Italian via email:

from an online project of learning and teaching towards the development of a multi-cultural discourse community

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This paper seeks to illustrate how the use of Internet resources (specifically email and the Web) can affect and enhance language learning and cultural understanding, modify the learning environment, reduce the barriers which time, space and societal differences may create, be a source of motivation, and redefine the role of teachers and learners. Although it is based on an on-going project, it already provides practical evidence of some advantages email and Internet resources can bring to the language learner and to the teacher. A detailed evaluation of the language outcomes is under way, but incomplete at the time of writing. This paper is nevertheless more concerned with other variables of language learning and teaching which the author considers fundamental to reach a successful degree of language use.

Introduction: the nature of the project

The project originally started in January 1994 and involved the creation of an email-based interactive Italian-speaking community (ISC) in the form of a discussion list ('Due chiacchiere in amicizia'). It was initially limited to on-campus learners of Italian or 'real' Italians. When the project started, the aims were:

- to provide online support for students who needed extra help in the learning process;
- to support learning motivation through one-to-one communication with the tutor;
- to provide the opportunity for additional language practice;
- to encourage students to reflect on both the language process and content;
- to provide a 'special niche' where learners from different nationalities, backgrounds and experiences could 'meet' with Italians and have the opportunity to explore the socio-cultural dimension.

The first period was left very open to permit familiarization with the use of email (not everybody was a regular email user). I provided short texts to be read, containing particular

grammatical points, and produced language exercises (gap filling, multiple choice questions, question and answer, etc.). The Italian contribution varied from participation in story-writing activities to riddles to solve and questions to answer. Initially, I selected topics which were relevant to what the learners were doing in class (Europe and being European, past experiences, holidays, politics, reasons for learning Italian, etc.). Occasionally, I suggested some Web sources (other discussion lists, newsgroups, etc.) where they could learn more about current affairs or cultural issues, or keep up to date with the reality of their country.

Although the participants responded positively to the activities – as reflected in a substantial increase in the number of messages after the first three weeks – I sensed that the reaction was more from a sense of duty than from genuine interest. Apart from the story-writing activities and the riddles which they liked, the learning environment was not leaving enough space for 'meaningful communication' (see Brown, 1980; and Halliday, 1985). The first four of the five aims mentioned above were satisfactorily achieved by the project as it stood. However, the creation of a real interactive community with its own dynamics was far from being achieved. It resembled closely a replica of communicative teaching techniques on screen. The influence of the teacher (myself) was too evident, and this showed in the formality of some messages and the type of requests.

In January 1995, membership was therefore opened to other learners of Italian and Italians globally. Absolute beginners were allowed to join in as silent participants and when – or if – they felt ready, they could give their profile or ask for clarifying questions. Consequently, the ISC became more diverse. Membership included Canada, Spain, America, Germany, France, Ireland, Brazil and Poland, to mention only some, while the 60 or so members (gained in the first six months) were equally mixed in terms of age, sex and occupation, and included the participation of two blind students. For these latter members, email represented a comparatively simple, economic and less discriminatory system which allowed them to communicate with the rest of the world. Because their world already contemplates a different visual dimension, the 'cluelessness' of email put everyone in the same position. While in a face-to-face situation, they may have been disadvantaged by the use of visual clues; in this 'blind' communication, the only clues were coming from within the texts. As an active member commented: 'Email gives me the chance to be heard for what I have got to say, regardless of my appearance'.[1] As a matter of fact, the two blind participants played a very active role in stimulating discussions.

A group dynamics developed, the shape of the messages changed, the tone relaxed, the messages became longer, and the language style more adventurous. The relationship between the participant, the others and the screen became strongly directed by the individual's agenda and satisfaction of perceived needs, interests and wants. One student noted that he would rather spend more time discussing issues on Italian life and culture than go to lectures which had no bearing in his real daily life. Another pointed out that 'it was not discussing for the sake of language learning'. The exchanges became more meaningful and carried the richness of the individuals' identities. In some cases this meant diverting discussions from Italian-related topics to more personal concerns about the world and the way things were going, their experiences of cultural shock, and political and social beliefs.

The next stage was the request by a participant to forward to the ISC a brief personal introduction which could allow the rest of the group to empathize with their fellow learners.

