

15 Collaborative Italian: An Open Online Language Course

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Abstract

The focus of this case study is on the design and content of a module in Italian language, *Collaborative Italian (Collit)*, which provides the empirical ground to implement open and student-led learning. *Collit* is an online learning initiative which targets adult students with at least an Intermediate (B1) level of Italian. It is free, optional and non-credit bearing. Most significantly, *Collit* is open in content and practice. By exploiting the openness and the flexibility of the online environment, *Collit* provides the learners with an overall communicative language learning experience based on collaboration and social interaction. *Collit*'s central activities pivot around a wiki task for which the learners take responsibility for their learning outcomes by developing their own learning content in accordance with their needs and interests. That is, the learners actively contribute to *Collit*'s curriculum by using open online resources to create new learning materials to be shared within the learning community. The result is increased engagement, participation and involvement with the learning process for the benefit of language achievement. The aim of this contribution is to present *Collit* by focussing on its design, its content and practice and to reflect on the affordances and limitations that have emerged from it.

Keywords: openness, collaboration, learner-generated content, online learning, MOOC, language learning.

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1. Context

The purpose of this contribution is to present a case study in which pedagogical practices based on the use of Web 2.0 applications, such as wikis, are applied in the context of language learning. The attention is on the design and content of an open online module in Italian language, called *Collaborative Italian* (*Collit*), which provides the empirical context for adopting a student-led learning approach while experimenting with openness.

The notion of openness has received increasing attention in education with the development of Open Courses, Open Educational Resources and Open Access. The recent rise and spread of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and the pedagogical model that they promote (Cormier & Siemens, 2010) are amongst the latest expressions of such a trend.

MOOCs recruit globally, are taught online and require no institutional affiliation. They are available to any individuals wishing to register regardless of their professional or academic experience. MOOCs promote participatory and connectivist pedagogies which exploit the openness and the multimodality of the online environment for building connections and for constructing and sharing knowledge.

Although *Collit* is not a fully-fledged MOOC, mainly because of its small size – a few regular participants against the hundreds in MOOCs (the term T(iny)OOCs (Goria, 2012) may be more appropriate), it incorporates several features of MOOC pedagogy. In particular, like a MOOC, *Collit* is open in content and practice.

Collit is an online language module run by the Language Centre (LC), School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies at the University of Nottingham (UoN). The LC offers three levels of face-to-face inter faculty modules in Italian: Beginners (A1); Elementary (A2) and Intermediate (B1). Additionally, with *Collit*, the LC currently teaches learners with levels of Italian above Intermediate (B1).

Collit's rationale lies in the need to expand the LC Italian provision and cater for

more advanced learners. Every academic year there is a small group of learners, especially exchange students, who come to UoN and wish to take Italian as part of their study programme. Their linguistic proficiency varies greatly depending on whether they have studied Italian at university or in secondary school, or whether they have learnt the language in informal contexts, for instance by living in Italy or by coming from families in which one of the parents is Italian. Different learning backgrounds lead to the development of different skills. Generally, those who learn Italian in informal contexts are more proficient in speaking and listening than those who take formal lessons and who perform better in writing and grammatical accuracy.

As the LC offered only the three stages listed above, these advanced learners were unable to pursue their interest in the Italian language, because their number was insufficient to financially justify fully-fledged face-to-face modules. Thus, the LC regularly faced the dilemma of whether to turn these learners away or attempt to accommodate them within the existing provision. *Collit* was conceived to address these problems: to cater for these advanced learners, to cope with mixed abilities and to affect minimally the institutional resources.

Collit complies with the following institutional criteria:

- it is a 12 week module to fit the university schedule;
- it is an inter faculty module offered to learners from a diverse range of study programmes at all levels of their studies;
- it is offered as an elective module.

In addition, *Collit* is non-credit bearing, allowing autonomy from institutional requirements such as high-stakes assessment, a pre-defined curriculum to fit in with other modules, minimum number of teaching hours, and so forth¹.

1. It should be noted that after two semesters (Autumn and Spring Semesters 2011-2012) as non-credit bearing, *Collit* became a credit-bearing module in the academic year 2012-2013. This changed its nature significantly. A discussion of the impact of such a change is beyond the scope of this contribution.

It is taught entirely online to avoid difficulties with classroom and timetable availability, and is offered openly to off campus participants not registered at UoN. *Collit* does not include formal assessment. Instead, all *Collit* activities incorporate strategies of learning oriented and less hierarchical forms of assessment (Carless, 2007).

Finally, the relatively high language level required by *Collit* imposes restrictions on the number of eligible participants, who are recruited on the basis of an interview with the teacher who evaluates the level of comprehension and fluency in the target language. So far, *Collit*'s regular participants have been one ex-student, three registered students of UoN, one retired and one in-service member of staff.

