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VALENTINA PAGNANINI

Literary itineraries to teach the Italian language and culture through mobile technologies

Abstract

The article presents the initial outcomes of an ongoing doctoral research project, concerning the theme of language education in the training of teachers for digital technologies and in line with the latest legislation. The research aims to address the challenge of innovating teaching through experiential pathways, aiming to sensitize teachers to interact with local institutions. The presentation will draw on data collected from interviews with teachers, questionnaires submitted to students attending Italian L2 courses, and sessions of didactic observation. The objective is to develop a broader comparison between educational practices and the technological solutions that have been tested. This was done to encourage inclusive (Torsani, Ravicchio 2021) and participatory dynamics in the teaching of the Italian language and culture from an intercultural perspective.

Keywords

Mobile language teaching, Italian L2, Literary educational paths, Digital humanities

1. Introduction: research topic

Can virtual paths be an opportunity for training foreign language teachers? Didactic itineraries through literary sites in the Marche region (Cognigni 2004) aimed to document how the use of technologies helps map and explore the horizons of reception and translation of Dante and Leopardi's works abroad, ranging from *La Divina commedia* to *L'Infinito* (Melosi 2022). The study examines the internal context of an Italian language and culture school and, using mobile learning platforms, integrates literary itineraries into the design of courses for playful, situated and experiential teaching. This approach is directed at Italian L2 students on study vacations in Italy, visiting tourist and literary sites.

2. Research hypothesis

The research hypothesis considered online teacher training (Celentin, Luise 2014; La Grassa 2022), and literary texts in relation to mobile learning (Ranieri and Pieri 2014) to assess the didactic effectiveness of hypermedia material in the study of the second language both within and outside the school context. Teaching the Italian

language and literature with mobile technologies implies, on the one hand, refresher courses for teachers towards a necessary deconstruction and reconstruction of didactic programming (Mezzadri 2020: 101). On the other hand, it involves rethinking the learning methods and spaces in educational contexts that streamlined and refunctionalized in an agile and dynamic way during the health emergency.

In the last two decades, mobile learning has been recognized as a powerful means to promote action research paths not only remotely but also in-person (Coppola 2023). The mobile device is a bridge tool for teaching in formal and informal environments (Trentin 2023; Morgana, Kukulska-Hulme 2021; Leone 2019) because it lends itself to ubiquitous content consumption, even in the form of incidental and situated learning, for the experiential deepening of Italian in local contexts (Valva and Cervini 2020). In our case, the integration of applications and online tools was based on tasks implemented with mobile technologies, following the ICT-TBLT combination in the language class (Corino 2018: 46). In the design of the itineraries, literary texts were placed at the centre, functional for the consolidation of linguistic competence, particularly for the creation of inductive educational paths (Barone, Di Sabato, Manzolillo 2021: 14). Texts by Dante and Leopardi were selected for students of the Campus L'Infinito – Scuola Dante Alighieri in Recanati, in relation to the cities and places that the learners would subsequently visit to observe similarities and differences as regards motivation and participation in guided tours and excursions.

3. Study: participants, methods, materials

In language schools, it often falls on the teacher to simultaneously integrate the professional skills of specialized figures – as noted by Villarini – those of a webmaster, instructional designer, creator of educational materials, and information broker (Villarini 2021: 214-215). This study integrated such skills for the design, creation, development, optimisation, updating of effective content and both physical and multimedia engaging materials in websites and online platforms, into two paths presented in two classes, at B1 and A2 level: the first focused on the figure of Dante Alighieri and the locations of Gradara, Fano, and Senigallia; the second on the cities visited by Giacomo Leopardi.

We decided to focus on the synergistic development of receptive and productive linguistic skills in L2 (Bonvino, Velásquez, De Meo and Fiorenza 2023) to promote an immersive language experience and the closest contact with literary places. We believed that it was essential for textual interpretation to focus on reading skills first and to adapt texts bilaterally, both semantically and stylistically, intervening at conceptual and linguistic-lexical levels (Abbaticchio 2018: 58) through some simplifying expedients: the selection of key excerpts, the dilation of central information for reading, the reconstruction of implicit elements, and the paraphrastic explanation of the most obscure passages in notes. Textual simplification was therefore oriented towards the conservation of the original text through the consultation of online dic-

tionaries, with hypertextual synonymous enrichment in cases of homonymy and the presentation of semantic equivalents to facilitate text usability and decoding.

We assessed the substantial students' inclination to the use of hypermedia materials by administering a bilingual questionnaire with thirty questions about linguistic needs, literary pre-knowledge, motivations and preferred study methods. In the B1 class Dante, Boccaccio and Giacomo Leopardi were among the already known authors, but only 9% claimed to have a good knowledge of Italian literature, with more than half of the class studying it for less than a year, either in language schools or at university. During guided visits to the museums, in many cases the learner's profile identified with that of the *Heritage Language Learner* (Dolci 2023: 30), emotionally connected to Italy, interested in literary works on the cities and villages of the Marche region to find information about the Italian origins of his family and delve into myths and legends about local characters.

