Cyberspace and Non-Avatars: Teaching Italian as Second Language in the Age of COVID-19. The case for WeChat.

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on teaching Italian as a second language. In the lockdown age which limits travel, foreign students wishing to learn Italian no longer have neither the environment nor the context in which to study a language. The lack of an immersion component has eliminated the classic distinction between learning a second language and a foreign language by making them virtually identical. Technology, via use of online platforms and the internet, has helped to avoid the total elimination of a learning environment by allowing students to continue to have a linguistic setting, passing from a physical location to a virtual location (virtual/real rooms) in which the native Italian teacher becomes the perfect interface for studying Italian as a second language. In particular, we will analyse the use of WeChat in a sample of Chinese students.

1. Cyberspace and reality during lockdown

Not much time has passed since William Gibson opened the door to the imaginary science fiction world of virtual space. Still, today we are ever more immersed in this “other reality” which allows us to be something other than our normal selves. Cyberspace had been our preferred “non-location” in which to build networks of relationships with the goal of fulfilling our desires and achieving the standards that modern-day consumer society has imposed. Consumption has become a way of self-affirmation in a global society in which the market not only establishes the norms of exclusion and inclusion of the subject, but also the difference between desires and needs. The young population, digital natives, have become clients and consumers of instruments and artificial spaces which allowed them to be accepted to the social network and have visibility. If, not long ago, we looked to evade, to escape big brother, in the XXI century we want to be watched and we ignore a new form of power. We passed from Panopticon (Bentham 36-37) to Synopticon: “Panopticon forced people into a position in which they could be watched. Synopticon doesn’t need to force anyone, it seduces people to watch” (Bauman 81-82) and adapt themselves in order to be noticed. This new form of power “is global in nature; the act of watching sets free the viewer from its location, and carries him, at least spiritually, into cyberspace, where the distance has no importance, even if, physically, you have not moved” (Bauman 59).

The technology evolution, therefore, not only allowed us to overcome the traditional concepts of space and distance, but also those of movement. Physical existence has been replaced by a
communicative one since the same communication has become a place, a setting in which dynamism is produced by the influx of information that people exchange. In cyberspace, subjects are the creators of their own settings that coincide with the communicative space. This allows them to not only insert themselves in a dynamic influx of learning, but also to transform the information that we want to spread. In a virtual model, the experience of space and daily objects used around the world can be created and represented by the objectives that one wants to achieve.

In contemporary reality this particular characteristic of cyberspace fuelled the desires of the consumer since the global market was able to create and direct spaces in which to fulfil them. The same identity has become a malleable consumable object in the virtual space. Think about consumer society as an aggregation that imposed identity paradigms on us in order to be admitted in society. Paradigms that can be achieved even without real interaction. In fact, in virtual reality we are able to introduce ourselves not as who we are, but how we would like to be and “it’s the teens who discover their identity, experimenting with it, learning who they are or who they would like to be, in this way offering a fascinating field of research on the understanding of the construction and experimentation of identity” (Castells 119).

We can shape our environment but also our identity by becoming an avatar, that is someone “other” than our normal selves. The participants of the virtual experiment and online communication have the possibility to select their identity, which can be tailored graphically and mentally. In the communicative environment of cyberspace, the actors of interaction become different people, representations of our imagination who we would choose to be in a different life and a different space (Fadini).

In any case, the identity construct by which online interactions is not a phenomenon which can be generalised because there is an important distinction between digital natives and adults. The virtual space seems to belong much more to the adult world (Ciotti). The experimentation of themselves outside of real life, the search for avatars is not the general rule of the advanced technology community.

Various studies have demonstrated, especially for teens, how the internet is not a different place but an extension of the real world. In fact, even in games which require role-play, real lives seem to give way to online socialisation because “people who live parallel lives on the screen, are nonetheless linked to their desires, by pain and mortality of their existence. Virtual communities offer a new dramatic context in which to think about human identity in the age of the internet” (Turkle 267).

