

# 6 The Italian electronic language log: a critical evaluation

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## Abstract

The present article focusses on the use of the Electronic Language Log (ELL) as a tool to monitor independent learning practices by *ab initio* students of Italian in their first year of study at the University of Leeds. The ELL is first described in the pedagogic framework from which it derives, the language log; the primary aim of this contribution, however, is to give a direct analysis and critical evaluation of the work produced by students for their ELL and, specifically, of the work submitted in the academic year 2015-2016. Key findings show how this learning tool has helped beginner students of Italian manage their own learning independently. Emphasis is placed on students as the primary owners of the ELL and on their preferences for self-directed, mobile-learning (m-learning) practices. The conclusion discusses the potential of the ELL for evaluating students' skills and competences in Italian, and whether the ELL is fulfilling its purpose effectively.

**Keywords:** electronic language log, m-learning, self-directed language learning, language apps, online technology.

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**How to cite this chapter:** Lomartire, S. (2018). The Italian electronic language log: a critical evaluation. In R. Biasini & A. Proudfoot (Eds), *Using digital resources to enhance language learning – case studies in Italian* (pp. 55-65). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.24.798>

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The language log

The language log is a tool for learning widely employed in language classes in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK to record independent language learning practices (Kühn & Pérez Cavana, 2012; López-Fernández, 2014). It has two objectives: the development of learner autonomy and the recording of language activities, ranging from written texts, drawings, and student reflections to audio or video recordings. The language log is also regarded as a flexible tool where student work done outside the classroom can be stored (Kühn & Pérez Cavana, 2012; Trappes-Lomax & Ferguson, 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

### 1.2. The electronic language log at the University of Leeds

The Italian department at Leeds adopted the language log in 2009 as a record of independent learning for first and second year students; since 2012 it has taken the form of an ELL<sup>3</sup>, which is an electronic Word document which students submit online at the end of each semester.

In the first-year *ab initio* programme, the ELL is the major component of students' independent work, helping students record what they have done by submitting screenshots. *Ab initio* students of Italian have four hours per week contact time over a ten week semester (in both Semesters 1 and 2). Language progression has to be rapid: starting at the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1 in Semester 1, students must reach CEFR A2<sup>4</sup> at the end of the second semester of their first academic year. To ensure these levels are reached, students must engage in eight to ten hours a week of

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2. For a concise yet meticulous summary of background literature on student autonomy, see Kristmanson, Lafargue, & Culligan (2013).

3. Electronic versions of the language log are becoming increasingly popular in the HEI context due to the advantages of the digital configuration; these have been effectively summarised by a recent article by Ciesielkiewicz & Méndez Coca (2013).

4. A1 corresponds to the first while A2 to the second level on a six-level scale of competence laid down in the CEFR. For more on the CEFR scale, see the eponymous publication by the Council of Europe's (2017) Language Policy Unit.

self-directed study, 70% of which must be devoted to the ELL<sup>5</sup>, which they start to build in Semester 1. ELL carries ten percent of the final mark for the two core language modules, one in Semester 1 and one in Semester 2.

Students are offered guidance on compiling their ELL: at least ten tasks per skill, per semester, should be included and students are given a list, with brief descriptions, of online language resources available for free – mostly podcasts, video channels, e-books, and language apps – which they are encouraged to use and record in their own log. The resources complement the classroom teaching which makes extensive use of communicative language teaching<sup>6</sup> and are intended to consolidate the four basic language skills in the context of the chosen task. Upon task completion, students are asked to paste a screengrab into the ELL, uploading the file to a designated area of the relevant Italian language module, on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Students are given the option of organising the screengrabs in the document by date, tutorial, skill, or language function.

Even though students can choose from an array of free resources, since the implementation of the ELL most have concentrated on app-based tasks alone. Screengrabs have included tasks from *Duolingo*<sup>7</sup>, *Memrise*<sup>8</sup>, *Lingua.ly*<sup>9</sup>, and *Linqapp*<sup>10</sup>. *Duolingo* focusses on morphological and syntactical elements matching the CEFR A1 and A2 descriptors for Italian but also alternates between reading, speaking, listening, and writing tasks. *Memrise* and *Lingua.ly*, as flashcard generator apps, make use of “mems” and *ad-hoc* flashcards respectively, which consist of associative visuals for A1 and A2 high-frequency Italian words, phrases, or longer texts aimed at enhancing short- and long-term

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5. The remainder of this time is devoted to the completion of a separate workbook.

6. Particularly, communicative language teaching approaches which stem from integrated models of facilitation and humanistic models (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Bosio, 2005; Bosio & Chini, 2014; Mezzadri, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Tarone & Yule, 1989).

