

Technologies for Teaching and Learning Intercultural Competence and Interlanguage Pragmatics in L2 Italian. Experiences of Implementing an Online Language Course on Moodle Platform

Borbála Samu¹, Valentino Santucci², Talia Sbardella³
University for Foreigners of Perugia, Italy^{1,2,3}

Abstract

Pragmatic competence is one of the main components of communicative ability in a second language. Recently, a great deal of research has been done regarding the acquisition and teaching of pragmatics of Italian as a foreign language. However, resources and teaching materials dealing with this aspect of the Italian language are still very scarce. This article describes the experiences in creating an Italian online language course, focusing on the tools available through the Moodle e-learning platform, selected to enhance the learning of this ability in language learners. Finally, the study indicates some future directions for the development of an effective language teaching online.

Keywords: online Italian language course, Moodle, interactive language learning, intercultural pragmatic competence

1. Introduction

It is well known that learning the grammar and the vocabulary of a second language (L2) is not a sufficient condition to use it effectively in a variety of contexts. It is in fact necessary to acquire the capacity to link words to the context where we want to use them to interact and to achieve our communicative goals. Communicative competence has been analysed and described in various ways [1, 2]. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* [3] indicates, as three main categories linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language effectively in a contextually appropriate way, given specific situations, speakers, and content. In the last thirteen years a great deal of research has been done on acquisition and instruction of pragmatic competence. Concerning L2 Italian, there is now a large and fast-growing literature on interlanguage pragmatics, that is, learners' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic ability and about the learning of L2 pragmatics in instructional context [4, 5]. However, resources and teaching materials dealing with this aspect of the Italian language are still very scarce. The main objective of this study is to give an insight into the resources able to enhance pragmatic and intercultural communicative competence in an online language course using Moodle. In this paper we first give an overview of some theoretical and methodological issues in teaching and learning pragmatics (§2), then we give a short description about tools provided by Moodle (§3) and we illustrate in some depth those we mainly used in the experience conducted in building our B1 Italian online course (§4). Finally, we indicate some possible ways to further develop language courses online.

2. Teaching pragmatics in the context of Italian as a foreign language

In order to be able to use language effectively in a contextually appropriate way, speakers need to know how to use speech acts, such as apologizing, complaining, complimenting, requesting. To communicate speech acts in L2, learners have to acquire linguistic expressions (for example, to apologize in Italian it is necessary to know the word *Scusi* 'sorry' or the expression *Sono mortificato* 'I am devastated') and they also need to have some knowledge about the rules of proper social behaviour, about social perception and values attributed to certain expressions (for example, to know if arriving 10 minutes late when joining a group of friends it is expected to express feeling devastated or not). As Kasper and Rose [6] note, "Speech communities differ in their assessment of speakers' and hearers' social distance and social power, their right and obligations, and the degree of imposition involved in particular communicative acts". So, learners of a foreign language must not only know the appropriate linguistic forms to achieve their goals using the language, but they must be aware of the sociocultural norms to speak and to behave "properly" in different communicative situations.

Pragmatic competence is, in fact, one of the core constructs of intercultural competence.

Adult learners have a considerable amount of L2 pragmatic knowledge: current theory and research suggest a number of universal features in discourse and pragmatics and other aspects may be successfully transferred from the learners' L1.

Basic orientation to communicative action, such as politeness [7], might be shared throughout communities, even though what counts as polite and how the principles of politeness are implemented in context varies across cultures. Similarly, specific communicative acts, such as greetings, requests, offers, invitations, refusal, apologies are available in any community, however their realization varies across cultures. The major realization strategies identified for some communicative acts have been found stable across ethnolinguistically distant speech communities [6]. For example, speakers may apologize directly, expressing regret or requesting forgiveness; or indirectly, admitting their own responsibility, giving an explanation, offering a repair, promising never perform the offence again, expressing concern for the hearer.

However, research shows that speech acts can manifest differently across languages and cultures. Comparing Italian and American and Australian English apology strategies Lipson [8] and Walker [9] show that Italians are more sensitive to differences of status, authority and social roles of participants, while American and Australian English egalitarian culture is reflected in avoiding displays of power through language.

As various studies demonstrate "many aspects of L2 pragmatics are not acquired without the benefit of instruction, or they are learned more slowly. There is thus a strong indication that instructional intervention may be facilitative to, or even necessary for, the acquisition of L2 pragmatic ability" [6]. Research has further shown that even advanced language learners often show imbalance between their grammatical and their pragmatic knowledge, with pragmatic competence lagging behind grammatical knowledge [10].

