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The V-Pal project: innovation and development in the language classroom

This contribution, based on a previously published article (Polisca, 2011), seeks to chart the progress of V-Pal (Virtual Partnerships for All Languages), a language project initiated in the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures at the University of Manchester in 2007. It will focus specifically on the Italian Studies strand of the project. V-Pal is a distance-learning language scheme which has undergone substantial modifications since its inception and has been transformed into two self-standing course units for blended learning.

V-Pal started off as a collaborative project between Italian Studies at Manchester and the Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo in Cagliari, Italy. In 2009, a new partnership with the Università degli Studi di Macerata, Italy, was also set up. Students of Italian in the UK are paired up with students of English in Italy with the objective of increasing participants' cultural awareness and language development. Throughout the duration of the project, students meet weekly for at least eight weeks using Skype, the free Internet telephony software that enables synchronous face-to-face communication through the simple use of webcams and headsets. Upon completion of these lingua-cultural virtual encounters, students produce a portfolio of evidence documenting their progression in the target language and their increased cultural awareness. From the outset, V-Pal has addressed key issues relevant to most language learners as their needs continue to evolve in line with technological developments. In particular, V-Pal addresses 'autonomous learning, the widening role of on-line technologies, the growing acceptance of the need to develop intercultural competence in language learners, and the recognition of the value of reciprocal learning schemes' (Truscott & Morley, 2001: 17).

In order to fulfil these needs, V-Pal participants work on a series of lingua-cultural activities that incrementally populate their learning portfolio. The portfolio activities have been devised to stimulate social interaction and make paired students curious about each other's background and personalities (Candlin & Murphy, 1987: 17); they entail interdependency and responsibility on the part of all those involved (Johnson & Johnson, 2004) in order to maximise collaboration and enhance linguistic and cultural learning. The tasks draw on participants' life experiences and contemporary issues in which students have a common interest: participants make use of authentic materials to substantiate their views or introduce their peers to an aspect of the target culture/language with which the latter are unfamiliar. Examples of topics include Food, Education, Traditions and Folklore, Entertainment, Accommodation.

Students of V-Pal may be at different levels of language proficiency. The fact that some participants may be linguistically more advanced than their partners has not proved to be an issue in the running of the project (two levels of linguistic ability are provided: 'higher' and 'lower', in order to leave students a degree of flexibility in how they use their languages). All sessions focus on Italian and English with an equal distribution of L1 and L2. Students adapt their mother-tongue contribution to suit the L2 level of their partner; equally, when the conversation switches to the other language, the second mother-tongue speaker will gauge their language output to meet the needs of their partner. Ultimately, the individual student is responsible for conducting the tasks at their partner's linguistic level. As noted above, one of the

project's innovations in helping students' acquisition of the target language and culture is that mother-tongue contributions may be supplemented as necessary by a number of multimedia tools, such as digital photographs, chats, live web links, videos or online dictionaries that help the immediate lingua-cultural needs of learners. In particular, initial findings show that V-Pal is proving effective in strengthening vocabulary acquisition and students' perceived abilities in communicating in the target language in line with other research findings on CMC (Computer Mediated Communication).

As well as providing more language contact time when compared with the restrictions a conventionally taught language curriculum puts on classroom delivery (Ciccarelli, 1996), V-Pal aims to achieve clear objectives for its participants, and in particular it seeks to:

- Enhance cultural sensitivity amongst its participants;
- Stimulate its participants to reflect on their own culture by contrasting it with the target culture in a process of cross-cultural awareness-raising (Broady, 2004);
- Increase confidence in the use of the target language, and spoken skills in particular;
- Promote learner autonomy by encouraging participants to take responsibility for their own learning and the learning of others (for representative studies on language learning autonomy, see Holec, 1979; Benson & Voller, 1997; Scharle & Szabó, 2001).

