

4 Using online tools and resources to encourage independent learning amongst *ab initio* students of Italian: a case study

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Abstract

This article describes the innovations introduced into the undergraduate *ab initio* Italian language programme at the School of Languages at the University of Bristol and the use of a range of online tools and resources. It evaluates to what extent the innovations have enhanced the students' experience. The article describes the course structure and how technology has been embedded in it. It looks at the pedagogy underpinning the choice of tools, explains how these tools are being used, and finally examines students' responses to the changes.

Keywords: blended learning, technology in the classroom, foreign languages, peer collaboration, learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

1.1. Description of the course

In common with Italian undergraduate courses at other UK higher education institutions, Bristol has two pathways: an *ab initio* pathway and a post-A-level pathway. *Ab initio* students are absolute beginners or near beginners in Italian.

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The course is intensive: in one year, learners are expected to reach level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

First year *ab initio* students of Italian at the University of Bristol had five contact hours of language per week. Classroom-based learning consisted of one hour dedicated to oral and aural skills and four hours dedicated to integrated elements including grammar, reading, and writing (including translation). Student numbers vary from 15 to 25 per group (8-12 in the oral/aural class).

1.2. The need for change

About three years ago the Department of Italian decided to make changes to the first year *ab initio* course. The aim was to enhance the learning experience and engage students, at the same time making full use of the new, purpose-built MultiMedia Centre (MMC) with its wide range of multimedia resources and the strong support network offered by the University's Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) team.

We wanted to draw on the principles of blended learning which, “with the combination of synchronous verbal and asynchronous written communication in the context of a cohesive community of inquiry, [...] offers a distinct advantage in supporting higher levels of learning through critical discourse and reflective thinking” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 98).

1.3. What we did

The teaching team introduced a one-hour weekly computer laboratory session in the MMC. The five hours per week of classroom based learning now consist of:

- one hour of oral and aural skills in small groups;
- three hours of integrated skills in a traditional classroom setting; and
- one hour in the computer laboratory in the MMC.

The teaching team devised a range of online resources to use during the MMC session. These included *Sanako*, a virtual language laboratory; *Mediasite*, a video platform; *Questionmark Perception*, an online testing tool; and *Blackboard*, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The activities created with these tools and resources can be used outside the MMC for students' independent learning. The activities are described in detail below.

2. Methodology

2.1. Rationale

In planning the changes to the *ab initio* course, the tutors focussed on using a range of multimedia resources in order to promote: (1) exposure to the target language, (2) social interaction and collaborative learning, and (3) learner autonomy.

2.1.1. *Exposure to the target language*

Learning a new language is easier when it takes place in the target country. Students cannot easily do that in the first year at university, therefore technology was used to bring the outside world into the classroom. Exposure to the target language can be maximised by the use of technology: students have “access to native speakers [... and] easy 24/7 access to [...] instructional and authentic language learning materials” (Lai & Gu, 2011, p. 317).

2.1.2. *Social interaction and collaborative learning*

According to Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999), in their study of computer assisted language learning, optimal language learning conditions will be achieved when “learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience” and when “learners are involved in authentic tasks” (p. 4). Social constructivism promotes the idea that “learning occurs not only individually but also through social interaction” (Nakata, 2006, p. 118). This approach

“stresses the need for a collaborative learning environment where learners are enabled and encouraged to interact with and support one another, a public space characterised by interaction and collaboration” (Schwienhorst, 2007, p. 19). A way had to be found to create this interaction and authenticity of environment and tasks in the new MMC hour.

2.1.3. *Learner autonomy*

According to Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999), learner autonomy is another of the ideal conditions for effective language learning. Autonomy is the learners’ ability to critically reflect on their own learning, to communicate and collaborate with other learners, and to take control and assume responsibility for their own learning (Schwienhorst, 2007). Students have to be guided and encouraged to take charge of their own learning.

