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Virtual Reality in the Language Classroom:
A Look at Students’ Attitudes and Believes

Berti, Maranzana, Monzingo

ABSTRACT
Virtual reality is an immersive technology that offers contextualized learning through authentic scenarios. Foreign language learners can experience the target language and culture by exploring realistic virtual environments, in place of real ones otherwise inaccessible due to geographical constraints. Researchers have recognized the potential of VR in various fields (e.g., McGrath et al. 189; Zhang et al. 144), nonetheless in the area of foreign language learning and pedagogy only a few studies have explored the use of virtual worlds (Repetto, Colombo, and Riva 8; Lin and Lan 493). Currently, there is a lack of research investigating learners’ attitudes and motivation towards the implementation of virtual reality in the language classroom. The current study addresses this gap by investigating foreign language learners’ perceptions towards the implementation of virtual reality in the educational context to promote cultural awareness. Undergraduate students enrolled in beginner Italian courses viewed 360-degree virtual reality videos of Italian environments (i.e., a piazza, a street corner, and the inside of a restaurant) with the use of the stereoscopic visor, Google Cardboard, a pair of headphones, and their smartphones. Through pre- and post-surveys, written reflections, and interviews participants shared their attitudes and perspectives regarding the implementation of virtual reality in the language classroom. Exploring and analyzing learners’ viewpoints is important to evaluate how emerging technologies can be utilized in pedagogical and learning practices, and to suggest revisions to the language curriculum (Antoniadou 57; Thorne 559-560). Results show that virtual reality is positively perceived by language learners and can be implemented in the language classroom to foster cultural awareness and to create new, immersive, and contextualized learning opportunities.
Virtual Reality in the Language Classroom: A Look at Students’ Attitudes and Believes

INTRODUCTION

Culture is an important component of language courses taught and learned through the exploration of various disciplines associated with the target language (Baker 1). Previous research has found positive attitudes, from teachers and learners, towards cultural pedagogy (Yesil and Demiröz 87); nonetheless, frequently language textbooks present the culture in a fixed manner without giving learners the opportunity to explore and engage with the many dimensions of the target culture. The depiction of foreign cultures in pedagogical materials can be considered problematic since students are not able to thoroughly explore the culture in its various facets (McConachy and Hata 294), however the Internet and the rapid advancement of technology have facilitated access to the various aspects of foreign cultures.

Today, educators integrate various technology tools in their own lessons and use resources and materials that traditional language-oriented textbooks do not offer. Teachers and researchers have examined how numerous tools, such as wikis (e.g., Kessler 81-83; Lund 41-44; Zorko 650-654), social networking sites (e.g., Barrot 290-293; Blattner and Fiori 2-8; Mills 2-5), podcasts (e.g., Ducate and Lomicka 70-71; Rosell-Aguilar 474-481; Yaman 63-65), and blogs (e.g., Comas-Quinn, Mardomingo and Valentine 14-23; Pinkman 15-16), can be utilized to support foreign language (FL) learning and teaching. Although virtual reality (VR) is among the latest emerging technologies, it has been recognized in many different fields (e.g., McGrath et al. 189; Zhang et al. 144). In recent years VR has received significant attention, however in the area of FL learning and pedagogy only a few studies have explored its affordances and constraints
Studies investigating learners’ attitudes and motivation towards the implementation of VR in the language classroom for cultural learning are scarce. Thus, the objective of this research is to examine FL learners’ perceptions towards the implementation of VR in the language classroom to foster cultural awareness. Through the use of selected 360-degree VR videos and Google Cardboard participants were able to immerse themselves in culturally authentic environments and explore the target culture. VR is the ideal technology tool to support the development of cultural awareness since it gives users the illusion of presence, an experience that the traditional language textbook does not offer. Exploring learners’ attitudes towards VR in the educational setting is essential to further understand how new technologies can be successfully utilized in pedagogical practices in the language classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual Reality

Throughout scholarship and consumer markets of recent years, the latest and greatest of technological advancements are frequently used to find new ways in which materials can be presented to the consumer and the learner. This study draws on two theoretical frameworks, immersion and Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), to describe the ways in which VR use can be approached to enhance cultural awareness in early university students, and to address concerns related to using rapidly advancing technologies in place of sound pedagogical practice, as opposed to ensuring proper use of technology together with best practices. Historically, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) scholarship has focused on the ways in which language learners might benefit from the use of computer technology in and out of the classroom.
to engage more meaningfully with curriculum to enhance learner outcomes. Indeed, today at people’s disposal are a variety of affordances due to the convenience of the Internet, including texts, film, music, news, and information that is all easily accessible in the modern classroom (Kern 340-341). The internet can bring the Other of foreign language and culture right to the students’ computer screen.

More recently, due to advancements in VR technology, themes of VR have been looked at to answer a variety of world issues, from medical training to spatial reasoning, because VR allows for manipulation of concepts and space in ways that have been heretofore unimagined and are in relatively low risk environments. VR is generally defined from anything as an immersive experience to having particular qualities of hardware or software (Blyth 225; Fabola et al. 1; Lloyd et al. 222). One issue that Kern raises in regards to any new and evolving technology, is a risk associated with the blind use of that technology as a type of panacea, a cure all for ills of educating language learners that cannot fathom a paradigm outside their own. He indicates that while the technology can be useful it needs to be interpreted as a designed environment where what is visualized on screen is another’s creation, and thus their own interpretation filtered through their own perception (341). One response to this understandable concern is an examination of two theoretical frameworks that shed light on how VR can enhance learning and cultural awareness without becoming a placebo in the search for authentic cultural activities.

**Cultural Awareness**

Before touching on those two theories, however, it must be discussed how cultural awareness is defined in this study so that an accurate reflection of the theoretical validity of the two theoretical frameworks mentioned above can be examined fairly. Awareness alone can be difficult to describe as it changes in the observer and the observed, already implying the
subjectivity of what any version of awareness actually means. It is better to think of awareness as a student’s knowledge and process of thinking of and speaking of culture, opposed to some sort of exclusionary ‘observation only’ point of view (Jones 1). It follows that student attitudes and behaviors should also be influenced through some understanding of a cultural ‘Other.’ Additionally, cultural awareness may be construed as an understanding of the cultural-self and behaviors of oneself, of others, and the ability to identify those similarities and differences (Tomalin and Stempleski 5). More specifically, it is the ability to acknowledge the target culture as a shared and dynamic feature of a country, and the capability to recognize and evaluate specific characteristics, generalizations, and stereotypes of such culture (Lado 40-41; Schulz 16-17).

Immersion

To return to the theoretical emphasis at hand, essential points of intersection within cultural awareness for VR are immersion and experience. In regards to reading, the term reading trance refers to the relative extent of ‘other-world citizenship’ induced in a reader thanks to an excellent narrative (Nell 77). Nell also describes an immersive experience where the reader is transported by what they read and their level of emotional investment in what is being described by the author (211). Marie-Laure Ryan applies immersion to literary theory by referring to the vividness and realism found in 3-D displays, speaking specifically of computer gaming, through some kind of hidden depth (110-112). One could posit that the hidden depth Ryan speaks of and the trance Nell discusses are one and the same.

If the above is true, then “Virtual reality (VR) is an immersive, computer-enabled technology that replicates an environment and allows a simulation of the user to be present and interact in that environment” where the virtual world can be interpreted as real through the
surroundings found within and the capability to physically interact with it and change it in some way (Lloyd et al. 222; Ryan 111; Sadler 376). For Ryan, this leads to a discussion of telepresence which is “at the conjunction of immersion and interactivity” in a 3-D world of subjective experience (Ryan 111; Wang et al. 433), again, dealing with an overall sense of ‘being there’. Wang et al. provide a more concrete example of immersion in support of some of Ryan’s more theoretical positioning, furthering its use in a language learning context. In their study 3-D virtual worlds created spaces for realistic scenarios useful for the EFL learner’s immersive practice in real contexts (432). Thus a virtual world is a place where context is available for the practice of vital language skills, and taken together with work in cultural awareness, vital cultural observation can be accomplished at a minimum. More essentially, it becomes an immersive tool for fostering cultural awareness through acts of noticing and reflection through simulated yet still real contexts.

While these contexts have existed in some form of virtual environment or another since the advent of the Internet (Kern 341; Sadler 376), such virtual worlds are in an entirely different league due to the immersive affordances created by advancements in technology that can be found in the augmented reality (AR) and the more mainstream approaches to VR using the new headsets together with software developed for language and cultural learning and software that is not specific to an educational setting (Reinhardt and Sykes 2; Sadler 376). “This new technology provides a more fully immersive experience to learners, potentially allowing a language student to experience being in cities like Paris or Tokyo in a way that has never before been possible without actually being there” (Sadler, 386); in this way, VR videos and simulations create immersive contexts allowing for environmental interaction with a sense of presence in the foreign context or a sense of interaction with the other.
Experiential Learning Theory

VR can give students a valuable cultural experience that goes beyond immersion to something more metacognitive. Sadler draws on Kolb’s (qtd. in Sadler) ELT to expound the virtues of using virtual worlds. The theory states that learning should be thought of as a process (not outcomes), it is based in experience, it is part of holistic world adaptation, a process of knowledge creation, and deals with person-environment transactions, and how the learning process must approach conflict resolution between different cultural world adaptations (Sadler 382) or in Kolb’s own words “...proactive adaptation by the use of auxiliary cultural stimuli, social knowledge, to actively transform personal knowledge” (1). This spiral of learning from experience described in ELT can help learners appreciate their own learning processes on a metacognitive level (Kolb 297). The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience, Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience, Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) (Kolb 298). In VR we find a bridge between grasping and transforming experiences, where learners gain concrete knowledge of other cultural experiences that can be abstractly conceptualized through RO after a VR video interaction event and through guiding questions given by the instructors and researchers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants and Research Questions

This research was conducted at a large university in the United States with the aim of understanding FL learners’ attitudes and perspectives towards the implementation of VR in the formal classroom setting. The data collection took place during a grant-funded student-teacher
interaction event that was open to undergraduate students enrolled in beginner Italian courses, at the end of the Spring 2018 semester. Of the 24 students who participated in the event, none of whom was a student of the researchers, 19 gave the consent to take part in the study. All data supplied by the remaining 5 students was discarded and not used for the purposes of this research.

The following research questions guided this study:

(1) What are students’ attitudes and concerns towards the use of VR and Google Cardboard in the language classroom?

(2) Do language learners believe that VR impacts cultural awareness as well as their understanding of the target culture?

Materials

This study included three 360-degree VR videos that were recorded in December 2017 by one of the researchers in Italy using a High Definition Xiaomi Mijia Mi 360-degree field of view (FOV) camera. Cameras featuring a 360-degree FOV are omnidirectional, i.e., they capture the entire environment surrounding it, as opposed to conventional video cameras that restrict recording to a fixed angle. This implies that footage realized with a panoramic 360-degree FOV offers the user the opportunity to choose which part of the environment he or she wants to view interactively. As the digital screens utilized to watch videos are rectangular in shape (TV, tablet, smartphone, etc.), only the corresponding portion of the captured environment in 360-degree can be seen at one time. Nonetheless, by dragging the image with a mouse, swiping on it, or simply moving the portable device in whichever direction, the viewer shifts the gaze to a different area of the environment (Corbillon et al. 4). The 360-degree videos used in this study lasted approximately two minutes each and showed sites in the city of Bergamo, Italy. The chosen
locations were the interior of a restaurant, a street corner, and a town square. Although numerous 360-degree videos of renowned Italian cities are available to view on YouTube.com, for this study the researchers chose to present a less touristic town, one that could encapsulate the average Italian cityscape and everyday Italian environments. Furthermore, feedback from a preceding pilot study carried out the previous semester indicated that prolonged VR viewing sessions, that is more than two minutes, were likely to induce dizziness. All three videos used in this study were uploaded on a public YouTube.com channel and made available for streaming to all participants via web-links sent to their email accounts a few minutes before the beginning of the VR viewing sessions.

This research also involved the use of the Google Cardboard headset, which allowed participants to experience the 360-degree videos in 3-D. Google Cardboard is among the cheapest VR Head Mounted Displays (HMD) currently on the market (Greenwald et al. 19). In this study, the researchers obtained a grant to purchase and lend one such device to each participant. Google Cardboard is a lightweight HMD that allows the user to utilize a smartphone as a display and, in conjunction with specific free applications, it enables the implementation of stereoscopy, that is the presentation of a slightly different image to each eye, to deliver the illusion of depth (Baños et al. 2; Fabola, Miller and Fawcett 5). When a smartphone is inserted in the dedicated slot in the front of the headset, the user can see the 360-degree video in stereoscopy (see fig. 1). In addition, the movement of the user’s head displays a different FOV in the video.

Fig. 1. The Google Cardboard headset and a smartphone display in VR mode.
Procedures

Before the viewing sessions began, participants were invited to sit around a table and form groups of four to five people. All interactions with participants throughout the event were led in English. On the table, participants found copies of the consent form, blank sheets of paper and the Google Cardboard viewers, one for each participant. Once consent forms were collected, the researchers provided a brief introduction to the study and an explanation on how to use the Google Cardboard headsets. All participants were previously notified via email that the event required the use of a fully-charged smartphone as well as headphones, in order to create a more immersive experience, and were advised to bring their own. Extra smartphones and headphones were available to the participants if needed. Participants played each one of the three videos twice on their smartphones, through the YouTube application, and viewed them with Google Cardboard while listening to the audio with their headphones. During the viewings, participants were encouraged to turn their heads in different directions to explore the virtual environment. Between each viewing, participants were asked to write about what they saw on the provided blank sheets of papers. After the second viewing of each video, a short researcher-led group discussion was conducted. The discussion aimed at fostering participants’ reflections on what
they just saw and to address any questions. At the end of the last viewing of the third video, participants were invited to take part in the focus group interview.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of students’ attitudes and motivation, and to answer the research questions outlined above, this study employed a mixed method approach to analyze the acquired data by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods (Dörnyei; Riazi and Candlin 138-140). The combination of methods is an important aspect of this type of research approach, which aspires at inquiring into students’ beliefs and how they interact with the environment (Barcelos 21). However, although quantitative methods are used to enhance the overall understanding of the object of study, learners’ attitudes can be better investigated through a qualitative approach which, unlike quantitative Likert-scale questionnaires, through narration and reflection allows students to become aware of their beliefs, their feelings and their concerns, and have the chance to express their opinions in their own words (Benson 156; Ritzau 98-99). Hence, the materials used in this study include pre- and a post-surveys, participants’ written reflections, and a focus group interview.

**Pre- and Post-Surveys**

A pre-survey, was administered to the participants (N=19) before the beginning of the VR viewing session while a Post-survey was dispensed at the end. Both surveys included 6-point Likert-scale statements, ranging from strongly disagree (1 point) to strongly agree (6 points) as well as open-ended questions. The inquiries were structured around these areas: background information concerning experience with VR and Google Cardboard, perceptions of the usefulness of technology and VR for language learning within the classroom context, interest in learning about the Italian culture and response to the VR experience. The surveys were created
with the Qualtrics online platform and made available via web-links that were sent to all participants. Owing to the Qualtrics mobile phone optimization feature, easy access to both surveys via smartphones was ensured.

