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Analysis of Teachers' Perception of the Effectiveness of MAECI Online Glottodidactic Training for Teachers of Italian as a Foreign Language: A Case Study

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Abstract

In this paper, theory and practice are interconnected in a case study to examine the suitability, multimodality and effectiveness of the training courses of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) for language teachers and university tutors of the Italian language across the world. The first part of the paper describes the theoretical framework underlying the training project design; the second part describes the qualitative research model used in order to explore, through an online questionnaire and focus group, the opinions of the informants as to the quality of the online course granted by Ca' Foscari University of Venice. In particular, the effects and impact of technology on the didactic activities of the participants are highlighted. The data obtained is useful in outlining a training model that effectively deploys technological tools to supply teachers with the latest digital competences for their everyday didactic activity.

Keywords: Training online, Taxonomy of Maeci training, Qualitative approach, Digital practices

1. Using 2.0 E-Learning to Train Foreign Language Teachers

In the last twenty years, training courses for language teachers have increased in number and quality thanks to the use of recent technologies. Multimedial support has become a means to enhance and exchange knowledge allowing the development of metacognitive and technological competences in teachers consistent with the requirements of different professional environments. The use of technology has further multiplied long-distance training offers on behalf of university institutions aware of the advantages of the web to sustain a personalized vision of knowledge where learning communities are set up and become capable of accomplishing effective training practises (Johnson, 2009). This has allowed the rethinking of training models in terms of:

a) a platform with social value;

b) technological tools that are both intuitive and suitable to carry out didactic activities in a virtual environment (Norman, 2002); and

c) specific training needs expressed by the participants to deepen targeted areas of interest and develop highly specialist abilities (Abbott, 2007).

Together with widespread communication technology applied to the implementation and enhancement of training for foreign teachers comes a methodology and set of learning tools purposely designed for an online environment guaranteeing:

a) flexibility in terms of time to dedicate to didactic activities;

b) productivity in terms of developing metacognitive strategies, collaboration competences and higher levels of understanding and experimentation within the creation of knowledge; and

c) versatility and affordability in terms of sharing knowledge with a large number of participants in a cost-efficient way (Anderson, 2007).

These kinds of technological platforms add value to the learning experience as they allow trainee teachers to become part of a community of professionals feeding off each other's own experience (Kudryashova et al, 2016).

2. Different Kinds of Online Learning for Language Teachers

Applying technologies to online learning environments involves intense social interaction which can be different from one learning environment to another. Vandergriff (2016) argues that online learning is divided into two types: formal and informal. The former develops within educational institutions whose operational model presents a linear sequence based on a learning process starting from theory and ending with practice, sometimes resulting in pitfalls that affect the natural learning processes students are normally accustomed to. This model, however, through its technological platform, enables the immediate finding of solutions to problems that surface in the course of the training process. In these kinds of institutional environments, all teachers belong to the institution administering the course. Tutors become facilitators addressing the needs of course participants so that specific competences and

different degrees of knowledge are developed. Specific technological tools and didactic activities are chosen in order to create and share knowledge and to be able to focus on real-life situations. Course participants, therefore, by the end of the course, should be able to use all kinds of different online resources in order to produce effective and quality-oriented contents thanks to the competences that have been collectively developed. The last feature that distinguishes formal learning is the issuing of a certificate at the end of the course. This ultimate institutional step tends to give closure to the entire learning cycle of the course.

The second kind of learning is the informal type. It takes place in environments that do not belong to any kind of educational institution and it releases no certificate at the end of the learning process. Its operational model entails the lack of immediate solutions to problems the individual faces, yet it allows a quick and free circulation of information. Different technological tools give support to the training process and help in the selection of certain study materials that allow course participants to interact and communicate in order to produce and apply knowledge. This kind of learning therefore proves to be very pragmatic as it revolves around the solution of problems in the logic of learning by doing. It can be based both on a timeline and on learning objectives. However, although informal, it needs to be driven by a purpose, mostly when stemming from the specific needs of a learning community.

3. The Role of Technological Tools within E-Learning

Following the definition by Erben et al., (2009), the use of technology applied to education entails the deployment of any kind of information and communication tool in a class environment for the sake of learning, be it by students or trainee teachers. These devices are selected by the teacher according to the didactic purposes at hand to improve the students' learning process.

Rogers (1995) highlights the peculiarities of the most recent technologies that need to be, on the one hand, easily accessible and compatible with different learning environments and student needs, and on the other, to allow users to share a great amount of information and resources.

According to Warschauer (2003), within online learning, different kinds of e-tools need to be user-friendly and consistent with the ecology of the virtual environment. Lafford (2009) underlines the importance of these tools in increasing the time-efficient and human dimensions of the virtual setting resulting from the interaction of the participants and the personalization of the environments.

In this perspective, the multimodal design represents one of the most innovative aspects of this kind of learning as it increases the personalization of the learning experience, multiplies the working space, develops different communication practices, and enables highly interactive didactic activities.