The creation of a folder containing all these profiles proved an important step. This file was given to all new ISC participants on joining. The personal profiles helped to create lines of interests, and allowed the integration of new meanings and recognition of a new set of beliefs, making sure that the wit and irony of certain participants could not be misunderstood. This can be clearly illustrated by the incident I now describe.

A participant asked a question concerning the current turbulence in Italian politics with particular reference to the magistrates' attitude towards the State and the Mafia. A member from Sicily, doing research in a German company in Munich, had just joined. His vivid images and experience of the bitter fight magistrates are conducting against the Mafia, and his position as newcomer, caused him to reply with vehemence (see Guiora *et al*, 1972). The misunderstanding was not at language level but at cultural level. It transpired that none of the other Italians reacted aggressively because they had already adjusted their ability to 'read between the lines', to negotiate meaning regardless of accuracy, and they were already familiar with the dynamics and socio-linguistic errors of the ISC.

Interactions went from general to specific, from personal to topical and involved a range of skills to tackle the texts and extract information. Some reacted immediately, some preferred to think about the topic and document themselves, some put more weight on their language improvement, some by-passed the language issue to concentrate on the meaning.

Distinguishing factors

Previous work in the area of technology and language learning (Garret, 1991; NCET, 1991; Mathiesen, 1993) has examined the potential use of email interaction to encourage students to use computers in a realistic context and enhance their communicative and thinking skills, and the last decade has seen an enormous increase in the use of this communication system for language learning. My project follows the work done by Austin and Mendlick (1993), Kroonenberg (1994) and Eck *et al* (1994), in exploring the potential of email for language learning.

Half-way through the first year, a number of factors changed and contributed to distinguishing this project from others such as those above. These changes include the group composition, the aims and objectives, the disappearance of the teacher and the development of a community spirit.

Group composition

While the majority of the projects involving email tend to focus on entire classes, 'Due chiacchiere in amicizia' consisted of a very heterogeneous, global group far from any comparison with a class. What evolved was an ISC which consisted of natives, non-natives and semi-bilinguals from all over the world, and the classroom or campus network shaped into a completely different environment, unexpected to the author of this paper as well. This created a very special and authentic setting within which language and social interaction took place – and still takes place. The variables between classroom and email environment are many: the setting of the interaction (physical distance, lack of visual input), the type of communication acts (written communication), the language use opportunities (continuous and asynchronous) and the affective domain (the level of empathy, inhibition, self-esteem, extroversion and

aggression and motivation). This is another good reason to detach the email environment from classroom comparison and create a new natural environment of authentic interactions. I do not intend to make the assumption that one system may – or will – substitute for the other, but that language learning is a complex phenomenon which involves social, emotional and intellectual dimensions, and any environment which can help the learning to happen should be tried and welcomed. With Kohn (1994), I share the belief that one of the ways – perhaps the most significant and effective – in which language learners acquire a considerable and vital part of their communicative linguistic competence, is through social interaction. It is through the learner's contact with the 'discourse community' (be it the workplace, the holiday resort, the university campus or whatever) that learners can measure their competence and modify both language needs and their cultural differences according to the challenges of their environment. The degree of proficiency achieved in the language will then be affected by the extent to which the learner wants to 'acculturate' to the other language group (Schumann, 1976); it will depend, therefore, on factors other than simply appropriating words or grammatical rules.

Although email interaction is text-based, it was very interesting to try to read aloud some of the interactions produced by the semi-bilingual participants. It was my impression that you could easily identify from the spelling of certain words the region of origin of the parents. In particular, the use of double consonants ('sonno un italiano-americano' for 'sono un italiano-americano'; 'mottore' for 'motore') or the substitution of a consonant or vowel ('strata' for 'strada'; 'genetori' for 'genitori'). There were also particular structures ('lui aiuta a sua figlia', 'voglio a praticare a lingua', etc.). This is not the place for a detailed linguistic analysis of the language, but a positive effect email interaction had on the semi-bilingual was the development of language awareness (sometimes hindered by very fluent spoken language) and improvement of written communication. This initial impression needs to be verified by further research.

Input, interaction and motivation clearly play a major role in language learning in and outside the classroom, and played a key role in the development of the community spirit. The increase in frequency and length of messages, and the cosmopolitan environment, stimulated a further increase in frequency, length, accuracy and motivation. As noticed by a participant, a beginner in Italian, 'I am talking to real Italians in Italy! Wow!'. In this situation, errors had a positive role to play, and there was no such thing as making a fool of yourself, which in a face-to-face situation may be a cause of anxiety. Participants started correcting each other (native to non-natives), and members of the community expressly asked to send corrected messages back to the main conference for everyone to benefit from.

