



# Online Italian Language Courses at University for Foreigners of Perugia: From Planning To Testing

Letizia Cinganotto

University for Foreigners of Perugia, Italy

## Abstract

*University for Foreigners of Perugia has been recently involved in a vast process of digitalization, also as a result of the challenges of the pandemic and the lessons learnt to be implemented in the post-pandemic era, or “new normal”. The main missions of the University include the spreading of Italian language and culture all over the world and the teaching of Italian to foreigners, both for professional and personal purposes. An online platform addressed to the teaching of Italian has been designed, implemented, and enhanced with videos and materials produced by the same University in the past. The courses, delivered on the University Moodle platform, are aligned with the CEFRCV and adopt an innovative and dynamic approach, based on self-study and self-assessment with the support of professors and tutors. The courses have been planned and implemented by taking into account the syllabi and corpora produced at the University for Foreigners of Perugia in latest years. The courses are based on audio and video storytelling, and involve the learners in authentic and real tasks, according to the Action-Oriented Approach described in the CEFRCV. Main features of the courses will be highlighted, with particular reference to some advanced functions, such as immersive environments in 3D and the use of Artificial Intelligence. Preliminary results of the ongoing experimentation of Artificial Intelligence applied to the learning and teaching of Italian as a Second or Foreign language will also be mentioned.*

**Keywords:** *Online courses; Italian as a Second/Foreign Language; Online testing; Webtools*

## 1. Introduction

University for Foreigners of Perugia<sup>1</sup> is a small, welcoming campus, with a strong international atmosphere: Italian and international students interact every day, sharing experiences, courses and study time in a multicultural and multilingual environment. The strong focus on the international dimension is demonstrated by the in-depth study of English, Spanish and French, as well as the most requested non-European languages on the market (Chinese, Japanese and Arabic). The University for Foreigners of Perugia offers courses of Italian language and culture face-to-face or remotely, aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – Companion Volume (CEFRCV), after taking an online placement test, placing the attendees at their relevant level of competence.

The CVCL (Centre for Language Evaluation and Certification) of the University for Foreigners of Perugia is responsible for the Italian language certification at the different levels, recognized by the Italian Ministry of Interiors and Foreign Affairs, and valid for migrants' long stay permit and citizenship. The language certificates issued by CVCL are comparable to the most important certificates issued by the European institutions members of ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) and relate to the learning objectives specified in the CEFRCV. The CVCL, in collaboration with the Division for Language Policy of the Council of Europe and of European Commission funding, has been carried out several research projects on language assessment and on the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unistrapg.it/en>



## **2. Language teaching and learning in the “new normal”**

In the post-pandemic era, so-called “new normal”, the University for Foreigners of Perugia and the CVCL have started a research project on digitalization, which has come out to be inevitable, after the enriching experience of the pandemic. In fact, despite the challenges and the huge problems caused by COVID 19, a lot of opportunities emerged in terms of digital and technological literacy.

A research conducted by INDIRE, in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit and the European Commission [1] [2] has shown that a lot of Italian teachers of foreign languages who had never used learning technologies for their teaching activities, found out the great potential of webtools, repositories, platforms as an added value to the traditional teaching and learning process, to be considered and implemented also in the post-pandemic era. In fact, teachers highlighted the importance of webtools and online platforms as a trigger for the students’ motivation and also stressed the fundamental role of technologies and the need to find new stimulating and engaging materials.

The University for Foreigners of Perugia has organized online undergraduate and postgraduate courses during the pandemic, without stopping the teaching activities. In the “new normal”, teachers and tutors have come back to teach in presence, but still continuing using a lot of the online functions provided by the university Moodle platform and by other webtools. The university has also extensive experience in online postgraduate degrees and professional teacher training courses on Italian as a foreign and second language which have been enhanced and empowered during the pandemic [3].

## **3. The online courses of Italian at the University for Foreigners of Perugia**

After the pandemic, a research group coordinated by the author, started a specific research project on online courses of Italian to be launched and spread internationally. An online platform addressed to the teaching of Italian has been designed, implemented, and enhanced with videos and materials produced by the same university in the past. The courses, delivered on the university Moodle platform, are aligned with the CEFRCV and adopt an innovative and dynamic approach, based on self-study and self-assessment with the support of professors and tutors.

The courses have been planned and implemented by taking into account the syllabi and corpora produced at the University for Foreigners of Perugia in latest years [4] [5]. They are based on audio and video storytelling, and involve the learners in authentic and real tasks, according to the Action-Oriented Approach described in the CEFRCV [6] [7]. Therefore, they are based on real and meaningful learning scenarios which represent the scene for real life actions.

The learning environment is characterized by materials and video-lessons specifically created to develop the linguistic and meta-linguistic skills of the learners, focusing on the Italian language and culture, while facilitating reflection on “Made in Italy” and on themes with a literary, historical-artistic, and socio-cultural background, with the aim of enhancing the Italian historical-cultural heritage, in close correlation with the Italian language.

The learning pathway is based on the interactive use of content and materials, both through asynchronous communication tools such as forum, blog and mailing list, and through synchronous video-conferencing tools.