7. <http://www.duolingo.com>

8. <https://www.memrise.com/>

9. <https://lingua.ly>

10. <http://www.linqapp.com>

memory skills and vocabulary. Additionally, *Lingua.ly* relies on a solid corpus of Italian texts from various online sources – whether tweets, blogs, or newspaper articles – where key vocabulary can be learnt in context, and virtually any word from any text can instantly be converted to a flashcard. *Linqapp* consolidates students’ speaking skills by engaging them in simple conversations at A1 and A2 level.

The ELL at Leeds emerged from the development of mobile and online technology<sup>11</sup>. While still promoting self-directed learning, as did the paper-based language log, it does so primarily through m-learning<sup>12</sup>. The ELL allows learners to piece together the different artefacts, “in a single location, organised chronologically, thematically, or according to a specific purpose” (Cummins & Davesne, 2009, p. 849). It is also simpler to update and access the ELL since “all the information that it contains can be downloaded [and consulted remotely] in order to be carefully studied and researched” (Ciesielkiewicz & Méndez Coca, 2013, p. 465). Finally, the tasks in the ELL can be stored for future reference (Kristmanson, Lafargue, & Culligan, 2013).

## 2. Methodology

The aim of the present study is to investigate how the ELL was used by first-year *ab initio* university students of Italian and evaluate its effectiveness as a tool for independent learning. The study adopted qualitative methods to analyse students’ use of the ELL and their preferred independent learning practices while evaluating how such practices impacted on students’ involvement in the language learning process.

The analysis was carried out at the end of the academic year 2015-2016 by assessing 60 logs produced by 30 first-year students (the average size cohort). Feedback from students was also elicited via the university module

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11. For a detailed classification of pedagogic uses of mobile and online technology, see Patten, Sánchez, & Tagney (2006).

12. For a comprehensive study on m-learning, see Herrington et al. (2009).

questionnaires which are distributed at the end of every taught module. Only answers from questionnaires distributed at the end of the core language module in semester two were considered in this analysis to ensure a balanced perception of students' independent learning habits and use of the ELL throughout their entire first year of study at university. The answers to two specific questions provided the basis of our results: (1) 'What was the best thing about the module?'; and (2) 'In addition to the prescribed reading for the module, what have you done to get the most out of the module?'. Students were asked to incorporate ELL-specific comments in their answers to these module-wide questions.

### 3. Results

The analysis of the ELLs and of the screengrabs included provides insights into students' independent language study habits. The results demonstrate an extensive range of language tasks and a marked preference for m-learning, mostly app-based tasks. This is backed up by students' comments in the module questionnaires.

The four language apps with the most screengrabs were: *Duolingo* (60 logs), *Linqapp* (60 logs), *Memrise* (46 logs), and *Lingua.ly* (28 logs). *Duolingo* is predominantly used by students for translations of simple sentences from English to Italian and transcription of short spoken sentences in Italian. Judging from the frequency with which these tasks appear in students' ELLs, the app plays a significant part in their independent learning. In the questionnaires, the majority (95%) also mentioned *Duolingo's* translations where the tasks fit well with the summative exams for Level 1 Italian (notably the written and listening test). Sixty percent of students also commented favourably on *Duolingo's* rapid-fire quizzes which are mostly used to consolidate their independent learning but also to compete against fellow students in the same group<sup>13</sup>.

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13. For more on the rationale behind this, see the section in Duolingo's home page (<http://www.duolingo.com/>).

*Memrise* and *Lingua.ly* are mostly selected by students for vocabulary-building exercises and monitoring both reading and pronunciation. Screenshot of *Memrise* show that the majority of students create their own “mems” either by taking pictures of relevant items or by selecting photos from a portfolio of google images which reflect key vocabulary covered in the set textbook in class (36 logs); a minority of students use the app to draw their own flashcards (10 logs). Seventy percent of students also found the “mems” a helpful revision tool as the app sends regular reminders to test the same word or phrase, a popular feature as students approach the end of their module and their exams.

A few students also use *Lingua.ly* to revise their vocabulary through purpose-made flashcards independently; at least six logs were filled with screenshots of such flashcards. However, *Lingua.ly* is primarily used to show engagement with longer texts in Italian and key vocabulary in context; this explains the greater popularity of this app with A2 rather than A1 students. Indeed, screenshots of the chosen text and its related flashcard were found mostly at A2 level (20 logs at A2 versus only two logs at A1 level).

Many students (46%) also commented positively on *Lingua.ly* in the questionnaires, particularly on the way the app ‘invites’ them to create a corpus of texts based upon their reading habits<sup>14</sup>. This allows students to assimilate key vocabulary in context, combined with a set of review sessions, with the added bonus that the Italian words are presented as a network of synonyms rather than a series of disconnected words.

The remaining screenshot evidence provided by students in their ELL relates to their speaking practice outside the classroom using *Linqapp*. All the A1 users presented screenshots of forum chats with other native Italian speaker *Linqapp* users; frequent discussion topics include simple points of grammar for clarification, but also cultural questions. At A2 level, students took screenshots of conversations which took place via VoIP<sup>15</sup> with native Italian speakers, using

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14. The app gathers information on students’ reading habits and suggests other written pieces, similar in content and length.