The aims and objectives

The change of the group composition partially affected the original aims of the project in that much more emphasis was put on meaning than on language with the intervention of affective variables; this was less evident in the first stage. Although the four major components of the communicative approach (Savignon 1983) were still strongly present, the concern moved towards the content of the communication. Participants were still working on their grammar (linguistic competence) or their ability to use appropriate writing style to the context (socio-linguistic competence). They were above all concerned with their ability to interpret sentences into a meaningful world and achieve coherent texts which are relevant to the given context – especially after a few misunderstandings (discourse competence) – and their ability to devise strategies to compensate for imperfect knowledge, for example seeking clarification, repetition,

paraphrasing and silence (strategic competence). As previously indicated, email provided an ideal environment to support the development of the these competences.

The attempt to create a real, new type of language learners' community, with its own internal dynamics, and to avoid a replica of a classroom environment, was a successful point of the project. If we agree with some of Ausubel's theory (Ausubel, 1964) that it is not the frequency of stimuli or the number of times spent practising that influence learning but the meaningfulness, then the development of a natural communicative setting was a powerful factor. The intensity of the interactions certainly has an important effect on memory retention (Brown, 1980), and has good effects on vocabulary expansion.

One member commented on how she improved her speaking skills (in terms of vocabulary richness) and overcame her lack of confidence when in discussion.

The disappearance of the traditional teacher

Although the teacher can create a rich environment within which authentic communication can take place, research into the learning process has shown that language learning is a highly complex and individual matter (Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). Taking personal responsibility for the learning, and becoming aware of the mechanisms involved, are strictly related to the achievement of high proficiency. Language teaching in the context of this project consisted of setting up the right conditions for interactions to take place and promoting induction work and personal development of strategies to tackle language-focused issues. In this respect, an obscure and difficult grammatical point like the subjunctive was more easily clarified by its recurrence in nearly every message than through a presentation of the rule. One aspect of this approach is the effective application of 'learning by communicating' which stimulated subsequent 'induction work'.

This is exactly what happened in the course of the project, where students started to ask questions about new structures. One, in fact, was the subjunctive – nearly always present in each text, and new or obscure to many non-native speakers. Through examples extracted from real conversations and help from the natives, some managed to extrapolate the rule and act as 'miniconcordancers', creating for themselves a portfolio of useful authentic examples of uses (Widdowson 1990; Schultz, 1991). There was a noticeable shift from the use of paraphrasing techniques, to avoid the use of such a mood, to the correct use of it.

The gradual withdrawal of the teacher as the main language input maker, and only feedback provider, also opened up opportunities for dominant personalities to mould the nature of the discussions.

If the communicative aspect of language learning is a vital component of current teaching methodology which tries – through group-work activities, simulations and authentic materials (satellite TV programmes, newspapers, etc.) – to replicate the native speakers' world, this attempt to replicate 'authenticity' is not without weaknesses. The biggest one is the reduction of language learning to sets of functions and scripts ready for performance, something which tends to limit the ability to react to unscripted language and cultural meanings. After all, life does not always fit the script. It is in the attempt to overcome this weakness that the project positively created a fluid environment of unfiltered, unscripted language and culture.

The development of a community spirit

Such development shares – on a much smaller scale – many of the stages one can see in the Community Language Learning model of Rogers (1951), in that the affective and social dynamics were valued, the teacher was seen more like a counsellor and mediator/translator, the style and tone of the conversation was in the hands of the group, the language was inductively analysed, and 'defensive' mechanisms were made unnecessary by the supportive environment. Furthermore, the counsellor became a 'client' of the community.

As Brown (1980) has highlighted, the Community Language Learning model is not without problems, and I was aware that it needed adapting. For this reason, the first stage of the project was very much directed, and only at a later stage was community language learning introduced. However, in order for the group dynamic processes to set and develop effectively, group work should preferably provide opportunities for learners to explore the socio-cultural dimension of language, and prepare and engage then in intercultural communication' (Eck *et al*, 1994, 45).