Through the activities proposed in the virtual environment, the courses aim at fostering BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), i.e., the basic skills for communication and interactional exchanges typical of the domains of daily life, and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), the formal, academically oriented register necessary to face university studies. Online seminar meetings held by lecturers and experts on specific topics of history, art, culture, literature, etc. are organized. In fact, those courses are requested by different international universities willing to arrange



exchange programs with our university and to send their students to Italy according to study-abroad programs or international scholarships.

Digital resources and cooperative tools are available on the platform, aimed at the full involvement and participation of students, through the realization of "e-tivities," individual or collaborative tasks planned according to certain learning objectives, which can be presented directly by the students during special webinars, named "TeachMeet", based on peer learning. The PBL (Project-Based Learning) approach is therefore, taken into account, which assist in the production and presentation of small projects, also in collaborative mode, exploiting the potential of webtools and dedicated apps.

Synchronous events, regularly scheduled on the platform, involve lectures or seminars held by experts on various topics, or presentations held by the students themselves, who are eager to share their experiences with their colleagues in the virtual classroom.

The courses are based on a narrative and functional approach, focusing on storytelling as one of the most important forms of human expression and its highly motivating and identifying role in the learning process.

The approach adopted, therefore, is both narrative, because it refers to authentic language use, according to the real needs of speakers, and functional, as it describes "language in action," not theoretically extracted from model-situations, but emerged from specific needs of learners, related to their experiences in different contexts of daily life.

Thus, the courses are designed and implemented according to the following features:

- reticular, not linear: the pathways are conceived not as separate skill packages, but as set of integrated skills;
- modular: the different modules are self-consistent, reusable, interchangeable;
- synchronous and asynchronous: input and materials of different types are offered, alternating asynchronous delivery with synchronous interaction among students and with teachers, also taking inspiration from the SOFLA model (Synchronous Online Flipped Learning Approach) [8], which adapts the flipped learning method to distance or blended learning, alternating individual or collaborative study in asynchronous, with interaction, discussion and presentation in synchronous. The student has the freedom to choose the most suitable learning modes, according to his or her needs and learning style, but within a well-defined path. The role of the teacher and tutor is crucial in this regard.

The content of the courses is in line with the syllabi developed by the University for Foreigners of Perugia, inspired from the Italian language profile [9], making use of video clips taken from sit-coms and web series, as well as videos specially made by professionals in the field. Students are guided in reflecting on the linguistic features of Italian-style fiction and video clips for authentic language use in real contexts and situations. Therefore, the potential of fictions and sit-coms in teaching Italian L2/FL for the development of pragmatic and sociocultural competence is exploited, focusing on the sociolinguistic, pragmatic, extra-linguistic and para-verbal features typical of oral communication and interaction in Italian in everyday life contexts.

Given the peculiarities of the multimedia learning environment, the courses also aim at the development of online interaction, one of the new descriptors of the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2020) [10].

Tasks, e-activities, individual or collaborative interactive exercises are crucial in the learning pathways, under the guidance of the teacher and the tutor, who will also aim at the personalization and individualization of the different activities.



Learning analytics are constantly monitored to collect data and make a screenshot of the learners' experience, for further improvement. Data are also collected through initial, mid-term and final questionnaires and tests, providing information not only on the different profiles of the participants but also on expectations and satisfaction in terms of usability of the activities, degree of interactivity and involvement in the course. Learning Analytics will provide indications about possible additional support needed by the students to achieve their goals, suggesting potential new activities to overcome critical issues during the course itself.

#### **4. Ongoing development with Artificial Intelligence**

The Artificial Intelligence system is the current most popular research strand in language education and the research group at University for Foreigners of Perugia has started investigating the potential of AI in Italian language teaching and learning. A specific AI prototype, created by a group of technicians, is being trained using a substantial corpus derived from the afore mentioned Italian language profile, which serves as a reference framework for the linguistic components corresponding to levels A1 through B2 for Italian as a second language. The research group is currently engaged in exploring the potential of AI-powered technologies within the context of Italian online courses described in the previous paragraphs. In fact, AI systems and chatbots are expected to offer learners interactive and personalized language practice opportunities, instant feedback, and immersive conversational scenarios. AI can enhance both oral communication and written production, addressing limitations frequently encountered in online course settings. The aim is to contemplate the promising role of Artificial Intelligence in augmenting language learning experiences and outcomes of the online courses of Italian implemented at the University for Foreigners of Perugia.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The research group at the University for Foreigners of Perugia led by the author, is currently engaged in studying and trying out the potential of Intelligent Tutoring Systems, powered by Natural Language Processing (NLP), to analyze learners' responses, administer personalized language exercises, and provide immediate feedback. AI may enhance students' abilities to recognize and rectify their syntactic errors more effectively, as well as to practice grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

The group is currently experimenting the online courses of Italian implemented on the university Moodle platform with a sample of Chinese university students, attending a joint-degree programme with the University for Foreigners of Perugia, providing online and self-study programmes and residential lessons in Perugia for the MA. The online courses of Italian allow them to improve their language skills before coming to study to the university campus in Perugia. Data are being collected in terms of participation and motivation, and preliminary results collected from the students' comments show positive attitudes and reactions, although it is too early to draw conclusions as far as learning outcomes are concerned.

However, the combination of online courses on a Moodle platform and additional practice through chatbox and Intelligent Tutoring Systems seems to be very engaging and promising, but further experimentation in the upcoming months are needed to achieve sustainable and scalable results.

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