

6 Using remote communication tools to facilitate student engagement, language learning, and cross-disciplinary professional development before, during, and after the pandemic: the Newcastle Calls project 2020 as a case study

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and Cristina Peligra³

Abstract

Aimed at fostering student engagement using remote communication tools to restructure language teaching, the *Newcastle Calls* project was piloted in early 2020, providing Newcastle University's Italian language students at intermediate level with a chance to be involved in the production of authentic material. Thanks to technology, they crossed space barriers, interviewed Italian researchers in the Antarctic and an Italian theatre actor virtually, discussing the researchers' life, climate change, acting, and the effects of Italy's COVID-19 lockdown. One of these interviews was made into a pilot documentary with Italian and English subtitles with the collaboration of Master of Arts (MA) translation and film students. This chapter explores how students

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How to cite: Guidarelli, B., Moore, C., & Peligra, C. (2022). Using remote communication tools to facilitate student engagement, language learning, and cross-disciplinary professional development before, during, and after the pandemic: the Newcastle Calls project 2020 as a case study. In C. Hampton & S. Salin (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education* (pp. 69-80). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.56.1374>

benefitted from the experience, evaluates the project's potential to facilitate students' transition to professional life after university, and the facilitators' experience using remote communication tools before and during COVID-19, reflecting on the advantages and challenges of implementing the use of up-to-date technology in language learning.

Keywords: collaboration, interactive listening, student engagement, technology in teaching, virtual interviews.

1. Newcastle Calls: innovation, collaboration

In 2020, Newcastle University staff, intermediate level undergraduate students of Italian, MA English and Italian translation students, and one MA film student jointly created a documentary with bilingual subtitles of an interview with an Italian professional actor conducted as part of the 2019/2020 undergraduate module Intermediate Italian.

This collaboration constituted the pilot stage of the *Newcastle Calls* project, which aims to introduce a new teaching and learning experience. Inspired by the need to make teaching more student-centred, inclusive and interactive, this project used technology to go beyond classroom tasks to better prepare students for post-university life.

This chapter describes the different pilot project's phases (i.e. the organisation of two virtual interviews with Italian professionals, a translation workshop to create multilingual subtitles, and the creation of a first pilot documentary), reflecting on what was successful and on the challenges faced, particularly after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent move to remote teaching. It also explores how students benefitted from co-creating their teaching and learning material and how the project will move forward.

2. The project

2.1. Aims and objectives

Remote communication tools have been introduced in the Italian language classroom at Newcastle University to revolutionise the traditional listening exercise, boost students' engagement in class, facilitate their progression, and ease their transition from university to working life.

Recent research has highlighted the interconnection of listening and speaking in foreign language learning (e.g. Rost, 2016). In *interactive listening* contexts, listeners actively negotiate meanings and shape conversations beyond the completion of a simple task in which they are passive recipients (Huang, 2019; Rost, 2016). However, students' listening practice in the foreign language classroom is often based on limited receptive, rather than truly holistic, interactive tasks.

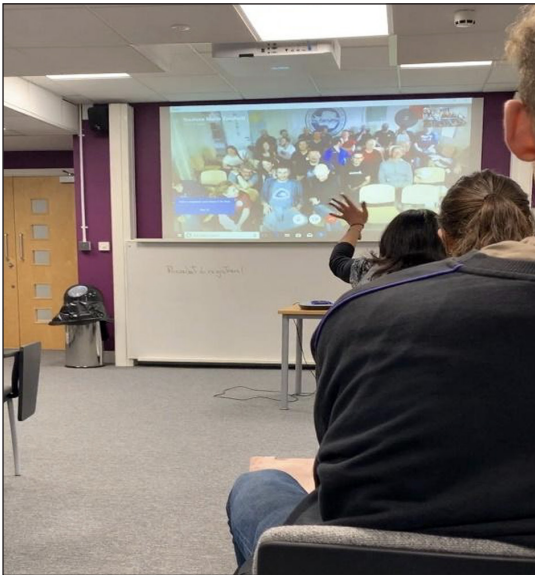
In the classroom, students risk being confronted with *artificial* situations, especially when relying on more traditional technology such as recordings. However, more interactive communication tools – like video-conferencing platforms – are available for language teaching and learning. Studies on the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication in particular for in- and out-of-the classroom language learning in various contexts precede the COVID-19 outbreak (Bueno-Alastuey, 2011; Lenkaitis, 2019; Romaña Correa, 2015).

At Newcastle University's School of Modern Languages, the implementation of virtual communication technology in the Italian language classroom allowed students to overcome physical barriers: they were able to connect with the world outside the classroom. They were capable of dealing with the challenge of authentic communicative situations, reducing the gap between life during and after university. As a consequence, the traditional student-teacher relationship was also overturned, as students became co-creators of the material. Furthermore, they were able to evaluate their language skills, becoming accountable for their own learning.

2.2. Virtual interviews

After being introduced to the interviewees via personal contacts, the facilitators were able to start Phase 1 (January to March 2020) of the *Newcastle Calls* pilot. In January, 40 Intermediate Italian language students took part in an interactive Skype interview with the team of Italian researchers at the permanent Antarctic research station *Mario Zucchelli* (Figure 1), one of the two Italian scientific bases in the continent (ENEA, 2020). The interview lasted about 50 minutes, during which the students asked 12 questions.