Eck's remarks lead to another major aspect of this project: culture learning. The emphasis on active use of the language as a technique for learning urged by the communicative language teaching approach has consequently demanded more authentic sources of language, hence the exposure to the language produced by the natives in their natural environment. As Seelye rightly stated:

> If he [the learner] avoids contact with native speakers and if he lacks respect for their world view, of what value is his training? Where can it be put to use? What educational breadth has it inspired? (Seelye, 1974, 21)

Seelye's questions effectively exemplify my project's philosophy, and highlight the impossibility of distinguishing language from culture. The ISC offered a panorama of cultures within the culture, of points of view and attitudes (the Sicilian participant represented a different culture from the girl from Bergamo or the professional from Verona). In this project, an interesting dimension was added by the Italian Erasmus students who used the environment to escape their inability to express themselves in English, and attempted to compensate for this temporary loss of identity by sharing their cultural values and beliefs with the ISC. As an Italian participant said, 'I have more to say than I'd like a pound of tomatoes', indicating her frustration at not being able to express her real social, emotional and intellectual self. As Cortazzi and Jin (1993, 24) have noted 'the lack of shared schemas in interaction are more likely to lead to communication breakdown than differences and difficulties at the level of linguistic code'

The ISC provided the framework within which widely dispersed and disparate participants could utilize their varied strengths in terms of culture and language, and benefit from the ensuing synergy. While Teichmann (1994) argues that 'confrontation with the reality of a different culture can lead at first to a reinforcement of all the prejudices previously cultivated', this paper posits that, in the long term, email and similar media may help overcome stereotypical attitudes, and possibly help a fruitful appreciation of cultural values through a process of 'acculturation'. This is a long-term goal of the project, which will include more sophisticated cultural activities. Byram (1989) provides practical ideas to look at stereotypes, prejudices and culture teaching activities. In my experience on the project, when people got together and really talked about what was significant for them, the whole team became more

than the sum of the individuals, and it gave birth to a lively multi-cultural community. Such an environment could be positively exploited for preparation for life abroad, either for work or study reasons, and help students to prepare from the culture shock that comes from thinking that 'everyone in the world should be like me' (Adler, 1972).

Project evaluation

Should the success of the project be measured through the 100% renewal of the subscription for 1995/96?

What is perhaps more subject to a critical evaluation is the appearance of a learning community which embraced at least three types of interaction:

- between native speakers;
- between natives and non-natives;
- with semi-bilingual members.

Further evidence of the development of an internal culture can be seen in the change of style of the messages. Messages came to be written and addressed not to me but to 'cari amici della lista' ('dear friends of the list'), or to a particular person, the topics were suggested by the participants, and the length of the messages doubled. After a few incidents, a new level of caution arose, not linked to grammatical concern but to a respect for the other's culture and hence a more careful search of the correct word to exemplify the concept one wanted to express. Language and cultural awareness for some members started to be seen as a unity. The position of some semi-bilinguals in the group was interesting. They felt exposed to two cultures, neither of which they necessarily understood deeply. For this particular group, some exchanges were clearly enlightening. Despite the asynchronous level of the interactions, the distance and the lack of visual signs, I found it amazing how clearly 'silences' due to non-understanding could be perceived, and it was in these situations that my role again became of relevance.

This online Italian environment was now allowing everybody to be a teacher in proportion to their knowledge and created a micro-society where strong personalities – not necessarily the same strong ones you will have in face-to-face communication – appeared and moderated discussions. In several instances, other Italians corrected language mistakes, and justified their corrections. In some other situations, students took the initiative and re-orientated the conversation. Particular expertise came to light, and in order to let the community express itself, I had to learn to step back and not to interfere. I was there to foster this expertise and – if necessary – to moderate the exchanges, to suggest readings and other sources of useful information, to correct grammatical mistakes (which I regularly did and sent back to the ISC with the member's permission), to gauge the level of the discussion, and to make sure that even simple basic questions could still be asked. The exploitation of other Web facilities, for example the televideo-news online or newsgroups, or surfing through Italy, helped to create a purposeful and authentic environment.

Some members started asking for information connected with their research areas, etc. I myself discovered places on the Web I did not know, thanks to a computer expert actively contributing to the list who regularly updated the list with new Web sources of information for Italian.