**Written Reflections and Focus Group Interview**

All participants were provided with three numbered blank letter-sized sheets of paper, one for each video that they were going to watch. Participants were instructed to write their names and record their reflections during the VR viewing sessions. Each sheet of paper was folded in half to allow participants to note their thoughts in different partitions of the page. For each one of the three videos, participants were to write: 1) prior to the viewing, their expectations about what they were about to watch (e.g., their thoughts on how a town square in Italy would look like); 2) their impressions of the first viewing; 3) their considerations and the differences from their own home environment following the second viewing, after being instructed by the researchers to focus on particular elements in the videos (e.g., how people were interacting in the virtual setting, sounds, the architecture, the means of transportation, etc.). At the end of the viewing event, 8 participants agreed to take part in a ten-minute focus group discussion led by one of the researchers. Participants were asked to reflect on the VR experience that had just concluded and were invited to share additional comments, beliefs, and concerns. The focus group discussion was recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researcher’s comments that transcended the focus of this study, such as greetings and clarifications, were not transcribed.

The quantitative data gathered for this study, which consisted of the 6-point Likert-scale pre- and post-survey responses, were analyzed and will be presented in the form of descriptive statistics. The qualitative data, consisting in the open-ended questions in the surveys, the written
reflections, and the transcripts from the focus group discussion were sorted, coded and analyzed. Due to the nature of the objectives of this research the data obtained from the written reflections was not included in this study. The following section presents and discusses the analyzed data gathered to answer the research questions outlined above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The collected data provided insightful information in regard to learners’ attitudes towards the implementation of VR in the language classroom as well as their beliefs about cultural awareness in relation to VR. The focus group interview further explored how the viewings impacted participants’ understanding of authentic everyday Italian environments and the target culture.

Pre-Survey

In the pre-survey, completed before the VR experience, participants answered open-ended questions and rated twelve statements on a 6-point Likert scale. The open-ended questions aimed to investigate whether the participants had been to Italy before, thus if they experienced authentic Italian environments, and if they had used VR prior to the event. Of the 19 participants, 6 (32%) answered that they had been to Italy and reported that the cities they had visited included Rome, Naples, Florence, Venice, Milan, and other popular destinations. None of the participants reported having visited Bergamo, the city where the videos were recorded. About one third of the participants (n=7, 37%) stated that they had used VR prior to the event, mainly for entertainment purposes. Thus, none of the participants had previous experiences in using VR for learning purposes, in the educational setting. As previously explained, the implementation of
VR technology in pedagogical practices and language learning is still scarce and as participants’ responses show, in the formal classroom context VR is yet to be utilized and exploited.

In the pre-survey, the objective of the 6-point Likert scale was to explore participants’ attitudes towards the use of technology in the educational setting and their familiarity and interest in the target culture. All the participants stated that using technology in the classroom is useful and it can be enjoyable and fun (see table 1). Most of the participants (n=16, 84%) also reported that they use technology for their studies and they believe that technology enhances language learning (n=18, 95%). Less than half of the participants (n=7, 36.5%) reported that they find technology a distraction in the classroom. As far as their familiarity with Google Cardboard, the viewer used in this study to experience VR environments, 53% (n=10) stated that they were not acquainted with such a tool. Overall the results show that prior to the VR viewings the majority of the participants, who already uses technology for learning purposes, had positive attitudes towards the use of technology in the educational setting, although some recognize technology as a hindrance in the classroom.

Three statements in the pre-survey concerned participants’ familiarity and desire to learn about the target culture. Almost all of the participants (n=18, 95%) reported that the target culture is important to them, and 78% (n=15) said that they plan to study or travel to Italy in the near future. One of the statements asked if they were very familiar with the Italian culture, and 26% (n=5) of the participants reported that they strongly agreed, while 37% (n=7) slightly disagreed. Altogether, the participants in this study expressed a strong interest in the Italian culture with future plans to travel or study in Italy, although more than half of them felt that they were not very familiar with the target culture. Consequently, a significant motivation to learn more about the Italian culture existed before the VR viewings occurred.
Last, the remaining three statements in the pre-survey inquired about the reasons that prompted students to participate in the VR event. Most of the participants were interested in learning more about the Italian culture (n=16, 84%) as well the opportunity to try VR (n=15, 78%). Since the VR viewing sessions took place outside of the classroom setting and were part of an event that allowed students to make up half an absence, one of the statements in the pre-survey also inquired if a reason for participating in the event was related to the extra-credit opportunity. Responses to this statement showed that 37% (n=7) either strongly disagreed or slightly disagreed, while 63% (n=12) strongly agreed, agreed and slightly agreed. Participants clearly expressed enthusiasm for the VR technology as well as the opportunity to learn more about the target culture.

Table 1
Pre-Survey Statements on a 6-Point Likert Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly disagree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using technology in the classroom is useful.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology in the classroom is enjoyable and fun.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use technology frequently for my studies.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think technology enhances language learning.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
technology a distraction in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am familiar with Google Cardboard.</th>
<th>26%</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>16%</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>16%</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Studying the Italian culture is important to me.</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>21%</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>63%</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am very familiar with the Italian culture.</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>16%</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>37%</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>26%</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I plan to study or travel to Italy next year.</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>73%</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I signed up for this event to learn more about the Italian culture.</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>26%</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>47%</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I signed up for this event because I want to learn more about virtual reality.</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>21%</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>31%</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>42%</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I signed up for this event to make up half an absence.</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>26%</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>11%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>47%</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Post-Survey**

Following the VR experience, participants completed the post-survey which included four open-ended questions and twelve statements to be rated on a 6-point Likert scale. The data
obtained through the post-survey inquired about learners’ attitudes towards the implementation of VR in the language classroom, their beliefs about cultural learning, as well as their motivation to study and learn more about the Italian culture after the viewings. The first open-ended question was for those participants who had travelled to Italy and asked how the VR experience compares to physically being in the target country. Participants’ responses included “I have been to Italy, it seemed nothing like it. Italy was much busier and more exciting”, “I believe it is similar but nothing compares to being to Italy in person” and “Does not live up to the real thing”. Participants thus clearly acknowledged that the VR experience did not provide the same experience as real-life interaction in the target country. Although VR provides users with realistic and authentic experiences (Hu-Au and Lee 219), it might not function as a complete substitute of real life experiences, that is physically being in a foreign country. While this is an indisputable limitation of VR, such technology gives language learners in the classroom access to environments that are usually inaccessible.

The second open-ended question asked what aspects of using VR were most memorable. Participants were fascinated by the opportunity to explore the surroundings by moving their head and viewer in different directions as well as seeing and hearing how people interact in different environments. Some students asserted that an important aspect of their VR experience was “Being up close to everything and getting the feeling of actually being there” and “The details and the way we were about to see everything, even people walking”. Therefore, from the analyzed responses it emerged that participants had positive attitudes towards the VR experience; some of them felt as they were present in the virtual environments and were able to notice particular details as a result of being able to move and explore the cultural setting in numerous directions. In this, the use of a VR HMD is very significant, and it demonstrates a clear
correlation to VR being utilized as a tool for immersion. Immersion thus becomes a motor for more positive attitudes and motivation to explore target cultural settings. Ideas of presence correspond to the earlier thoughts on interactivity and immersion, leading to increased engagement based on participant attitudes (Lloyd et al. 222; Ryan 111; Sadler 376). This is also observed in the post-survey Likert scale descriptive statistics described later in this discussion.

The third open-ended question aimed to compare the VR experience to previous classroom experiences, for example learning about the target culture from the traditional textbook or from a teacher led-presentation. The majority of the participants explained that they would like to use VR more than the textbook, “You can learn more about the culture and architecture better when you can be that close up rather than just seeing a picture or regular video”, “VR is cool because it gives learning a more hands on experience”, and “The VR gives a visual representation of Italy that can only be seen using technology. A book can't show you Italy like VR can”. Evidently, language learners reported positive attitudes towards the use of VR in the classroom setting and recognized the limitations of the traditional language textbook, which cannot provide immersive and contextualized experiences as VR technologies. Nonetheless, one participant was concerned with the lack of human interaction, while another participant stated that “I just think these are two different ways to teach, I don’t feel like they are actually comparable”. Such responses emphasize the drastic difference between learning from a textbook and a technology tool as VR, which should be used carefully by instructors and language learners. It is important to recognize the differences between the two and it is crucial to understand that some tools might be more appropriate and useful than others in specific learning settings. It is interesting to note that the these differing students’ viewpoints can be summed up as pertaining to the different aspects of Kolb’s ELT (87). ‘Hands-on’ may reference concrete
experience in an abstract experience. The participant that notices they are not actually comparable has essentially used Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) to determine that the Abstract Conceptualization of VR is really just another tool, which has incidentally illustrated the utility of VR for increasing learner metacognitive awareness.

The last open-ended question specifically asked participants what concerns they might have in regard to the use of VR in the classroom setting. Many responses addressed the issue of feeling nauseated and dizzy when Google Cardboard was used for five minutes without interruption. Other participants were concerned about the technological aspects of using VR, for instance “Getting caught up in the idea of using technology and not really retaining any knowledge” and “Setting up the tech could take too long, though it was pretty easy in this event”. As previously stated, and as noted by the participants, in order to support students’ learning it is important to evaluate how new technologies will impact the learning process and students’ development. In fact, merely implementing the latest technologies in the educational setting is not enough; it is fundamental to consider how the tools that are brought into the classroom, such as VR, will be used to support learning through thoroughly planned activities that encourage reflections and discussions.

The next section of the post-survey included twelve statements on a six-point Likert scale which participants had to rate from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The first statement, also included in the pre-survey discussed above, was purposely chosen to investigate whether students’ attitudes towards the use of technology in the classroom changed after the VR experience. The results show that while the vast majority of participants (n=18, 95%) believe that technology is useful in the classroom (see table 2), after the VR sessions took place one participant slightly disagreed with such statement although in the pre-survey he or she agreed.
Thus, it is possible that the participant did not believe in the usefulness of VR for educational purposes and to enhance cultural awareness.

Other statements investigated how the viewings impacted learners’ understanding of the target culture as well as their motivation to travel to Italy. Slightly more than half (n=10, 52%) of the participants reported that they learned more about the Italian culture by watching the VR videos, and the majority of them (n=17, 89%) also believed that such experience was useful to understand more about Italy. Almost all the participants (95%, n=18) affirmed that virtually experiencing Italian places increased their motivation to travel to Italy. However, surprisingly some of the participants (n=12, 63%) believed that the VR experience was more fun than educational. Consequently, it appears that although participants had positive attitudes towards VR, felt as they learned more about the target culture, and such tool increased their motivation to travel to the target country, some of them perceived such technology as an entreating tool more than an educational one.

More than half (64%, n=12) stated that they felt present in the environments they viewed in 360 degrees and three dimensions with Google Cardboard, and 74% (n=14) of the participants would like to regularly use VR in their own Italian classes. The majority of them (n=16, 84%) also could also see a potential use of VR in other courses they are taking. Last, 68% (n=13) of the participants expressed a preference towards VR compared to the traditional language textbook. Overall, participants’ responses show that VR is a technology tool positively perceived by language learners who desire to use it in the language classroom as well as in other courses. Although VR cannot entirely substitute the traditional language textbook, some specific topics, such as the target culture, can be further explored through the use of VR and Google Cardboard.
to support students’ learning especially since learners stated that they prefer VR to the usual textbook.

Table 2
Post-Survey Statements on a 6-Point Likert Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly disagree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using technology in the classroom is useful.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By watching the videos I did not learn much about Italian culture.</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not feel present in the environments I watched.</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing videos in 360 degrees and virtually experiencing Italian places increases my motivation to travel to Italy.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not interested in learning about Italian culture.</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am interested in learning more about Google Cardboard.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The VR experience was useful to understand more about Italy.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The VR experience was more fun than educational for me.</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to regularly use VR in my Italian class to learn about Italy.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer learning about the Italian culture through immersive VR videos instead of printed images in the textbook.</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to learn more about these places from a book or film, not in a 360 immersive way.</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think VR could also be used in other classes that I am taking.</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus group interview

During the focus group interview participants freely expressed themselves in regard to the VR viewings and shared attitudes, beliefs and concerns in relation to the new technology. One participant expected to see popular Italian cities (e.g., Rome and Florence) and believed that in such cause it would have been a more interesting experience; nonetheless, another participant who had visited less-known places in Italy explained that it was great to see an ordinary town because, as he argued, “that is how most Italian cities are and the language textbook mainly focuses on touristic places, while leaving out minor cities”. As a matter of fact, the researchers’ decision to use VR videos depicting a less-popular town was driven by the desire to expose language learners to ordinary environments that are relevant to the Italian culture but often excluded from the language textbook.

A participant was impressed by the individuals in the VR videos because “you see strangers walking by in the VR experience and it makes you feel like you are actually in the place because you actually see normal people walking and doing their everyday stuff”. The architecture was also noticed by several participants and it was recognized as unique to the explored sites and different from participants’ own hometowns. One participant was intrigued by how people interacted with the environment, in her own words: “one of the reasons of learning Italian for me is that I don't want to stand like a tourist, but I would like to know kind of roughly how people act in the streets”. Interestingly, as noticed by many, the VR viewings allowed language learners to feel present and immersed in the foreign culture, giving the impression to be observers in a specific setting. Since during the VR experience it was not possible to move forward or backward within the video, one participant suggested to record future videos with a camera placed on a moving vehicle so that the user is not just standing in a place and observing
the surroundings, but he or she could actually virtually move along and see various dynamic aspects of the environment. Similarly to the results in the post-survey, in the focus group interview it emerged that students prefer to use VR and Google Cardboard to the traditional textbook in the language classroom because it gives a sense of reality and authenticity. According to one participant, images in the textbook could be “staged” or in another words, purposely created to be photographed and used in pedagogical materials. Instead, recording VR videos in authentic environments in the target country and using them in the language classroom allows students to be immersed in virtual settings that are real and genuine, and can be explored in various directions and in 3-D.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to investigate language learners’ attitudes and perceptions towards the implementation of VR in the educational setting. Participants’ beliefs about cultural learning through the use of VR technology were also examined. Exploring motivations and beliefs through lenses of immersion and ELT has shown correlations to learner attitudes and their feelings of presence while also demonstrating an increase in their metacognitive awareness of their own learning. After the viewings occurred, participants’ felt that the experience was useful to them since it supported their understanding of Italy, the target culture, and cultural awareness. Generally, VR was positively perceived and it can have a place in the classroom setting. Although some participants were concerned by the lack of interaction, or the possibility of getting caught up with the technology, it is important to state that new technologies must be carefully considered when utilized for pedagogical purposes. While it is true that the selected VR videos and Google Cardboard do not allow for direct interaction with the environment, such technologies can support students learning by providing authentic and contextualized
environments, otherwise inaccessible. Future studies will need to examine more closely the relationship between learner attitudes, immersion, and precise levels of cultural awareness. While awareness has a variety of definitions and interpretations, a commonality has been found that can provide valuable insight into the use of VR HMDs to enhance cultural awareness, and learner attitudes demonstrate a willingness to use VR in and out of the classroom to facilitate their own learning and development of cultural awareness.
WORKS CITED


Technology’s Promise: Online or Face-to-Face, the Language is Yours!

