MULTIMEDIA MULTILINGUAL MULTILITERACIES FOR ITALIAN STUDIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CONSTRUCTIONS, CONNECTIONS AND CYBERGENRE AWARENESS

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Abstract

This paper, based on a previously published chapter (Orsini-Jones, 2010), discusses the need for both undergraduate Italian Studies students and the staff who teach them to engage with digital literacies and cybergenre awareness. It argues that such engagement can promote critical and academic literacy in students and help them to 'read' and decode a complex and globally connected world.

The paper also explores the tensions that can arise between the academic and the social uses of the various e-learning platforms available in the new millennium and proposes that for the purpose of developing critical academic digital literacy and cybergenre awareness, a compromise must be reached. It would be difficult to integrate the experience of all the (ever-changing) cybertextualities available on the World Wide Web into the Italian academic curriculum. It is suggested that lecturers should maximise the use of institutional proprietary systems (like Virtual Learning Environments – VLEs – and e-portfolios) to develop students' hypertextual awareness. This is because proprietary systems make formal socio-collaborative assessment, metacognition and coherent curriculum delivery more manageable. However, tutors should also allow for students to be creative and

make use of other e-tools available on the World Wide Web to explore new multilingual multiliteracies and textualities (both oral and written) via carefully designed e-tasks. Such tasks should be informed by the relevant theories on task-based language learning and teaching (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998; Coleman and Klapper, 2005) as well as those on autonomous language learning (e.g. Little, 2002; Dam, 1995), as learning is, as argued by Ackermann, a 'dance' between collaboration and autonomy: 'without connection people cannot grow, yet without separation they cannot relate' (Ackermann, 1996: 32).

1. Introduction

A certain tension can arise between staff and students with reference to the traditional written and oral academic genres needed for university and the social-networking use of the cybergenres available online today. However, a mastery of the new genres is necessary to operate effectively in higher education and both staff and students must therefore engage with the new digital tools available to maximise their educational potential.

This paper proposes a balanced approach to the acquisition of digital multiliteracies that aims at identifying higher-education language students' modes of engagement with e-learning environments in an academic setting. It evaluates how dedicated courses and tasks were designed to help students to become critical and learn to maximise the technology available to them to enhance both their learning experience while at university and their professional opportunities after graduation. It explores how carefully selected e-learning tools, such as

the e-portfolio *PebblePad* and Blackboard Collaborate (formerly one of the *Wimba Voice Tools)*, can be used to encourage students to reflect on the learning process and develop autonomous and metacognitive abilities. There is evidence that metacognition can enhance learning, be conducive to the understanding of difficult concepts and support students' autonomy (Mason & Rennie, 2008: 136–9; Moon, 2004: 86; Orsini-Jones, 2008).

The acquisition of multiliteracies and the ability to move across different genres (digital and not digital) can be empowering for students. Freire and Macedo (1987), quoted in Hokstad and Dons (2007), maintain that literacy is 'the ability, the possibility and will to read the world'. Warschauer and Ware, quoting Castells (2008: 228), highlight how digital competences can enable all learners to be 'interacting' rather than passively 'interacted'. The development of critical thinking and autonomous learning can be fostered in an educational environment that makes effective use of the available technology while at the same time raising students' awareness of the new digital genres that are emerging, in order to develop *academic and professional multilingual digital literacies*.

2. Developing students' digital critical literacy: themes and issues

It is assumed here that Prenski's 'digital native' model is more a myth than a reality and that although undergraduate students are used to utilising a variety of e-tools, many lack the analytical skills required to process the information retrieved in a critical way (Prenski, 2001; Mason & Rennie, 2008: 134-5). Students have technical ICT skills, but lack in academic digital literacy. The aforementioned need to engage with new media in order

to 'read the world' is the driver for the integration of technology into the higher education curriculum and, as stressed above, there is robust evidence that it can empower learners and foster autonomy. Warschauer and Grimes refer to an example illustrated by Bloch (Bloch, 2007; cited in Warschauer & Grimes, 2007: 8). They discuss how the use of blogs (web logs) helped Abdullah, a Somali refugee student who had emigrated to the United States, to improve his academic writing skills in a composition class. Metacognition is one of the motivational drivers highlighted in this study that also stressed how blogging

> should be seen as not only a pathway to academic writing for students but also as an important new literacy act in its own regard, enabling students to become 'contributors and not just consumers of information on the World Wide Web' (Bloch, 2007: 138; quoted in Warschauer & Grimes, 2007: 9).

