Integrating Intercultural Email Communication and the TV News in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the benefits associated with the integration of email communication between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) and the Italian daily broadcast telegiornale in the context of foreign language learning. For one-semester sixteen second-year students of Italian at an Australian University participated in one-to-one email interactions with Italian NS and discussed a range of topics presented in the news. As part of the project learners also contributed to weekly oral discussions in class on relevant cultural issues emerging from both the telegiornale and the email interactions with the NS. Throughout the semester students negotiated the content of both email and oral discussions with little intervention from the instructor aside from the requirements that the topics discussed were relevant to the Italian current situation and that communication took place entirely in the target language. This study profiles an integrated approach that provides a personal and cultural connection with contemporary Italian language and culture encourages discussion and reflection on relevant issues and increases students' interest in the target language culture.

Introduction

Several studies into the pedagogical uses of electronic communication between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of a foreign language have discussed the benefits associated with the integration of email activities into the teaching and learning of a language subject (Beavois & Eledge, 1996; Gray & Stockwell, 1998; Fedderholt, 2001; Roed, 2003). Some of these benefits include increases in motivation, reduction of anxiety, increased participation and development of learner autonomy, opportunities for authentic communication with a real audience, and enhanced cultural awareness (Stockwell 2003, p. 38).

A number of studies have described carefully designed email exchange projects in which learners participated in discussion tasks with a very specific focus (Kern, 1996; Chen, 1998; Muller-Hartmann, 2000) and which were fully integrated into the ongoing structure of assessment and students' classroom interaction (Warschauer, 2001). Other studies have indicated that the type of activities and tasks carried out by learners during the email interactions not only influence the nature of communication but also learners' attitudes and motivation concerning the exercise (Kern, 1998; Mueller-Hartmann, 2000; OfDowd, 2001; Warschauer, 2001). These studies also suggest that goal-oriented tasks and activities that allow for interaction and collaboration are generally more valuable for

motivating students and encouraging their participation and involvement in the learning process.

In the particular context of this project, the use of intercultural email communication was combined with discussions on issues presented in the Italian telegiornale and integrated into the teaching and learning of a second-year Italian language and culture subject. For one-semester students participated in one-to-one email interactions with Italian NS and discussed a range of topics presented in the Italian news. As part of the project, students also actively participated in and contributed to oral discussions in class on relevant issues emerging from both the telegiornale and the email interactions with the NS.

Research into the integration of the Italian telegiornale within a teaching and learning context has investigated its cultural significance and pedagogical value. Several studies have recommended integrating it into the structure of the language classroom to improve students' linguistic skills and broaden their knowledge of modern Italian culture and society (Diadori, 2000; Absalom, 2002), encourage discussion and reflection on relevant issues (Losi, 2001) and increase students' motivation and interest in the target language culture (Balboni, 2000).

Both email communication and the Italian telegiornale provided students with the opportunity not only to be exposed to and extend their knowledge of contemporary Italian language and culture but also to connect and engage with it on two different levels: through authentic communication with a real audience and observation, reflection and discussion on culturally significant issues.

From a practical point of view, the choice of email communication proved to be appropriate as it is technically very simple to use and allows for flexibility in the choice of time and space. It also allows learners to review earlier messages and discussion threads and to reflect on their linguistic and cultural content after completing the exercise. Similarly, the integration of the Italian telegiornale to encourage oral production and stimulate discussion seemed ideal, as it is an authentic and always up-to-date resource (Absalom, 2002) that is easily accessible daily, either through TV or the Internet and requires minimal technical support.

Method

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to provide students with an intermediate Italian language and culture subject with the opportunity to interact with suitable NS correspondents and discuss issues relevant to the current Italian situation. A second aim was to create a personal connection with the target language culture and increase students' cultural awareness.

Setting

The project consisted of two components, the telegiornale discussions and the email interactions. Each component involved the following phases:

Telegiornale discussions:

Watching the Wednesday morning edition of the Italian news. 2. Preparation for the class discussion. Each student prepared a presentation based on one item selected from the news. Each student prepared a list of relevant vocabulary to be distributed to the class for students' reference as well as a list of relevant questions and issues to be posed to the class for discussion. 3. Participation in the class discussion on Thursday. Two students selected by the instructor-led discussion based on the chosen topic. All students in the class participated in the discussion.

Email interactions:

Initiate email interactions. Each student was assigned to an NS correspondent and sent her/him a first introductory message in Italian. 2. After receiving a reply, each participating student proceeded with the virtual dialogue with the Italian correspondent. 3. Every week each student wrote a message to the designated partner and discussed one or more topics presented in the news or emerged from the class discussions. The email interactions involved both composing messages and responding to the messages received from the Italian partner.