Multimodality applied to teacher training can satisfy different types of needs and encourages member participation through the use of different communication channels (Page, 2010). Technological support, therefore, is designed to increase the sustainability of the

communication process and make resources transferrable. These factors become crucial in student learning as online course platforms are managed directly by the users with an entire set of e-tools at their disposal (Jewitt, 2009).

As pointed out by a case study by Levy (2009), different communicative channels are trustworthy when based on solid pedagogic standards and they aim to:

a) balance glottodidactic research with the practical experience of teaching;

b) encourage course members to participate;

c) increase the integration of learners in the communicational and knowledge sharing process; and

d) become tools for the teacher's daily experience.

The technological element therefore does not represent just a means of communication, but also features specific characteristics consistent with the paradigm that generates its realization. In this perspective, Moore et al., (2011) agree on the fact that the design of different virtual environments is functional to the purposes and contents of the course itself. With this in mind, the virtual learning environment has no superfluous elements beyond what is strictly needed to carry out the activities assigned. From the viewpoint of Eady and Lockyer (2013), the virtual setting must be designed in order to reduce the mnemonic work of the course participants and consequently work to build mind maps and interdisciplinary connections. This means that all those e-tools, channels and resources that are not functional to the taxonomic principles that have generated the course or the activities assigned must be eliminated. The e-tools need to be user-friendly and allow for inter-operativity so that the end-user may focus on the object of study and find the learning experience easier and effective as based on interconnected and mappable knowledge. Wikis, blogs, Mindmeister and other tools give the chance to personalize the learning process and create notes and charts to design methodological and operative solutions to the assignments handed out by the tutor.

In must also be pointed out that the use of e-tools may represent an obstacle in the case of those students less familiar with technology. According to Picciano (2009), one of the possible problems represented by the use of the web and e-tools such as wikis in online training could be the lack of familiarity with technology that would therefore lead to misunderstanding the features of the system and not appreciating the value of the social interaction such a system entails. Another negative factor might be the fear on the part of users to share materials online, as they are scared of losing face if they consider themselves unsuitable to carry out collaborative work and devise critical arguments. In these cases, Wood et al., (1976) and Palfreyman (2011) agree on the fact that the tutor is the key factor in constructing scaffolding around the course participants so that they can become comfortable in using and exploiting the virtual system to its fullest.

4. The MAECI Online Glottodidactic Training Course

What follows aims, firstly, to outline the political and epistemological reasons for the existence of the MAECI training course addressing 202 teachers and university language

tutors of Italian as a foreign language across the world. Then the different methods used to carry out the course, its glottodidactic objectives and the peculiarities of the course's virtual environment are shown.

4.1 The Political Foundation of the MAECI Course

The priceless aid of technology in learning has made it possible to establish a training course addressing teachers and university language tutors of Italian across the world. The process was made possible thanks to the MAECI, namely the *Ufficio III*, whose language policy plan has allowed investment in the field of multimediality with the purpose of:

a) exploiting the potential of the Internet by reaching out to a great number of end-users that can experiment with web application methods for professional purposes (Vermesan & Friess, 2014);

b) streamlining the methods through which the Italian cultural identity is promoted (Bastos & Oliveira, 2006), thus showing how the Ministry has renewed and updated its strategy in creating an active and effective interaction with international realities; and

c) spreading the methodology of multimediality in the training of teachers of Italian, as shown by the recently established portal of the Italian language so that online contents remain a steady service and an appreciable resource (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009).

For the MAECI, knowing how to use e-tools to categorize, share and produce multimedial and multimodal contents becomes the purpose and prerequisite to improve the quality of teaching Italian to foreign students. As to these materials, according to Strother (2002), it becomes strategic to administer customized contents designed to be studied online without simply uploading online materials originally intended for printed purposes that require other levels of effort and attention.

This premise is useful in framing the use of the web when speaking about teacher training. Designing an online course, in fact, requires focus on the learner by giving him or her the plan of the activities in advance, explaining how the course unfolds, which contents are dealt within the forums, which criteria are employed in the evaluation process, and even foreseeing personalized solutions in case some students cannot attend the necessary quota of the online lessons or possibly experience failures.

The MAECI has promoted in the last three years (2014-2017) a language policy that, as mentioned above, takes advantage of an online platform that has been designed, firstly, to be user-friendly, accessible and appealing to increase the motivation of participants; secondly, to allow to personalize contents and create categories and mind maps according to the topic at hand; and thirdly, to be flexible in adjusting the virtual space to the social and study needs of the learners. This set-up allows the use of different kinds of channels according to the learning style of the users, be it visual, auditory or kinesthetic.

4.2 Taxonomy of MAECI Training

Consistent with the studies by Cross (2007), what was originally established was a formal learning environment as many teachers were first-time participants in online courses. The online environment needed to be designed to guarantee maximum accessibility and usability for those unfamiliar with the web and allow them to acquire technological abilities in order to showcase and share their professional experiences in the field of teaching Italian to foreigners.