To measure whether these objectives had been met after the first pilot year, evaluation questionnaires were circulated to students. The questionnaires focussed on the V-Pal sessions, participants' linguistic ability and cultural awareness, project tasks, technology/resources and students' appreciation of V-Pal as a whole, with a section inviting further comments. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree), and initial results suggested that participants had found V-Pal a positive experience and had become aware of the project's potential to foster their lingua-cultural progression, as claimed by one student: '[V-Pal] raises cultural awareness and improves linguistic ability' (Student F). The results below are from 2008 and relate to students' individual perceptions on the following:

- increased confidence in speaking (average score 2)
- increased understanding of spoken Italian (2)
- improvement with aspects of grammar (2.5)
- improvement in vocabulary acquisition (2.3)
- increased knowledge of L2 culture (1.7)

At the end of the pilot project, it was decided that V-Pal would continue the following year with the same format. However, the voluntary nature of the project highlighted some areas for improvement. In particular, participants were aware that they did not devote enough time to preparing for the sessions, and they hardly did any follow-up work despite the fact that clear guidelines were given in the information booklet, as the comments below show:

'I just didn't have the time. I couldn't justify devoting additional time after the meetings to something that was not assessed when other work was due in' (Student F)

'I did about 5 mins of thinking beforehand. I put all my effort in whilst I was there though. If it had been for credits I would have done' (Student A)

In order to help students make the most of the project, it became clear that V-Pal would have to become a formal part of the existing curriculum. Thus, V-Pal has now been transformed into two fully-fledged course units, one at final-year level (from 2009) and one at second-year level (from 2010) and both renamed 'Additional Language'.

Both course units are worth 10 credits and run over one semester. They also include one timetabled weekly class, a Blackboard component with online seminars open to both UK and Italian participants, and formal assessment. The weekly class focuses on recent current affairs and discussions on aspects of *italianità*, benefiting from the input of visiting Erasmus students, who are invited to join the class. As regards formal assessment, the portfolio represents the largest component of the course, requiring students to submit a variety of documentation (e.g. preparatory notes, formal post-task reflections, printouts of Skype chats).

After the introduction of credits for Additional Language at final-year level, the author was able to draw some parallels with recent existing research investigating how Computer Mediated Communication affects language learning. Although results remain provisional, they are nevertheless encouraging for the future of schemes similar to V-Pal/Additional Language. As proved elsewhere (Sotillo, 2000; Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2004; Beltz & Thorne, 2006; Tudini, 2007), CMC offers learners a number of benefits similar to, or greater than, those offered by face-to-face communication. In particular, it has been proved that CMC can increase student participation, as well as the quality and quantity of learners' outputs, and may be less threatening than face-to-face interaction when explicitness in indicating understanding is required (e.g. through the use of emoticons). The V-Pal/Additional Language experience in particular has showed that virtual face-to-face encounters are enriched by the possibilities of the different CMC mediums: when conversations are conducted using Skype, for instance, almost all of the student pairs made wide use of emoticons. These, as shown below, were used by participants in the first student meeting to establish a connection with one another and, in subsequent meetings, to indicate understanding or show reciprocal appreciation or empathy. As others have argued (Murray, 2000), the use of emoticons facilitates and fosters the expression of emotional meaning in environments in which the use of non-verbal cues may be limited:

Student 1 scrive: Hi Ashleigh, Matteo here
Student 1 scrive: I'm ready when you are ☺
Student 2 scrive: arrivo!
Student 1 scrive: ok ☺
(extract from a first conversation)

Student 3 says: hi! Can you see me now?
Student 4 says: hey up! Yeh I can ☺
Student 4 says: tutto bene adesso?
Student 3 says: sì, ora sto usando un altro laptop
Student 3 says: il mio ha deciso di non funzionare ☺
Student 4 says: hehe ho ok capisco!!
(extract from a first conversation)

Student 5 says: eheheh, la grammatica italiana è difficile e noiosa anche per me..
Student 6 says: davvero? :D
Student 5 says: Si!!!