2. Intended outcomes: *Collit*'s learning outcomes and pedagogical objectives

The context described above led to the design of a flexible module which runs online, recruits openly, is optional and non-credit bearing. It is also open-curricular and develops entirely from the learners' participation and contributions. *Collit* has several student-controlled learning outcomes (LOs):

1. further development of language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing);
2. improved ability to deal adequately with real-life situations in the target language;
3. improved awareness of several aspects of the Italian culture and society;
4. consolidated and extended knowledge of the grammar of Italian.

The overarching objective of *Collit* is to ensure learners' achievement of the LOs listed above through an informal communicative experience. This is done by

adopting an approach to course design which promotes collaboration, knowledge sharing, social interaction, learning which is personally relevant, self and peer assessment, and learner-teacher mutual respect and openness (Toohey, 1999). Thus, advocating the role of the teacher as the source of guidance for learners' own initiative, *Collit's* intended pedagogical objectives (IPOs) are:

1. to enhance communication through social interaction and collaboration;
2. to encourage self and peer assessment;
3. to improve ownership of learning;
4. to increase knowledge which is personally relevant.

These are achieved by exploiting the openness and flexibility of the online environment mainly through wiki activities and synchronous voiced communication.

The wiki provides the learners with the environment to improve their language skills and awareness (LOs above) through individual practice as well as sharing and collaboration (IPO 1).

For the wiki task the learners are required to search for, evaluate, select and share online resources to develop themes in accordance with their own needs and interests. Beyond providing the participants with a broadly defined initial structure of suggested themes, the wiki is open-ended and develops entirely from student-led learning activities. In this sense *Collit* implements the *community-as-curriculum* model (Cormier & Siemens, 2010, p. 35) of open courses such as MOOCs, by which the position of the curriculum is inverted from being a prerequisite to being the output of the module. As in a MOOC, in *Collit*, under the educator's guidance, "learners are expected to actively contribute to the formation of the curriculum through conversations, discussions and interactions" (ibid, p. 36) through sharing resources and creating new ones. In such a context the learners determine their own learning trajectories (IPOs 3 and 4 above) on

the basis of their existing skills and those to be improved. This addresses the issue of mixed abilities mentioned earlier.

The open-ended nature of *Collit* is maximised by engaging the participants not only in discerning content and resources, but also in taking up the role of teachers and creating new materials and activities for their peers' learning. The process of creating rather than responding to questions leads to deep learning (Draper, 2009) and increases the participants' ownership of the learning process (IPOs 3 and 4).

As the wiki allows all users to have equal and open authoring access, it ensures that all learning content is available for follow-up activities of self and peer assessment (IPO 2).

Sharing and collaboration in *Collit* is also supported by synchronous voiced *Skype* tutorials held in a group. The aim of these meetings is to provide speaking practice (LOs above), increase social presence, provide timely teacher support and stimulate learners' initiative¹.

3. Nuts and bolts

Collit develops around a website, *Skype* tutorials and a wiki. *Collit's* website is used by the teacher to deliver information and instructions about the module. A free website creator (www.weebly.com) is used, one which allows the creation of websites which are simple to design, build and maintain.

The *Skype* tutorials run once a week using *Skype Premium* because it supports group video chats. *Skype* voice only is also used when connection problems arise. Other video conferencing platforms have been tested, but *Skype* has turned out to be the most effective and easy to use.

1. The participants also keep a reflective journal of their experience providing opportunities for self-evaluation. The learners choose the format of their journal. As the journal has not played a key role in *Collit* so far, it will not be discussed in this contribution.

Pbworks (www.pbworks.com) is *Collit*'s wiki platform. The learners have full editor access in order to be able to populate it with their chosen learning resources and those newly created. Pbworks was selected because of its accessible design and editing tools.

4. In practice

This section presents some activities of *Collit* as the practical implementation of the *community-as-curriculum* model and as practical examples of learner-generated teaching content, i.e. exercises for language practice.

4.1. Community-as-curriculum

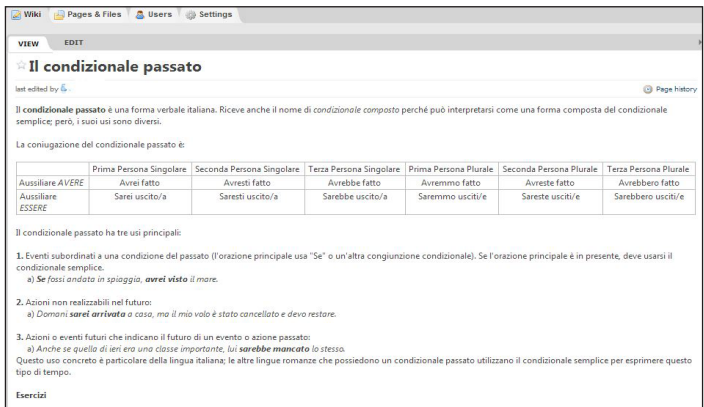
As mentioned earlier, the learners populate the wiki with content of their choice after negotiation with the teacher. The topics are explored and discussed during the *Skype* sessions and subsequently the learners look for relevant resources and create new related activities.

