

Resourcing Foreign Language Learning via the Internet

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

In recent years the theory and practice of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) has moved in directions which are generally summed up in one word: communication. Even for those who are not faithful followers of the so called Communicative Approach, expressions such as 'communicative competence' and 'communication skills' have become well known buzzwords. During the same years a different kind of revolution has taken place, with the move from the 'language lab' (dominated by tape recorders and headphones) to multimedia and IT.

The Department of Italian at Warwick University is involved in the development of courses for a large number of ab initio students as well as more advanced learners. Our 'Language courses' also deal with a wide variety of specific needs, ranging from tailor-made options for students of History and History of Art, to courses aimed at students from Sciences and Social Studies, to courses on Contemporary Italian Culture entirely delivered in the target language and aimed at students completing degrees in Italian.

Many of the courses follow a broad communicative approach, and attempt to implement some of the following principles:

- Use of Target Language
- Presentation of Language in Context
- Use of Authentic Materials
- Attention given to Textual and Discourse Features of Language
- Stress on Appropriacy of Language
- Development of Language Awareness
- Development of Cultural Competence
- Reliance on Task and Project-Based Learning
- Another series of widely accepted methodological principles applies to the respective roles of FL teachers and learners:
 - Learner-Centred Approach
 - Development of Independent Learning
 - Encouragement of Creativity
 - Personal Relevance of Tasks Performed

Finally, the range and nature of our teaching brings to the fore two further issues. The first is that of Languages for Specific Purposes, which constantly poses tutors the problem of finding appropriate learning materials while also forcing them to teach language relating to widely different areas of knowledge (of which they are probably not experts). Besides, the composite nature of Modern Languages as a subject of HE means that we are constantly working within the constraints of the traditional dichotomy between language teaching on the one hand and literature/history/culture on the other; modern approaches shows a trend towards a less divisive attitude based on the integrated development of language and topic related competencies - but we need new ideas and resources to make this really happen.

IT AND INTERNET

The Italian Department introduced IT in its courses some years ago. The first experiments were with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL): tailor made software was installed on individual machines and used with test groups during classes. Four years ago we started

experimenting with network delivery, moving towards the practice of training all students and then encouraging the use of IT as a tool for independent learning. The scope for the application of CALL is however often limited by its lack of real interaction. As a result IT is frequently seen as a useful tool for the development of grammatical and spelling accuracy, or for revision and remedial work, with limited relevance to the development of communication skills.

We have now started to test ways in which Internet can introduce new dimensions to the role of IT in Foreign Language Teaching. So far we have concentrated on the element of access to information - while delivery and exchange still have to be tackled.

Internet resources can be accessed by tutors themselves. In the Italian Department we are using them for the following purposes:

- Keeping up with the facts: we can now gain immediate access to the Italian news via the on-line versions of daily newspapers and of the Italian equivalent of Teletext (Televideo), the Web site of the ANSA news agency, or the Edicola service, based at the University of Rome, which distributes summaries of the front pages of all the main newspapers.
- Keeping up with the language: Internet pages are giving us access to a wealth of authentic texts, ranging from generic news items to specialised publications; this allows us not only to draw on a huge bank of potential teaching aids, but also to analyse the language they contain; in fact, given the electronic format of the material it is easy to use a concordancing package to gain detailed knowledge of many lexical and grammatical features contained in the texts we are interested in. The potential of this kind of analysis for FLT is vast, especially in the case of Languages for Specific Purposes.
- Keeping up with our specific subjects: it is more and more common for academic and non-academic events taking place in Italy to produce some Internet output; it is possible, for instance, to access the Internet site of the recently established parliamentary commission for institutional reforms (Commissione Bicamerale), or women studies journals such as *NoiDonne*, or even on-line debates between academics and/or experts of the most different fields (often featuring the name of Umberto Eco...).

These and other uses which tutors in the department have begun to make of Internet resources can of course be reflected in teaching practices: materials can be directly used in language classes; examples of linguistic use may be extracted where relevant; and subject specific material may be introduced in courses relating to culture, history, politics, and so on. In this way Internet is helping us to turn many of the FLT principles listed above into practice: we are using authentic up-to-date texts, which present appropriate language in context and give learners the opportunity to familiarise themselves with register and subject-specific linguistic features while also giving unmediated and up-to-date images of Italy and its culture (rather than the usually tourist-oriented and often stereotypical view of most language course books).

Even more important, however, is direct student access to on-line resources. 'Keeping up with the facts' is becoming an increasingly important element in the range of competencies expected of modern languages graduates, both during and after their course of study. For instance we often require students to give oral presentations on aspects of contemporary Italy - and a Web search may be quicker and offer better results than a desperate sift through limited library resources. To encourage this type of use we have started putting selected links on our departmental home-page. Besides, where suitable we advise students carrying out project work (whether set for language courses, seminar presentations or subject-specific essays) to consult Internet sources. Relevant past examples include researching a paper on Italian legislation concerning equal opportunities, sexual harassment and sexual violence: books, and even journal articles are never entirely up to date, while, by directly accessing a range of Italian sites the student in question was able to include even the latest changes in legislation. In another case a concordancing package was used by a student to scrutinise two years of newspapers headlines in order identify the periods in which issues concerning industrial relations had been in the news; this immensely simplified further research allowing the student to consult only the relevant copies of the papers.

Finally, whatever the specific use students are making of on-line resources, they are clearly also coming into direct contact with Italian language and Italian culture, they are developing IT skills, and they are exploring more independent ways of learning - for instance, being able to rely on Internet for up-to-date information on a variety of contemporary issues, students may choose from a wider range of topics than ever before, and this will potentially produce more personalised choices and more creative work.

FURTHER ISSUES

So far we have only been able to test the possible role of Internet resources for FLT with a small sample of materials, students and projects. More work needs to be done towards effective integration and regular exploitation of on-line material, and this will inevitably involve issues related not only to access, but also to delivery and exchange of information. It would be useful, for instance, for course notes made available via Internet to feature links to important web sites, thus combining the two aspects of delivery and access.

For a competent exploitation of the opportunities offered by Internet to FLT, however, the real issues remain those of widespread student and staff training and of the resources needed for it.

Update

We are still engaged - and will be, for the foreseeable future - in integrating new resources into our approach to learning and teaching. Technologies evolve, attitudes and expectations change, and our strategies become more complex as we learn from experience. Yet the goal remains the same: to exploit the instruments at our disposal for what they do best, maximising the benefits for staff and students, without falling prey to too many fashions and fads.

We are now working on an interdisciplinary e.learning project involving all Modern Languages departments and the Language Centre, and potentially capable of affecting the learning of hundreds of students each year. We want to make this a step towards a sustainable — as well as an imaginative — e-learning strategy for foreign languages at Warwick. It is the next logical development. And it is what our students expect.

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