The choice of formal learning was also dictated by considerations on the work by Conner (2004) for which certain typologies of activities allow to:

a) cater to the needs of students who have intentionally chosen to register to an online course;

b) experience a kind of learning that is in itself connected to the nature of glottodidactics, starting from the theoretical and leading on to research-action; and

c) acquire competences crucial to the teaching of languages.

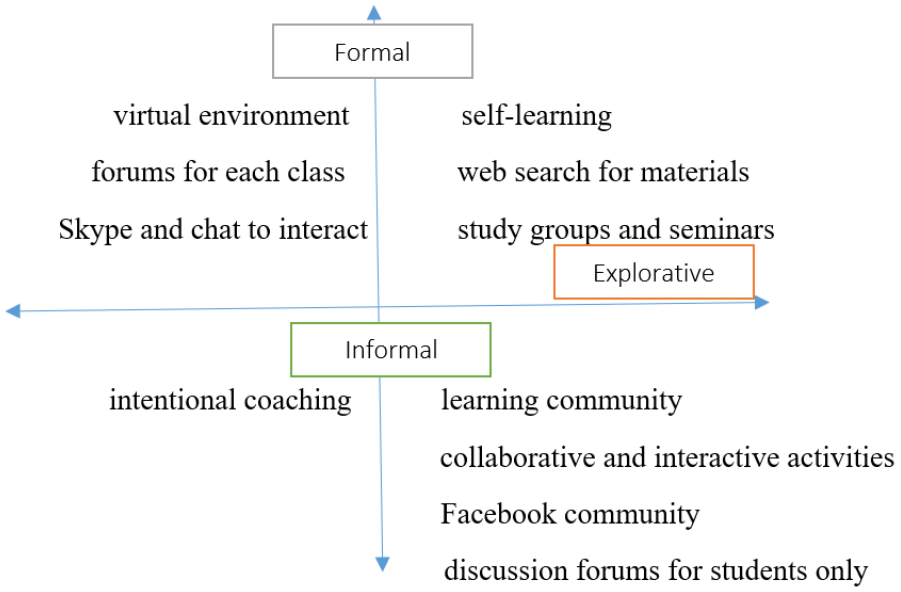


Figure 1. Taxonomy of MAECI training and refreshment courses. Personal elaboration

By analyzing the chart, it is clear that here there is no strict categorization between formal and informal learning, but rather the two categories are deeply interconnected. The Cartesian coordinates in fact point out how the different quadrants affect each other in each phase implying a process of ongoing and enriching learning. This conceptual framework, moreover, distinguishes a constructivist didactic model based on the alternation between theoretical and practical work of content acquired. The leading thread of the training process therefore rules out abstract conditions to generate a learning experience exclusively based on:

a) the contextualization of knowledge (Gao, 2010);

b) the specificity of the topics offered; and

c) research-action in order to keep the contents being offered updated and connected to the daily teaching practice of the participants.

The next paragraph deals with the scientific structure resulting from such a theoretical model.

4.3 The scientific foundation of the training process

The features that characterize the architecture of the training project are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Framework of the MAECI training project.

Framework of the online training project for foreign language teachers	
Structure of the training process	Structured and coordinated
Organizational approach	Balanced between top-down and bottom-up
Glottodidactic approach	Constructivist and cognitivist
Length	Limited to the length of the course itself
Objectives	Established by the course syllabus and plan
Aims of language training	Personal and professional advancement
Overall purpose	Observational study and improvement of teaching methodology
Work methodology	Individual and group work
Overall attitude	Active
Expressed values	Positive interaction, trust, empathy, sharing

The constructivist perspective focuses primarily on the learner, accompanying him or her throughout the entire learning process so that, firstly, his or her disciplinary knowledge can surface and, then, he or she may direct his or her efforts and attention towards critical observations and didactic experimentation. In this manner, the course participant may refine and improve the effectiveness of his or her teaching strategies and become more acutely aware of how to use them effectively in class. The course materials produced are then made available to the course participants so that each user can take advantage of the contents shared and set them up in his or her own class according to personalized solutions.

Where restrictive routes have been established for participants, as in the case of initial top-down approaches and preset glottodidactic objectives, there has been the need to suggest conceptual paths to allow course participants to familiarize themselves with the platform and become aware of what working cooperatively using e-tools such as Wiki entails.

In the end, the main feature of the training course is a leading thread according to which a virtual environment is a suitable space to build knowledge cooperatively and experiment in finding solutions regarding how to better teach students. In doing so, the users, however, have

asked tutors to supply them with personalized feedback on the activities carried out and therefore give value to the conceptual framework of the course and the sequentiality of the learning process.