In the summer of 2017 I offered an online Italian intensive beginners course. As I considered the pros and cons of online teaching while creating this class, I pondered on activities and teaching strategies for an online environment. I realized that technology would allow me to offer a well-structured and balanced online class, just as much as it does in a face-to-face environment. I kept in mind my goal, which is always to give students an opportunity to learn in realistic and relevant environments. I achieve this by using lots of videos, readings, and discussion, that lead students to create their own videos and presentations in which they act, interact, or perform on a given topic. Examples are a skype interview with a CEO of an Italian olive oil company; or studying ecology and environment, presenting on 0% waste, ecological furniture, or addressing the Mayor of Naples to solve the garbage issue; c) discussing cuisine, learning about the culture of a specific region, and having students use certain ingredients as they prepare a recipe, all recorded and presented to the class. My objective is for students to consider multiple perspectives on specific topics and develop cultural understanding; to be engaged as they learn; to experience the culture through multiple modes of representation; to collaborate on project work to build reading and writing skills and increase speaking fluency through practice; and to improve reading comprehension. Therefore, as I sorted my ideas, I pushed back against what sociology professors Angela C. Garcia, Alecea I. Standlee, and Jennifer Bechkoff call “[…] a common misconception that we often see an online communication as somehow inferior, and that an amount of “compensating” is necessary to make up for the absence of a classroom and the regular human, social aspects of interaction, rather than seeing the differing contexts of physical and online environments simply as different communicative modes of one lifeworld.”

83 The result was tremendously successful, and I’d like to share my resources to maintain that real language learning environment, both in an online and face-to-face classroom, with material that helps students see and feel the language, and really live it.

I can still hear my Italian Literature professor in College tell his students that if he was not able to stimulate the inner child in us through collaborative class work, he was doing a bad job. Those words have resonated throughout my career as a language instructor, although I recognize that methodologies back in my college years were a lot different. They included a lot of simplistic tasks based on the professor’s input, and we certainly did not have access to technology as we do today. The inner child wants to have fun, right? Fun does not mean an easy class. It means engagement, involvement, and repetition with a twist, as well as experiential learning ¹, which is how modern pedagogies like to call task-oriented learning. Everyone knows that successful technology integration in a language classroom consists in the use of social media platforms and networks, smartphones and tablets, software applications, the internet etc. I use social media to post status updates as a class; write blog posts about what students are learning; connect to other classrooms, even abroad; I use YouTube for students to host a show, prepare a video, or show a podcast; and to create accounts for special interest projects. Successful

¹ Experiential learning consists in gaining knowledge through experiences which allow students to collect and reflect on primary data and engage in problem solving. It includes various stages: a concrete experience, reflecting upon it, abstract conceptualization (analysis and generating conclusions or new ideas), and active application of the lessons drawn from the experience. (Bunse, Simon, Bunker, Sarah, McDermot, Michael- TLISI 2018: Experiential (Service) Learning: Action Labs - May 23, 2018)
technology integration is achieved when the use of technology is routine and transparent; accessible and readily available for the task at hand; supporting the curricular goals, and helping the students to effectively reach their goals. The Edutopia website of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, founded by innovative and award-winning film-maker George Lucas, states: “When technology integration is at its best, a child or a teacher doesn't stop to think that he or she is using a technology tool -- it is second nature. And students are often more actively engaged in projects when technology tools are a seamless part of the learning process.” I believe this, provided that we keep in mind that our goal is not to offer technology integrated classes for the sake of technology: something boring on paper is still boring on a tablet or a laptop.

Educator Malcom S. Knowles, in his book *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, says: “As a college faculty member, applying andragogical (also known as adult learning theory) principles can be critical in effectiveness as an educator of adults. Adult learners have unique instructional needs to be met, expectations to fulfill, and barriers to overcome.” (8) In 1973 he argues that instruction for college students should be task-oriented, just like for kids, where learning activities should be in the context of common tasks, although adults must be treated differently. Reading Knowles makes me realize how we are reinventing hot water, seeking to re-establish that active learning is key. In my opinion, especially when it comes to teaching a foreign language, there is so much we can teach and learn through technology, and apply to our classrooms, to ensure that tasks are meaningful, involving, and have some kind of useful impact and outcome. That said, language instructors need to rethink their strategies even further because we are in the era of online classes that are becoming more and more popular and in demand. There is worry about the loss of a face-to-face environment, that allows room for improvisation and total collaboration. However, even an online classroom has so much room for incredibly engaging oral activities, collaborative projects, and synchronous communication. My goal in this article is to establish a relationship between the face-to-face and online classrooms, and explore the many activities and tasks technology has helped me offer to my students in both types of settings. The activities I present have the purpose to explore how effective they are in showcasing my students in action, which is the final result I wish to obtain. Instead of providing pedagogical standards or research in this article, I prefer to “show and tell” the outcome of my students’ achievements through the activities I propose. I believe it useful to have concrete examples that can perhaps inspire some creativity.

I had the opportunity to devise an online course for my intensive Italian 123 first and second semester course in summer 2017. My goal was to deliver the exact same course I offer in a face-to-face environment, pedagogically solid and culturally valid and meaningful, that would maintain the students’ interest high in order to recruit for my upper division courses. The idea of an online course was new to me, and forced me to be open to all options for language learning, or rather, to find ways to allow my students to learn effectively. I did my research, and discovered that certain types of technology, and the use of certain apps, could make education more personalized for my students. In *Education, the Case for Language Learning*, appeared in *The Guardian* in February 2014, Von Ahn, founder of the popular language app Duolinguo,
states: “The truth of the matter is that learning a language takes months or years. We have to find a way to keep them [the students] interested and that's where the gamification came in.” As technology is making education more personalized, I realize that it is encouraging students to a more active approach to learning, and that online tools are going to be most effective when used as a component of a larger arsenal of tools.

Before I continue to articulate on my experience teaching an online course, allow me to mention an application I created myself in 2013, called Impara l’italiano con l’ispettor Zunicchi. The idea came from a class I offered: an introduction to the history of the Italian mystery novel. I devised a language learning module that students could use once a week as a complement to the course, and I developed a program that would challenge their reading, aural, and comprehension skills. Students were to compete in solving a mystery, where a crime had been committed. Their task was to discover the who, when, what, and why. The module was a venue for students to live the language experiencing it through a computer game; they were exposed to task oriented cultural topics that included geography, music, representative videos, readings, and aural activities with the goal to immerse them into the culture and allow them to use their own language skills. The success was instantaneous, and students loved the class. They mastered a particular and unusual type of vocabulary based on crime, using words associated to poisons, weapons, evidence, tests, samples, and alibis. 3 The victim in my game is an industrialist, and he is murdered by poisoned mushrooms; the crime is of passion; the discovery of the story and the suspects’ alibis are what will help each student find clues. I am sharing a few examples of how this module was created and implemented, and I encourage anyone to experiment with Camtasia and Share Pointe if you have the time. Even my students who do not take the course use the application just for fun, especially intermediate level students who already have a better knowledge of Italian grammar. https://youtu.be/1X3wEW6N9W4

The effect of my game testifies that students need to have some sort of meaningful application of the language once they leave the classroom, and a game is a good way to keep their interest high. I can see how a simple mobile application like Duolingo is so successful today among our learners. It offers interfaces and timed language challenges, and tracks scores. It has four levels of intensity and each intensity comes with a different daily learning timeline. In Duolingo Used Gamification & Nailed It, journalist Reham Dibas explains that the integration of gamification makes the app the most downloaded and used educational app around the world. 4 I encourage my students to use Duolingo, and ask them to show me their reached levels once a week. I hope that after the first year, they will be ahead enough to want to explore on their own verb tenses like the subjunctive. In Why Learn a Foreign Language? Professor Emerita of German Studies Ruth H. Sanders states: “The shock of discovering the subjunctive happens only once; after that, you’ll start to understand it as one tool in a culture’s toolbox for solving universal human communication problems.” (84) While the subjunctive might represent a shock to our students, technology is still a shock to many teachers, who fear of being supplanted by it. The newest advances in educational technology- use of mobile devices, virtual reality, scan of

3 The idea for the game came from a true event. When I was in my early teens I went hiking in the hills of Liguria with three friends and we stumbled upon a dead body. At first, we only saw a fancy pair of leather shoes sticking out from under some rocks, but then we noticed legs, so we ran back to town to warn an adult. To this day, I do not know anything about the person, unfortunately, but I elaborated the story and gave it my own twist for the purpose of the game.

4 The creators of the app integrated the gamification techniques in it based on these rules: Motivation by small achievable goals which a user can set for himself, so that the daily use of the application can eventually become a daily habit; Continuous progress, using bars and scores that appear everywhere and show the level of achievement and how far each user has come; External triggers to keep the users motivated to come back and learn, such as emails and personal reminders. <https://www.gamiphy.co/software-gamification-duolingo-case/>
QRs, digital course material, data-informed research, not to mention the current international change in education⁵- are powerful enough to deliver content, assess, and engage students in course learning, all without a teacher. The audience is no longer the teacher, but the peers and the world, because social networks have changed our notion of audience. Therefore, technology has become that element in our culture toolbox that we pull out to solve our universal communication, too.

The student revolt is upon us. University of Exeter professor Donald Bligh disdained lectures in the seventies stating that students let their professors bore them. Bligh suggested in his *What’s the Use for Lectures?* “[…] no lecture should last more than fifteen-twenty minutes,” (19) but since he made that recommendation, student attention spans have been cut to half that time. In the mean-time, even the required text book is declining because students can get by without. They seek source materials on their own, actively engaging in course subject matter. Students attend online courses more and more, too. This leads to the question whether asynchronous learning can really be effective, so let’s make the distinction. In the journal *Hybrid Pedagogy*, Associate Professor at the American University in Cairo Maha Bali states: “The strength of online learning might lie in the asynchronous components.” Synchronous e-learning involves online studies through videoconferencing and chat. The learning tool is real-time and allows students, like in a virtual classroom, to interact with peers and instructors. It is very similar to a face-to-face environment. Questions and answers are provided instantly, hence the word synchronous. On the other hand, asynchronous e-learning involves coursework delivered via message boards posted on online forums, the web, and email. Students complete the course at their own pace. The advantages of asynchronous classes are, according to Bali, the non-marginal issue of convenience, promotion of deep reflection, less pressure, and flexibility. She argues: “Synchronous learning is first of all biased against certain time zones,” and: “An imperfect way around this is to change the time of such interactions each week to accommodate each of the extreme time zones — i.e. you accommodate each time-zone half as often.” She continues stating: “Synchronous meetings are culturally unaware of people’s holidays; biased against families and busy people; synchronous meetings that involve audiovisuals are elitist (there could be choppy internet); and finally, meetings rely heavily on linguistic capital.” In her opinion, if you are not fluent in the dominant language spoken, you are lost. I believe there is some truth behind all this if we are considering MOOC courses (massive open online courses). Aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web, these courses make their money by offering bundles of connected classes in targeted fields, have them carry college credit, and offer a deep, discounted tuition price. However, while many universities are pushing for MOOC courses, programs are still reluctant to move in that direction. Mike Bergleson, CEO and cofounder of human resource company Everwise, states in his article *4 Pros and 4 Cons of MOOCs: Whether to Take Study from Classroom to Online*: “The disadvantages of MOOC courses are that they are

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⁵ Currently, there is an international change in education that includes the development of new learning programs and policies, such as (a) bilingual education programs (Thomas & Collier, 2012), including courses taught in a second language (usually English); (b) University programs resulting from the implementation of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area, with an emphasis on a more autonomous way of learning (EHEA, 2010); (c) the systematic evaluation and assessment of students and educational results, such as PISA (Program for International Student Assessment, OECD, 2014); and (d) the application of guidelines and recommendations in order to correct the problems in education identified by means of these evaluations and assessments. This international shift in education has recently motivated the emergence of several new scenarios and environments for teaching and learning. Thus, we are witnesses to the transition from the traditional, pure (and opposed) face-to-face and distance approaches to teaching and learning to a whole new range of (mixed) ways of learning, such as blended learning, e-learning, ubiquitous learning, social learning, incidental learning, contextual learning, autonomous learning or lifelong learning. All these new approaches (discussed in the next chapters) put the focus on learners and are intended to adapt to their needs and limitations. In our days, for example, people do not have much time for learning, and it is often difficult for us to allocate a fixed moment in our schedules to attend courses (be they virtual or not). This is the new scenario for education, and the way we teach and learn is adapting in accordance. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED565804.pdf>
oversimplified and too basic, lack interaction, meetups, and physical space, and there is a high rate of abandonment.” Jeffrey Selingo, in MOOC U: The Revolution Isn’t Over, appeared in the Chronicle for Higher Education, has this to say: “College leaders should focus on using MOOCs to complement and enhance their continuing-education programs, as the number of options students have for education in small bites and on their own schedule continues to grow.” I might not be ready to introduce a MOOC course quite yet, but I do believe that making students work with a virtual team can be part of their education. Web based platforms such as Canvas, for example, can become a single portal for course activities, where synchronous and asynchronous learning come together in a meaningful way. Regardless of whether one chooses synchronous, asynchronous or a combination of both, it is the quality of the materials, instruction, interactions and activities that create effective learning. Which brings me to my strong point: it’s about teaching, first of all; technology is just a tool.

My experience with online teaching is positive, and allows me to offer a course that is partly asynchronous, where face-to-face meetings of an hour and a half via Zoom online occur 5 days a week for 5 weeks (the duration of the course), although students are required to “Zoom in” 3 days a week. As I chart pros and cons, and what I can use in face-to-face and online environments, as well as enhance if possible, I realize that technology allows me to offer well-structured and balanced classes. My goals are always to give students an opportunity to learn in complex, realistic, and relevant environments. I achieve this by using, for example, videos, readings, and discussion, that lead students to create their own videos in which they act, interact, or perform on a given topic. Examples are: a) a Skype interview with a CEO of an Italian company- for example one that produces olive oil- that leads to questions and research, after students have watched videos, learned about the olive oil production in Italy, and its economic impact; b) studying ecology and environment, and having students record themselves in action, and present on composting, 0% waste, recycling, ecological furniture, and particular projects like addressing the Mayor of Naples through a local high school to solve the garbage issue; c) discussing cuisine, learning about the culture of a specific region, and having students use certain ingredients as they prepare a recipe, all recorded and presented to the class. My goal is for them to consider multiple perspectives on specific topics and develop cultural understanding; to be engaged in social negotiation as an integral part of learning; to take ownership of learning; to experience the culture through multiple modes of representation; to collaborate on project work to build reading and writing skills and increase speaking fluency through practice; and to improve reading comprehension. All of my language students in lower and upper division courses regularly participate in activities that allow them to use the language through realistic venues, applying the simple technology of collaborative boards, videos, and applications for their presentations. If I structure my class so that each meeting, face-to-face or online, contains active use of language and application of vocabulary and grammar, followed by homework reinforcement and online activities, I am able to give a sense of immersion into the culture and language. Examples below highlight some activities, with a few links to students-in-action videos. These links have the purpose of highlighting linguistic achievements, but also to remind us that it is easier to learn when we are having fun. The learning outcome is that students have focused on learning vocabulary through group activities; they have reasoned on patterns, and deduced solutions; they create a script, a montage, and presentation; and they will receive constructive review and feedback from their peers and the instructor as a final reward.
1. **Show and Tell.** Beginners Italian. Students use nouns and adjectives that help create sentence structure. They are asked to discuss an item of their choice. Some talk about their pet, but many choose a strange object that reveals itself through a description. They record themselves and upload on Canvas.