In the A2 level class, we preferred to improve creative writing skills to develop students' imagination and to better understand poetic perspectives. We encouraged students to write about their own experiences in short descriptive texts for a postcard to promote the association of biographical events and texts with literary places, stimulating a comparison between photographs and narrative descriptions. In the writing activities, the emotions and impressions they had, the interest in the activities and trips, the satisfaction with the experiences and excursions proposed, the invitation to return to their own country to visit other cities emerged. Brainstorming about the resources used on the Padlet online board and comprehension checks with quizzes on the Kahoot! gaming platform revealed a pre-existing use of technology in informal contexts. As noted in our observation diary: 'I learn new words with Quizlet, in the bus' declared a student. This statement was verified in agreement with the teacher in both oral exchanges and written tests. The student demonstrated a broader and more accurate lexical repertoire than her classmates.

In both classes, the risk of impoverishing individual conversations in virtual exchanges was reduced with the use of portable technologies in small groups, where cooperative dynamics favoured creativity and storytelling. Experimentations of using Kahoot! in educational contexts have emphasized its participatory and engaging characteristics (Da Pra 2021: 314), oriented towards a multimodal literature teaching approach. Based on the observations noted and shared with the course teachers, after using the platform with mobile devices, our class changed its appearance in terms of interest, participation, motivation and curiosity because the majority had already had previous digital gaming experiences (Santipolo 2023). One student mentioned the extensive use of gaming platforms and Kahoot! by his teachers in his home country for interdisciplinary study of mathematics and law.

The path dealing with the figure of Giacomo Leopardi proposed in a B1-level class, allowed students to follow the poet's itineraries in the cities of Bologna, Rome, Pisa and Recanati, before and after their tourist experiences. We wanted to make the reading of the poems an authentic and experiential study, paraphrasing passages from the most famous poems, such as *L'Infinito*, in relation to the places, with the

reading of letters and authentic materials, such as informative texts about the *Io nel pensiero mi fingo* exhibition, present at Casa Leopardi. This aimed to teach authentic scenarios set in urban pedagogical spaces (Borghetti 2010). We also stimulated a comparison between cities and representations between the past and the present, by watching excerpts from films and narrative sequences to deepen the literary value of the homonymous places (Piazza Leopardi, Piazza Sabato del Villaggio, Colle dell'Infinito) and for the analysis of authentic situations set in literary sites.

4. *First Results and Comments*

The first data collected from student questionnaires and interviews with five teachers allowed the inclusion of observations on teacher training in the use of technological tools. We asked about knowledge of the Italian language and literature and the Marche region, surveyed familiarity with and use of online platforms, digital resources and mobile applications. We highlighted that the most commonly used apps in these language classrooms are Kahoot, Quizlet and Wordwall. From teaching experience in individual classrooms, as a case study based on action research, we have seen progress in the use of mobile devices for comprehension and vocabulary enrichment. Interviews revealed the teachers' willingness to attend training courses for the use of apps in the classroom and during excursions. On one side, there is a risk of limiting the tourist experience and having less contact with the teacher, while on the other, the potential for an application to organize contests and obtain materials to rework in the classroom is recognized (Santoianni 2021). Finally, a higher level of learning is observed in those who use an app compared to those who do not, and all agree that applications facilitate the memorization of educational content.

Virtual paths can be a valuable resource for L2 teachers and should be considered in didactic programming as an opportunity for teachers engaged in seamless learning both in class and during excursions. Mobile technologies have helped L2 students to deepen implicit references inside literary texts by using interactive tools to interview their peers, to review contents in playful situations and to retrieve hypermedia teaching materials to memory during their tours. This implies rethinking the educational context as open to blended activities and tasks, continuously and collaboratively implementable and updatable.

5. *Conclusions*

The preliminary assessment of the paths has confirmed the interest of both teachers and learners in hybrid and integrated training to seize the opportunity to adapt and reshape educational interventions cyclically and in a customizable way, as Carloni notes: "Re-thinking online learning environments has provided language education practitioners with the opportunity to design online learning pathways fostering students' active learning and engagement to a very high degree" (Carloni 2022: 30).

Contextual analysis (Stockwell 2021) has proved to be equally essential. The educational context was considered first, namely which topics and applications were already familiar to the students; then the experiential context, i.e., which Italian cities had already been visited and which ones would be; finally, the temporal context, i.e., which current events could be connected to the ongoing activities (for example, a task involved writing a postcard about the city of Senigallia immediately after the flood emergency) to compare the images of the city in literature and reality, encourage eco-pedagogical analysis and raise awareness of dialogue with local institutions. For the internal observation and reflection within the school context, for the motivational purpose of the didactic intervention aimed at concretely enhancing the training and tourist experience of the particular sample of student-tourists with mobile activities, and for the predominantly qualitative analysis of data collected from questionnaires and initial interviews, the proposed investigation can be interpreted as the first phase of a research-action process (Coonan 2000: 25).

6. Future Research Directions

In the future, there is hope for a more impactful orientation in the experiences of training (Balboni 2023) and progressive updating of language teachers (Serragiotto 2012) toward the transversal use of multichannel applications in hypermedial customizable environments, increasingly necessary in navigating the paths of linguistic education 4.0, never forgetting the significance of the narrative component: “future teachers can be provided with linguistic and methodological training targeted to help them use storytelling effectively” (Sisti 2016: 14).

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