This theory was put on show during the COVID-19 pandemic, which staying together and living on social media platforms became a need, no longer a desire. A complete superimposition between real and virtual. The only space in which to interact and live. Precisely because online interactions are born from real interactions, the use of the internet to teach Italian allowed for the creation of a real setting in which to execute the learning of the Italian as a second language (Balboni). Therefore, real and virtual are combined to generate an experience as close to the real one since “many, probably the majority of online users create an online me which is coherent with their offline identities” (Baym 35-68).

The Pandemic confirmed this theory in that it did not obstruct virtual interaction. It did not impede social relations like avatars, but it did impede real social relationships which were transformed in even more true and coveted desires of our century. This longing for reality has found in the learning of a language a communicative space in which to interact in order to create a relationship with oneself and with others.
The lockdown generated by COVID-19 has shown that some theories on the use of the internet are now considered passé because we can no longer consider the internet as a place other than reality, but as a tool capable of maintaining existing social relationships. The internet has made it possible not to experience the virtual, but to continue living the real.

2. Technology: From tool to place
In order to confirm these theories, we can highlight the real-life cases from our university during the international lockdown period. We have a school of Italian for foreigners and we are located in southern Italy, more precisely in Lecce. I want to specify this because Lecce is a very particular city for one to study Italian as a second language for a series of reasons, of which:
1) Lecce is a small city, easy to navigate and constitutes a perfect place for students.
2) Due to it being small, students can have a setting in which interaction with local people is very easy. For example, after only the first week of the program, students start being recognised by the cashiers in shops and by other service workers.
3) Southern Italy is traditionally recognised for its warm and friendly people. They are very open and often our students find themselves as guests at dinners or lunches organised by the host families or by the school staff themselves.
4) Being in the south there is a substantial difference with northern Italy. It is very difficult to meet people who speak English as a lingua franca. In fact, the feedback given by our own students when they return from their short trips in the week of the break is exemplary in this sense. Usually, they are attracted to famous Italian cities such as Venice, Milan, Turin. But, once back, their experience is very disappointing as during this period they could not improve their Italian since the locals, noticing that they were foreigners, automatically used English to communicate. This is clearly not what our students wanted and were often disappointed.
5) Lecce is called the Florence of the South for its incredible Baroque architecture and strong folkloric culture. The students, in fact, enter this folklore from the very first week and soon take part in it.

These points are very important in order to understand how essential, authentic, real interaction is for our study programs for foreign students.

With the lockdown we found ourselves having to rethink our program overnight. Above all, this experience was very interesting because it made us reflect and adapt the use of technologies in our teaching methodology.

We were able to observe this experience on a double track:
1) Students who were in Lecce at the time of the lockdown and who were in class with lectures 24 hours before the decision by the Italian government to close schools and universities and switch to distance learning.
2) Students who were physically in other countries, such as the United States, Australia, Europe and who had already submitted their application to come to Lecce, at the LUM university for the summer intensive program.

Regarding the first experience it was even more interesting because most of the Italian students present in Lecce at the time of closing were Chinese (D’Annunzio). This complicated things because:
1) As the pandemic started in China, the students had a different perception of the gravity of the situation as they had news from their families. Italy entered a lockdown in March when China had already been in a pandemic situation for several months. We went from having classes of students who felt safe in Lecce because they thought the danger was far away, to students, who after learning of the discovery of the first cases in Italy too, they panicked completely without wanting to leave the
house for any reason. Unlike the other students, they already had an amplified perception of the problem that we here in Italy, at the beginning, had not yet realised.

2) All teachers who teach Italian as a second language know perfectly well that language learning also depends on the native language of the students. It is a fact that Spanish students progress from basic to intermediate level within a few weeks, just as it is a fact that for Chinese students the work is much harder as there is an abysmal distance between the Italian language and culture and the Chinese one. The difficulties of a Chinese student are truly multiplied and very often we find ourselves faced with examples of students who after a year fail to make significant progress.