15. The app is built-in with a VoIP system to communicate among users.

*Linqapp*, creating a genuine language exchange, with occasional questions on Italian linguistics.

Among the positive aspects of *Linqapp* mentioned in the questionnaires was the sense of community generated by interactions with other language learners (40%). Students (78%) also enjoyed using *Linqapp* to upload photos of street signs, food menus, and extracts from written texts for other users to comment on<sup>16</sup>.

## 4. Discussion

From my review of students' work produced for their ELL, it became clear that a number of common practices emerged in the ways Level 1 beginner students of Italian used the ELL to gather evidence of their independent study. These focused on action-oriented language tasks, as advocated in the CEFR ([Council of Europe, 2017](#)), and included:

- a preference for vocabulary-building exercises by means of kinaesthetic activities, from the creation of flashcards with the most commonly used Italian words to word games;
- grammar and/or translation activities used as a means to develop language skills to communicate, with a prevalence of exercises based on integrated skills (such as written comprehension questions on an aural text);
- the need for regular testing and revision;
- the desire to interact with a native speaker, in order to communicate and work as part of a community of learners.

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16. *Linqapp* facilitates such exchanges through a points system: according to the complexity of the comment given, users gather points which allow them to gain an "experienced status" within the *Linqapp* community – something many students appear to value as part of their log.

These findings further demonstrate how students, in selecting the tasks they want to carry out, make their own choices, demonstrating individual learning styles, whilst at the same time being motivated to work in groups or to support other app users. Specifically, while *Duolingo* gives students the chance to work together outside the classroom, *Linqapp* offers students the opportunity to work with a community of individuals from the most diverse backgrounds who are just as interested in learning as they are in helping one another, with the added bonus that students are also exposed to other languages.

Concurrently, my observations seem to confirm what has been posited by [Ciesielkiewicz and Méndez Coca \(2013\)](#), i.e. that the ELL appears to be a flexible tool to monitor students' independent learning. It is also easier for students to update their ELL as screengrab evidence can be added easily and students can use their logs to look back on their learning journey at the end of both semesters through the screengrabs. In particular, as revealed by the questionnaires, for 98 % of students their ELL often turns into a reliable language companion ([Cummins & Davesne, 2009](#)).

However, independent learning practices identified in the ELL also carry a number of constraints. Some language apps are more appropriate to certain CEFR levels than others. *Duolingo* does not teach the pragmatic competences needed for both second- and final-year students, while *Linqapp* may offer too intense a learning experience for A1 students. It is clear then that app-based tasks should be used in conjunction with one another and that the four independent study habits referred to above should not be seen as mutually exclusive.

At a different level, external pressures, which challenge both the format of the ELL and the validity of the app-based tasks, also exist. Ever since its initial implementation, the ELL has been met with some resistance among the less technologically literate users, and not only among them<sup>17</sup>. A more discerning approach to technology-enhanced learning is sometimes adopted both by

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17. Debate in this sense is still ongoing. Solid and informed reflections are offered by [Hart and Hart Frejd \(2013\)](#), [Cummins \(2007\)](#), and [Gibson \(2006, pp. 135-145\)](#).



students and by some facilitators who lament both the effects of “education based technology” (Hart & Hart Frejd, 2013, p. 46) and the sometimes intrusive nature of apps such as *Memrise*. Universities also tend to put emphasis on their own VLE. These VLE platforms frequently come with their own language and online tools for independent learning, thereby competing with the language apps discussed here.

## 5. Conclusion

While the ELL may vary from one institution to another, this study can help us draw conclusions on how this tool can be employed to assess students’ independent learning and how examples of good practice can be extended to other languages as well. The study has shown that, in spite of the obstacles preventing its full implementation, the ELL offers an effective complementary tool to monitor independent language learning habits within HEIs, especially for *ab initio* students of Italian in their first year of study. The ELL appears to be successful in recording students’ achievements and experiences. Importantly, the flexibility and adaptability of the tasks can accommodate different learning styles, responding to students’ individual learning needs.

Concurrently, students not only seem aware of the learning goals they want to reach through their choice of app-based tasks for the ELL, but they also seem aware of the potential of their self-directed learning practices, while their curiosity seems to be stimulated by the app-based tasks chosen independently. In this way, students ultimately achieve what Kohonen (2004) called “invisible learning outcomes”, i.e. those goals that “are essential for the development of language competence and student autonomy” (p. 32).

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association  
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**Using digital resources to enhance language learning – case studies in Italian**  
**Edited by Rosalba Biasini and Anna Proudfoot**

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

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-13-9 (Ebook, PDF, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-14-6 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-12-2 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)  
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, UK:** British Library.  
**Legal deposit, France:** Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juillet 2018.

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