2. **Culinary expertise.** Beginners Italian. Students show and tell a recipe while preparing it. They may simply discuss a recipe, but most choose to prepare a dish while they discuss. Recipes are typically Italian, and vary from a simple bruschetta, pizza, or insalata caprese, to pasta, meats and even fish dishes. The truly invested students go above and beyond, and invite friends to savor the recipe! Presentation is recorded and uploaded on Canvas. Here is an example:
   - [https://youtu.be/mffaD31XeuA](https://youtu.be/mffaD31XeuA) part one
   - [https://youtu.be/gNErSO9s4Bk](https://youtu.be/gNErSO9s4Bk) part two

3. **The Italian Me.** Beginners Italian. Students show off their Italian “me,” discussing who they are, where they live in Italy, what they do, and what they like. They usually play the role dressing up, and conclude with a catchy phrase that truly underlines their Italian identity. Presentations are recorded and uploaded on Canvas.

When face-to-face, but could be also done online:

1. **Let’s All Be Ecological.** Intermediate Italian. Students discuss and show how they can be part of a 0% waste mentality, or creative and successful as they recycle or are environmentally involved. They must create a video that showcases them ecologically in action. Topics vary and nobody has the same topic. We get to explore many options of this interesting field, and they have two minutes to discuss in class what they are showing in the video. Videos are recorded and uploaded on Canvas.

2. **Let’s Explore the Middle Ages!** Intermediate Italian. Students must do a presentation on a typical Italian medieval dish, city, or custom, choosing from different topics that I provide. The presentation is in pairs, and they have two minutes to showcase their topic and show pictures that they have previously uploaded on Canvas. Some of their favorite topics are Middle Ages and personal hygiene, the criminal and judicial system, sugars and sweeteners, diseases and epidemics, curing herbs, and medieval castles.

3. **Renaissance!** Intermediate Italian. Students choose a famous Italian person who lived during the Renaissance, or an aspect of that time, such as architecture, cuisine, social classes, education, political structures, music, art, and fashion. Their presentation is individual and memorized, and they have up to three minutes of time. They can use pictures and music in the background that they have previously uploaded on Canvas.

4. **The Regions of Italy.** Beginners and Intermediate Italian. Students are assigned a region and they must do some research and create a video in which they read to the class 10 clues that will help peers guess which region it is. This is a popular activity, where students record themselves speaking in front of the camera and uploading on Canvas. During class time, I play the individual recordings and we all try to guess. The videos are engaging, funny, and start with harder clues that become gradually easier, from 10 to 1. The outcome is often hilarious because I encourage students to dress up to represent that region, and their efforts are priceless!

5. **Me and My Sport.** Intermediate Italian. Students photo shop themselves in extreme sports and tell all about it. Some use pictures when they were children, involved in some close encounter with danger while doing a sport, others showcase high school achievements.
and trophies, but most have not ever done any extreme sports, so they use photoshop. I make sure all sports are different, and some of the popular choices are parachuting, paragliding, squirrel gliding, extreme biking or cycling, snow sports, rafting, etc.

6. **Fashion Show.** Beginners Italian. Students walk the fashion runway in class, wearing outfits they discuss. This is one of the favorite presentations in my intensive language classes. Two examples of students in action:

https://youtu.be/prrOaCTiktE part one  
https://youtu.be/Z6AC0eq9R8g part two

7. **TG NEWS- Notizie di Oggi.** Intermediate Italian. Students must record a news presentation covering three main areas: a current topic (environment, politics, health etc.); flashback in time (history); culture (cuisine, sport, art etc.) They comment and create interaction on the chosen topic. They cover each of the three areas specifying dates and references, and create an entertaining and well-organized background setting that reflects the Italian culture of news casting. In groups of two, or three in case of uneven number. 7 minutes maximum time. Here is an example of students in action:

https://youtu.be/rf-MG1XEsnM

The chart below sorts my ideas, and helps me push back against a common misconception that we often see an online communication as somehow inferior, and that “[...] an amount of compensating is necessary to make up for the absence of a classroom and the regular human, social aspects of interaction,” (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, and Cui 2009) rather than seeing the differing contexts of physical and online environments simply as different communicative modes of one lifeworld.

**Italian**

**Analyzing face-to-face and online synchronous teaching, and comparing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Face-to-Face strategy</th>
<th>Online strategy</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regions: showing slides on the different regions and engaging students in learning about culture. Assessment is subjective to students’ responses.</td>
<td>Regions: Students look at the slides on their own and study them because they know they will have an extra credit quiz on regions- we also talk about the regions during our Zoom session, but I do not show them the slides. Assessment is a graded quiz.</td>
<td>The outcome is similar, however, looking at slides together is a fruitful experience: students get to ask lots of questions. Face-to-face allows a little more time for this. On the other hand, online students are invested in learning the details because they know they can get extra credit with a quiz on the regions at the end of the course. This extra credit is up to 5 points with 10 questions, each worth half a point. The extra credit is added to their comprehensive final online quiz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills and practice of the language: Face-to-face students talk with me and their peers, and do group activities. They are given tasks, or are</td>
<td>Communication skills and practice of the language: Online students talk with me and their peers, and do group activities through breakout rooms. Online students love to work in breakout rooms because they negotiate meaning and difficulties with their peers. During a zoom session I try to give them at least three breakout room activities.</td>
<td>There is plenty of room for improvisation in both classes, face-to-face and online. Students feel comfortable expressing themselves in the target language, and know that they will be called on. I don’t often ask for volunteers, and prefer to engage them singularly each time, so they stay alert and active all the time. When in groups, their task feedback is individual,</td>
</tr>
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</table>
involved in debates. Group activities are abundant, three times a week. Assessment occurs through rubrics, self-assessment, and task oriented activities.

In student surveys it always is clearly stated that working in breakout rooms is their favorite activity, so I encourage students to meet via Zoom and study together. I find that both activities help to create a sense of community. Assessment is the same as face-to-face.

meaning that they cannot choose a spokesperson for the group, but must all provide answers.

| Activities: Learn a chapter, discuss culture, study vocabulary, use new grammar structures, create an activity, post on Canvas, perform. Assessment is a graded activity. | Activities: Learn a chapter, discuss culture, study vocabulary, use new grammar structures, create an activity, post on Canvas, perform and also have asynchronous feedback through a discussion board. For example, when students are assigned an activity where they must perform the language in front of the online class, they also must take notes and collaborate in voting for their favorite performance. This can be done in a face-to-face environment too. Assessment is the same as face-to-face. | The online activities are more thorough and easier to assess, in my opinion, mainly because I use more rubrics, online chats and forums, videos, and labs. In a face-to-face environment, sometimes I have less time for details, and although all students have a tablet or phone, I would still need to take the time to have them log in, access the info, etc. whereas online we are already all synched. |
| Assessment: 1. Oral exams with audio, video and oral questions 2. Online quizzes 3. Daily language assessment | Assessment: 1. Oral exams with audio, video and oral questions 2. Quizzes online 3. Daily language assessment | The outcome is the same. 1. For the oral exam, in both environments, students listen to an audio recording and provide answers to my questions, then watch a video (3 minutes long) and provide answers to my questions, and finally write the oral questions I ask (dictation), and provide answers. 2. Online quizzes are accessed through the Lock Down Browser application. They have 20 minutes to take the quiz and are tested on vocabulary and grammar at the end of each chapter we study. 3. Daily language assessment is oral: I begin a warm up with questions that I prefer not to show on the screen right away. I like them to rely on their listening skills only and try to negotiate meaning. After a response, I show the question. |
| Types of oral activities: 1. Fashion show: example on video 2. Show and tell 3. Middle Ages; 4. Recycling; 5. Me and My Sport 6. Culinary: example on video 7. Extracurricular Assessment is a graded activity. | Types of oral activities: 1. Show and tell 2. Culinary activity 3. The Italian me Assessment is a graded activity. I don’t do the other activities because the online class is for beginners only | The outcome is similar: students prepare a well-rehearsed presentation and deliver to the class. When in a face-to-face class, students interact with peers who react to their presentations; when in an online class, students use a discussion board and communicate their ideas. For extracurricular activities, there really is none in an online environment. When face-to-face, students get involved in events and perform the language without realizing they are speaking and interacting spontaneously. |
Use of text book to introduce chapter, vocabulary, and grammar structures

The outcome is the same: having a text book helps me give structure to their assignments.

Over the last two decades, there has been increased interest in what is sometimes called course-embedded assessment. Lori Breslaw, director of the Teaching and Learning Laboratory at MIT, in *Methods of Measuring Learning Outcomes and Value Added* states: “This approach comes from the realization that faculty are assessing student learning all the time—it is what they do as part of their role as instructors. However, they may not be consciously looking at student work products for evidence of what their students have (or have not) learned.” She continues, arguing that there is the need for faculty to “go meta,” that is: “[…] to analyze assignments, exams, etc. specifically for evidence of learning. This may require using more rigorous methods of investigation along with the usual ways of grading, which may, in turn, require training faculty or the expertise of an educational researcher.” (4) I could argue that assessing constantly is busy work, and that I have no time to deal with it. However, if I look at assessment as a way to improve the quality of my teaching, then it is well worth it. As I share my resources to maintain a real language learning environment, I want to underline that everything starts with a well-planned syllabus, and material that can help students see and feel the language, and really live it. The example videos I include demonstrate students’ engagement, interest, enjoyment, and even passion for the language. They also represent the learning outcome, and underline their abilities and knowledge. Task based language learning brings my students to an Italian immersion weekend, where they cook, play games, and experience living the language and culture; or has them contact an Italian company and conduct interviews that will help provide meaningful information; or has them negotiate meaning in groups, when assigned a specific task. Technology gives results through assessments like tests, quizzes, essays, and projects. It helps run a classroom efficiently and effectively, and really is a teacher’s number one best friend. Focused and personalized instruction that incorporates audio and video applications and feedback tools, provide not only a rich, social environment that students can explore, but also reach out to all students, in general. Engaging the students with the content they are consuming is the goal, so I invite you to be creative!


How to develop listening abilities with Minuti Contati. An experimental study with international mobility students in Turin

Micaela Grosso¹, Paolo Nitti²

ABSTRACT

Oral input represents a child’s first encounter with his/her own mother tongue, but often, it is also the first contact which a student may have with a second language. Listening, in this sense, constitutes the first linguistic ability and the essential presupposition for language learning (Leone and Mezzi).

In an ISL (Italian as Second Language) context, the input to which the learner is exposed plays a decisive role (Krashen). Nevertheless, the possibility of access to the sounds of the target language is often precluded because of the exposure to different educational approaches, lack of time and other factors.

The Minuti Contati project originates from the evidence of the scarce availability of materials specifically aimed at listening, and, on the other hand, the need for a compendium created for the development of oral comprehension.

The project deals with two minute dialogues, and can be accessed from any device, smartphone or tablet, with Internet connection and, if necessary, using earphones.

Minuti Contati has been conceived for use as complementary material to authentic textual materials, produced by the ISL class teacher for adults and students in international mobility, as well as for self-learning.

The aim is to focus on the lexical structures and on the words useful to facilitate learning in the various lexical fields. The path is structured in units, each related to a lexical field dealing with a specific communicative context.

These materials have been used for the courses of ISL and of ILSP (Italian Language for Specific Purposes), patronized by the Università degli Studi di Torino, addressed to adults and university students in international mobility, and held at the Centro Interculturale di Torino, in the years 2015-2017.

The project was nominated for the award “Un Libro per L’italiano – 2017”, Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia. Targeting adults and young people of A2-B1 levels, Minuti Contati aspires to respond to the immediate needs of different generations - not just the new ones - who are perpetually connected. The expression "micro-moments", borrowed from the digital marketing lexicon, is ideal for defining the concrete user-learning needs, and accurately conveys the underlying concept of the fruition of digital materials.

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How to develop listening abilities with Minuti Contati.  
An experimental study with international mobility students in Turin

1. Development of oral abilities

Oral input embodies, by chronological criteria, the first meeting of a child with his own first language, but most of times it is also the first meeting of a learner who is coming in the second language. Listening can therefore be considered the first language ability and the necessary prerequisite for learning the language (Leone and Mezzi).

Despite the fact that foreign language teaching considers the input priority since the 70’s and, later, from the birth of functional and communicational methods, the attribution of this relevance is not usually applied in a balanced education. This is because of the continued use of old methods that steal time from listening activities, as well as the well-known difficulties of finding suitable and complete materials. In a context of SL learning, the input to which the learner is exposed plays an important role, but the possibility of dealing with studied language sounds is usually impossible. This is due to different educational approaches, lack of time, discerning intentions of teachers that prefer a more freely improvised management of the class, a strict scheduling or a planning more based on the written text (Mezzadri).

The following work is based on the considerations from above and is proposed to be a support for the development of the oral comprehension, which is a language skill not commonly used, but is extremely important for the progress of the remaining others. Generally, ISL teachers have limited time for the construction of materials as well as for the listening activities in the class (which wastes a lot of time). The latter on the other hand, can be done individually: in this context Minuti Contati is placed.

2. The Context

2.1 The target

Minuti Contati, applying to young men and adults of level A2 – B1 composed of workers, parents and people looking for a job, saves time and wants to respond to immediate needs of the whole generations always connected. As mentioned earlier, the expression “micro-moments” refers to the possibility of the use of online materials. It is taken from digital marketing and is very useful in our context, characterized by a concrete need of the learning user.

2.2 How

Minuti Contati looks like a web app accessible both online and offline according to each person’s will. The most suitable way to use Minuti Contati should be a podcast channel: a place where .mp3 files and texts can be downloaded on one’s own device to always be ready for listening and reading, anywhere and without connection limits, with the advantage of a direct, individual and repeatable access.
The reflection on the form is subservient to the expressed needs of the colleagues, desiring a land of one functional tool but of simple use, pocketable as well as characterized by a low economic impact.

The material, as it is in its current state, has already been tested by teachers, holders of a lot of courses, who spoke about the motivating function for the students. Before the end of the scholastic year, it is planned to expand the range of the materials in order to amplify the thematic areas and texts with a perspective of improvement.

2.3 Foreign Language (FL) Context, Second Language (L2) Context

Minuti Contati is, it was said, conceived like a support to the intervention of the teacher, a database of audio files which is possible to be used differently and multiple, based on educational needs.

The product has been studied, projected and tested in the learning environment of the Italian language like L2; the main difference of the latter with the Italian language learned in FL conditions resides in the communicative context. This discrepancy conducts a variation of the motivation, first of all, of the student.

The L2 Italian student learns, through the various interconnected factors, thanks to the integrative motivation (Coonan). In *Linguistics and language: a survey of basic concepts and implications*, Julia S. Falk supports in 1978 that the major success in the learning is reserved to the students moved from a sentiment of attachment to the dimension of the target language, which proves personal interest for the natives and their culture and they desire to enter the community of arrival. It deals with therefore of a perceptive necessity, like that which you feel thanks to the instrumental motivation - useful to obtain a job, to make a career, to gain a title of study and so on. Thanks to the instrumental motivation, the student is accustomed to the language with a practical wish, but that permits him anyway to attain a certain efficiency.

The FL student, viceversa, is often pushed by the motivation intrinsically; this is based on the pleasure of learning and is perceived like a stimulus from the inside that guarantees the success in learning long term. The risk, for the FL learner, is that he doesn’t risk to deviate from the extrinsic motivation, limiting himself for example to fulfill school obligation or looking to reach the more closer goal, without giving a deeper understanding.