It could be argued that the advent of Web 2.0 technology is making the development of digital critical literacies more urgent as students, now exposed to a multitude of new information, must quickly take decisions regarding the value of this information:

> Decision-making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to the alterations in the information climate affecting the decision (Siemens, 2004; quoted in Mason & Rennie, 2008: 19).

Web 2.0 has also brought about another variable: the private/social engagement of students with platforms such as Facebook, and its language learning equivalents (e.g. Busuu and Livemocha, see McBride, 2009, Brick, 2011, Orsini-Jones, Brick and Pibworth 2013 on these social networking sites for language learning). So, while between 1995 and 2005 educators could still motivate their students with new e-tools students had not encountered before (as illustrated in Orsini-Jones, 2004 with the VLE WebCT), the situation is now reversed. It is educators who have to keep up with the tools the students already use in everyday life.

Finally, Goodfellow refers to another type of tension that is currently arising in the HE setting: that between our use of electronic classrooms to enact process-oriented models of learning, and the existence of prior standards and assessment criteria by which we determine the kinds of learning and writing we wish these classrooms to promote (Goodfellow, 2004). Students can become confused as they may be asked to use an informal register of the target language on blogs, wikis and synchronous online discussions, but then need to 'switch' if asked to write essays and reports in the academic genre of the foreign language studied.

3. Developing multilingual multiliteracies and genre awareness amongst language students at university level

Practising a genre is almost like playing a game, with its own rules and conventions. Established genre

participants, both writers and readers, are like skilled players, who succeed by their manipulation and exploitation of, rather than a strict compliance with, the rules of the game. It is not simply a matter of learning the language or even learning the rules of the game, it is more like acquiring the rules of the game in order to be able to exploit and manipulate them to fulfil professional and disciplinary purposes. (Bhatia, 1999: 25-6; quoted in Paltridge, 2006: 86).

This section deals with a variety of e-learning tasks aimed at maximising digital tools to enhance students' professional and academic skills and literacies. The tasks also show how new digital 'genres' can be practised in the foreign language studied, with the support of technology. Long-term language projects (tasks) that involve student-centred problem-solving elements have been reported to enhance multilingual multiliteracies (Klapper, 2006; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007).

All the tasks described here are built around the capabilities of the software used bearing in mind the following general principles:

- An e-learning activity must be very carefully designed and is defined as '*a specific interaction of learner(s) with other(s) using specific tools and resources, orientated towards specific outcomes*' (Beetham, 2007: 28, emphasis in original).
- As implied by McLuhan (1967) the medium (or media) chosen for the task affects the students' learning experience and cognitive journey.

- Learning, as argued by Vigotsky, 'is a socially mediated activity in the first instance, with concepts and skills being internalized only after they have been mastered in a collaborative context' (Vigotsky, 1986; quoted in Beetham, 2007: 36).
- The learners' experience should not be confined to the learning experience of the tutor (Dudeney, 2009, quoting a Hebrew proverb).
- Metacognitive activities, supported by e-learning tools, must be integrated into language learning tasks: thinking on how one learns can help with learning (Moon, 2004).

The e-tools discussed are mainly proprietary systems, as opposed to freeware available online like Facebook or the various blogging tools on the World Wide Web. This was a conscious and deliberate choice as the process of assessment would become unmanageable if students were to submit work for formative or summative feedback in a range of different tools/styles. The latter would be even more problematic if the work were intended to be 'private' in some way as a multitude of passwords would be required by both the students and the assessor to be able to access and comment upon each others' work. However, these proprietary tools can be linked to the World Wide Web and students can access a variety of 'cybertexts', both oral and written, and/or move in and out of the VLE.