Participants

Sixteen second-year students of Italian at an Australian university participated in the project. The students, twelve females, and four males had all completed at least three semesters of formal Italian language study, either at the university level or at the secondary school level, and had therefore developed a good level of competence in the target language. Eight of the sixteen Australian participants were students between 18 and 22 years of age, eight were mature age students between 25 and 40.

Research into the sustainability of email exchanges between NS and NNS suggests that establishing a positive personal relationship with the correspondents is vital to maintain a viable electronic partnership (Muller-Hartmann, 2000; Belz, 2002, Stockwell & Levy, 2003). Research also indicates that when communication is engaging for both participants, the likelihood that interaction continues for a longer period increases considerably (Stockwell, 2003).

In this project, providing the Australian students with suitable correspondents was a crucial issue, not only to increase the chances of sustained interactions and continuity throughout the exercise but also to keep both correspondents motivated and engaged throughout the project. When the possibility of participating in the project was initially discussed in class, 80% of the mature age students expressed the desire to communicate with NS belonging to a similar age group, with compatible interests and attitudes, rather than with young high school or university students. A broader selection of NS participants was therefore involved in the exchange. Individual correspondents were chosen by the instructor based on their characteristics (including age group, gender, profession, and interests) as well as their willingness to actively participate in the exchange.

All NS participants agreed to participate in the project voluntarily and were highly motivated and willing to commit themselves to interact with their Australian partners.

Eight of the NS participants were high school students aged between 17 and 19 and eight were adults between 25 and 40 years of age.

Role of the Instructor

Aitsiselmi (1999) points out that the role of the instructor as a facilitator, advisor, or mentor is crucial to ensure that learners engaged in an email exchange project are encouraged to pursue their learning in the appropriate direction. Absalom (2002) claims that such a role is vital for a teaching program that integrates the telegiornale as the instructor needs to teach explicitly and provide clear guidelines to the students involved in the various tasks.

At the beginning of the project, students were provided with a set of instructions and suggestions for composing and interpreting messages as well as various examples of what was considered to be successful participation. They were also given specific guidelines on how to watch the news and what to focus on while preparing their presentation. The instructor then guided students in the process of making meaning of the issues presented in the news and also in the development of their virtual relationship with their correspondents. Support and feedback were provided during the process of writing and communicating with the NS and during the process of analysing messages and reflect on particular aspects of the other culture. Students and instructors had the opportunity to discuss and reflect together on the particularities and challenges of the interactions.

Communication with the teacher has proven to be valuable as students felt comfortable discussing difficulties and concerns related to the email interactions as they arose, rather than having to deal with them on their own. The instructor made sure students were not intimidated by the fact they were communicating with NS, by engaging with them regularly and regularly seeking feedback on the progress of the exercise.

The role of the instructor was not to impose the topics to be discussed or to be prescriptive but rather to guide students and facilitate their experience. As mentioned earlier, students negotiated the content of the interactions with their correspondents and independently selected relevant issues for the class discussions. They had the freedom to actively construct the environment for their learning (see Laurillard, 2002) by focusing the discussion on topics that were not limited to a specific list of pre-determined items but significantly covered their interests, experiences, and opinions.

Assessment

Angelo and Cross (1993) and McCarthy (1999) agree that learning tasks need to be assessed to be taken seriously and that it is vital that students see a clear relationship between their performance in a particular task and formal assessment. To motivate students' participation and encourage interest in the exercise (see Ramsden, 1994, p. 185), a percentage of the final mark for this subject was dedicated to both the email interactions and the class discussions.

The email interactions were worth 15% of the overall mark for the subject and the class discussions were worth another 15% to make up a total of 30%. Both the exchanges and the telegiornale discussions were evaluated concerning a set of four criteria that were explained to the students at the start of the project: communication, linguistic accuracy,

content, and cultural awareness. Each of the four criteria was weighted at 25% of the 15% of the overall mark for each task.

The communicative criteria referred to the ability to lead a discussion and to understand and respond appropriately to questions and observations posed in class. In the case of email interactions it related to the communicative aspects of the messages such as clear questioning and answering, comprehension of the preceding discourse and coherent development of ideas and dialogue. The linguistic criteria related specifically to linguistics accuracy (grammatical correctness and fluency) and to coherent use of linguistic expressions. Content related to the depth and quality of both oral presentations and email discussions. In the case of email interactions, messages that were more complex and sustained were marked more favourably than those that limited the discussion to more superficial topics. Cultural awareness related to the ability to comprehend cultural references and to discuss and reflect on events and culturally significant content as well as the ability to compare aspects of Italian and Australian culture

Data collection

In order to learn about students' attitudes about the integration of the Italian telegiornale and the email discussions with the NS, NNS participants were asked to complete two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was distributed at the start of the semester to find out about students' prior experience of viewing the Italian news and communicating with NS in an online environment. The second one was handed out at the end of the semester to gather some feedback on students' perceptions of the value of the exercise and on their experience of discussing the issues presented in the news both in class and online.