In one instance, during a *Skype* tutorial, the conversation verged towards the topic of social networks and one learner was particularly interested in the development of *Facebook* and the biography of Mark Zuckerberg. It was agreed that he would explore this topic as part of an individual work task – to be carried out during the first three weeks of the module¹. First, the learner produced and published an essay on the chosen topic. The teacher gave feedback on his work which was again openly discussed in a *Skype* session. Second, as the learner mentioned a number of additional resources on the topic, he was encouraged to explore them further. The learner found a 50 minute interview on *YouTube* about Mark Zuckerberg and used it to produce further written work. It is worth pointing out that this particular learner's level of spoken Italian was very high, while he needed to work on his writing skills.

1. It is important to clarify that, although the students begin participating in *Collit* with individual tasks, all resources are shared and all students are encouraged to view and comment on each other's work.

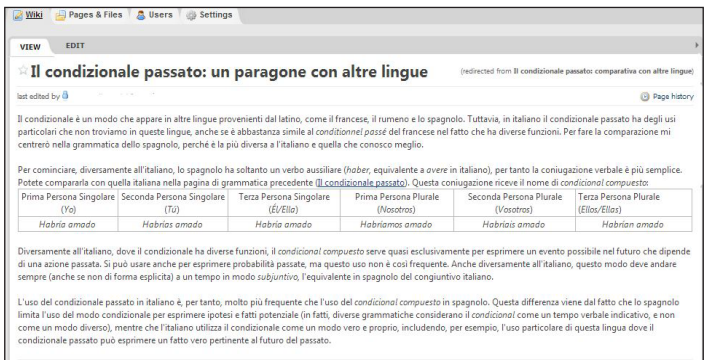
A similar approach is used for the study of grammar. All learners negotiate with the teacher the grammar topics of their choice and look for and create new grammar resources. One learner created and shared a new wiki page with the explanation of the grammatical rules of the use of the past conditional (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A learner's explanations on a wiki page



In addition, the same learner decided to carry out a small comparative study between the use of the same verb form in Italian and in her native language (Figure 2), and finally shared it with the others.

Figure 2. A learner's contribution



4.2. Learner-generated teaching resources

The next example illustrates a set of learning events in which the learners engaged in searching for content and in creating new activities, which were later used by the other participants as study materials.

After a visit to Italy, one learner chose to share one aspect of his experience with the other participants. He did so by selecting a relevant *YouTube* video and by creating a set of related comprehension questions. Additional questions were also posted by the teacher (circled). Both media and set of questions were published on the wiki for the other learners to view and complete the task respectively (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Study materials produced by a learner

The screenshot shows a wiki page titled "Cappella degli Scrovegni" with a "VIEW" and "EDIT" header. Below the title, it says "last edited by [user icon]". The main content is a YouTube video player with the title "Voyager-Cappella degli Scrovegni Padova". The video player shows a still from a video of the Scrovegni Chapel frescoes, with a play button in the center. Below the video player, there is a list of six comprehension questions in Italian. The last two questions are circled in red.

Esercizio di comprensione orale. Guardate il video e trovate le risposte per le seguenti domande:

Voyager-Cappella degli Scrovegni Padova

1. Chi è l'autore degli affreschi?
 2. Dove si trova la cappella?
 3. Chi era il committente e quale sono stati i suoi motivi?
 4. Chi si bacia nella pittura?
 5. Che cosa è illuminata dalla luce a Natale, l'8 settembre e il 25 marzo?
 6. Dove si trova la croce templare?

Altre domande
 Cosa ci dice il video della cometa di Betlemme?
 Quali altri misteri si nascondono nella Cappella?

The responses of the participants were different in nature. Some language corrections were suggested, the comprehension questions were answered and new related resources and learner-created activities were added: one learner added a new related *YouTube* video and a new set of comprehension questions; another learner added a *PowerPoint* presentation on the work of an Italian painter and a related piece of written work, generating additional participation and learning resources. In this instance, the teacher also took the role of the learner by completing all comprehension tasks, providing model answers for self-assessment. Finally, all learners worked collaboratively to create a glossary of the vocabulary related to the topic Art.

