

For their independent learning, and as a conclusion to the TU, students were asked to write a short essay by the end of the third week (400 words) for formative assessment and feedback[16].

In the second Oral seminar, students shared findings about themselves, with the tutor breaking the ice showing how s/he appears online, starting with a Google search. Subsequently, the students had to share their views on how to build a stronger online reputation, and while talking in Italian, they also made written notes to help them during the following class debate on how to improve our online reputation[17]. Via this exercise, while practising Italian linguistic structures, students were able to further explore the potential of the digital world.

In the third and final week of the TU, a video from the Italian TV programme *Reputescion* was used in the Lab seminar (an interview with an Italian celebrity, in which their online presence is reviewed). In the Oral seminar, students discussed and drafted a list of 'dos & don'ts' for a perfect web identity, while the Text seminar was dedicated to writing: in groups, the essay title's keywords were

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14. http://www.panorama.it/economia/opinioni/regole-gestione-reputazione-online/

15. https://research-publishing.box.com/s/m6bbdx2kbpb8tj34x4lwfct4exksibpp

16. The essay title asked students whether in the digital world TV is still a useful source of information ("I media e le notizie: la televisione fa ancora informazione? Elabora la tua risposta portando esempi della realtà italiana e di quella del tuo Paese"). For the summative assessment (600 words), one of the three essay titles engaged students with online reputation ("'L'immagine online è il nostro primo biglietto da visita'. Discuti questa affermazione, valutando l'importanza di costruirsi una solida reputazione online a livello privato e professionale. Nella tua discussione, fai riferimento soprattutto a esempi concreti, spiegando come un corretto uso delle nuove tecnologie e dei social network può contribuire a migliorare il proprio profilo lavorativo").

17. Such suggestions included deciding to open a LinkedIn account (https://www.linkedin.com), making their social media profile private, changing their public profile pictures, and so on.

analysed, useful resources were listed and shared, and an essay plan ("scaletta") was drafted to provide extra help to the students and to make sure that they would actually work on the essay, due at the end of that week.

3.   Results and discussion

This TU has stimulated an informed reflection on the impact of ICT on students' personal and professional life. On the basis of the students' feedback, results have been encouraging and shown that the activities proposed provide various benefits for the students' learning and development. Acquiring digital literacy is amongst the cognitive skills listed in the most recent version of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, which also recommends a focus on practical skills, e.g. being able to "access and use digital resources and social media appropriately" (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2015, p. 17), as well as generic skills, e.g. being able to "use digital media effectively as a source of information, a means of communication and as an aid to learning" (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2015, p. 24).

All the above skills have been reinforced via the TU here described. Students have been encouraged to take a more conscious approach to the web, including social media, and have been exposed to digital materials for learning. Some of them showed improved digital skills and awareness of the digital world, i.e. in their use of the Office package, as shown in their work submission and their emails, as well as in their comments in essays and in the end of semester questionnaires, which showed an appreciation for the topic. The tutor set the example by sharing his/her digital competences, and also with the digital texts proposed, including videos. These materials are discussed in class and analysed in terms of their relevance and reliability, educating the students to use Internet sources in an informed way. Being trained to check their sources carefully, students are better prepared to approach information with the same attention during their independent learning and research. Moreover, the digital materials retrieved are always authentic, as recommended by the Subject Benchmarks, and comprise Italian media, which have the benefit of opening up a fresh perspective

on Italian culture and society. If the benefits so far described can be achieved using any topic, it must be recognised that the importance of discussing new media lies in offering the chance for students to reflect on digital competencies and literacies, including the importance of building an online reputation and protecting and enhancing their digital identity. Through this TU, students were encouraged not only to use technologies, but also to comment on their digital education and to expand and perfect their knowledge and skills, developing transferable skills that can have a significant impact on self-development and employability.

4.   Conclusion

With the present paper, I described a TU that would provide students with a fuller understanding of the digital era they live in. As recognised by JISC and suggested by the Subject Benchmarks, students should be trained to employ a whole set of technologies and competences, including the ability to reflect on the digital world and on their experience of it, both in their life and in their learning. As explained, the digital world can be used in the language class as a content topic, helping students to improve their digital literacies and competences and to reflect on the impact on their learning and personal life, as well as in social and professional contexts.

The paper aimed at showing how, while developing all 'canonical' linguistic skills, students also improved their transferable skills, such as working on self-development, shaping digital identity and reputation, approaching media literacies, and learning. The level of students' engagement and their improved perception of the digital world have proved the approach successful.

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Research-publishing.net

Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

Using digital resources to enhance language learning – case studies in Italian
Edited by Rosalba Biasini and Anna Proudfoot

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)