4.3.1 Glottodidactic Objectives of the MAECI Training

Thanks to targeted contents, a friendly atmosphere and collaborative working strategies, the general learning conditions of the training course want to lead to the accomplishment of the following competences and specific ramifications:

Table 2. Glottodidactic objectives of the training course.

Disciplinary Competence
For both the layout of the modules and the communicative exchange between tutor and participants, the language of choice consists in more direct and streamlined forms generating confidence and enthusiasm in the course participant and avoiding overly-specialistic language which discourages the user.
Direct and constructive communication aims at finding the most pertinent solutions to problems together with the course participant.
Interpersonal and Intercultural Competence
The collaborative activities aim at overcoming the relational distances among course participants.
Knowing how to observe and put problems into perspective contributes to generating sensitivity and respect towards diversity.
Great importance is given to the analysis and development of critical thinking.
Converging Towards Results, i.e. being able to:
a) foresee course developments;
b) balance contents and types of courses;
c) channel the results of the course participants towards the objectives established by the organization;
d) keep the level of motivation high by respecting deadlines for assignments and supplying course participants with timely feedback;
e) keep course objectives, both curricular and disciplinary, clear at all times.

4.3.2 The Learning Environment of the Course

As to the learning environment that hosts the course, in setting up the classes, a multimodal structure was preferred. Then the e-tool setting for the participants allowed easy access to the online study materials by allowing the creation of a very rich hypertext of connections and references. The theoretical contents were converted into video broadcasts transforming the learning process into a multimodal experience. In this sensibility, chats, forums, emailing within the system and video-call software such as Skype have all enhanced the learning and

interactive experience. Different technological tools were designed to allow the users to interact and communicate through chats, mails, blogs and forums for users only. The set of tools allowed them to understand the functions of the online technological resources. Furthermore, these tools were controlled directly by the users without any mediation on behalf of tutors or webmasters. This was made possible thanks to some specific technical features of the platform, namely:

a) the e-tools were configured in order to best fit the objectives of the curriculum and the needs of the course participants;

b) the platform designers wanted to guarantee site accessibility throughout all stages of the course (Lachiver & Tardiff, 2002); and

c) the multimedial support system was intended to be at all times intuitive and user-friendly.

Generally speaking, the online technological support system was totally consistent with the constructivist and dialogical nature of the training course itself, becoming therefore a priceless means to encourage and facilitate participant communication and the development of critical thinking (Kubanyiova, 2012).

4.3.3 How the Training Course Unfolded

The course took place between 15 December 2015 and 9 June 2016. It followed a methodological approach based on action research: the tutors of the 5 modules, 4 compulsory and an elective glottodidactics one, led participants towards the analysis and observation of module contents in the span of the first weeks. The fourth week instead was dedicated to experimentation on contents by setting up didactic plans and materials offered to the real classes belonging to the course participants. Therefore, there has always been an eye for the applicability of materials and experimental approaches to real-life teaching situations.

The physical space within which the course took place was the University of Venice, Ca' Foscari, and the training process took place in three different stages: familiarization; opening and implementation; and closing and maintenance of the community through refreshment, research and update appointments.

The virtual setting has allowed the following to be clear and available:

a) the framework of the course;

b) the sequence of the modules;

c) the detection and acquisition of the contents of the modules uploaded;

d) the participation in a customized forum; and

e) the disciplinary profile of colleagues with whom to share one's own experience.

Such a project has the objective of encouraging the training of an entire community of teaching professionals within a friendly environment so that, while being committed to active teaching settings, they can acquire methodologies and technical skills to put effective

teaching methods in place to administer Italian to students across the most diverse learning environments.

5. A Case Study

The following paragraph focuses on the case study investigative method and research tools. Results are finally interpreted in order to produce new perspectives to improve the methodology of the course to better address the training needs of the course participants.

5.1 The Research Method

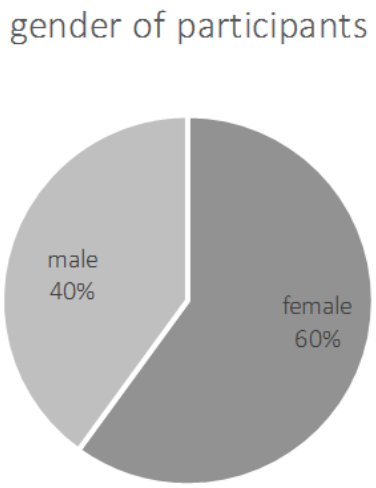
The research method used to probe the quality and effectiveness of the MAECI course is based on an action research approach. Such an approach, according to the studies by Burns (2010), allows the course participants to critically and reflectively explore complete learning and training experiences (Nunan & Bailey, 2009) and highlight the opinions of informants through online questionnaires at the end of the process. In such a manner, it was possible to obtain meaningful data to evaluate the effects on the training itself. First, it was important to evaluate whether users perceived the quality of the technology-based course and if so, through which criteria; and, secondly, to understand if the use of multimedial tools for teacher training represented more an obstacle to users or rather an aid in activities, becoming a crucial component for their studying activity and professional practice. The research tools therefore belonged to the field of quality investigation (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Harklau, 2011), while the research questions concentrated on the technological dimension of the learning process in order to understand whether such technical feature represented in fact a complication within the training process increasing as a matter of fact the distance among participants, or if it rather facilitated the user in his or her studying process helping in carrying out assigned activities in a synergic manner. Informants were also asked to gauge if the online training course contributed to the participants' professional development and if the technological tools could be used for future training situations. A focus group with 7 training-teachers was also set up in order to cross-check the data and see the extent to which the skill in using educational e-tools was useful and crucial for the upgrading of teacher professionalism. Lastly, the data obtained from the questionnaire were treated qualitatively by using *Survio* software, while the setup of the focus group and the charting of the resulting findings were carried out by using the programme *FileMaker Pro 14*.