Most of the e-learning tasks illustrated below have been developed via cycles of action-research (see Burns, 2010 on this approach) carried out between the academic years 2002-2011. The students involved were studying Italian for a Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in the UK (three

years in Coventry/Manchester and one abroad in the country(ies) of the target language(s) studied). The three proprietary systems used were the VLE Blackboard Vista (formerly WebCT Campus), the Wimba Voice Tools and the e-portfolio PebblePad, the latter two both being distributed from within the VLE.

4. Designing e-learning tasks to foster autonomy and multiliteracy awareness amongst learners

This section illustrates tailor-made e-learning tasks that proved to be successful in fostering learners' autonomy and multiliteracy awareness.

4.1. VLEs and the genre of hypertextual text analysis for translation purposes

As previously discussed (Orsini-Jones & De, 2007), VLEs are subject to criticism these days, possibly because they are mainly being used as tools for the uploading of administration-related information and as static content repositories (see Beetham & Sharpe, 2007 on this point). The fact that they facilitated a major interactive change in the Higher Education learning landscape in the late 1990s is often overlooked. Asynchronous discussion forums, constructivist individual and group project work and live chats were pioneered with VLEs. As stressed in Beetham (2007:33), technology will enhance the learning environment only if skilled practitioners can put in place the necessary support measures for learners to make the most of it. Students should therefore be supported in:

- Taking responsibility—thinking about what they are doing and why.

- Planning—setting targets and identifying the means to achieve them.
- Reflecting—thinking about what they have done, are doing and are aiming to do.

Even if rudimentary when compared with the more advanced forms of socio-collaborative software available these days (e.g. Facebook) a VLE allows students to

- Find more opportunities to plan their discourse.
- Reflect on their production.
- Compare their production with that of their peers and their lecturers.
- Share electronic knowledge (students have suggested useful sites to each other with direct links in discussion forum).
- Feel that they share a more democratic setting with their lecturers who become their peers in discussion forum.
- Acquire useful digital and transferable skills (see Orsini-Jones, 2004: 194).

The possibilities offered via the VLE provided the opportunity to introduce students to collaborative hypertextual analysis in their Italian translation module in the academic years 1998-2009. Following the example set by Landow (e.g. Landow, 1994; 2006), at Coventry University students were encouraged to 'reconfigure texts' digitally in order to understand and deconstruct their discourse for translation purposes. Students first of all studied issues relating to the translation of texts from Italian into English and vice-versa. This discussion was underpinned by the analysis of extracts from theoretical

works on translation studies (for example Ulrych, 1992) and face-to-face translation practice/seminars. In addition, students could make use of a resource area created within the VLE with direct links to Italian and English websites and to online dictionaries and corpora. Groups were formed early in the academic year to allow students to start engaging in their hypertextual translation project. The minutes for the seminar discussions about translation, in Italian, were typed directly onto the VLE's discussion forum by each group of students, so that both lecturers and students could have a record of what had been said and students could swap translation versions online. Students subsequently had to create assessed group 'hypertext translation artefacts' analysing comparative issues in translation in the shared content area of the VLE and to present these artefacts to each other in micro-teaching assessed translation sessions. The difference between Figures 1 and 2 consists mainly in the fact that while students needed the help of a technologist for their translation projects between 1998-2004 (Figure 2), their technology awareness together with the adoption of newer web creation tools meant that they could create their own hypertexts in a relatively easy way without any technical assistance from 2004 onwards (Figure 1).

