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How to Develop Listening Abilities with Minuti Contati. An Experimental Study with International Mobility Students in Turin.

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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.
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.

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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 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, synthesis 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
Babele 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”, 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 a 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.

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.

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1 Orig. “molecola matetica”.
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 estratégias 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” (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” (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 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).

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2 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”.

3 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 linguistici”.

4 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”.

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.

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.
Figure 1: Material Approval Rating
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 decline 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.
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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