The 24/7 availability of the VLE and online resources, and a clear structure to guide them through, assists students keen to develop their language skills further via independent learning, helping them to test themselves and to take control of their own learning.

2.2. **Computer assisted class activities: the MMC hour**

To introduce these innovations, we used a blend of university managed software and online tools:

- *Blackboard*, as a VLE;
- *Sanako*², a language learning software available in the computer suite;
- *Questionmark Perception*, a dedicated system for delivering and managing online formative and summative assessment and examinations; and

2. <http://www.sanako.com/en-gb/products/study-1200/>

- *Mediasite*³, the university's centrally supported enterprise video platform.

Each weekly class in the MMC uses a range of tools, according to its aims and objectives.

2.2.1. *Blackboard*

Blackboard is used for all the components of the *ab initio* Italian course: it provides separate sections for reading skills, oral classes, the MMC hour, etc., and is easy to access and navigate. *Blackboard* is widely used as a VLE across the university, so is familiar to students.

In the MMC hour, *Blackboard* is the starting point for most class activities. Each week all material is made available on a specific area of the *ab initio* Italian *Blackboard* module, to which students can refer to outside of class.

Wherever possible, students are given authentic tasks, accessing Italian websites that Italians might use, for example, carrying out their online weekly shopping in an Italian supermarket⁴, ordering take-away food⁵ or searching for a new house on an Italian estate agents' website⁶. After the research, students write up their findings (individually or in pairs) in a blog or wiki, shared with the rest of the class. Usually, work started in class is completed at home, where students can still collaborate without needing to be in the same room.

Students then give general feedback to their peers, commenting on the content (opinions on the chosen menu/house/etc.) rather than the language. Students' work is generally corrected but not awarded marks. Students also use *Blackboard*'s wiki and blog tools to create short stories based either on visual elements (such as short

3. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/tel/support/tools/mediasite/>

4. <http://www.sunmarket.it/>

5. <http://www.justeat.it/domicilio/italiano/roma/>

6. <http://www.agenzieimmobiliari.com/>

videos, publicity material, or pictures) or on written stimuli, and to work together on translation tasks. Again, all this work is corrected but not formally assessed.

2.2.2. *Sanako*

Sanako is a multimedia language lab software with classroom management. It is a modern version of the old language lab which allows students to get more involved in the lesson and to actively participate in all language learning exercises. Each weekly class in the MMC generally starts with a vocabulary test created via the learning software *Sanako* and delivered to students individually. Upon logging onto their computers, students are presented with word lists in Italian or English which they need to translate within a given amount of time. The test ends automatically when the set time is over; the tutor is able to check all scores and answers before sharing individual results with each student.

Another main function of *Sanako* used in class is the text chat facility. This is used in two ways, both individually and in small groups.

(1) Working individually, students access an online chat room via their computer and type a response to, or comment on, a stimulus launched online by the tutor: either a warm-up activity or a vocabulary revision activity. By typing their responses or comments in the chat room, everyone can contribute synchronously, including students who are normally shy or reluctant. The general atmosphere becomes quickly relaxed and playful, great for breaking the ice and reducing the stress typically associated with “foreign language anxiety” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, pp. 125-132).

(2) Working in pairs or in groups, students work collaboratively on a more structured task. This can be a written conversation in the form of text chat targeting a particular language point (e.g. organising an informal date or a formal meeting using modal verbs) or for general communication skills (e.g. ordering a meal, etc.). Students work in pairs

or in groups of three and collaborate and help each other in writing their messages, thus creating a dynamic interactive exchange. The tutor can observe and intervene discreetly from the main computer station while students enjoy the variety of tasks.

2.2.3. *Questionmark Perception*

Language assessment in the first year includes various components, two of which (grammar tests) are delivered online via *Questionmark Perception*, which is an online testing tool used to design, create, and deliver formative and summative online assessment. The Department of Italian has successfully used this tool to create grammar tests and exams for several years. Activities created include multiple choice, matching, fill in the gap, and true/false. Although creating tests can be time consuming, the material can be re-used repeatedly.