The second method of data collection included saving all online interactions between NS and NNS as well as audio recording all class discussions. The email exchanges were systematically forwarded to the instructor and saved in chronological order. The class discussions were recorded and later revisited and analysed by the researcher using qualitative techniques.

Results and Discussion

Data from the questionnaires, the online exchanges, and the class discussions were employed to report and justify the findings.

In the questionnaire administered at the beginning of the semester, students reported that they did not feel confident about presenting on the telegiornale because they had difficulties understanding and interpreting the content of the news. They also commented that they felt anxious about discussing Italian current affairs with correspondents who were more informed than them and more familiar with the topics considered. A number of students were concerned about making too many mistakes in the correspondence and some worried about not being understood by the NS.

An analysis of students' responses to the questionnaire completed at the end of the semester revealed a shift in their attitude towards the tasks of both watching the telegiornale and interacting with the NS. When asked to describe the experience of watching the telegiornale and to comment on some of the issues encountered, students

observed that the routine of regularly watching and analysing the news helped them becoming more familiar with what was reported and also assisted them in the task of summarising the content of the news for presentation in class and for the online discussions. A number of students noted that, despite the difficulty of grasping some of the topics presented, particularly about Italian politics, they felt that, as the weeks progressed, they were able to understand more of the cultural context of the telegiornale and became more interested in following Italian current events.

When asked to comment on the value of the online discussions with the NS, students pointed out that the task of discussing the news with the Italian correspondents contributed to improving their linguistic skills and offered them the unique opportunity of being exposed to authentic language. They noted that, by the end of the semester, they felt more confident in their use of Italian as they could express themselves more effectively on many issues. Some students praised the opportunity to listen to a different point of views and opinions, reflect on differences and similarities between the Australian and Italian culture as well as exchange ideas, and engage in interesting discussions. The results of the end of semester questionnaire revealed that overall the exercise had a positive effect on students' motivation for learning about Italian culture and society and for improving their language skills.

Analysis of the online interactions between native and non-native speakers and observation of the class discussions revealed that the tasks of interpreting, analysing and synthesising relevant issues presented in the telegiornale as well as discussing them with the Italian correspondents contributed to improving the quality, depth and strength of students' arguments and debates. It is particularly interesting to note that, as the semester progressed, the content and quality of both class discussions and email messages improved dramatically, with contributions covering a wider range of topics and becoming more structured and relevant.

In terms of linguistic development, it is interesting to point out that in a number of cases the NNS followed examples of language usage modelled by their NS correspondents and tried to incorporate words and expressions learned from their email partners into both their online and oral contributions. Analysis of the messages exchanged also revealed a range of cases where the NS assisted the NNS in acquiring new lexical terms and expressions. In a small number of cases, and only when explicitly asked, the NS corrected some of the mistakes made by the NNS.

Conclusion

The integration of intercultural email communication and the Italian TV news into the teaching and learning of this Italian language and culture subject had a number of benefits for the students involved. It not only provided learners with the opportunity to be exposed to and broaden their knowledge of contemporary Italian language and culture but also allowed them to connect and engage with the target language culture on a personal basis, through authentic communication with native speakers.

Through observation and analysis of the Italian news and regular interaction both in class and with their correspondents, learners were able to listen to different points of view and opinions on relevant matters, reflect on differences and similarities between

Italian and Australian social and cultural themes, and critically compare their views and those of others. They also had the chance to express their opinions and perspective on a range of issues, engage in interesting discussions with classmates, NS, and instructors, and receive individual responses and feedback from their correspondents.

From a linguistic point of view, the combination of different activities associated with the use of both media allowed students to develop their receptive abilities of aural/visual comprehension, as well as their productive oral and written abilities. Through regular practice in presenting and discussing main points and arguments in both written and oral form, students developed their presentation and organisational skills and became more effective and confident speakers and writers.

The integration of both media encouraged students to participate at two different levels. While the telegiornale served as an authentic resource to represent contemporary Italian culture and society and as a departure point for oral and email discussions, email communication served as preparation for face-to-face discussions and offered students a real audience that assisted them in the task of making meaning of the news, reflecting on them and expressing their point of view.

In conclusion, this project has created an environment in which learners were able to express themselves in oral and written form in the target language as well as discuss and reflect on a number of relevant issues. The project also had a positive effect on students' motivation and interest in the subject. It encouraged them to expand their knowledge of Italian culture and society and develop an ongoing interest in current affairs. A final important benefit of this exercise was that it gave students the chance to construct their own learning experience and develop a sense of autonomy and independence (see Laurillard 2002, pp. 67-69). The skills that were developed could be applied in the wider world as well as the university context.

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