3) Precisely because the Chinese language and culture is so distant from the Western world, we often find ourselves in front of closed groups of students who live among themselves for their entire stay in Lecce speaking in Chinese any time they are not in class. There have been cases in which for the entire year a Chinese student has never been to the sea, the Basilica of Santa Croce, a beautiful display of Lecce's Baroque architecture, or never tried to eat a plate of pasta or a piece of pizza.

These reasons have always made it a very difficult task for Chinese students to study a second language and not just a foreign language.

In a context like this, you will understand that for us the characteristics of Lecce, which we mentioned above, were essential to put all students at ease and create interactions with the outside world and Italian culture.

As soon as the news of infections in Italy was heard before the lockdown, our Chinese students expressed their anxiety and fear of coming to the University. Therefore, as a school of Italian for foreigners, we anticipated the decisions of the Italian government, and decided to proceed with the course through the use of technology.

But which technology?

Previously we had used technologies to create ways of learning faster and closer to the students, such as videos, blogs, interviews with local people (Rossi, Maglioni and Biscaro). This was part of the adaptation of teaching Italian as a second language to the changing times (D'Elia-Zunino). At our university, for example, we have created virtual exhibitions of famous Italian paintings with role play in which each student chooses to play the artist, creating avatars. No less important were all the extracurricular activities that have always allowed us to interact virtually with the outside space and come into contact with the authenticity of Italian culture. Being in southern Italy in the summer program, the works of the students were interesting, for example on the symbolic language of Lecce baroque, on short films shot on our beautiful beaches, on our cooking classes. The students interactively presented their projects and reflections: photo shoots, film scenes, final projects that are planned at our university (Polito).

But, with the pandemic, all this has ceased and the difference is that the online has become a single space without the possibility of other interactions.

Furthermore, in the case of Chinese students it is by no means an easy task to select technologies as they use tools that are completely different from those of the Western world. The Google search engine itself is not a space they know or know how to use because they use “BAIDU”.

When we decided to proceed with the online lessons, we already had tools available that we used to complement face-to-face activities. Our tools were Zoom, Google meet, Skype, all applications totally unknown to the students in question.

We could have chosen to have them download our applications, instead, we decided to go to them by creating an environment as reassuring as possible. An environment known to them in which they could feel confident. For this we asked what the best tool was and we were told WeChat.
WeChat has thus become our space for Italian as a second language. A space that has no longer been “other” but has perfectly coincided with reality, or rather, with the only reality that we could live. What allowed this? Definitely the Italian mother tongue teacher residing in Italy who has become the perfect interface between student and environment in a virtual space.

The pandemic has consolidated the overcoming of the traditional representation of the space of didactic action: the hierarchical, vertical and triangular construction led by the teacher. Indeed, this overcoming had already been highlighted by Balboni when in his book *Le sfide di Babele* he proposed a horizontal graph in which the teacher became a *trait d'union* between student and language in a learning space in which “the teacher holds everything, keeps it in balance, accentuating and restricting the role of the two protagonists, student and language, with the logic of a director, who does not appear, rather than as a leading actor” (Balboni 104).

If we look at the teaching techniques of recent years, the image of the teacher-director is actually both the most faithful description of the dynamics of the class, but also that of contact with Italian culture. In fact, let’s not forget that teaching Italian as a second language cannot ignore a certain spontaneity of learning, generated by the environment in which the student lives. The direction of the teacher in fact refers both to the internal management of the class and to the management of the information that the students bring to the classroom from the outside world. Therefore, the function of the teacher is also to make understandable and fix that spontaneous learning that occurs outside the classroom. With the lockdown, this dualism between external and internal has just disappeared, or rather to started coincide. Not being able to physically leave one’s home, the communicative environment has totally moved into cyberspace. A fluid, dynamic space in which the teacher was not only the director but also the screenwriter of a new reality in which to continue learning a second language and not just a foreign language. Technologies, in fact, have no longer been a simple tool in use for learning, but have themselves been the world in which to live one’s daily life. The advantage for the teacher was that his audience, being young, was native to that world. This means that for the students in question, cyberspace is their favorite space, the space in which they are used to communicating and expressing their deepest selves, creating not identity avatars but linguistic avatars. An Italian “other than me” who, however, coincides with me in a relational space already widely frequented by the learner.