Short formative grammar tests distributed throughout the academic year help students learn and revise, and familiarise them with the test format in advance of the two summative tests (labelled ‘End of Teaching Block One and Two’). Formative tests are introduced in class as a 10-15 minute activity during the MMC hour, and subsequently made available online.

2.2.4. *Mediasite*

As already mentioned, the programme has a strong focus on independent learning: students are expected to spend at least five hours per week working independently (and a further five hours per week on homework). They are free to choose how they do this.

Another innovation aimed at encouraging independent learning was the introduction of an online library of video grammar tutorials. *Mediasite* allows the creation, editing, and publishing of material (via *Blackboard*) and management of content. Two *ab initio* tutors used the *Mediasite* tool to create twenty-six short video grammar tutorials (8-12 minutes each) to accompany PowerPoint presentations previously used in class: one video per grammar point. The video

tutorials become available online after each class. These recordings are not intended as an alternative to attending class but rather as a revision tool freeing up class time for other activities.

From the tutors’ point of view, it has been a positive experience: any initial reluctance about video recording oneself quickly disappeared, thanks to the enthusiastic response from the students. In terms of time constraints, while the first year has been relatively demanding for the tutors making the recordings, the same material can be reused in the future. From the students’ point of view, as illustrated later, this has been a great success.

3. Evaluation

Several data sources were used to evaluate the innovations: a printed survey⁷, an online survey (see Table 1), *Mediasite*’s video analytics, and built-in reports on Blackboard (see Figure 1).

Table 1. Online survey (May 2016)

1. I have enjoyed the lessons in the Multimedia Centre (MMC): 1 2 3 4 5 *
2. Classes were well structured: 1 2 3 4 5 *
3. Classes were interactive and interesting: 1 2 3 4 5 *
4. I felt motivated by being in the MMC: 1 2 3 4 5 *
5. I feel my language knowledge has been reinforced: 1 2 3 4 5 *
6. I feel I have learned what I was supposed to: 1 2 3 4 5 *
7. I would have preferred a more traditional approach (no computers, classroom based) : 1 2 3 4 5 *
8. What was the best element about these classes? And the worst?
9. I found all technology in the MMC classes easy to use: 1 2 3 4 5 *
10. I feel I had enough instructions from my tutor: 1 2 3 4 5 *
11. I find my IT skills have improved: 1 2 3 4 5 *
12. Which of the following activities/tools did you find useful? : A B C D E **
13. Which of the following did you find particularly enjoyable and/or stimulating? : A B C D E **

7. <https://research-publishing.box.com/s/0o8rj375xam3hiem5k958s4sr1m9qak4>

14. What do you think could be improved and/or changed in the MMC classes?
 15. Any further comments?

* 1. Strongly Agree; 2. Agree; 3. Neutral; 4. Disagree; 5. Strongly Disagree
 ** A. Vocabulary test
 B. Group chat activities
 C. Wiki/blog for creative writing
 D. Wiki/blog for translation
 E. Online grammar tests

Figure 1. Mediasite analytics: example



The printed survey was a standard end of year ‘language unit evaluation questionnaire’ commissioned by the School of Modern Languages. It included

questions on the entire language course including its components, the use of *Blackboard*, and the online material available for independent learning.

The online survey, on the other hand, was created specifically this year by the Italian Department to gather students' opinions on the way the MMC teaching room was used. It included 15 questions, of which three were open questions inviting comments on the positive and negative elements of the MMC hour and on how to improve it. The rest were closed questions, evaluating various aspects of the classes and the resources used.

At the end of the academic year, students were asked to complete both surveys. Out of the 43 students in the *ab initio* language course, 34 completed the printed survey, 32 of whom also completed the online survey. All responses were anonymous. The aim was to identify both positive and negative perceptions of the use of IT, both in class and outside the classroom, and produce recommendations for ways to improve the materials and students' engagement with the material.