Students commented positively on experiencing the text in a hypertextual version that they had created collaboratively. The process had enabled them to actively engage with its layers and choose their reading and analysis paths through it. Students also commented that the shared hypertextual analysis had enabled them to identify linguistic features that they would not otherwise have noticed. It would be interesting to explore this

comment further in the light of 'noticing' theories of
language-learning (see Johnson, 2008 on this point).
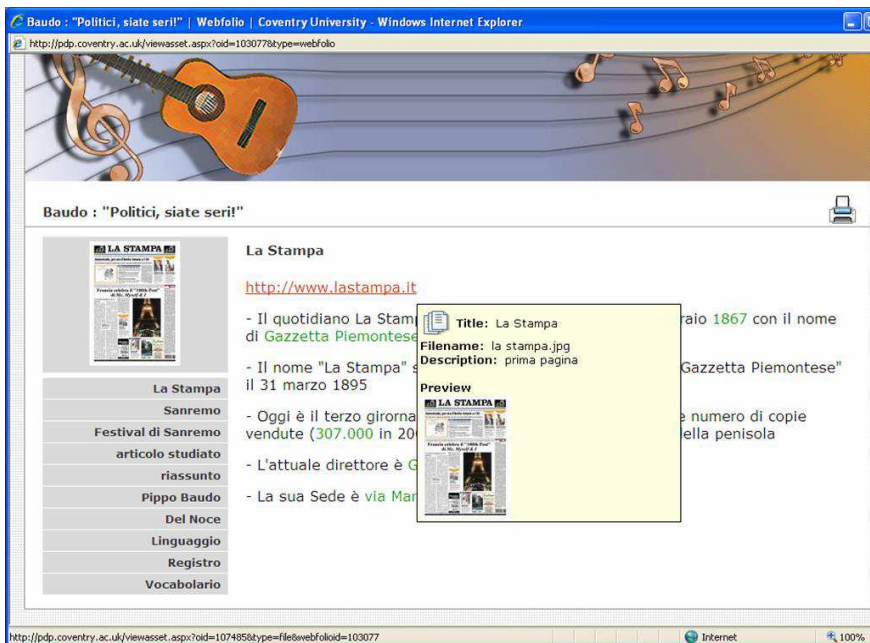
**Figure 1. Translation/Area Studies – Final-Year
Hypertextual Group Project created by students with
the e-portfolio PebblePad (webfolio tool)**

Figure 2. Translation – Final-Year Hypertextual Project created by students in HTML with the help of a learning technologist

4.2. The Wimba Tools and the genre of oral/written digital discourse

The Wimba Tools (now known as Blackboard Collaborate tools) were embedded into the VLE at Coventry University but could also be used as stand-alone web tools. These toolsare supported by VoIP (Voice-over Internet Protocol) technology and allow staff and students to engage in a variety of online spoken activities. The creation of these tools (originally by a French firm in 2000) opened up the welcome opportunity for language teachers to familiarise students with the practice of collaborative spoken discourse both at a distance and in the classroom. 'Wimba classroom' (now Blackboard

Collaborate) put a new 'spin' on video-conferencing as it allows students to interact in real-time at a distance in a classroom setting. The tutor and the students can also display material or websites on a split screen that all participants can view, even on different sites and in different countries. The advantage of utilising these tools instead of the freeware VoIP-supported *Skype* is that they offer a more robust pedagogical platform where the tutors can also record all exchanges for future research and teaching purposes.

4.2.1. Beginners'/*ab initio* e-learning tasks: practising 'spoken texts' – Unit 1

The first example of multilingual multiliteracy practice facilitated by the voice tools is that of the 'reflective' beginners' class, Unit 1: 'Greetings, getting to know each other and reflection on task'**.** The outcomes of this unit are that students first of all learn how to introduce themselves in the target language (Italian in the example provided). Secondly, they engage in socio-collaborative oral reflection – in English – about the new skills acquired in the unit ('learning how to learn a language'). They can choose to keep their blog private or to publish it to a shared 'gateway' that everybody can see either in the VLE or in the e-portfolio *PebblePad*. The Italian teaching unit has been regularly tested with level 1 beginner students of Italian on the university-wide languages programme at Coventry University.