5.2 The Profile of the Online Questionnaire Informants

Thirteen countries participated in the MAECI ministerial training courses. Table Figure 5 shows how the cohort of participants was extremely diverse, from Northern Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia) to the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon), from the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) to Asia and China.

Table 3. Countries involved in the Ministry's training Fig. 2. Gender of the participants

Country	N° Participants
1. Algeria	42
2. Albania	15
3. China	32
4. Bosnia	11
5. Croazia	12
6. Egypt	42
7. Jordan	4
8. Lebanon	6
9. Macedonia	2
10. Morocco	9
11. Montenegro	6
12. Serbia	2
13. Tunisia	19



The greatest number of participants was recorded in Egypt and Algeria, while in China 32 participants were university professors, some of whom were Italians working for Chinese public institutions. As can be seen in Figure 2, the majority of participants were female, 60%, while 40% were male.

All course participants were committed to teaching the Italian language and Italian cultural heritage within universities or local Italian Institutes of Culture (IICs). Figure 3 shows the main areas of specialization:

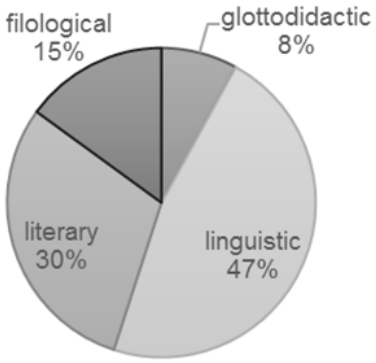


Figure 3. Areas of specialization of the informants. Personal elaboration.

5.3 How to Measure the Quality of the Training Process: The Online Questionnaire

In order to conduct a participant satisfaction survey, a questionnaire was used to measure the informants' perception of the quality and effectiveness of the training course mediated by

technology. Given the very high number of participants and the different geographical areas of origin involved, the scientific and didactic committee decided to employ the web as a means of collecting the necessary data as soon as the course had finished.

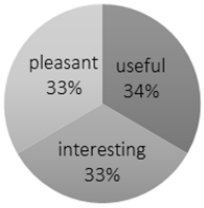
In detail, *Survio* software was used as it offered the option of gathering data from different technological support systems, with the visualization of updates in real-time and findings downloaded in more than one format, from rough Html data for example to more sophisticated results to be then analyzed using *Excel*.

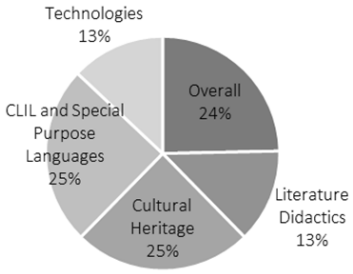
As mentioned above, the purpose of the questionnaire was to gather the opinion of the informants and reveal if the online format allowed them to reach appreciable results consistent with results obtainable from in-person courses. It became, therefore, crucial to understand their attitude towards the course and the difficulties they were forced to face in order to analyze the most frequent problems and find solutions in order to make these technologically-based courses even more effective and professionally oriented. In fact, the questions the informants were asked were necessarily connected to the didactic context they were involved in, so that the results portrayed the learning experience as a whole.

5.4 Results

The following paragraph shows the correlation between the questions that were believed to be crucial for this paper and the ultimate results in order to check if the original design and implementation of the training project could encompass all the didactic aspects previously highlighted and also lead to the acquisition of meaningful contents.

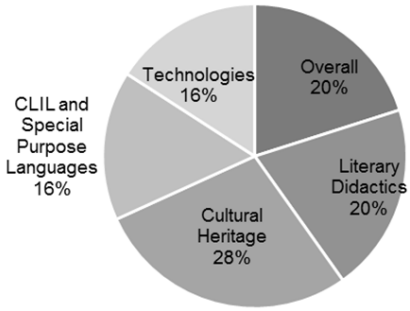
1) Have you ever participated in an online language training course before?

