Learning a foreign language through the making of a video

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Abstract

This paper intends to present a case study on the use of new technologies for language teaching, which presents different cognitive aspects and positive effects for language learning. These effects could be ignored if not observed in detail, whereas when observed they could strongly influence the attainment of didactic aims.

1 Introduction: definition of the didactic context

In this paper we will present some of the didactic activities for Chinese students studying at the University of Bergamo (Marco Polo national project). Such activities have been organized by the Centre of Italian for foreign Students (CIS) at the University. The student group composed of 9 people coming from different parts of the Popular Republic of China whose average level of the Italian language was A1 (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and the Italian course they attended was blended, consisting of main activities conducted while they were present, and additional activities carried out via e-learning.

2 Technical aspects

The e-learning aspect of the didactic program has 2 different areas: "Marco Polo: course of Italian for Chinese students" where the students find a lot of exercises that they can do by themselves, and "Marco Polo: how to read a text" for the collaborative online learning activities. With this separation, the different aims of the two areas are immediately clear for the students. At the same time, the students have more chances to use the e-learning platform (IBM Lotus Quickr) and use the collaborative synchronous tools to express their opinions on the didactic topics.

Besides this, the teachers have presented the software Adobe Captivate to the students, which has been useful for the making of a video presentation by the students[1]. Through the use of Adobe Captivate the students have developed and improved their language skills, and above all their reading skills (and other positive aspects that are presented further).

3 Language education features

The linguistic needs of the Chinese students are the basis upon which the teachers prepared the online course "Marco Polo: how to read a text". The Chinese students have a mother language typologically distant (Mandarin Chinese) from their target language (standard Italian) and Italian will be their study language as students of the University of Bergamo (above all, the students will have to face the difficulties of reading books in Italian).

In order to make students aware of some reading techniques useful for their academic studies (and, in general, with the study reading), the teachers decided to focus on two different kinds of reading of a text: scanning reading (or selective reading) and skimming reading (or global reading). These two kinds of reading have their own techniques for handling a text and gradually tend to study reading.

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[1] It is possible to see the video at: http://elearning.unibg.it/ricerca/videoletture.htm

In brief, scanning reading is the one we make use of when we have to find a single item of information such as a name, a date or time: in this case we do not read the text fully but we quickly look through it. Whereas, during the skimming reading, we apply expectancy grammar (see Balboni, 1998c) and we read only what is of importance, which summarizes the content of the text (i.e. titles, subtitles, beginnings of paragraphs etc.). During the lessons, the students analyzed the texts and applied the techniques through a metacognitive didactic approach. This approach gradually (from a deductive approach to an inductive one) gave the students first of all the acknowledgement of the aim of the reading, l and consequently the techniques that have to be applied. Through Adobe Captivate the students created a video presentation where they explain the two types of reading they analyzed. The use of this new technology made the whole work fun for the students and kept high the learning motivation, such as personal or internal motivation (De Beni & Moè, 2000), above all creating some flow experiences

4 Innovative features

This project is strongly innovative: even if it is inserted in a standard blended e-learning course (with its didactic program according to students' language knowledge), providing benefits of a technical toll which originally are not numbered amongst the software that is normally used for learning and studying a second language in a CALL situation. As a matter of fact, Adobe Captivate is normally used for the creation of video-guides in order to demonstrate the use of software and to produce role games and interactive quizzes. That us to say that normally Adobe Captivate is a multimedia product far from didactic applications for the acquisition of a second language. This feature is the main key point of choosing such an instrument: besides the language course, Adobe Captivate brought about a number of value-added features such as the great collaboration between the students, the usage of different media and language skills, the acquisition of technical knowledge, and a sort of cognitive and meta-cognitive "inheritage".

5 Collaborative features

The students' role concerned different aspects of the work: conception, planning and creation were the steps they took in order to create the presentation video, along with the teachers. This situation created a positive atmosphere among the students and the teachers, thereby the exchanging of ideas and collaborative work were promoted. Besides, a project like this one allows the students to have defined roles (everyone had their own work to do), and the

students can offer what they have learnt to the whole class, in order to create a high-level product. At the end, the video is a common and shared work, that has a practical function and can be seen on the internet by everyone.

6 Language education and multimediality

Besides the collaborative feature, it is interesting to discover the use of multimedia technology in language education and language learning (CALL) from a cognitive and linguistic point of view. Their use can, indeed, have positive effects both on comprehension skills and on the relation between quality and quantity of the language learning (Chapelle, 2003). In such situations, learning a language has a creative approach that has its realization both in oral and in written language.

As Gagné affirmed (Gagné, 1985) in the theory of the double-coding, the absorption of a concept must pass through at least one canal (i.e. auditory canal), when the canal is doubled then learning will be greatly effective and will be more durable. The creation of a video product affirms this theory very well, but, much more than the product itself, it is the process of the creation of the video that makes the difference between the several qualities of learning. As a matter of fact, during the making process, collaborative dynamics, negotiation and communicative interactions in a foreign language are available using all the media.

In this case, Italian is the second language for the Chinese students and it has a double role: it is both the media and the object of the learning course. Indeed, the software the students used has instructions in Italian. Besides, the course planned surfing of Italian websites and the recording of the audio comment was in Italian as well. The communicative medium overlaps with the learning aim, i.e. learning the Italian language.

7 Knowledge and cognitive inheritage

One of the aims which characterized the project was the possibility of creating a multimedia product showing knowledge specifications regarding the type of reading. These conditions allow the students to express themselves using both text and audio components. At the same time, the tutors can evaluate the real comprehension of the content they taught during lessons, the level of technical knowledge and the level of gratification that the students reached. Besides, this product represents a sort of "cognitive inheritage" for the Marco Polo students for the following year, who will observe several aspects: the knowledge level reached by their colleagues who noticed and listened to the issues and the solutions for them to be confronted with cognitive and meta-

cognitive models and who became part of a new community of practice.

Conclusions

It's possible to draw several conclusions from this experience: the expectations of the teachers and the students are confirmed. Above all, the teachers verified the value and the capabilities of a technical tool, that is flexible and integrated inside the e-learning platform. This allowed the students to became creators and not only recipients of information (from the phase of receiving information to the phase of creating and transferring knowledge).

The students considered the project interesting, above all because of the innovative and collaborative modalities which characterized the project alongside shared knowledge and a problem solving activity.

The suggestion of a new experience for everyone allowed every student to widen his/her linguistic and technical knowledge and discover a new way of learning having fun.

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