Below is a summary of the e-learning tasks delivered via the VLE with Wimba and PebblePad. Students:

- Listen to the audio instructions containing information on the activities to carry out (voice message created by the teacher using Voice Authoring/Recorder);
- Read blogs written by famous people on themselves (pre-selected by the tutor);
- Practise speaking in Italian about themselves (with Voice Board);
- Practise reflecting in English about the skills learned (with Voice Board/Voice Direct and written discussion board);
- Share audio-discussion postings and engage in peer-learning with peers both on campus and on remote sites, through tandem learning with students at a university in Italy learning English and/or Socrates exchange students on campus (with Voice Board and written discussion board).
- Assess their understanding of the new vocabulary learned with the relevant, tailor-made audio multiple-choice quiz.
- Learn how to turn-take and improve their listening and speaking skills both in English and in the target language.

Figure 3. E-learning tasks for beginners' Unit 1

With the activity detailed above, students learn how to engage with the new genre of the digital spoken discourse in an academic setting both in their native language and in the target language studied (Figure 3). Staff and students then have access to recordings that can be analysed again to highlight relevant features of the target language studied. These tools offer new ways of studying a rather neglected area of foreign language discourse: that of spoken grammar (for further information on the discourse of spoken grammar see McCarthy & Carter, 1995).

Moreover, by engaging in the above e-learning tasks, students develop the following academic and professional skills:

- Communication (both in the target language and English).
- Digital literacy.
- Learning to learn (reflectiveness).

- Peer learning/team work.

4.2.2. Advanced level e-learning task: the journalist's report

The second example of an activity carried out with the Wimba Tools was designed for advanced-level students studying Italian Language and Society in their final year of a four-year BA Honours degree (with one year spent abroad). The course covered both socio-political issues relating to Italy and translation skills. The class would normally be a mixed one, as half of the students were native speakers of English and half were Socrates students on exchange from Italian universities. The activity was designed bearing this in mind.

Preliminary activities involved studying the style and register of different daily newspapers in both Italy and the UK. Other online links and World Wide Web tools were also used, such as academic electronic journal articles on the topic being discussed.

Students were told to imagine that they were journalists from various English newspapers and that they had to report on a lecture by a famous professor in the style of that newspaper. Students then attended a one-hour face-to-face lecture on Silvio Berlusconi — the then Italian Prime Minister — delivered in Italian by a member of staff (the 'famous professor').

Students were subsequently given thirty minutes to summarise the lecture into English in the appropriate journalistic style and work in pairs (one English student and one Italian student). The students then recorded their 'report' on Wimba voice board as a 'mock'

telephone call to the editor, as well as providing bullet points in writing on the voice board writing pad.

All students could then listen to the news reports and record their comments on their style and register in 'Voice board'. English students had to speak in Italian and Italian students in English. The whole oral thread could be exported and used for staff development/error analysis/discourse analysis purposes by the staff involved. Students could, moreover, download the discussion thread to their iPods (or equivalent devices).

Figure 4. The "journalist's report" on Wimba Voice Board

With the above activity (Figure 4), students practise the following:

- Listening and comprehension.
- Speaking.
- Interpreting and translating.
- Summary.
- Critical and analytical thinking.

- Self-and peer-evaluation.
- Digital oral and written discourse.
- Style/register.
- Tandem learning.

5. Conclusion

As discussed at a symposium on digital literacies that took place at the Open University in May 2009 (Digital Literacies in Higher Education, 2009), staff who are www enthusiasts have to realise that students must cope with many more academic 'genres' and literacies than their pre-www predecessors. There is no doubt that equipping students with multiliteracies and genre awareness is a necessity, but all tasks must be carefully structured to avoid information overload and to foster the development of critical hypertextual analysis. At the same time the new cybergenres offer staff and students alike the opportunity to engage with texts – and a variety of new "texts" – in novel ways. It is becoming apparent that there is now a shift towards the personalisation in a multifunctional way of the e-learning zones that students inhabit. Carefully structured activities that allow students to be creative and to personalise the e-learning environment can help them both to cope with the various hypertextual dimensions they face in everyday life and to enhance their academic multilingual multiliteracy and genre awareness.

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