2) What is your overall opinion of the MAECI training course? Please indicate a value from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very high)

3) What is your overall opinion about the course materials? Please indicate a value from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very high)

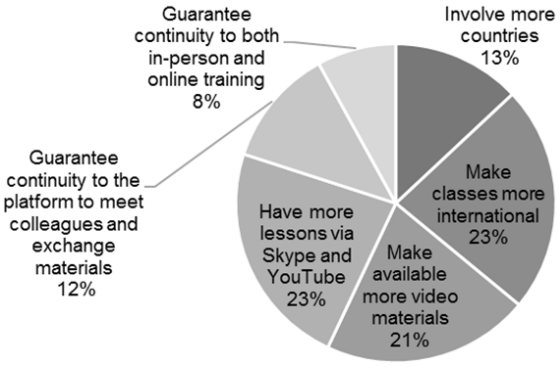


4) Which other topics would you like to be offered for future training?

5) What is the value you would attribute to tutorships? Please indicate a value from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very high)



6) Because of the great resources the MAECI has been investing in this course, what advice would you give to improve its training?



7) Because of the considerable scientific and organizational efforts and resources the ITALS and LABCOM Departments have been investing in this course, what advice would you give them to improve the training offered?

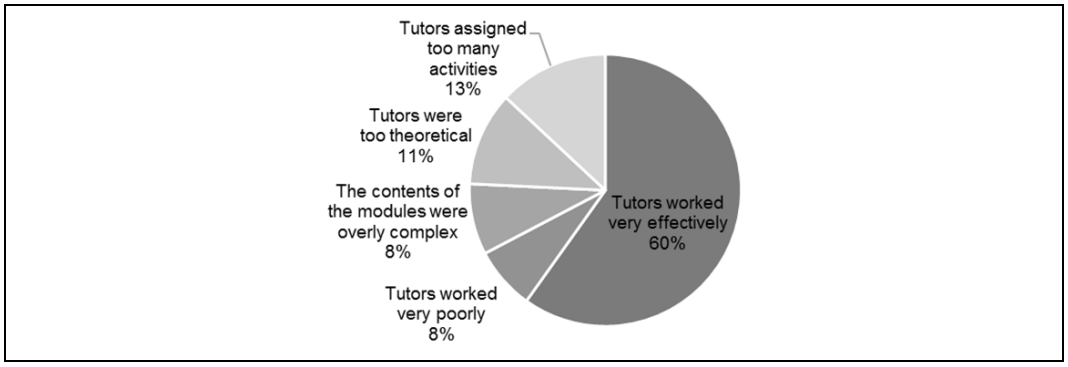


Figure 4. Tabulation of the data from the questionnaire.

The first question of the set shows that most teachers had never participated in an online language training course mediated by technology, even though the professional profiles of the teachers selected reveals that they can count on a long experience of teaching.

Therefore, for most of the teachers the course was the first approach to the use of technological and multimedial support systems with a glottodidactic purpose in mind, so the course itself, although presenting difficulties in understanding how to use the platform and how the constructivist modality was applied to the learning environment, proved to be a pleasant and useful challenge, as can be seen from Question Two. In fact, to overcome problems, it was first important to become familiar with the structure of the platform, and then be helped and coordinated by the tutor who helped limit issues in using digital resources by providing a scaffolding in each stage of the work and planning course activities. The correspondence between the design of the online context, the online study and self-evaluation materials (Question Three) and the working methods allowed the course to turn into an effective and useful learning experience, confirmed also by the highly positive feedback expressed by the participants in Question Seven. The success of the course is greatly based on, first, the quality of the tutoring, Question Six, and, second, on the accessibility and acquisition of the contents and on the effectiveness of the e-tools, Question Five, which allowed coursework to be fully carried out and enabled the transfer of the course contents to real-life class environments (Xiao & Carroll, 2007). In this perspective, teachers have shown to be in favour of protracting the online training experience by using new online tools such as *Moodle*, suggesting (as per Question Six) the will to use more often hypertexts, video-materials and programmes such as *YouTube* and *Skype* in place of face-to-face lessons. The informants have also expressed, in Question Four, their desire to deepen their expertise about the didactics of the Italian language in an intercultural perspective.

5.5 Results of the Focus Group

In order to select the control group, a conceptual model designed by Patton (2002) was applied according to which the selection criteria included gender, geographical area of origin, subject matter and limited confidence in technology in teaching Italian to foreigners.

Among these criteria, special importance was given to:

a) the geographical context of the participants: the teachers come from the most diverse geographical contexts, but are all connected by the fact that they work within institutional environments that have not regarded technology within education as a priority (Gorsuch, 2000). Teachers, in fact, have pointed out that most of the times there is a total lack of funds for investments in technology and that they are compelled to use their own personal cellphone connections to make up for the lack of wi-fi networks within their schools or universities;

b) the subject matter taught: a great variety of disciplines has been taken into consideration connected not only to the teaching of Italian as a language, but also, for example, the teaching of literature and history; and

c) one's own experience with technology: although the universities that the participants belonged to were not equipped with the sufficient hardware to host e-tools, the widespread notion of the teachers was that the introduction of new technologies was an absolute requirement to help keep student motivation high and allow those falling behind to carry out extra work at home. During the course, the seven teachers involved in the focus group had more than once expressed the wish to introduce technological devices into their teaching practices in order to increase the interest of their students and create collaborative activities for which technology became a crucial factor in order to find authentic resources different from textbook materials and also explore new cultural dimensions that require numerous sources and resources to be investigated and understood. This shows in the end how important the use technology applied to teaching was for the informants.