Finally, *Blackboard* allows tutors to access information on the use students make of the *Mediasite* tutorials. Each video tutorial contains video analytics and built-in reports which allow tutors to identify students' engagement and behaviour, with intensity maps indicating which video segments are watched most or least ([Video Analytics, 2017](#)).

4. Results

The overall feedback for the MMC hour and its related activities was very positive.

The Language Unit Evaluation Questionnaires generally showed appreciation for all aspects of the *ab initio* course. There was a particularly enthusiastic response to the video grammar tutorials: at least 50% of the 34 completed questionnaires contained a positive comment on the *Mediasite* material, such as “video tutorials

were AMAZING”, “loved the grammar tutorials”, and “the grammar tutorials allowed me to go over things if I didn’t understand”.

Mediasite’s video analytics confirm this enthusiasm: students accessed the video tutorials fairly regularly but the peaks in usage correspond to the days following class explanation and the revision period preceding tests and exams.

More information on the use of the computer laboratory and of technology was gathered from the online survey. As stated earlier, 32 out of 43 students completed this questionnaire. Over 84% of respondents enjoyed the lessons in the MMC and found them interactive and interesting, while 81% felt that their language knowledge had been reinforced. A small percentage of students (12%) would have preferred a more traditional approach, without the use of computers.

Overall, the positive comments outnumbered the negative ones. In their comments, learners stated that they enjoyed the relaxed and stimulating atmosphere and felt that the use of technology helped their learning: “it feels like a more relaxed class, lots of discussion between my peers”; “the use of computers, etc. is very useful for language-learning, it helps to establish resources that we can use at home, and breaks up the week, so that not everything is classroom-based, which may have been a bit dry” (online survey).

Generally, students appreciated the variety of tasks, the level of creativity involved, and the exposure to authentic Italian resources and culture. They also enjoyed the collaborative side of these classes, remarking: “the best part was being able to work together in a more relaxed way and be able to improve in ways that would have been hard without using the computers” (online survey).

The comments on specific online activities were again very positive: “I liked the vocabulary tests on the computer [...] as you can check your mistakes soon after the test”, “vocab test every week was motivating”, “loved when we used the chat facilities on *Sanako*”, “online grammar tests is [sic] good practice to put to use what we have learnt in the other classes” (online survey).

In two cases, however, learners felt that for some activities the use of computers was superfluous: “I felt, for a lot of the exercises we did in class, using computers to do them was unnecessary – they could easily have been done on paper, and if that were the case I would have found them easier to focus on”, and “I feel at times technology wasn’t used effectively and we could have done the same material in the MMC that we do in normal classrooms, without the added distraction of computers” (online survey). Negative responses on the use of computers occurred seven times in the online survey: five students disliked the technical issues linked to computer use and two found computers an extra source of distraction. Moreover, one student felt that unless work was “officially marked” by the tutor, “it was difficult to be motivated enough to complete [...] tasks started in the lessons” (online survey).

5. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of the way in which online tools were introduced into the *ab initio* Italian language course. The aim of the initiative was to use the principles of blended learning to enhance the learning experience, making it dynamic, engaging, effective, and interactive. A carefully planned blend of online tools was integrated with a weekly lesson in the MMC and with students’ independent learning.

As learners’ comments have shown, integrating new technology into the course has been beneficial to their learning process and level of engagement; it has enabled the teaching team to cater for all learning styles and needs, both inside and outside the classroom, and has made lessons generally more enjoyable and motivating.

Although the response from students was largely positive, it is clear that a small minority of learners see the use of computers in class as an obstacle rather than facilitating the learning process. A clearer explanation of the aims and objectives of the initiative might help all learners to appreciate the use of technology in the classroom and motivate them further.

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