With the student of L2 is it however preferable to favor a communicative approach, proposing in the first phase a method distinctly situational and linked to the context. The teacher must do it in a way that facilitates development of communicative competence and the relative sub-competence, in a way to make up for the immediate linguistic needs. He must favor authentic material with diverse levels of didacticism and propose a syllabus cut out on the analysis of the needs of the students.

With the student of Italian LS, the teacher is free to choose methods pertaining to the formalistic approach. Proposing many written tests, looking first at the development of the ability of reading and writing and considering to adapt for the explanations of a frank language. The latter, in addition to saving time, in fact it allows going into more in depth and complete clarifications, distancing the sense of initial disorientation that is felt in the presence of the strange language and putting the learner at ease. The teacher of LS can normally choose to place little attention to the pronunciation, with respect to the teacher of L2.

Differently from the teacher of L2, the teacher of FL has the obligation to dedicate substantial parts of lessons to the contextualization, deepening numerous aspects of culture and civilization,
to permit the students to dive, at a distance, into the dimension of the target language and to
leverage their motivation.
A written test or oral, in any case, must be presented to the class with an initial global approach.
To arrive at the 3 phases of analysis, *syntesis and reflection* (Balboni). After having identified
the linguistic acts that are the objective of the lesson, to be found in the text, in *Le Sfide di Bablele*
Balboni suggests in fact that it is necessary to drive the students to the comprehension of
the functionality that these assume within the *ad hoc* managed activities. In addition to linguistic
acts, it is appropriate that the professor identifies the contents in the text-input and continue
grammatical, cultural and not verbally which can be useful to its purpose. In this way, maintains
Balboni, it is possible to gain a lasting rooting of what is chosen to teach, since the 3 phases of
analysis, synthesis and reflection constitutes a “learning molecule”\(^3\), that founded “the nucleus of
the activity of strange language acquisition: every text - every dialogue, song, fable, cartoon,
poem, commercial letter, film scene, etc. - that comes is presented to the student goes explored
through the 3 phases of the *gestalt* perception: first in global manner, then in in an analytic way,
finally making a synthesis in the most autonomous way possible and a reflection that allows the
learning to evolve in acquisition, that carries the new information to settle in the mind together
with the existing heritage (Balboni).

### 2.4 Structure

Minuti Contati was thought for use in matching and completion of authentic textual material,
taught and produced by Italian teachers in SL classes for adults and adolescents, as well as for
self-learning, thanks to its essential and intuitive nature (Sisinni). The goal is to focus on lexical
structures and terms useful to a facilitated passage to the various lexical fields. Minuti Contati is
structured in fact in units, each one involved with a lexical field of practical mold and relating to
interpersonal relationships. It is an aid to conceive as a listening database, which presents some
northern linguistic varieties. It was born with the intent of simplifying the teacher’s work, and it
is a prelude to a possible development and expansion based on further topics and levels.

### 2.5 A semi-authentic language

The language proposed by Minuti Contati means to deviate from the unnatural models of
artifacts and simplified dialogues, sons of the inexact conviction that it would suffice to submit
the input to the learner, as long as the contact itself is enough, even if this implies a reduction of
the language to models of dubious adherence to reality (Chini).
The variety of languages proposed are all the result of research activities in concrete and
standardized communicative situations, ranging from dialectical elements, markedly regional or
local, from paralinguistic and typical speech interferences.
These material have been used in FL Italian courses and Italian micro language courses aimed at
adults and adolescents and held at the Centro Interculturale di Torino, on the basis of teachers’
requests and activities; they have been amplified thanks to the instances and interventions of the
latter. The voices recorded in fact belong to ISL teacher colleagues, who firstly participated in
the recordings and subsequently tested the produced material, adopting it in their classes during
the years 2015/2016 and 2016/2017.

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\(^3\) Orig. “molecola matetica”.
2.6 Notes to the text

The product is constantly evolving, as it was born from the concrete needs of teaching support. Its construction, as well as any eventual subsequent modification, respond to the research and analysis of the teachers’ need. The presented dialogues were actually commissioned and tested in the classroom, and this is the reason for their thematic variety. Priority was given to useful and urgent areas of teaching, as reported by language training professionals, in an intercultural, fluid and polychrome context.

Next to each dialogue are reported the most complicated and characteristic terms of the vocabulary, accompanied by explanation and synonyms. The verbs reported in the note are all first translated into the infinite form and then deepened.

In the blue color are reported recurring and relevant communicative expressions, of which no explicit definition is given. The purpose is an enhancement and an initial familiarity, a stimulus for further insight.

Black bold terms are listed in the glossary beside the text. The goal is a lexical sensitization as well as to knock down the autonomous search time of words. Each of the definitions provided is to be understood as being unique and strictly contextual.

2.7 A sociolinguistic attention

The use of methods of daily communication, connected with the communicating reality and active compared to the measure of communication in life, is significant for a class of a second language.

Individuals that learn a second language, by definition, are immersed in the communicative reality that surrounds them and they practice the language in a situation, which is different from what happens to the students who learn a foreign language, but continue to use their first language outside of the classroom. The purpose of teaching Italian as a second language is therefore “the specific placement or reuse of instruments/strategies and proper concepts of language sciences to offer analysis of the relationships between the development (or the lack of development) between the semiotic capacity and familiar language (of the first language) and foreign ones of the school and the complex intellectual and relational development between the students”\(^4\) (De Mauro 19-20).

The importance of the social-linguistic perspective in language teaching is evident since “all around us, daily life is covered by linguistic scenes every moment. People speak, write, converse, in every circumstance they produce or receive linguistic messages”\(^5\) (Berruto 3).

To understand the specific environment of the sociolinguistics and the importance of second language courses, it is possible to analyze some extracts of short communication, taken from everyday life; it will be noticed almost immediately that the scholastic grammars and the linguistic manuals will not adhere to the specificities of the interactions examined: “in all cases it is about uses and manifestations of verbal language in which the language presents itself in

\(^4\) Orig.: “La messa a punto specifica o il riuso di strumenti e concetti propri delle scienze del linguaggio per offrire analisi dei rapporti fra lo sviluppo (o il non sviluppo) delle capacità semiotiche e linguistiche all’interno e all’esterno della scuola e il complessivo sviluppo intellettuale e relazionale degli scolari”.

\(^5\) Orig.: “Attorno a noi, la vita quotidiana è in ogni momento percorsa da scene linguistiche. Le persone parlano, scrivono, conversano, in ogni circostanza sono produttrici o riceventi di messaggi linguisticì”.
aspects and forms a bit different from the ‘correct use that we have learned at school, certainly not covered by the standard of the ‘good language’, the standard language” (Berruto 6).

The process that explains the lack of adherence to the communicative reality is related to the teaching, to the Krashen hypothesis on the learnable input and to those of Pienemann on the processability; indeed, a low or intermediate interlinguistic level would have difficulty understanding messages outside of their second language experience (and mother tongue, compared to intercomprehension).

Occasionally, even native speakers fail to understand some elements of communication, if they do not fall within an encyclopedia of linguistic and communicative uses and knowledge.

The Minuti Contati project, starting from the premises presented, is configured as a specific teaching format for the comprehension of audio texts, totally adhering to the communicative reality, not modified with respect to noise and to the elements that are commonly involved in the interaction.

Every linguistic manifestation is connected with a social use of the language; in fact it is possible to distinguish different varieties of the language according to some variation dimensions:

a) The diamesic axis concerning the communication channel, written, spoken, reported (Lorenzetti);
b) The diastratic axis connected with the groups of speakers;
c) The diaphasic axis concerning the registers and the socio-cultural context of communication;
d) The diatopic axis, or the territorial characterization of the language;
e) The diachronic axis, the linguistic use in the course of history.

All these linguistic uses are implicitly contained in most of the messages that surround the speakers on a daily basis and it is fundamental that the educational use of the texts does not simplify the aspects of linguistic complexity that contribute to the achievement of the aims of communication.

According to the different levels of development of interlanguages, it is possible to consider and recognize some elements and neglect others, making the texts effective on the communicative level and opportune on the educational one.

The Minuti Contati project is conceived as a proposal for educational use; the task of the Italian teacher as a second language is to calibrate the activities and exercises in relation to the aims he intends to deal with during the lesson.

We have chosen to insert some linguistic elements belonging to colloquial, youth and sometimes substandard varieties, highlighting the specific uses through a mirror on the side of the text and some explanatory notes.

The reason for the proposed use of substandard varieties, considered frequently unacceptable by regulatory grammars, is linguistic-educational: beyond the considerations of normative grammars, linguistic uses are obvious and it is necessary that linguistic education should take appropriate account of it.

For the same reason, it was decided to include loans from other foreign languages, commonly used and accepted in daily communication, without considering them a source of language impoverishment or a recourse to foreign affairs.

6 Orig.: “In tutti i casi si tratta di impieghi e manifestazioni del linguaggio verbale in cui la lingua si presenta sotto aspetti e forme un po’ diversi dall’uso corretto che abbiamo imparato a scuola, certamente non contemplati dal canone della ‘buona lingua’, la lingua standard”.
Within the dialogues related to youth communication exchanges, in situations of confidence and friendship between the interlocutors, some vulgar words are also frequent, commonly used within informal and amicable contexts of communication. As regards the diatopic dimension, it was decided to limit the scope of linguistic variability to the area of Turin, the city in which the experimental activity was carried out using the Minuti Contati project.

3. Collecting and analyzing data

The structure of Minuti Contati starts with an analysis of course progress data for the period of 2014/2015. The students out of the lessons and teachers were invited to compile a short questionnaire on the problems encountered during the reaching period (Nitti).

It emerged that the main difficulty of the students concerned operational redundancy in real-life contexts and almost all of the learners required greater attention to speech comprehension skills (Santipolo). Teachers have requested to concentrate on the extracurricular dimension and on more adherent materials to reality.

From the analysis of the course data, it is evident that:

- a) Students did not feel comfortable with the materials they were provided;
- b) Accommodation skills, especially speech comprehension are heavily underdeveloped, especially in intensive courses of communicative nature;
- c) Teachers often do not have the time to prepare the material;
- d) The contents of the standard listening activities often do not respond to the actual communicative needs of the classmates and deviate from the communicative reality.

Based on the collected data, the Minuti Contati project has been developed, as described in the previous paragraphs.

The project has been marked in different operational phases: reading and analyzing data, comparing with a specific committee of the Università degli Studi di Torino, the Università degli Studi Telematica ECampus and the Università degli Studi dell’Insubria, the drafting of the project lines, the creation of dialogues with teachers interested in the courses, recording dialogues, randomization (Nitti), the inclusion of materials in the syllabuses of Italian courses, the use and the collection and analysis of the data resulting from the use of Minuti Contati dialogues.

The beneficiaries of the project during the two-year period 2015/2017, were 194 students, of whom 40% belonged to the working student category and 60% of those students were international mobility.

The Minuti Contati materials were used by 13 teachers in 17 ISL courses, level A2, B1, although some were used in higher levels, up to C1. After finishing the courses, students were invited to respond in anonymous form to some questions regarding the use of the Minuti Contati dialogues. The first questions concerned the students’ profile, the level of appreciation and the approval of the course.
Generally, the rate of approval of ISL courses within the Centro Interculturale di Torino was very high, but, as shown in Graphics 1 and 2, the use of Minuti Contati has significantly contributed to positive peak growth.

Graphic 1 – Material approval rating

![Material approval rating chart](chart1.png)

Graphic 2 – Course approval rating

![Course approval rating chart](chart2.png)
If students are historically generous with respect to material appreciation data (Ballarin et al.), Minuti Contati has been a decisive extension of the approval rate because all the graduates have been extremely satisfied.

Another significant element involved the data on the rate of dispersion. ISL courses delivered by the Centro Interculturale della Città di Torino have always been free and gratuity has favored a high dispersion index (on average 20-30%), being adult students, well-educated or university-educated.

The courses are inserted in the afternoon, early evening or evening time slot and are marked 2 or 3 times a week, for 2 to 3 months, lasting from 2 to 3 hours. As often occurs in language classes directed towards an adult audience, if a student finds work, he likely abandons the course in favor of the professional world (Bettoni): the second language is spoken by the course members in an everyday context to live, and it is in their interest to find a way to sustain themselves (Balboni). The course members of Minuti Contati, as opposed to other representatives from within the control group, presented a much lower dispersion index, 50% less. The data is interpretable on the basis of life and work conditions in reference to periods of the year and economic cycles in connection with work offers (Bettoni), but it is also possible to interpret within the data a will tied to the attendance of the course in respect to motivation (Vandergrift). Among the aspects that notably increase motivation are materials and their use within the language instruction (Nitti).
4. Main Aspects of the Project

One of the major innovative characteristics of the project is the possibility to utilize the materials outside of the context of formal studies (Andorno): the course members can listen to dialogues of Minuti Contati with they are at home or not, using audio playback devices (Nitti). They can also match this with the supporting text which goes back to the notes that explain the language, generally through paraphrasing, the use of the synonyms, and secondarily on the notes that explain sociolinguistic and cultural aspects – local uses of the language, cultural clarification in respect to onomastics and to toponymy (Berruto). The adhesion of the dialogues to real-life communication (Ballarin) and partly the territorial context (Ciliberti), represented the strong point on a scientific level of the design and operative dimensions of project, because it allowed the teachers to face the language in its vitality and its declination in different possibilities, depending on the communicative context and its characteristics. The final questionnaire addressed to the measure of effectiveness of the project in motivational terms expressly cited certain strong points (Pallotti) of the materials, concentrating in particular on:

a) Possibility to listen outside of class;
b) Possibility to listen on mobile devices;
c) Notes and considerations on the language;
d) Voices and quality of the audio playback;
e) Communicative situations;
f) Methods of the teachers;
g) Possibility of self-learning.

The course members demonstrated an appreciation for every point suggested by the questionnaire, inserting as aspects of greatest interest: use through mobile devices (Elliot and Urry), the possibility of autonomous learning (Menegale) and the accuracy as well as the clear exhibition of the notes and considerations (Biggs and Moore).

5. Conclusions

If the appreciation index of the course represents one of the major indicators useful to the examination of a teacher, the other element of interest, concerning language education, is consisting of the presentation and of the result in the form of the final test (Phillips 100). Contrary to expectations, the students who used Minuti Contati, compared to the control groups, had reported significantly higher results for all of the abilities tested (Serragiotto) and for some of the integrated (reformulation, writing under dictation), as emerges in Graphic 3.

Graphic 3 – Testing
The use of spendable materials in respect of the communicative reality (Rastelli) has permitted the course members to report the best results based on all of the abilities considered on the test, in particular one can observe the efficiency of the comprehensibility of the written pieces and the production of the speaker (Danesi). The linguistic input proposed in Minuti Contati dialogues served as a reference model, like a script of a situational-communicative scene (Bazzanella) that can be reproduced and changed depending on needs. The most interesting aspect is that the increase of results and of presentations is parallel to a significant interest in motivation and the measure of satisfaction within the course (Ciliberti).