During the first lockdown, students, digital natives, and the teacher were inserted into the fluidity of the virtual space where “distance no longer matters even if you haven’t moved physically” (Bauman 70). In this fluid contest the teacher and the learner become floating monads surrounded by infinite data and information. There are no longer any hierarchical vertical orders or horizontal orders. In this liquidity of interaction, the native Italian teacher has the function of defining the communicative space, making it a space for language learning, but also a space for a linguistic environment. Here the difference between synchronous and asynchronous lessons is also substantiated. In an asynchronous lesson, technology remains a tool through which to learn a foreign language by following its declination. In synchronous lessons, on the other hand, technology becomes a context, an environment in which the mother tongue teacher channels the flow of information about the student. Following a visual scheme, they could be represented as follows:
3. WeChat. Lesson structure and applied methodology.
With the lockdown, the use of technology proved to be a valuable tool for all schools of order and grade and it was possible to choose between synchronous and asynchronous lessons, especially in the university environment. In this period, in fact, widespread use was made of flipped learning, a technique that was already used in our Italian L2 classes. The inverted teaching approach considers technology as an effective tool for learning. This is based on the inversion of training environments: students watch a preparatory video lesson and then practice in class. Flipped learning therefore presupposes a transition from a solitary and passive learning environment between the four walls of the home, to an environment-class of interaction and corruption of experience (Rossi).
With the lockdown this dynamic of the passage has been completely eliminated and the space has been made one and only. Precisely for these reasons we preferred to proceed with the synchronous lessons in order to bring together passive and active learning in a single virtual space. In particular, in our case-study we have built on WeChat a model of an “other world”, faithful as possible to reality. A model in which there was no desire to be other than oneself, to be virtual, but, on the contrary, the will to be oneself.
Finding ourselves in cyberspace, we took everything we needed to create a learning space for students in order to convey the Italian language and culture.
As a first step, we transferred all the activities carried out in the traditional way in the classroom to WeChat, maintaining the timetables and the pre-pandemic educational calendar. Therefore, the students entered the class, followed their lesson, took their break, carried out their exercises. What changed was the post-class. In fact, we tried to reproduce what would have happened if the students could have left the house. We asked ourselves how to activate the spontaneous learning of the language that occurs when a student is forced to enter into relationships with native speakers. As we said earlier, in a reality like Lecce, making the effort to speak Italian is necessary to survive as there is not a significant amount of people capable of using English as a *lingua franca*. 
This type of context certainly supports communicative competence transcending the linguistic one. By focusing on communication, in fact, we believed in the social nature of language that made us think, or rather, rethink the concept of situation. The will was to maintain a pragmatic approach to the language even in a completely new situation for all of us. With the lockdown, we preferred to not abandon the situational method, but rather to strengthen it to put it at the base of the linguistic register variations.

To proceed with this methodology, we took advantage of the fact that our students, at first, were all of the same nationality and lived, albeit in small groups, in the same house. For this, by applying the situational method, we have materially and physically created the spaces within which the virtual and real contexts merged together in order to allow the communicative approach of the language to be put into practice.

Basically, we have divided the spaces of the house into virtually real places: a system “in which reality itself (that is, the material / symbolic existence of people) is entirely captured, completely immersed in a virtual environment of images, in the world of fiction, in which appearances are not only on the screen through which the experience is communicated, but they become experience” (Castells 431). Wise and prophetic, the words of Manuel Castells have become for us a point of study and reflection.