Student 5 says: ma io non devo più studiarla per fortuna ;)
Student 6 says: sei fortunata
(extract from a subsequent conversation)

CMC has also proved capable of supporting and enriching face-to-face communication (Polisca, 2011): Skype chats are used to clarify linguistic doubts such as spelling or word meaning and provide immediate cultural references to the conversation in the form, for example, of pictures or web links as the extract below shows:

Student 7 says: Cala goloritzè
Student 7 says:
http://www.google.it/images?hl=it&q=cala%20goloritz%C3%A8&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi
Student 8 says: the ashmolean
Student 8 says: punting
Student 8 says:
http://www.google.co.uk/images?ul=en&source=hp&q=punting%20in%20oxford&oq=&um=1&ie=UTF-8&tab=wi

Furthermore, and in line with other findings (Jones, 2006; Fuente, 2003; Perez, 2003; Şahin, 2009; Smith, 2004), Additional Language has also proved to be an effective medium to support vocabulary acquisition. In several conversations, new vocabulary introduced during the face-to-face encounters appears in the Skype chats and in the subsequent follow-up through reflective comments or student notes. This seems to suggest that Additional Language offers the opportunity for a comprehensive, all-round approach to vocabulary learning, as the examples below show:

Example 1:
 • Conversation transcript:
Student 9: And an Italian journalist told that "Citizen Kane" compared to our premier it's like a **flea**, we say a **flea**, something very small. That's the Italian way to say to be like a **flea: come una pulce. Flea is pulce.**
Student 10: **Pulce**. Ok. So, wow. It's quite interesting.

 • Chat log:
Student 9*:* **pulce**
Student 9: **flea**

 • Follow-up written comments:
Student 10: 'La situazione dei media in Italia è, secondo [name of partner], incredibile. […] E la situazione di 'Citizen Kane' è come un (sic) **pulce** in confronto alla situazione in Italia.'

Example 2:
 • Conversation transcript:
Student 5: invece, secondo me non sono i prodotti biologici ma più tipo le uova che vengono da **galline** che sono...**non sono tenute**... non so come si chiama in italiano, ehm... come? Ah sì sì, quelle... però come si scrive? **Ruspanti**... **in inglese è *free range*... free range chicken...**

Student 6: **galline ruspanti**, sono quelle che **sono lasciate libere**...

- Chat log:

Student 6: **ruspanti**
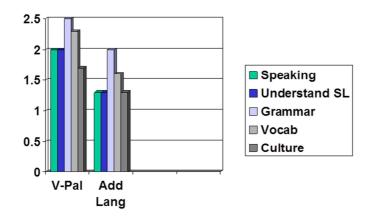Student 5: **free range**

- Student 5 personal notes:

D: **RUSPANTI = free range**
(Emphasis and capitalisation in original)

At the end of 2009, an evaluation was run for the Additional language module at final-year level. Results were very encouraging and improved from the initial V-Pal pilot phase (table A below). The highest scores were recorded in students' increased feeling of confidence in speaking and understanding of Italian and their knowledge of L2 culture, followed by a perceived improvement in vocabulary acquisition:

- increased confidence in speaking (1,3)
- increased understanding of spoken Italian (1,3)
- improvement with aspects of grammar (2)
- improvement in vocabulary acquisition (1,6)
- increased knowledge of L2 culture (1,3)

(table A)

Conclusions

This contribution has charted the progress and development of V-Pal/Additional Language and has briefly sought to show that CMC-enriched face-to-face encounters offer a number of benefits for those involved in the programme. Additional Language retains the benefits of both face-to-face encounters and CMC: in particular, the programme helps to foster and enhance vocabulary acquisition through an all-round approach (oral and written), develops oral skills and enhances intercultural knowledge. In this respect, CMC in the forms shown above has confirmed its already proven benefits as an extra aid for face-to-face (virtual) encounters with clear benefits for the learner. Further research to measure the real extent of vocabulary acquisition in CMC-aided peer-encounters for Additional Language and similar language projects is still needed, alongside a stronger focus on the measurability of participants' 'cultural awareness'. However, it

is hoped that the high level of transferability of V-Pal/Additional Language and the relative ease with which it can be set up will inspire other language practitioners to use technology to students' advantage in and beyond the classroom environment.

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