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This is a two-author paper, it has been conceived by the two authors together, but for a correct attribution Micaela Grosso has written the abstract, chapters 1, 2.1-6, and Paolo Nitti chapters 2.7, 3, 4, 5 and the bibliography.
Exploring ESP Learners’ Motivation: the Case of MOOC Integration into the University Curriculum

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Abstract

This research examines the problem of motivation as an important variable in language learning including ESP (English for specific purposes). Despite the fact that there are different approaches to cultivating motivation the author suggests considering the potential of massive open online courses (MOOCs) that may help language learners of non-linguistic specialties. This paper describes the results of the integration of MOOCs into the ESP course curriculum at the faculty of Business Informatics of the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow. The integration of the MOOC component in the ESP course demonstrated that the educational outcome in this case might be higher than in a traditional course due to such factors as the content of instruction being tailored to the learning needs of IT students, regular and inspiring feedback to the students from the MOOC instructors, the use of interactive teaching materials and a personalized approach to learning. Research findings illustrate that imbedding MOOCs in the university ESP course could become the basis for the integrated study of special subjects and the English language in the international learning community, under the condition that on-campus courses have been re-designed to incorporate MOOC-like component.

Keywords: MOOC (Massive Open Online Course); higher education; ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course; student engagement; student motivation; online learning
Introduction

Under the influence of globalization and growing value of professionals able to productively communicate in their working place, ‘the demand for English for Specific Purposes continues to increase and expand throughout the world’ (Dudley-Evans, 2001, p.115). The field of ESP addresses the teaching and learning English as a foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain (like business or technology). Teaching ESP has developed rapidly in the past forty years to become a major force in English language teaching and research (Hyland, 2007).

Russian tertiary education has always aimed at delivering knowledge and skills relevant to a profession. University students need courses that have an emphasis on practical outcomes, matching the needs and requirements of employers. To provide the students with all the advantage of modern university education at the Department of Business Informatics of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (NRU HSE) the ESP course ‘English for Information Technology Professionals’ has been taught for 9 years. This has led to a growth of the English language proficiency but unexpectedly it led to a decreasing level of the student motivation. First, this phenomenon was perceived indirectly through class observations with a decreasing number of students attending ESP classes, it was discussed in professional conversations with the faculty, and ESP instructors were not completely satisfied with the learner engagement. Finally, in 2017, when the ESP course was announced as an option, the number of the students enrolled in the course reduced by 25%. The problem considered in this study stems from the discrepancies between the rising level of student language proficiency and the lowering level of motivation for learning a foreign language. It also attempts to find ways to raise the engagement of the learners studying ESP course.

Literature Review

Motivation is one of the most important variables in language learning. The study of motivation in an educational context has received considerable attention (e.g. Bray & McClaskey, 2015; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dörnyei 20012; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Ehrman et al., 2003; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Kormos & Dörnyei, 2000; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Reinders, 2016) given their association with learning and achievement. Teachers recognize the importance of motivation, with regard to intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, which are based on the different reasons or goals that give rise to an action (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual and is related to the individual’s identity
and sense of well-being. Students are intrinsically motivated when learning is a goal in itself (Ehrman et al., 2003). They find intrinsically motivating tasks interesting and challenging; the reward is the enjoyment of the activity itself or a feeling of competence (self-efficacy) in doing the task (Bandura, 1997). In such tasks, students may experience ‘flow’, which is an optimal sensation of enjoyment and competence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Extrinsic motivation comes from outside the individual. Students are extrinsically motivated when learning is done for the sake of rewards (such as grades or praise) that are not inherently associated with the learning itself, that is, when learning or performing well becomes necessary to earning those rewards. (Ehrman et al., 2003)

Walqui (2000) argues that intrinsic motivation correlates more closely with language learning success than extrinsic motivation, but a student’s total motivation is most frequently a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Teachers can increase their students’ intrinsic motivation by providing them with learning experiences that meet their needs; and teachers can often enhance both students’ persistence and sense of autonomy by giving students choices. Motivation thus depends greatly on the context, people involved, and specific circumstances (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

In terms of ‘motivational intensity’, motivation is the effort learners are prepared to make to learn a language and their persistence in learning. Learners might demonstrate particular orientations but be weakly or strongly motivated to achieve their goals (Gardner, 1985). Gardner and Lambert (1972) suggested that integrative motivation correlates most strongly with measures of L2 achievement but subsequent research has shown that in some teaching contexts (e.g. the Philippines or India) an instrumental motivation was more important. The extent to which each learner is prepared to pursue the learning goal (i.e. motivational intensity and perseverance) is important.

Kormos and Dörnyei (2000) investigated motivation in relation to oral performance on an argumentative task. They report a significant correlation between individual student willingness to communicate, their overall attitudes to the course and their attitudes to the particular task on the one hand, and the amount of speech produced on the other. This study suggests that task-based instruction needs to include a consideration of individual differences.

Obviously, motivation is a complex and multifaceted concept (Dörnyei, 2012). What motivates one learner may not be motivational for the other one. In some ways, it may be more productive, to speak of attempts to ‘engage’ learners. Making assumptions about what materials or instruction will make students want to learn (motivate them) is hard. Identifying topics and themes that engage learners, especially if the target audience is well defined, is easier (Reinders, 2016).
Bray and McClaskey (2015) consider that the learners want to be engaged with the content and they want to learn more about something they are interested in. Engagement is the effective side of learning. Including what learners are interested in, have a talent in, or aspire to be. This can be what inspires them to learn something. The teacher should keep track of learner aspirations, talents, interests, and passions. This will help define who they are as learners and how they learn best.

Cultivating motivation is crucial to a language learner's success and therefore crucial for the language teacher and researcher to understand (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The majority of ESP instructors admit the fact that maintaining learner motivation at a high level is not an easy task. Research conducted by Zaitseva (2013) on the motivation of students studying a foreign language at the Engineering Faculty revealed that the level of motivation had decreased by the second year of study for a variety of reasons such as the students’ inability to acquire knowledge independently, unfavorable relationships with other students, the old-fashioned methods of instruction and the low quality of textbooks and teaching aids. However, the most important reason was that many learners do not see the benefit of using a foreign language for their professional development since the ESP teaching is not filled with personal meaning and it is often divorced from the professional realities (Rybuskina & Chuchalin, 2015).

Many ESP practitioners who work on the problem of increasing the motivation of the students of non-linguistic specialties already apply a set of tools that may engage the learners in the learning process such as the integration of video clips and blogs into classroom activities (Lansford, 2014), the using of mobile devices in the language classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2011), the organization and monitoring of group discussions (Halpern, 2000), the introduction of LMS (Learning Management System) in the educational process (Rozanova, 2012), the case method (Strekalova, 2014), the use of personalized handouts (Stognieva, 2009), and texts on professional subjects (Molodykh-Nagaeva & Chuwilskaya, 2014).

In this paper, the author argues that Massive Open Online Courses can be effectively integrated into the university ESP curriculum and contribute to increasing the motivation for the learning of English by the students of IT specialties, since the subjects of the courses correspond to their professional interests. MOOCs trigger huge changes in Russian education standards. They break the stereotyped teaching mode and provide a stage for new trends in education. The success of MOOCs is defined by the wide range of opportunities they give their diverse and heterogeneous audience (Gruzdev, Makarov, Semenova, & Terentev, 2015). From 2013 until 2016 only in NRU HSE 725,000 learners registered for the online courses.  

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1 NRU HSE Centre for Institutional Research.  
URL: [https://www.hse.ru/data/2016/07/04/1116628106/%D0%A2%D0%80%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD](https://www.hse.ru/data/2016/07/04/1116628106/%D0%A2%D0%80%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD)
The biggest advantage of MOOCs is that they are designed and delivered by well-known professors from prestigious universities such as Stanford, Princeton, Harvard and MIT. This fact not only guarantees high-quality instruction and authenticity but also provides additional motivation to students for learning.

Khan (1997) and McCormack and Jones (1997) have found that adding web-based elements to a course increases student motivation and participation in class discussions and projects. Motivation is crucial for effective learning, and as an educational tool MOOCs can help to keep up motivation through a personalized approach to learning, which is defined as instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences, and tailored to the specific interests of different learners (Bray & McClaskey, 2015). Personalization gives learners a sense of ownership and relevance. Kucirkova and FitzGerald (2015) point out that personalized learning is about teachers working with students to customize instruction to meet the student’s individual needs and interests.

The main feature of the ESP course is that the content should satisfy the specific needs of the learners (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Crookes and Schmidt (1991) revealed that if students feel that the course they have opted to study meets their needs and expectations, they are more likely to be motivated to achieve success.

The ability for students to choose an online course according to their personal preferences, interests, individual abilities, and competencies gives them an opportunity of a personalized approach to learning that suits their learning styles and busy schedules.

Every student has a unique learning style. To accommodate different learning types online environments permit the instructor to design a course implementing a variety of resources. In this case, students can utilize materials in the way that works best for them, for example, videos, java applets, reading materials, lecture notes, presentations. These resources are available to the students anytime, and they can access content and review it at a self-determined pace.

The rector of NRU HSE, Professor Kuzminov outlines that students taking an online course benefit from MOOCs as they can experience a new learning environment of the most prestigious and well-established universities according to their choice, which is no longer restricted to only one brick-and-mortar university (Kuzminov & Carnoy, 2015).

The participants of MOOCs take part in a global network of discussions on curriculum content and exchange learning experiences. The integration of online forums offer possibilities for the...
emergence of learning communities to share experiences and common interests, where more knowledgeable participants help others to develop skills and knowledge (Manning, Morrison & McIlroy, 2014).

Along with multiple general academic strengths, integrating MOOCs into the ESP curriculum can be a powerful instructional tool in non-English-speaking countries, despite the fact that most online courses are not designed as a means to develop language skills (Rybushkina & Chuchalin, 2015). English is the working language of most MOOCs, and this provides a potential increase of motivation for Russian students learning English in order to be understood by other learners. This practice directly contributes to the development of the students’ foreign language competency.

**Material and methods**

Experimental teaching incorporating MOOCs in the ESP curriculum was carried out at the NRU HSE (Moscow campus) while teaching the ESP course ‘English for IT Professionals’ to seventy-five Bachelor students from the faculty of Business Informatics. The participants’ level of proficiency in English was estimated as B2-C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The level of EFL proficiency was verified using The Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT), which is a standardized test from Oxford University Press. It is used as a quick (about one hour) measurement of students’ general proficiency, which is automatically marked, accurate and reliable. After completion of the test procedure, learners were put into target proficiency levels based on the scores they received.

The students were allowed to make a choice between a traditional face-to-face approach and an online course format provided by platforms like Coursera, Udacity, edX or FutureLearn.

As a result, fifty-three students out of seventy-five preferred to study online, though 85 % (forty-five students) had never taken an online course before.

Course selection should meet the following criteria:

1) the course should be conducted in English;
2) the course should be field-specific and correlate with one of the relevant subjects of the students’ curriculum;
3) the length of the course should be between four to ten weeks;
4) the dates of the course should be within the period of experimental teaching (February - April 2017);
5) the course materials should include video-lectures, texts and tasks for further reading, and tests.
6) the educational platform should provide the opportunity for communication with both tutors from the university organizing the course, and other students participating in the course via forums, chatrooms, webinars.

7) the course should be followed by the final automatically evaluated examination, test or (peer) assessed project.

ESP instructors shortlisted six courses that fitted the curriculum outcomes. Table 1 presents which MOOCs satisfied the criteria and were chosen for experimental teaching. ESP instructors also helped students to select a course according to their personal needs and preferences, conducted group discussions in English about the goals and rules of online instruction, and recorded formative and summative assessment results.

**Table 1.** Shortlisted courses for experimental teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The name of the course</th>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Length (weeks)</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Certification</th>
<th>The form of final evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet history, technology and security</td>
<td>Coursera</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>Final exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An introduction to interactive programming in Python (Part 1)</td>
<td>Coursera</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rice University</td>
<td>Statement of Accomplishment (Certificate is available after completing all 6 parts and the capstone project)</td>
<td>To complete the course the learner has to do all the assessed tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The data scientist’s toolbox</td>
<td>Coursera</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Johns Hopkins University</td>
<td>Statement of Accomplishment (Certificate is available after completing all 10 parts and the capstone project)</td>
<td>To complete the course the learner has to do all the assessed tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming in Scratch</td>
<td>edX</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>HarveyMuddX</td>
<td>Honor Code Certificate or Verified Certificate is available</td>
<td>Peer assessed project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Linux</td>
<td>edX</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>LinuxFoundationX</td>
<td>Honor Code Certificate or Verified Certificate is available</td>
<td>Final exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics and R</td>
<td>edX</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>HarvardX</td>
<td>Honor Code Certificate or Verified Certificate is available</td>
<td>Final test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. The percentage of MOOCs selected for experimental teaching

As the six chosen courses were diverse in terms of their length, the proficiency level required for the participants, the difficulty level of the material and the ways of certification, a rubric to grade academic progress of students participating in the course according to a 10-point scale was designed. The criteria presented in Table 2, allowed the ESP teacher to develop a unified approach to the final evaluation of the online course.

Table 2. The rubric for online course evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The length of the course</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2-3 weeks</td>
<td>4-6 weeks</td>
<td>7-10 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td>Less than 60% of the course is completed.</td>
<td>60% of the course is completed.</td>
<td>61%-80% of the course is completed. All intermediate tests are completed</td>
<td>81%-100% of the course is completed. All intermediate tests are completed Final tests and projects are completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to learning community</td>
<td></td>
<td>Does not make efforts to participate in forums and discussions</td>
<td>Occasionally makes a meaningful reflection, marginal effort to become involved with the group</td>
<td>Frequent attempts to direct discussion and present relevant viewpoints. Interacts freely.</td>
<td>Aware of needs of the community, frequently attempts to moderate the group discussion. Presents a creative approach to the topic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One point is added for retrieved Certificate or Statement of Accomplishment.
Following the experimental teaching phase, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which provided information for further analysis. The survey asked about the level of motivation of those who studied the online course and investigates whether there is a positive outcome of the MOOCs integrated into the ESP curriculum.

1) What are the reasons for choosing a MOOC as a part of your ESP course?
2) What aspects/factors of online course engaged you the most in the studies?
3) To what extent do you agree that your English language proficiency improved while studying the course?
4) To what extent do you agree that a MOOC component should be integrated into the ESP course ‘English for IT Professionals’?

Questions number 3 and 4 the students were asked to rate from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Results and Discussion

Initially, only 17% of respondents chose a MOOC to improve their English language skills. The most common reasons for choosing a MOOC was personal professional development, curiosity for a new way of learning and earning a higher grade for the course (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. The reasons for taking a MOOC](image)

However, after the course completion about more than a half of the participants (65%) admitted that their English language skills have improved in the process of learning the online course. In
their feedback, many students admitted that taking an online course is one of the ways to develop their English skills, for they expanded their vocabulary, developed their listening, reading and writing skills through repeatedly watching video lectures, reading downloaded files, submitting written assignments, participating in online discussions, sharing their learning experience with other participants of the course and completing other tasks required by the course design.

