

Can web series improve language learning? A preliminary discussion

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Abstract. The use of innovative language in education is a current and pressing issue in a digital landscape where knowledge and skills are acquired in much more complex and fragmented ways than in the past (Di Blas, 2016; Selvaggi, Sicignano, & Vollono, 2007). We are experiencing a lot of interest in flipped classrooms, interactive learning environments and serious games, MOOCs platforms, and e-learning projects, which universities are increasingly adopting. The web series is a highly effective format, characterized by short episodes that can also be enjoyed individually, low budget, and a serialized and therefore potentially engaging narrative identity, and is particularly suitable for use on digital platforms. The aim of this paper is to preliminarily present the expected benefits of an interactive web series made by the University for Foreigners of Perugia for a B1 online Italian Language course, before deeper investigation of their suitability for language learning.

Keywords: webseries, interactive language learning, intercultural competence, communicative competence.

1. Theoretical background

Learning a foreign language inevitably requires an analysis of the context and circumstances that influence its proper use. In order to achieve effective communication, students are required to develop the ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and values within their own as well as other cultures

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(Kramersch, 1995). These issues are underlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (Council of Europe, 2001), which recommends a curriculum oriented toward enhancing students' integrated skills. The main goal is to open a window on the rites and rituals, taboos, beliefs, and conventions within communication, in order to deconstruct any prejudices and stereotypes that could hinder the acquisition of knowledge about or the interpretation of a culture (Balboni, 1999).

Video is one of the most effective tools allowing learners to immerse themselves in a different culture (Biscarini et al., 2019b). The potential of this resource in language teaching has been exploited since the development of the communicative approach; through videos, learners receive sociolinguistic, cultural, and pragmatic information illustrating the worldview and values of the society that produced them (Bosc & Malandra, 1999).

In the context of the didactics of Italian as a foreign language, the importance of developing extra linguistic competence is essential. It is assumed that non-verbal communication is part of Italian culture, and in an intercultural perspective, gestures, facial expressions, looks, touch and distances, signs and habits could be a starting point for overcoming stereotypes in order to develop a more complex and multifaceted vision (Caon, 2016).

Quoting David Abercrombie (1968), “[w]e speak with our vocal organs, but we converse with our entire bodies” (p. 55), but often, paralinguistic and extralinguistic aspects still have a marginal role in the didactics of foreign languages, and in this context, the audiovisual medium becomes an excellent way of contextualizing learning experience.

In recent years, the use of ICT has found a place in foreign language training, with several files available on the Internet which provide authentic material that is indisputably useful for learners. However, research has shown (Comodi, 1995) that there are also potentially negative aspects to consider – in particular, when the authentic materials are not graduated or adapted to the level of the learners. This material is potentially too difficult and complex, or does not provide any stimulus to interact with the resource. The consequence may be loss of attention and motivation. In addition, in definition of interactivity, Jensen (1998) highlighted the importance of the transition from a one-way model where the content belongs to the medium, to bidirectional models in which user and medium alternate in production and content distribution, hence the importance of web series as a tool of interactivity, focusing on the storytelling construction process as a means to

involve students. The spectator-user can, for example, choose between two or more options in a story, selecting a particular character to continue the narrative with; or interact with the multiple narrative possibilities at her disposal, fostering at the same time the motivation to get in touch with the Italian language in all its diatopic, diaphasic, diastratic and diachronic varieties (Diadori & Micheli, 2010).

In this short paper, we discuss the elaboration of an educational project based on the design of web series for a B1 online Italian language course, with the aim of improving students' communicative skills and broadening their sociocultural knowledge of Italy.

2. Punto.it – an interactive webseries for a B1 online language course

In order to overcome problems related to length or inadequate language, using video available on the web, the University for Foreigners of Perugia shot a web series called “Punto.it” for our B1 online Italian language course oriented to young adult and adult learners. The course is organized within the Moodle platform and is divided into 12 learning units, articulated in six sections. Each section is divided into multiple paths in which the tools available on the platform are exploited in order to enhance students' exploration of Italian language and culture, thus fostering their engagement throughout the learning process. All the episodes are 1-3 minutes long, which is the most typically recommended length to maintain the viewers' interest and to use the relevant linguistic content effectively (Diadori, 2009). The narration revolves around a small number of characters involved in a wide range of communicative situations, covering topics from everyday life to more abstract and complex themes. In the proposed sequences, linguistic and cultural elements of Italy emerge, and students will be able to use the related information in order to organize their knowledge from a sociolinguistic and sociocultural point of view, increasing their competence in facing new linguistic data. All the clips are exploited in many ways: in some units, a significant initial sequence without audio or a pause at an intense moment is used to allow students to make hypotheses that will be more or less confirmed by the integral vision. In other units the title of the video is presented, and once various elements have been elicited, a frame is offered that narrows the options to focus on the actual situation, followed by the visual, which will consolidate understanding of the episode itself. In other units, students will be called on to elaborate a prequel or a sequel, enhancing their interaction and participation by rewriting the story from different points of view. Attention has been paid to prosody: each word has

a different pitch according to intent, and many activities have been developed on expressions, and the identification and interpretation of communicative intention. In order to deepen the control of structures and expressions discovered, individual activities are accompanied by interaction on discussion boards, negotiating significates and activating metacognitive resources (Samu, Santucci, & Sbardella, 2019). The use of educational materials can be either self-paced or tutor-led. The integration of a wrap-around approach, i.e. the construction of a learning process with characteristics of flexibility and openness, allows learners to reflect on how to relate the knowledge and skills acquired with the communicative aspects, enhancing their skills from a lifelong learning perspective (Biscarini et al., 2019a).

3. Conclusions

In this paper, we have considered and discussed the potential benefits of using a web series made by the University for Foreigners of Perugia in a B1 online language course as a tool to boost students' motivation to get in touch with Italian language and culture with interactive activities, and to foster their communicative and sociopragmatic skills at the same time. The course is not yet started, and as a future line of research we are considering the use of learning analytics tools in order to collect information about learners' participation during their training and to optimize methods and resources, with the aim of verifying the sustainability of the course and providing new and increasingly engaging dimensions of learning.

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