2 Web-based and interactive Italian blended learning course: embedded apps and tools in a structured learning process

Laura Capitani[1]

Abstract

'Web-based and Interactive Italian' is a detailed and progressive programme developed by the author for the Maastricht University Language Centre. The course started in 2013, with the intention of catering for the variability in the number of students following the regular courses, as well as broadening the language offer using blended learning. The eight interactive tutor-led Skype sessions are preceded by 80 hours of self-study per level. Starting from a flipped classroom approach, it is structured in three consecutive learning steps. It makes use of existing language apps and tools, like Babbel[2] and Quizlet[3], and of a manual book used at the intermediate levels, as well as bespoke web-based and interactive learning materials as preparation for the oral sessions. The course is still running successfully and represents an effective alternative to traditional courses, offering distance learners the possibility of completing the whole study programme from A1 to B2.

Keywords: web-based, interactive, blended learning, flipped classroom.

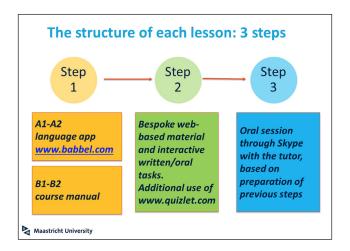1. Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands; laura.capitani@maastrichtuniversity.nl

2. http://www.babbel.com

3. http://www.quizlet.com

1. Introduction

The Maastricht University Language Centre is part of a modern and young university in the South of The Netherlands. The university is well-known for its problem based learning approach. The Language Centre has always aimed to augment the pedagogical value of its courses by using task-based, communicative, online, and web-based approaches. The motivation to learn a less widely used foreign language (such as Italian) can depend on and vary according to several situations (Quan, 2014). One important one is the possibility to physically attend classroom sessions. This might account for a reduced number of participants, which in turn can lead to course cancellation, and ultimately result in courses no longer being made available to students. In this context, in 2013, I developed the web-based and interactive Italian course with the intention of accommodating the decrease in students by using a modern blended learning approach. This web-based and interactive Italian course is still running, and it represents a good alternative to class-based courses. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the course structure and content as well as the success factors of this web-based and interactive way of language learning.

Figure 1. Web-based and interactive Italian: from learning to performing the language

2.   Method: starting from existing material on the web

I started by researching what was already on offer in terms of web-based learning. My goal was to find a starting point by identifying tools that already existed which I could use to build a structured course that suited our communicative and task-based approach. In the big universe of apps, tools, and existing language programmes, I found Babbel. This was the only app that assured a good and well-structured base for developing my course, aimed at improving students' oral communication skills. While Babbel was suitable for the goals at beginner levels (A1-A2), a course book was required to meet the needs of intermediate students (B1-B2). I divided the Babbel course and the manual book in eight parts, adding and/or removing parts according to our programme and to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) directives.

2.1.   The course in a nutshell

This course offers four language levels (A1 to B2). The students attain each level through eight one-to-one, tutor-led, 30-minutes Skype sessions and a maximum of 80 self-study hours, following a three step learning plan (Figure 1). Aimed at a flipped classroom, task-based approach, this plan is based on existing language apps, a course manual, and additional web-based and interactive additional material. Students following this course must sit the same final exam covering the four language skills, as offered in the traditional 28 contact hours class-based courses the Language Centre offers.

2.2.   How it works: the three steps

Steps 1 and 2 are meant for autonomous learning, while Step 3 requires students to demonstrate their speaking and interacting skills to the tutor. Students receive written and oral feedback from the tutor during Steps 2 and 3.

In Step 1, before each lesson, beginners can discover and learn the fundamentals of the language through Babbel, while the advanced students learn these using a

course book. All language skills are dealt with during this phase. The structure of the Babbel courses is based on a central progressive course. This course is divided into short lessons and some interesting additional courses such as culture, grammar, and idioms. The vocabulary review manager and the Babbel community serve to correct written texts. The inductive learning approach used by Babbel is based on exercises such as matching words, repeating phrases/words, filling in the blanks, listening, and completing the dialogues. Each lesson contains a clear grammar explanation where the learners can inductively discover the grammar rules. The course book I chose for the intermediate level uses a communicative and task-based approach and proposes interesting subjects to learners, providing context for real-life situations.

Step 2 helps the students to reinforce and extend what they have learnt during Step 1. I developed original training modules from scratch for speaking, listening, reading, and writing using bespoke web and task-based material. The interactive written and oral tasks I created for this phase stimulate the students to use authentic material from the internet for developing their language skills. In order to strengthen the newly-acquired vocabulary and grammar, I also developed various exercises in Quizlet. This phase is crucial for the success of the third phase, because the students can post their tasks and get my feedback, before the oral session.

The goals of the oral session are clear to students from the start of each lesson. Written tasks during Step 2 are designed for the preparation of role-plays (beginner levels) or presentations and debates (intermediate levels).

> "Naturally, the instructor must prepare the conversational tasks ahead of time so that the students know exactly what to expect and be primed with the appropriate vocabulary and grammar needed to successfully bring the task to completion" (Blake, 2016, p. 132).

However, during the oral session, the tutor proposes situations that are slightly different from the ones the students have prepared. This ensures spontaneous conversations using the learnt part of the programme.

For intermediate students, the oral test consists of two presentations delivered throughout the course, and subsequent discussion/debate with the tutor. In contrast, the beginners perform two role-plays with the tutor based on the learning material. In addition to this, all students have a written exam in order to test their listening, reading, and writing language skills. The schedule and the pace of the lessons are flexible and agreed on between tutor and student at the beginning of the course. Because the students are not allowed to miss any Skype sessions, the schedule can always be adjusted during the course in relation to changes in students' or tutors' commitments.

3.   Results and discussion

The many students who followed these courses throughout the years enjoyed the very clear structure of the programme and are perfectly able to work autonomously for preparing the oral sessions. They appreciate the personal attention they get from the tutor, as well as the tailor-made extra material provided by the tutor when they feel they need extra support in a language area. Also, the flexible schedule benefits students, who often struggle to manage their busy agendas. This flexibility is also convenient for tutors who are not bound to the institutionally allocated time and places for their lessons.

Although the development of such a course requires a great deal of development time, the tutor only needs a few hours per semester to make minor adjustments, once the course structure has been set. The result is that little preparation time is required for lessons. Additionally, written feedback can be conveyed quickly using Google Docs tools. Students can also record the Skype sessions and review the feedback given in the Skype chat-box later: this has proven to be helpful for the improvement of their language skills.

Students have reported feeling satisfied with the results: the personal attention the tutor can give them helps to surface and focus on any difficulties and to offer the right support before the exam. Students' comments and suggestions allow for a continuous improvement of the programme.

The success of the web-based and interactive Italian programme led the Language Centre to extend its offering and develop a new web-based and interactive Portuguese course. Although the one-to-one lessons prove to be very effective, there is still something missing: group dynamics. Therefore, I plan to expand this course with the help of virtual reality group situations, where one-to-one lessons alternate with class sessions for virtual interaction.

4.   Conclusions

Over the years, this course has proven to be a very good alternative to the traditional, face-to-face courses. These are courses that provide students with the necessary opportunities for language acquisition, and are as effective as more traditionally delivered courses. At the same time, students of all ages and in all locations, as well as those who are not enrolled at the university can participate in this course. On the tutors' side, the clear structure makes the course easy to manage. The motivation of the students in such a personalised programme ensures that the learning outcomes are high. Computer and web-based education combined with tutor expertise and feedback prove to be not only the future but also the present of the language learning process.

5.   Acknowledgements

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