It was particularly fascinating to observe the gradual linguistic changes (in terms of accuracy and fluency) which some members developed in the course of the year. Because of the nature of the medium – which supports written interaction – learners started with very short and simple messages (on average about four to five lines), and gradually moved to more complex ones. Moreover, the speed with which one could receive feedback contributed to creating in the participants this ambiguity of 'written conversation', the illusion of being in a face-to-face situation, and hence sending a message to a 'real' audience online at the time of the dispatch.

It was not always like that, however, and sometimes there was a sense of frustration at the 'message in the bottle' which nobody collects. Problems also arose over turn-taking or misunderstanding of the rules. Another aspect of this type of communication was the apparently incoherent and undisciplined arrival of the messages, which – because of the lack of a subdivision per topic – was very difficult to control. It was real communication without filters. And, as Grenfell (1994) has pointed out, 'real language is just not that tidy.' In most cases, the native speakers were using typical Italian structures, vocabulary and metaphors which denied the non-natives any chance of slow, artificial modification of the style in order to make themselves understood. But this encouraged and challenged the participants to go further and ask relevant questions. All of a sudden, they found themselves part of an Italian environment, unlike the simulations they may have experienced in a class. Certain structures were absorbed by observing how the Italians were using them: vocabulary used by the Italians reappeared in the non-natives' replies, applying what Ellis (1991) has brilliantly called the 'scaffolding' process. Email helped to contextualize hitherto unknown written words, and hence enabled learners to remember them vividly and use them actively. What was difficult, and what other more sophisticated computer-conferencing systems (such as FirstClass) can overcome, was the inability to sort out messages automatically and allow the flow of the thread. This meant the participants had to scan through all the messages sent to the list to see which one they wanted to reply to. This was particularly time-consuming for the two blind students. In the second phase, the list has now been subdivided in various conferences, each with a thread one can follow. The conferences currently active are on politics, tourism, cultural issues and language.

The attraction of email was its potential to engage the imagination of the participants and create positive interactions where they not only moved into new areas of knowledge but lived this experience as a development of their selves. Without this empowerment, language learning risks being reduced to mechanical and technical competence acquisition, and hence subordinate to the technology. As per Brown (1980), 'the human being is a social animal and the chief mechanism for maintaining the bonds of society is language'. Some teaching methods tend to over-simplify or disregard the social factor as relevant for language learning by not recognizing the complexity of the relation between language and society, and language and culture.

To date there is no telecommunications system which effectively can reproduce such a complexity. This shows another possible limitation of email in comparison with other telecommunications applications: it does not give space for body language, and has to find surrogates in the use of 'emotions', not always very effective or expressive. Nevertheless, any incorrect interpretation of a text caused by the inability to recognize certain socio-linguistic, discursive, grammatical or strategic aspects of the language, provided the opportunity to become aware of these aspects. Unexpected or inappropriate responses generated awareness of

language phenomena. Once again, this could be seen as a positive aspect of language learning which the email environment was able to develop.

Conclusion

This attempt, which needs further refining, seems to have proved successful in that learners of Italian gathered together regularly and compared notes on both cultural and linguistic issues. Demand was such that membership had to be closed to foster the development of the existing community spirit. However, from September 1995, new universities in both Italy and elsewhere have joined in, with between 5 and 20 participants from each institution. Team teaching, which was a missing element of the first phase, has been introduced by inviting lecturers of Italian from the other participating universities to moderate particular conferences, and some of the 'old' participants have assisted me in the development of the new framework. A conference has been specifically devoted to language issues, and there are 'surgeries' for learner training for members to 'attend' when in need of clarification on specific points.

During this year and a half of interaction, I managed to store and record a huge amount of texts which transform what could have been a conversation lost in space into something durable and relevant. The texts constitute an invaluable collection of authentic interaction which could be re-used to stimulate future discussions. These texts need to be re-analysed in the light of experience gained thus far, and this year's new developments.

While language skills can be measured and quantified, cultural interactions seem to be more difficult to quantify. However, further work utilizing Henri's analytical model highlighting five main dimensions (participative, social, interactive, cognitive and meta-cognitive – Henri, 1992) may prove more useful in ascertaining if this 'invaluable collection' lends itself to further analysis.

Open issues remain the impact on cultural awareness, vocabulary acquisition and reading speed, learning styles, and teacher training to cope with the new counselling and mediating role. Some of these things are currently under scrutiny in the second phase of the project.

Note

1. The participants' observations and comments reported have been translated into English by the author of this paper.

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