Figure 1. Interviewing the researchers at the Mario Zucchelli station (permission from ENEA, PNRA). Photo by Maria Zubelzu de Brown



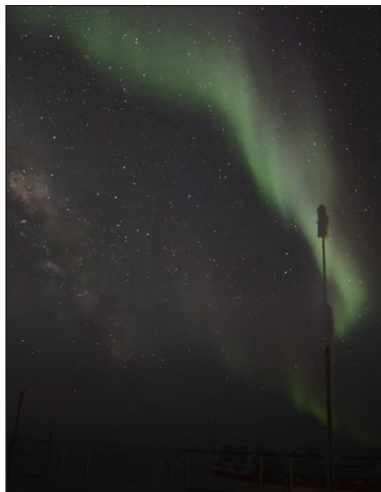
The climate crisis and researchers' day-to-day at the station were discussed. The topics of research in Antarctica and climate change were studied in class, prior to the interview. Students were then asked to think about questions they would like to ask the scientists. These were created solely by the students, according to what they wanted to explore and how they hoped to expand upon classroom activities.

An example was “What do you normally eat?”. Thanks to video-conferencing technology, students could also see the place where researchers were gathered, images of the Antarctic sky (Figure 2), and the Aurora Australis (Figure 3), which made the experience extremely exciting and informative.

Figure 2. Time-lapse (permission from ENEA, PNRA). Photo by Simonetta Montaguti PNRA/IPEV



Figure 3. Aurora Australis (permission from ENEA, PNRA)



The conversation was conducted in Italian, challenging the students to take part in real-life communication, testing their ability to use inferencing, or the mental processes of unveiling meaning by connecting pieces of information or by “problem-solving-oriented heuristic procedures involving both logic and real-world knowledge” (Rost, 2016, p. 62).

In March, the same group of students took part in an interview with an Italian theatre actor via Zoom, asking him about life as an actor and the performing arts job market in Italy. About two hours of lecture and seminar time were spent working on this topic prior to the interview, which lasted about 50 minutes, during which the students asked eight questions, including: “What is it like to build a career in the art world?”.

This second interview took place on 17th March, the first day of Newcastle University’s transition to online teaching as a response to COVID-19. As Italy was already in a very strict lockdown, students were shown the empty streets (Figure 4) and could ask about the effects of the pandemic there.

Figure 4. Empty streets in Italy (permission from Antonio Giuseppe Peligra)



After these live interviews, the recordings were uploaded to the university’s virtual learning environment so that students could listen to them again at their own pace. The interview topics formed part of the final examinations, where

students were asked to write an essay based on the interviews. In the future, we aim to expand on this and ask students questions aimed at fostering critical thinking, both in class and during the examinations.

2.3. The subtitled documentary

In phase two of the pilot project, the second interview was made into a documentary⁴ to be made available to a wider audience thanks to interdisciplinary collaboration. One MA film student edited the recording, adding scenes from live news from March 2020, photos of Italian cities during lockdown, a short introduction, and credits. Three English and Italian MA students translated the interview into English to create subtitles as part of a one-day student-led translation workshop, overseen by two MA lecturers in translation.

The benefits of this phase were manifold. It enabled the creation of an archive of co-created material that can be used in class or for independent learning, and made available to the public. It also fostered cross-disciplinary and cross-stage collaboration, as this material can be useful for students, lecturers, and researchers of several disciplines, such as film, science, and drama. Finally, it allowed MA students to encounter real-life experiences, to be introduced to the latest technologies in their field, and to have an extra-curricular opportunity for professional development. The MA students involved boosted their CVs by starting to build their own portfolio, and by managing and delivering a commissioned end-product in which they were credited. Furthermore, they enhanced their course experience and understanding of translation as a discipline and profession by putting theory into practice. Thanks to Newcastle University NUTELA⁵ Small Grants Fund, they were paid for their work at a standard student rate.

Alongside the difficulties arising from the fact that students were working with a *spoken* text for their first time and the specific limitations – such as character

4. Titled: Un'intervista con Antonio Peligra, attore di teatro. Available on Newcastle University's IPTV and on Canvas at <https://iptv.ncl.ac.uk/View.aspx?id=17209~5g~7ONkMSOEdC>

5. Newcastle University Technology Enhanced Learning Advocates.

count and reading speed – imposed by subtitling, it became evident to them how the translation *purpose* “determines the choice of translation method and strategy” (Nord, 2006, p. 142) as they faced a rather challenging translation brief. In fact, they were translating for both a mixed audience of English native speakers as well as intermediate level learners of Italian. Particularly thought-provoking were passages where the interviewee, aware of being in front of language learners, explained Italian vocabulary and phonetics, as in the example below. The guest speaker said:

“in Italian there are some vowels, such as *E* and *O* that can be pronounced both open and closed for example [...] ‘**pésca**’, **fishing**, is what the fisherman does when he goes into the river or the sea to catch fish, **but the same word written in the same way can also be the fruit, peach, ‘la pèsca’...**”.