![Figure 3. Improvement in learning English](image)

Figure 4 illustrates that the most engaging aspect for learners taking a MOOC is inspiring and regular feedback from the instructors. Students appreciate when instructors consistently let them know if their performance is good or needs to be improved. It keeps students engaged in the course and is mentioned by 47% of the participants. The content of the instruction that is tailored to learning needs and specific interests is mentioned as a motivational factor by 44% of participants. 38% of the students are kept engaged in the course by interactive teaching materials (videos, presentations, lectures, etc.) which are not available in the face-to-face teaching environment. The opportunity to learn at their own pace and their own schedule is stated by 35% of learners. A personalized approach to learning suits their learning styles and busy schedules. Being involved in group discussions by publishing online posts and sharing their opinions within the international learning community is an engaging factor for 25% of learners.
In response to the question whether MOOC component should be integrated into the ESP course ‘English for IT Professionals’ on a permanent basis the majority (about 80%) of the students provided a positive response, which showed a high level of comfort with MOOCs.

A meta-analysis by the United States Department of Education published in 2009 reported that it was found some evidence to support the notion that blended learning is more effective than either...
face to face or online learning by themselves. Further, between online and face to face instruction, online is at least as good and may even have the advantage in terms of improving student achievement and potentially expanding the amount of time students spend learning. (Graham, 2015).

Experimental teaching with the integration of MOOCs at the ESP curriculum in NRU HSE revealed that it could be a worthwhile contribution to higher education. As Hollands and Tirthali (2014) point out, educational outcomes can be improved through MOOCs when they are integrated with on-campus courses or when on-campus courses are re-designed to incorporate MOOC-like components.

The research shows positive attitudes of students towards integrating MOOCs into the ESP on-campus course. The findings of the study reported in this paper indicate four benefits that the students may gain.

First, since any ESP course is designed to meet specific needs of the learner (Strevens, 1988), the integration of MOOCs can bring more personalization to the learning process, for MOOCs are student-centered and addresses students’ specific needs. The learning activities, which use multiple modalities to support different learning styles are specified by the MOOC design, which meets affective needs of students: motivation, self-esteem, and autonomy.

Second, in ESP course teaching content (themes and topics) should be related to specific disciplines (Strevens, 1988) including custom-made materials (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Engagement is achieved by the use of authentic up-to-date materials created by a team of professionals in their subject field. The use of technology is also important for keeping IT students engaged in the course.

Third, the students are more engaged in the class in case they feel a connection to the MOOC instructors and receive inspiring and regular feedback from them. The role of the ESP teachers is changing at this point. They become language advisers, having equal status with the learners who often demonstrate more expertise in the subject matter (Sierocka, 2008). MOOCs engage authentic audiences, including outside English speaking experts in specific fields, which often cannot be provided by learning on-campus.

Fourth, ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998), preparing the learners to operate in a professional environment. Moreover, MOOCs establish a learning community by using collaboration and by providing interaction through communicative activities representative of specific professional environments.
The results of the experimental teaching demonstrated that imbedding MOOCs in university ESP courses could contribute to increasing the motivation for learning ESP by the students of non-linguistic specialties taking in consideration such factors as regular feedback to the students from the MOOC instructors, the content of the instruction that is tailored to the learning needs of IT students, interactive teaching materials and personalized approach to learning.

**Conclusions**

Experimental teaching incorporating MOOCs in the field of IT as a component of the ESP curriculum was carried out at NRU HSE and was followed by a student survey, which revealed that the incorporation of MOOCs into higher education could bring significant benefits to students including the development of their English language proficiency combined with the increased level of their motivation to learn a foreign language.

As with any research effort, this study does have limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, experimental teaching was limited to a three-month timeframe, about 10% of the students failed to choose a course based on their specific interests and aspirations due to the available online courses schedule. Second, time constraints only allowed one university to be studied, which could affect the generalizability of the study.

The results presented in this paper have highlighted a number of topics on which further research would be beneficial. The sample size and scope of study could be expanded by engaging other teachers who are ready to implement MOOC integration to the ESP curriculum for obtaining a higher level of student motivation and engagement. Additional research could be conducted to determine the extent to which MOOCs enhance learner vocabulary, reading and listening skills.

For the last decade, Russian universities have been directed to modify their curriculum in compliance with new standards of technologically advanced innovations in education. ESP teachers today are motivated to integrate technology into their courses because it plays an essential role in their learners’ everyday lives. Integration of MOOCs into the ESP curriculum can significantly enhance the educational outcomes of university ESP courses in various subject related fields. The role of MOOCs in this process is to contribute to higher education and not to replace it. As Bill Gates reminds us, online education courses, and all higher education programs, only help those who are passionate and genuinely want to learn (Tucker, 2014).
References


Developing Cultural Literacy: The Contrastive Study of TV Advertisements.
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ABSTRACT
The teaching of culture is often at risk of being detached from the teaching of language, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of presenting cultural content free of a critical reflection on both the target culture(s) and one own’s. Byram has debunked arguments that limited linguistic proficiency prevents comprehensive and critical approaches to culture and advocated that the teaching of culture should be intertwined with the teaching of language. At the same time, a critical engagement with cultural content is key to respond to stereotypical views of the target culture and to promote critical skills transferable across disciplines and contexts.

This paper, expanding previous scholarship on the pedagogical use of commercials for the teaching of Italian, provides a framework for critical engagement with cultural content via the example of a project-based learning unit in which lower Intermediate students of Italian analyzed commercials in order to reflect on the Italian and American cultures and their representations. The unit: integrates the study of commercials within a curricular progression that prepares the learners with the necessary linguistic tools to complete the task; requires pair of students to conduct a contrastive analysis of two commercials of the same Italian or American product, developed for the Italian and U.S. markets (for they offer portraits of italianità or Americanness that differ as they cater to a native or to a foreign audience); and, through a collaborative
inductive approach, includes recursive whole-class discussions where the instructor poses questions aimed at facing the implications of the observed representations. This process provides affordances to gain a nuanced, complex, and critical reflection, far from simplistic stereotypical views.

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Developing Cultural Literacy: The Contrastive Study of TV Advertisements.

The case described in this paper aims at furthering students’ cultural literacy by engaging them in a critical study of Italian cultural products. The study is designed to elicit critical inductive analysis of the perspectives embedded in cultural products and to counter the risk of stereotyping and othering via guided collaborative inquiry.

While the teaching of culture, in different forms and to different extents, has been long part of foreign language programs, in recent years its nature and goals have been under increasing scrutiny, as practitioners and scholars reflect on which type of cultural literacy is germane to the students’ full responsible participation in the contemporary world. An indication of the relevance of the issue is the release of the Can-do statements for intercultural communication (NCSSFL-ACTFL) by the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The statements are rooted in the earlier drafted World-Readiness Standards (The National Standards Collaborative Board), that identify cultures as one the five prominent areas of focus (commonly referred to as the five Cs). In the ACTFL paradigm, cultural learning involves the study of products, practices, and perspectives (the three Ps, articulates in World-Readiness Standards 2.1 and 2.2). Cutshall argued that, in the teaching of culture in world languages courses, products and practices should be considered as springboards to access and examine perspectives. Translating the three Ps and the ACTFL paradigm in concrete learning units can be elusive.
(Blad, Ryan, and Serafin) but there have been scholarly attempts to operationalize the construct of cultural literacy that can guide curricular and lesson design. Barrette and Paesani, following a systematic review of existing literature, suggested that cultural literacy is comprised of ten factors, articulated under the three broad categories of knowledge, context of use, and process. Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel, in reporting the results of ad-hoc task force for cultural learning in Italian, list four areas for cultural learning: awareness, knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions (54-55). These models share a nuanced and comprehensive view of culture as situated and rooted in ways of thinking.

Yet, the teaching of textbook culture, a superficial presentation of unexamined or unquestioned information, mainly related to observable traits of the culture and often limited to the knowledge category in Barrette and Paesani’s model (i.e. excluding context of use and process factors), is common. Such approach presents geographical information, cultural artifacts, and traditions in ways that are not conducive to connect the information presented to worldviews and perspectives. Notwithstanding the obstacles highlighted by the literature (Chang and Yang; Li)², studies of courses that focused on cultural comparisons, on intercultural communication, and on culture as an entry point to ways of thinking indicated that engaging students into critical learning of culture did effectively expose students to cultural perspectives, beyond the knowledge aspect of cultural learning. Such approaches translate in changes in motivation and attitudes toward target language speakers (Acheson, Nelson, and Luna), critical appreciation of cultural differences and similarities, and “a more positive attitude towards ‘otherness’” (Li and Liu, 97). These studies encourage instructors to overcome the challenges of training and availability of published materials and effectively pursue a deeper approach to the teaching of culture. The present paper is driven by the question How can language instructors teach culture
as a complex perspective, in dialogue with one’s own culture(s), inseparable from the language, and examined critically and from a holistic, interdisciplinary framework?

The importance of making engagement with perspectives a primary goal of language teaching is even more compelling in higher education courses. In college settings, the involvement of higher order cognitive skills via critical examination of cultural content and of multiple, culturally-related perspectives (that provide different points of view) make world language courses instrumental to the overall intellectual growth of the students (Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel) opening a pedagogy of possibilities (Muirhead). To this end, the distinction between Our Way, My Way, and Their Way (Damen) is a valuable analytical lens to counter the danger of stereotyping. While the adjectives Our and Their frame culture as an element common to and shared by a specific social group, thinking about My Way emphasizes that “each individual culture bearer (you) carries around his/her own personal version of that social blueprint or map” (88). This distinction is key to set the basis for critical discussions that are sensitive to “the dangers of stereotyping evidenced in the transmission of generalized statements concerning cultural patterns and mores” (81) and to the role power plays in shaping our views of cultures. Adding this dimension to the three Ps framework counters the risk of validating “existing essentialized ideas of the culture of the Self and the Other” (Kubota 35). Additional tools advocated by Kubota are: “(1) employing a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, approach to analyzing culture, (2) exploring cultural diversity within a culture in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, generation, geographical location, and so on, (3) understanding the dynamic nature of culture in historical contexts, and (4) critically understanding the discursive construction of culture” (35). These four tenets, an emphasis on perspectives, and attention to the
Our Way, My Way, Their Way framework (Damen) are the theoretical lenses that inform the view of cultural instruction adopted in this paper.

In pedagogical terms, this paper advocates for a markedly inductive approach to cultural literacy learning. The experience of language teachers interviewed by Cutshall made a case for student-led research projects in which cultural learning derives from an inductive examination of products and practices. The inductive approach is enhanced by recursive rounds of discussion at the individual, pair, group and whole-class level since whole class dialogic conversation adds value to individual or group work (Kramsch). Among the advantages of an inductive approach is that starting from products and practices makes perspectives accessible even at lower levels of linguistic proficiency, provided that instructors design lesson plans seeking connections between language instruction and cultural content (Barnes-Karol and Broner; Byram).  

The learning unit described in this paper aims at having students conduct an inquiry on cultural perspectives while progressing their linguistic development; it actively seeks to engage factors ranging across all of the three categories that comprise cultural literacy (i.e. not only knowledge, but context of use and process as well) and to promote a complex, dynamic, non-essentialist view of culture.

**Commercials as a cultural product**

This paper presents the work done in several sections of an Intermediate Italian I course within an undergraduate Italian program. The aim of the classroom project was having students explore the different cultural perspectives embedded in a particular type of cultural product, pairs of commercials of the same product that were developed respectively for the Italian and the U.S. market.
Commercials have a remarkable pedagogical potential for (a) they offer a linguistically approachable way to enter a conversation on worldviews and perspectives; (b) they foster student interest, engagement, and motivation (Etienne & Vanbaelen; Pavan); (c) they provide cultural insights due to their representation of desirability and values. In the project described here, adopting an inductive approach provided affordances to practice linguistic structures and consolidate lexicon, thus sustaining the parallel learning of cultural content and language (Byram).

Pavan framed studies on commercials as a way to present a cultural view that is current at a certain time, “a cross section of Italy at the time the message is produced and broadcasted” (117). Vegna examined commercials to discuss views from Italy and of Italy, studying representations of Italy and Italians in foreign commercials and comparing international Barilla® pasta commercials to expose embedded views of family and Italianity, while debating cultural views of the moral acceptability of cheating, the value attributed to individualism or ambition, or the various forms patriotism can take, to name a few. Blad, Ryan, and Serafin describe a learning unit where the diachronic study of laundry commercials is an entrypoint to discuss the evolution of gender roles in Italy from the 1970s to the present.

In common with these studies, the current report is based on the belief that commercials are a valuable tool to elicit the students’ interest and examine cultural views. While the class project is rooted in student-led research and inductive analysis (Cutshall), it includes recursive instructor-moderated discussions (Byram) that brought explicit attention to the cultural perspectives embedded in the commercials.

**Design and settings**
This project was developed for an Intermediate Italian I course (second semester) at the undergraduate level in a North-Eastern University. Several sections of the course were involved over a period of a few semesters.

Students enrolled in the course had either successfully passed one intensive semester-long Introductory course or had placed at this level when starting college. All of them were learners of Italian as a foreign language. The course is part of a mandatory language requirement for the vast majority of the students, therefore the level of intrinsic motivation varied considerably, with several students enrolling in the course with the main goal to fulfill a requirement. Several sections of the course, taught by multiple instructors over four semesters, have adopted this project.

The project presented in this paper is well integrated in a gradual syllabus and is part of a unit where students are introduced to the topic of mass media and the study of pronouns. At this point, students have the core linguistic tools to make statements that describe TV commercials in concrete terms, but they also possess the tools to make general comments by using impersonal statements. The concrete aspect of describing what the video shows makes this project extremely accessible at lower levels of linguistic proficiency; more abstract conclusions develop from the bottom up, after having seen several sets of commercials, via inferences that typically can be expressed in simple sentences.

The classwork related to this project involves two overlapping but conceptually distinct parts at each class meeting. In the first, a pair of students presents to the class the two commercials they chose in a mini-lesson. In the second, a class discussion with interventions from the instructor serves the purpose to reflect on the cultural representations embedded in the
commercials, identify their implications, and recast the comments in light of the whole series of mini-lessons up to that point. The format is repeated until all pairs had the chance to lead a mini-lesson.

a) **Students’ mini-lesson presentations**

Working in pairs or groups of three, students are instructed to select two commercials for the same product, produced at roughly the same time period, for different international markets: the Italian market and the US market. The product can originate from any country in the world, but most groups choose Italian or American products. This part of the project centers on the inductive analysis of the cultural products. The presenters’ task is to conduct a mini-lesson of 12-15 minutes in which they show the commercials to their peers, help them understand the commercials at the literal level, and guide them with interpretative remarks and questions. The guidelines for the mini-lesson include a list of four key requirements:

1. Presenters must ensure that the peer audience understand the commercials at the literal level, providing support for vocabulary and contextual information as fit.
2. Presenters must engage the peer audience actively with specific tasks.
3. The activities designed by the presenters must address interpretations.
4. Any accompanying slide presentation is meant to be visual support, not a duplicate of what is said.

Typical questions that the mini-lesson leaders pose include: “Is this product consumed socially or in isolation? How’s the background/environment/setting? Which adjectives describe the product? Which feelings or emotions are associated to the product? What is the slogan in each of the commercials? Why should people but this product according to each advertisement?
Which differences and similarities do you notice in the (youth, family, couple, individual…) represented in the two commercials? Do you think the commercial has a happy ending or not? Which one is most effective for you?”. At the end of each mini-class all students are required to provide a brief feedback to the presenters and invited to take notes for future reference.

b) Discussing the commercials in a whole-class setting to notice patterns, highlight complexities, and question unwarranted generalizations

Following this inductive, student-led analysis, the instructor recursively introduces input and comments aimed at bringing explicit attention to cultural views (Byram). This step is essential in order to make sure that the analysis of cultural products is an entry point to perspectives. Whereas the pair/group work of leading a mini-class allows for a first hand, engaged analysis of the commercials, it is only through the cumulative collective work of discussing the commercials in class that perspectives can be accessed in their complexities and nuances.