The heterogeneity of the informants allowed comparison of their different technological experiences and opinions on how useful they believed technology applied to education was. In order to set up the focus group, *Skype* was used so that it was possible to have long-distance meetings beyond time zones and therefore carry out the assigned activities in an effective and timely manner.

In order to set up the focus group, an interview method – present in Balboni (2007) – was employed in order to guide the discussion towards certain areas of interest and reveal the informants' opinions and ideas on different kinds of topics.

Table 4. Profile of the informants of the focus group

Profile of the informants	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Country	Albania	Algeria	China	Egypt	Lebanon	Macedonia	Morocco
Gender	woman	man	man	woman	woman	woman	man
Discipline	language	history	linguistics	literature	music	studies on Dante	language
Familiarity with Technology	internet email PPT	internet email	internet email Prezi	internet email	internet email PPT	internet email PPT	internet email

Empirical evidence of the answers can be extensively examined in the chart below (Table 5), which allows consideration of individual results and specific conclusions to be drawn following the data analysis model designed by Cecconi (2002).

Table 5. Participants' answers to the focus group questions

Questions	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Use of technology in university curriculum?	Language lab	No	Laboratory	No	Laboratory	Laboratory	no
Why use technology applied to education?	Increase motivation	Be updated with today's generation of teens	Increase interest	More effectively carry out school projects; learn from video-materials	Listen to interviews; improve didactic activities	Improve didactic activities	Reinforce motivation
How often is technology used in class?	Every day	Every day	Once a week	Every day	Every day	Every day	Every day
Advantages of using technology in class?	Increase motivation; understand language input; search for new resources; build structured exercises	Increase motivation; make didactic activities more effective; develop language abilities	Search materials for both work in class and at home	Search materials for both work in class and at home; make didactic activities more effective, also thanks to audio-visual files	Search materials for both work in class and at home	Search materials for both work in class and at home	Understand language input; act as sensorial input; supply diverse sources to observe cultural models; build structured exercises
How much does the course help provide digital competences?	Much	Much	Very much	Very much	Much	Much	Much

When analyzing the results obtained, the answers from the informants highlight, on the one hand, a sense of unease caused by the lack of the latest educational technologies within their institution's curriculum, while on the other, the fact that teachers are aware of the potential of e-tools and software applied to teaching. Each teacher, in fact, argued that e-tools were essential in order to enhance the learning of a subject matter or a foreign language and also better develop language and collaborative skills mostly with regard to the presentation of class projects in, for example, economics, literature or history or webquests in Italian. The considerations of the informants as to the advantages of using the latest e-tools underscores how they have developed a real inclination towards and preference for the use of specific programmes to facilitate didactic activities customized according to their teaching context. However, they have also had to deal with scarce resources to finance the purchase of technology (as in the case of Algeria and Morocco, for example) and, in several cases, also the indifference of their institution's management, which does not regard technology applied to teaching as being of great benefit.

The considerations below from the focus group teachers summarize effectively what needs to be kept in mind when there is the desire to successfully apply technology to virtual classes:

a) tutors need to explain the purpose of the e-tools and their advantages before starting to use them at the beginning of any online course;

b) the teacher needs to know how to choose different kinds of programmes and software to increase student participation and interest and allow learners to become more familiar with the different kinds of e-tools in order to develop new technological skills;

c) teachers need to widen the use of programmes specifically designed for educational purposes, from software to web pages hosting class projects, therefore, exploiting the potential of the social media to allow students to keep in contact and increase their chances of interacting and discussing specialist topics; and

d) teachers and students need to keep in mind that the entire set of technological devices does not represent an end in itself replacing good didactic practices, but rather a means towards easier and better learning.

Thanks to the considerations above, it is now possible to draw the following conclusions:

a) the use of technology does not automatically support or drive the learning process of participants unless the tutor or course coordinator spends the effort to explain the methods and purposes implied in the use of those same technological tools (Thornbury, 2016). In this kind of sensibility, Levy (2009) recommends the platform should feature an explanatory legend where each e-tool used throughout the course is illustrated and explained so that participants may use any sort of software or device with due confidence. This would allow teachers in the end to increase control over their learning experience and give it proper and full value (Lai, 2013);

b) there needs to be, according to studies by Lai and Gu (2011), a wide range of software programmes and tools so that participants become familiar with what e-tool best fits their learning needs; and

c) the use of technology for leaning increases a sense of awareness when the participant applies it to monitor and adjust his or her own learning process, mostly when deepening the subject matter, creating interdisciplinary connections, correcting possible mistakes or simply rethinking one's own contribution to forums or group work.