Similarly, with reference to grammar, one learner chose to work on the use of the Italian past tenses. She looked for an appropriate text and created a Fill in the Gap exercise (Figure 4). This time the teacher intervened with model answers after all learners had attempted the exercise and had given feedback on each other's answers.

Figure 4. Gap-fill created by a learner

The screenshot shows a Wiki page titled "Esercizio: La volpe_". It contains instructions for a gap-fill exercise and a text passage with several verbs in parentheses to be conjugated in the past tense. The text is titled "LA VOLPE E LA CIGOGNA" by Esopo. The exercise asks to complete the text with verbs from a list: (essere), (vedere), (invitare), (leccare), (riuscire), (dire), (rispondere), (sedere), (tuffare), and (tirare).

WIKI Pages & Files Users Settings

VIEW **EDIT**

Esercizio: La volpe_

last edited by [user icon]

Suggerimento su come svolgere e caricare (upload-are) l'esercizio:

1. fate "taglia e incolla" del testo qui sotto su un file di "word"
2. fate l'esercizio e salvate il documento nominandolo per esempio "la volpe e la cigogna (Cecilia)"
3. caricate il documento nel wiki (si puo' fare dal tab "Pages and Files"
4. poi aggiungete nella colonna **Risposte** "completato da..." creando un hyperlink al vostro documento.
5. se avete bisogno di aiuto scrivetemi !!!!

LA VOLPE E LA CIGOGNA
di Esopo

Completate il testo con i verbi al passato.

La volpe e la cigogna (**essere**) buone amiche. Un tempo si (**vedere**) spesso, e un giorno la volpe (**invitare**) a pranzo la cigogna; per farle uno scherzo, le (**servire**) della minestrina unascodella poco profonda: la volpe (**leccare**) facilmente, ma la cigogna (**riuscire**) soltanto a bagnare la punta del lungo becco e dopo pranzo (**essere**) più affamata di prima.

- Mi dispiace - (**dire**) la volpe - La minestra non è di tuo gradimento?
- Oh, non ti preoccupare: spero anzi che vorrai restituirmi la visita e che verrai presto a pranzo da me - (**rispondere**) la cigogna.

Così (**essere**) stabilito il giorno in cui la volpe sarebbe andata a trovare la cigogna.
..... (**sedere**) a tavola, mai i cibi (**essere**) preparati in vasi dal collo lungo e stretto nei quali la volpe non (**riuscire**) ad infilare il muso: tutto ciò che (**potere**) fare (**essere**) leccare l'esterno del vaso, mentre la cigogna (**tuffare**) il becco nel brodo e ne (**tirare**) fuori saporitissime rane.

- Non ti piace, cara, ciò che ho preparato?
..... (**essere**) così che la volpe burlona (**essere**) a sua volta presa in giro dalla cigogna.

Risposte

- 1) completato da Roxana
- 2) completato da Adriano
- 3) completato da Maria
- 4) completato da Joanne

5. Conclusion: Open *Collit*

It was mentioned earlier that in addition to the learning outcomes, *Collit* has several pedagogical objectives (cf. IPOs in section 2). These are achieved by adopting features of the open pedagogical model promoted by MOOCs (Cormier & Siemens, 2010). Like a MOOC, *Collit* embraces openness in a number of ways. *Collit*:

- is taught online and recruits openly, provided the learners have the appropriate level of linguistic competence, aiming to ensure variety and continuity in the social interaction;
- relies on freely accessible online applications keeping the impact of the running of the module to the minimum;
- relies on existing open online resources and generates new ones, ensuring the benefits of multimodal and multimedia learning (Moreno & Mayer, 1999);
- is based on open and transparent dialogues between the learners and between the learners and the teacher, encouraging knowledge sharing, collaboration and reflection on one's own work and that of others;
- implements the *community-as-curriculum* model of MOOCs.

The examples in section 4 show that open practices have so far proved successful for nurturing new learning dynamics by which the learners create their own learning content and lead their learning process.

However, other factors related to openness have had a less positive impact. It is attested that learners' persistence and motivation is lower in online than in face-to-face programmes (Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2002; among others). The online nature of *Collit* coupled with its optionality has caused slow student responses, intermittent participation and several dropouts. Also, *Collit's* open

recruitment strategy has increased the degree of mixed abilities amongst the learners. This, added to the fact that the learners have different backgrounds and ages, made it difficult to reconcile their abilities and interests, affecting the creation of the materials. Similarly, the varying levels of digital skills of the learners made it difficult to overcome technical glitches and influenced the teacher's choice of e-tools. Although the participants were expected to feel comfortable with the use of online tools, technology was kept as simple as possible to help reduce technical problems, limiting the variety of *Collit's* learning activities.

These observations will provide guidelines for the future phases of *Collit* and for future studies concerned with the adoption of open pedagogies for language learning and teaching.

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