The instructor's remarks throughout the mini-lessons bring explicit attention to three interconnected key points. First, they help framing interpretation within an understanding of the purpose of commercials and the way they leverage on the values that are attributed to the target audience in order to sell a product. This lens introduces the complexity of representations, perspectives, and views layered in the cultural artifact. Whenever the product in the commercial is a representative of one of the two cultures (for example an Italian car maker or American soda producer), students need to read it as a representation of that culture in a way that would appeal to the audience, leveraging on the audience’s values and desires. In this sense commercials are extremely complex in the layers of representations and perspectives included, offering ideas of Americanness and Italianity for American and Italian audiences. Although these concepts are
complex and fairly abstract, the experience of implementing this project in the classroom proved that they can be offered at a linguistically-accessible level if the remarks follow the view and discussion of an actual commercial. The questions posed bring explicit attention to certain concrete elements; although the questions and answers focus on concrete aspects of the texts, they activate inferences at a more abstract, critical level. At subsequent mini-classes, students are encouraged to recall their inferences and try them on new text, ultimately inferring a more general analytical framework from their initial analyses.

A second, connected point that the instructor addresses explicitly is the idea of the multitude of realities and cultures that comprise a more ideal Italian or American culture, some more prominently visible, others invisible. The target of the commercial is not a whole country, but a subset, represented according to the perspective of the people who created the commercial. Again, rather than presenting this upfront and deductively applying it to the analysis, the instructor poses questions that raise the issue in the context of the mini-lessons led by the students. The fact that one of the commercials is for the US market facilitate this task, since it’s easier to relate issues of representation and stereotypical generalizations of groups when they apply to the context to which the students belong. At this layer of analysis, the exclusion, under representation, or questionable representation of particular groups based on class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical and mental ability, and so on, is brought to surface.

Finally, and connected to the two previous points, explicit attention is brought to the perspective of individuals, the My Way version of culture, in Damen’s terms, “to make certain that students understand that the traits of the target of foreign culture [...] may or may not be shared by all members of a given cultural group” (82). At this point, issues of stereotypization,
identifications, and attributed values emerge as part of a critical comment on the implications of the representations embedded in the commercial. Again, the inclusion of commercials developed for the US market is crucial, as students, by seeing their own depictions in commercials, will directly question the way American youth is represented. In agreement with Pavan, emphasis is put on the practice of observing the manifestations of a consistently evolving culture, reflecting and questioning it.

In the final weeks of the project, when students have had the opportunity to examine several pairs of texts, “by locating certain knowledge about culture and cultural difference in discursive fields and exploring how such knowledge is produced in political and ideological struggles for power, it is possible to extend our knowledge beyond normative and essentialist thinking” (Kubota 35).

c) Final reflective paper

The cycle of inductive, student-led mini-lessons, and instructor-moderated discussions leads the class to engage into a critical examination of the cultural representations observable in the texts, it invites them to a dialectic reflection on the target culture(s) and their own, and encourages them to think about ways groups and individuals relate to aspects of culture represented in the commercials. The culmination of this process is a final, individual reflective piece of writing. The prompt is comprised by a first set of questions in the target language, Italian, and a second set of more challenging questions that students can answer in Italian or English. Some sample questions for the first part, in the target language, are:

1. Consider and refer to all the in-class presentations you saw. Which concepts stayed with you?
2. Whenever you detected a representation of Italianity or Americanness in the commercials, how were those characterized?

3. Which questions and/or personal comments do you have?13

The second part, in the target language or English, can ask questions such as (but not limited to):

1. How and what do commercials teach us about culture?

2. How do commercials represent a “culture”? Can we say that what we see in a commercial is a (direct) depiction of the target culture?

3. How do you feel regarding the differences you noted in the ways advertisers targeted the US and the Italian market?

4. Share your thoughts on what “culture” is, reflecting on the project.

**Assessment**

The assessment of students’ work is aligned with the principles that informed the design of this specific project: students’ direct engagement with inductive inquiry that combines language learning and cultural content, and activation of a framework for critical analysis of culture as a perspective. These three broad aspects are addressed in different assessment exercises: peer feedback on individual presentations; instructor’s evaluation of individual presentations in terms of structure and delivery of the presentation; and instructor’s assessment of the individual final reflective paper for critical content and cultural learning. Only the latter exercise is used to evaluate cultural literacy.

At the end of each mini-lesson, each member of the peer audience compiles telegraphic feedback to which the class refers as *a compliment, a suggestion, a thank-you-for* (a note on positive aspects of the presentation, a note on what could be improved, and a *grazie*, a thank you,
or the personal take-away for the viewer) and, after sharing it with the instructor (who can thus gain a sense of the class reception), hands it to the presenting group. The purpose of this task is two-fold. If, on the one hand, via this activity peers offer feedback and acknowledge and celebrate the work done, on the other hand, they also engage in a reflection on the mini-lesson, which encourages deeper engagement with the content and gives them an opportunity to think about their own mini-lesson, in the attempt to promote thoughtfully planned mini-lessons.

Additionally, at the end of each mini-lesson, the instructor grades the student leaders’ performance according to a rubric that takes into account research, active engagement of the class, communicative effectiveness, fluency, use of grammar for meaning making, and lexical choices. In other words, the emphasis is on two aspects, language and preparation, with the assumption that preparation (articulated in research, class engagement, and, in part, reflected in communicative effectiveness) will set the ground for the dialogic in-class reflection that will lead to the cultural content. Students are not expected to deliver fully developed critical content independently at this point. Cultural learning is the desired outcome of the whole project, a series of several mini-lessons, intended as collective conversation, rather than of individual presentations.

The attainment of cultural learning is evaluated via the final reflective writing that all students complete individually. In order to evaluate the responses, I developed a descriptive scale. The initial draft underwent several rounds of revision, each tested on the students’ responses until all responses could be reasonably described by one of the statements. The final scale includes four descriptions.¹⁴

1. Student demonstrates a superficial/stereotypical/essentialist view of culture(s), not rooted into the commercials examined. Student does not raise issues of perspective or
2. Student depicts an anecdotal view of culture(s), might make specific referrals to some elements of the commercials analyzed, but fails to draw general reflections. Student considers the commercials as a literal representation of a culture (face-value).

3. Student draws some general conclusions on culture based on the examined commercials. Student demonstrates understanding that commercials reflect a culture but fails to examine the layers of representation in their complexity and deeply question the literal representation.

4. Student draws critical conclusions on culture based on the examined commercials. Student demonstrates understanding that commercials reflect a culture in indirect, not literal ways and draws larger reflections on cultural representations or perspectives, questioning stereotypical representations of cultures and avoiding binary interpretations.

**Challenges**

Provided that the project presented here has limitations in terms of its applicability to other contexts of learning and is offered as an exemplification of the guiding principle, not as a directly transferable model, it is helpful to examine some challenges that emerged and strategies that can be implemented to respond to them, which are likely to emerge also in other contexts.

Most of the challenges repeatedly encountered during the cycles of student-led analysis of the commercials and class-wide discussions were of three orders: some related to cultural stereotypes, others to ungranted overgeneralizations of the findings of each mini-lesson, others yet to the sensitivity of critical topics emerged in the discussion. These challenges can be addressed with specific pedagogical strategies.

a) *Dealing with stereotypes*
A risk that became apparent from the first stages of the project was the danger to reinforce stereotypes or essentialist views of culture. Across the various semesters, it was common for the first groups leading the mini-class to attempt to explain differences in the specific pair of commercials with generic and simplistic commonplaces, for example statements that Italians have large families, or Italians love to feast on food, or Americans eat fast food. Cutshall shared two recommendations from the teachers she interviewed to counter this risk: contextualize and let students do ethnographic research. Providing extra source of information to give more context is a feasible strategy for many cultural topics. For this project, it was a fruitful effort curbing the urge, as instructor, to rectify what felt like misled interpretations, and instead posing more questions to let the students suggest alternative interpretations. The questions, formulated in concrete terms, nevertheless stimulated the application of lenses such as targeted audience, leveraged values, represented perspectives, imagined communities, aspirational belonging, and encouraged to avoid simplistic direct explanations. At the end of the discussion, initial observations that replicated unquestioned stereotypes could then be recast in different terms.

*Example 1.* Initial statement: Italians have large, traditional families.

Exemplary questions/sources that can be raised in response: How do you know? Let’s check the current statistical data. Who is the target of the advertisement? If the commercial does not reflect the actual reality of many families in Italy, why is it so?

*Example 2.* Initial statement: Italians love to feast on food, Americans eat fast food.

Possible exemplary questions/sources that can be raised in response: How do you know? For how many in the class fast food is the primary source of nutrition? Are there fast food chains in Italy? Which ones? Whom are they popular with? What is a traditional menu structure in
Italy? Are all courses served at each meal nowadays? Are there options for Italians who eat out for lunch? Whom is this commercial directed to?

b) Dealing with incomplete/partial observations and overgeneralizations

A second challenge that emerged was, for certain groups, a tendency to draw conclusive generalizations from a single pair of commercials, as if the sample exhausted what one could learn about Italian culture on the topic (for example, as if a commercial on a family’s breakfast could exhaustively exemplify the cultural notion of family or breakfast). Cutshall states that the goal while teaching cultural content is that students realize that they are learning a little bit about a specific area. It is a good practice that instructors make this explicit throughout the project. In addition, it is helpful to mimic that strategy that Barnes-Karol and Broner used to prevent superficial overgeneralizations. In their study on the acquisition of cultural-specific concepts associated to words, for example what countryside or farm mean in English and in Spanish, they searched for images that offered a cultural-specific representation of the word and situated the images in context first. Then, they connected each image to sequences of other images or verbal texts (other cultural products) to test the hypotheses generated on the first image because “as students encounter images linked to other images or texts, the tendency to turn one image into a monolithic statement about the target culture is immediately challenged as any image is just a springboard to a more extensive consideration of the cultural phenomena it depicts or illuminates” (Barnes-Karol & Broner 429). Similarly, in this project any individual groups’ contribution helps recasting the previous groups’ comments into a larger picture. In addition, it is helpful to keep asking the students to identify the target of the commercials. Finally, explicit remarks of the instructor bring to the students’ attention to other sources of information and other examples that may challenge or complete emerging partial views.
c) *Dealing with sensitive issues*

Finally, instructors need to be ready to facilitate classroom dynamics when students touch on cultural comparisons of politically loaded themes (Byram; Byram & Wagner). Although difficult (Britzman; Ennser-Kananen), dark, or painful topics (Becker; Zipin) pose challenges in the classroom, not only they are crucial to a true, deep understanding of culture; their avoidance would also perpetuate the exclusion of groups too often invisible in the curriculum. In order to mitigate possible tensions, Byram argues for exposing the students to different multiple perspectives and worldviews, without advocating for one or the other, while referring to human rights’ standards to escape from the risk of moral relativism. In this project, approaching all themes from the frameworks of targeted audience and with the critical understanding of the layered perspectives embedded safeguarded from potential tensions and encouraged to favor analysis and understanding over judgement of value.

**Conclusions**

The repeated experience of teaching this learning unit over several semesters has been rewarding. Far from considering it a comprehensive way to achieve cultural literacy, this project is a single point in a curriculum where cultures are approached with an inquisitive eye and valued as complex, multifaceted perspectives. For its appeal to the student body and its rich potential it has become one of the most relevant points in the curriculum along the path toward cultural literacy.

The project could be adapted to other learning contexts or serve as an example for individual instructors, curriculum designers, pedagogical coordinators, and departmental administrators, who seek approaches to the teaching of culture in higher education that view
cultures as perspectives, conceptualize cultural literacy as comprising knowledge, context of use, and process, and commit to engage in foreign language teaching with a critical lens.
Works Cited


Notes

1 See Lange and Paige; Ryan-Scheutz and Nuessel

2 The challenges that world language educators face in teaching culture are exemplified by the findings of Cheng and Yang in their six case studies of college educators from different language programs in the US. The instructors, whose individual understanding of culture varied significantly, struggled with the lack of standards for teaching culture in the classroom and between the choice to teach "textbook culture or reality culture" (171). Li described a similar challenge in English culture instruction in Chinese colleges, with lack of clarity on the specificities of what English culture means and which aspects of it are suitable as teaching content, paired with inexperience with the pedagogy of teaching intercultural awareness.

3 In fact, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages in 2007 recommended that postsecondary second language programs cultivate students’ “translingual and transcultural competence”.

4 Byram argues for teaching culture in a way that’s intertwined with linguistic instruction, “as a strategy for helping students to develop the interrelated linguistic and cultural competencies” (525) for translingual and transcultural competence. The explicit analysis of certain aspects of language and grammar - those that are imbued with perspective, such as the subjunctive mood or use of subjects - can be seen in itself a powerful “entry point for higher-level critical thinking” (Byram 530). Similarly, in Barnes-Karol and Broner’s work on images to learn about culture-specific nuances in meaning, the conceptual analysis of the pictures went in parallel with the conscious development of language in which perspective is embedded, language for “paraphrasing, relating another’s point of view, analyzing texts, supporting a position with
textual evidence, refuting an argument with textual evidence, pointing out contradictions among sources, citing sources appropriately, and so forth” (428).

Li and Liu found that the critical discussion of cultural topics in general had a positive effect on motivation.

Byram (2001) recommends that “linguistic forms and practice should be explicitly linked to cultural information to help students develop sensitivity to the meanings forms carry within their natural context” (Byram 527).

“Uno spaccato dell’Italia nel momento in cui il messaggio viene prodotto e trasmesso” (Pavan 117). Pavan’s intent was to engage the students with a four-folded purpose: interrupt monotony, achieve results, increase students’ engagement, make the task more engaging (described in Italian with the acronym ROAR, Rompere la monotonia, ottenere risultati, aumentare il coinvolgimento degli studenti, rendere il compito più interessante).

A variant of this project, not described in this paper, gave the additional option to contrast two commercials of the same product for the Italian market created in different decades.

Barnes-Karol and Broner described similar concerns when working with images with their students, noting that all images “are taken by a person with a specific purpose for a specific audience, and it is wise for instructors to bring this to the forefront in using these images in the classroom.” (427)

Similarly, Pavan alluded to regional differences represented in commercials. Here, differences are not just regional, but pertain also to various groups that comprise a nation, that share similar demographic characteristics.

See Blad, Ryan, and Serafin on gender roles and commercials.
Damen, discussing the emergence of the intercultural communication field, exposed the limits of textbooks adopting “the anthropologists’ approach to culture as a group phenomenon” (75) with the danger of validating stereotypical views of cultures and countries.

Original questions in Italian: Che cosa ti è rimasto delle presentazioni che hai visto in classe? Fai riferimento a tutte le lezioni. Quando hai notato una rappresentazione di italianità or americanità come erano caratterizzate? Hai domande o commenti personali da fare?

The initial scale included five levels, but upon testing the descriptions on the students’ work it became apparent that levels four and five did not provide much differentiation and were condensed in a single group.

NOTE: I co-authored a paper on this topic, currently under peer review, and I will reference it in a footnote if accepted.