This real technological context had the rooms of the students houses as its physical space (students lived in shared apartments). Weekly we identified each room in the house following a thematic order of language learning and communication. A virtually real map was created with names of streets, squares, bus stops, rules of practicability.

The level of knowledge of the student’s language was referable to an A2. Therefore, all activities were planned based on the starting level we had at the beginning of the lockdown, but also, in perspective, the level that the students had to reach, that is, B1-B2.

In the first week, the following theme was food, the supermarket, shopping, going to the pharmacy, going to the bar. How we structured our virtual city:

1) Room number one: located in via De Nicola and is a well-known Italian supermarket, Solo per Te, where you can also find international foods for exquisite recipes from all over the world.
2) Room number two: located in via Manzoni and is a pharmacy, Farmacia del corso.
3) Room number three: located in via Foscolo and is a very popular bar in the city. This is the Tutti i gusti Bar.

Having established the spaces, we proceeded to draw up a calendar with precise afternoon times in which the student could go shopping, go to the pharmacy, have a coffee at the bar, etc. In each virtual space we used WeChat to have direct connections with people and locals who spent time online with the students. To be clear, in room 1 the students could actually find the supermarket cashier to talk to. In room 2 they found the live-in-pharmacist and in room 3 the bartender. By synchronizing schedules and connections, the mother tongue teacher was able to reproduce the real daily environment in which student could learn Italian as a second language (Luise). This method was also aligned with the new ways in which the various businesses could operate in the lockdown phase. In addition to generating an interaction, in fact, the experiment also facilitated and made possible the online ordering of products of primary necessity, the home delivery of what children needed. In fact, by establishing a relationship with the experts, the students felt at ease in transferring all their actions from the real to the virtual.
In addition, we have created an open channel on WeChat to chat at set times with Italian students and with people selected by the teacher who could bring added value to the chat. Thus, WeChat quickly became an all-encompassing space for meetings, outings, experiences and technological learning contexts.

The rooms had a periodic cyclic rotation and the spaces were created by the teacher following the study theme. For example, in the second cycle, room n.1 became a clothing store, room n.2 a pastry shop, room n.3 a hairdresser. The hairdresser's experience was interesting as he also left the students with tutorials in asynchronous mode that could be followed in their free time.

Even more interesting was the use of WeChat to create fun evenings. Each room has been transformed into a place where you can talk, have a drink, spend time pleasantly. In particular, the students had organized a type of room in each room:

- Room n.1 a pub
- Room n.2 a theater
- Room n.3 a concert hall

Facilitating this type of approach was the fact that most of the Chinese students present at our university at the time of the first lockdown were students of the “Marco Polo” and “Turandot” programs. A program that concerns students enrolled at the Italian Academy of Fine Arts. Therefore, the mother tongue teacher found himself with opera singers, musicians of different instruments, artists.

We thus took advantage this opportunity to our advantage and in every room a student was performing while live on WeChat Italian students and interested people could follow and comment. Hence, everyday life was reproduced by intertwining chats, synchronous lessons, asynchronous videos, webinars, direct on a single app.

To strengthen and confirm this methodology was then the entry of the children who should have participated in the summer programs of our university. Unable to travel and therefore come to Italy, they entered our virtual classrooms and rooms. Despite having the opportunity to take online courses at their home universities, these guys chose to join our real virtuality project, as confirmed by their final feedback, they felt it was a more authentic experience. All the students, of all nationalities, confirmed that attending the virtual summer program proposed by us was like living in Italy. Through the filter of the mother tongue teacher, therefore, even the student not physically present in Italy were able to interact with the natives of the place and learn Italian as a second language.

The pandemic experience has shown how the use of technology can be a valid learning context. The lockdown made us experience a new way of using technology, no longer a simple support for teaching in person but a place which is virtually realistic. Real and virtual overlapped in a dynamic learning path that saw the participation of a multitude of people on a single platform. In this new context, the participants did not have the desire to create identities different from the real ones, but they were able to make their own identity visible.
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