Here, students had to agree on strategies to make the language-specific issues discussed clear for both speakers and learners of Italian, and an audience of lay people. In the words of one of the translation students involved:

“there were certain things we needed to be mindful of; [...] the documentary will also be used as a learning tool for future students. Therefore, we had to consider how useful this would be for [students of Italian] as well as general viewers”.

To achieve this, they often opted for visual clues (e.g. accents) or repetition of Italian key words in their original form followed by their brief explanation.

3. Students’ feedback

We strongly believe all the students involved, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, enjoyed and benefitted greatly from the experience, as can be seen from the feedback gathered by using a questionnaire and writing essays. One student of Italian said:

“the video interviews on the Italian course this year have been some of the most interesting parts of the course. This is because we spoke to leaders who were passionate about their field of expertise”.

And another one:

“I really enjoyed both interviews, I felt that they were a fun and engaging way to improve my Italian language skills, whilst the topics of the interviews were really varied and interesting. From science in the Antarctic to theatre work in a pandemic – there was something for everyone!”.

Student feedback helped us evaluate the project’s delivery and confirmed its overall aims were achieved. Firstly, participating in the interviews seemed to have *the potential to boost* undergraduate students’ *language confidence*. One student claimed:

“despite the vocabulary issue, I was shocked that I could understand at least 70% of the interviews which made me more confident with my Italian”.

Furthermore, the project was able to foster students’ overall *engagement*, as their interests were valued and they were confronted with appropriate, up-to-date material, to which they could relate.

“I think the video interview with the Italian researchers in Antarctica was the most fascinating for me. We talked about different topics, like their unbelievable research in geophysics, geology, biology, and even astrobiology! I was so impressed with the videos of the Aurora Australis”.

“It has been good to hear that the lockdown in Italy has united people as a community. I think this is a feeling people all over the world can identify with at the moment”.

After the translation task, MA students were given a feedback questionnaire asking them to evaluate the workshop. They were asked why they decided to participate in the project, how they found the task and whether they felt the project was helpful on a professional level. One student responded, identifying the task as an opportunity for professional development:

“I really enjoyed this project and hope the university is able to continue work like this in the future. [...] I have little professional translation experience and I feel as though this will improve my career prospects immensely”.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Challenges and opportunities

The main challenge we faced while planning and carrying out the project was the unexpected COVID-19 outbreak and the subsequent need to restructure phase two of the project, which was first delayed because of the lockdown, and then adjusted to the restrictions. Unfortunately, instead of organising a series of student-led subtitling workshops in the computer lab, we had to limit the translation workshop to a one-day online event (held via Zoom) and were able to introduce only briefly our translation students to the chosen subtitling software during a short online session.

The COVID-19 related circumstances caused further delays in the project’s delivery and changes in the project’s scope. Firstly, they made it harder to secure funding to pay the students involved, as university expenditure was put on hold. Secondly, contacting relevant institutions abroad became extremely difficult due to smart working systems. For this reason, it was not possible to start with a documentary of the first interview, as the relevant permissions took longer to obtain. Similarly, theatre photos could not be attached to the pilot documentary about the actor, as asking for permission was inevitably delayed, due to Italy’s lockdown.

However, we feel it is important to state that, while COVID-19 was certainly disruptive, it did not hinder the completion of the project altogether. On the contrary, we feel that the strong focus on the use of remote communication tools helped us to be prepared to move to teaching online. We believe such a project clearly demonstrates the innovative potential of technology in crossing boundaries and that collaboration through technology is an exciting opportunity for the future.

4.2. The next phases

In the future, we would like to focus more on the implementation of new technology in translation teaching and practice. We are planning to further develop the project by creating an online platform with learning tasks based on the interviews and graded by language level, from listening comprehension tasks for *ab initio* students, to critical thinking exercises for intermediate level students. Translation and subtitling tasks for the MA in translation students will also be included in such a platform. All students involved will be able to self-evaluate their skills and learn from real-life situations.

5. Acknowledgements

This project was first presented in Newcastle University's Learning and Teaching Development Service online database of teaching practice (© Newcastle University, used with permission).

Guidarelli, B. (2020). *Newcastle Calls collaborative teaching project*. <https://microsites.ncl.ac.uk/casestudies/2020/08/31/the-newcastle-calls-collaborative-teaching-project/>

We are grateful to Newcastle University NUTELA Small Grants Fund for making the pilot project possible, the XXXV Italian Antarctica Expedition, and Antonio Giuseppe Peligra for the interviews, the 2019/2020 Intermediate Italian (UG) students for their active participation and interview co-creation,

the 2019/2020 English and Italian translation students (MA) Roberta Destro, Diana Stoica, and Roisin Crossen for the English translation, MA film student Bradley Sampson for editing the documentary, and to Dr Pauline Henry-Tierney for acting as subtitling consultant.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education
Edited by Cathy Hampton and Sandra Salin

Publication date: 2022/05/30

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Cover layout by © 2022 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-98-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

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

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2022.