The considerations above all underline how the course participants, thanks to their exceptional motivation, were very well-disposed towards multimedial resources to the point that they were able to overcome initial fears and difficulties in using and working with technical devices, strengthen their interest towards digital tools, select the best type of technology for a certain learning situation, and in the end improve their overall learning (Teo, 2010).

6. Suggestions for Improvement

The success of the training course had its fulcrum more in the educational motivation of its participants than in their personal economic profit. This helped create a friendly and cooperative online atmosphere, enhanced also by the constructivist nature of the learning process, the cooperative and project-based nature of the working methodologies, and the concrete application of course contents to Forum Discussions and critical thinking on teaching.

The major scientific features of the course in fact correspond to the objectives established by the participants themselves. The course materials were designed to be immediately accessible online and promote the active participation and observation of the users in discussions guided by the tutors. Tutors created the best possible conditions to focus on the learner in order to accelerate and increase the quality of the online discussions about the most important features of a given topic and quickly activate social interaction to effectively find solutions to issues assigned within the modules.

Another important aspect that made the learning experience meaningful for course participants was the induction of the entire learning community to the structure, features and tools of the online platform itself, a choice that helped reinforce trust towards the organization administering the course. In fact, both the organization supplying the course and the careful choice of online tools helped teachers set up a structured online environment conducive to critical thinking and suitably designed course activities. Therefore, the chance to customize the setting and have a space to share content and knowledge confirms the initial proposition, where a learning community develops its own history and identifies with the "brand of the organizing institution" (Grant & Basye, 2014).

Following the idea of personalization of the online environment, the answers from the informants' questionnaire and focus group confirm the importance attributed to educational technologies in analytically understanding the functions of different kinds of software and in supplying course users with the most innovative strategies consistent with the educational and communicational contexts of the learners. The informants therefore prove to be in favour of using technology when teaching Italian in terms of both language and culture. This shows how they feel the urgent need to deploy the latest e-tools in their daily teaching settings in order to strengthen their students' learning. This result is indeed achievable on condition that political and educational institutions work together with teaching communities in order to:

a) *change the cultural perception of the latest technologies applied to teaching*: studies first by Koohang (1989) and later by Bullock (2004) show that the greatest obstacle to the introduction of educational technology is connected not so much to the lack of funds to purchase such devices (Gray, 2001), but rather to the attitude and scarce consideration teachers show towards multimediality. This gives rise to the need to change the perception of the latest technologies applied to teaching. Rogers (1995) uses the expression "initial stage" to refer to the activation of a process where the benefits from using educational technology are shown and explained and "second stage" to refer to the development of positive attitudes towards using technological methodologies. According to Young (1991), the initial process

of sensitizing towards the use of e-tools is born only when a specific value and meaning within an educational and linguistic context is attributed to technologies that are already present within the teaching institution. Lam (2000) reinforces such hypothesis arguing, in fact, that it is the teacher who mostly needs to understand the value and benefit of the technological devices he or she has at his or her own disposal. If he or she believes that there is a practical advantage in using technology, it will be the teacher himself who will develop an interest towards e-tools and educational technology and deepen his knowledge to be able to use it in class. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that the combination of teaching and technology leads teachers to re-design and re-adjust their teaching plans, tools, and technological choices in order to teach better and develop a more positive attitude towards their own concept of teaching;

b) *push towards a systematic use of technologies*: this is, first of all, an institutional objective that entails the creation of new training and refreshment courses to develop new skills among both administrative and technical staff in teaching institutions and also teachers and tutors in order to be able to plan, design and implement innovative curriculums. Studies by Osarumwense (2016) converge on the fact that adopting an experimental e-learning model where digital competences are taught has a ripple effect on the didactics of languages given that the trainee teachers can then create curriculums where they can deploy the most suitable technological tools and experiment with new teaching methods to create didactic activities and remedial materials targeting specific language skills; and

c) *develop digital competences*: the integration of multimediality within the teaching and learning of languages entails a different perspective in the role of the educator and his or her own approach to teaching. In fact, it will be important to see if and how educational institutions will endorse training and refreshment opportunities for teachers, including how to apply technological tools to language didactics. All this will allow educators to acquire the necessary knowledge and competences to redesign teaching methods and materials ever more aligned with the needs of the learning process of students.

In conclusion, the dimension of multimediality needs to be promoted, first of all, as a means to reinforce the language and digital policy of educational institutions. Secondly, digitally-based training and refreshment courses, especially of the Italian language, allow teaching methodologies to be effectively upgraded, resulting in greater teacher and student motivation in the study of the Italian language and heritage across the world thanks to the adaptation of multimedial tools to the needs of the learners.

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