Kasper [11] cites three conditions for the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge: the pertinent input, noticing of the input and the opportunity to develop a high level of control. Particularly in the foreign language setting, where the exposure to the target language is limited to the language course, teaching of pragmatics gets even more importance.

The teaching of pragmatics requires specific methodological attention, the question of "rules" in pragmatics being rather complex. Turning back to apologies, the ways for apologizing are as many as the possible contexts where one could realize this linguistic

act; speakers may choose to attenuate or intensify the act according the importance they give to contextual variables. So, the most reliable reference points will be authentic texts reporting the effective use of language by native speakers in real interactions. Apart from the appropriate input, awareness-raising and noticing activities should supplement the introduction of pragmatically relevant input in instructed L2 learning. Evaluation of pragmatic competence is also a key factor, “Especially in instructional contexts where formal testing is regularly performed, curricular innovations that comprise pragmatics as a learning objective will be ineffective as long as pragmatic ability is not included as a regular and important component of language test” [6].

3. Moodle as an online learning platform

Moodle is the worldwide most used learning management system (LMS) designed to provide educators and learners with a single, robust, secure and integrated system to create personalized learning environments [12, 13, 14]. At the time of writing, Moodle has more than 100000 active sites in educational institutions from more than 200 countries in the world (see <https://moodle.net/sites>). These data clearly explain why Moodle is often the first solution to consider in order to build a platform for e-learning and blended learning courses, as it is the case of our Italian online language courses.

Moodle provides a variety of tools and functionalities with a twofold objective: on the one hand the teacher can design the learning path and create the course content in a relatively easy way, while on the other hand Moodle delivers course contents to the learners without the need of any other technological tool (as it is the case, for example, of the SCORM packages). Therefore, Moodle covers the whole lifecycle of a course and all the aspects of a learning path: design, content creation, learners’ enrolment, delivery to the learners, how learners interact with the content, communications between teacher and learners and among learners, evaluation of the learning activities, issue of digital certificates, and measurement and analysis of the data produced by the learners.

For the sake of space, here we briefly describe the main tools and functionalities that, we think, are more useful in a language learning course developed using Moodle, keeping in mind our specific objective, that is, to develop pragmatic and intercultural competences. Moodle allows to create contents by means of the *resource* and *activity* modules. A resource is an item that a teacher can use to support learning, such as a file or a web page which can also contain multimedia content like video or audio-clips. More interesting are the activities, i.e., something in which a learner can actively participate and obtain a feedback, possibly preset, by the teacher and interact with other learners or the teacher. Among the variety of activities, the most useful for our context are: forums, chats, quizzes, lessons, wikis, assignments and workshops.

The forum and chat activities allow, respectively, asynchronous and synchronous communication among learners and with the teacher. In a self-paced learning perspective, forums are usually preferred (with respect to chats) and can have some interesting use cases. For example, a teacher may create a collaborative exercise about “how to apologize”: every learner is invited to open a new topic where she can upload an audio-clip, then the other learners and the teacher can reply such topics by indicating errors, suggestions, asking for an explanation, etc.

The quiz activity allows the teacher to understand the progress of the learners and it is also important for learners’ self-evaluation. Indeed, Moodle allows to preset some feedback comments that are displayed to the learners depending on the chosen answer or on the grade obtained. Moreover, the H5P plugin (see <https://h5p.org>) allows to embed questions inside a video lesson in order to restart or skip some parts of the video

depending on the answer provided to the quiz.

A useful activity to co-construct pragmatic knowledge is the wiki, where the learners, altogether or divided in groups, can build up step by step a content page. Possibly, the teacher can preset the format of such a page by providing some guidelines.

Lessons allow to build a series of multimedia pages, possibly interleaved by questions, and to connect them in predetermined alternative learning paths: the learner can choose its navigation path by clicking the desired button or depending on the answer provided in a question page.

Assignments can be delivered for evaluation to the teacher and can contain also video-clip that learners can record on the fly by using the online recording tool provided by Moodle. Peer evaluation among the learners is also allowed by means of the workshop activity.

Finally, it is worth to note that all the activities and resources allow to set completion criteria and conditions for accessing them. The combination of these two features is very powerful and allows to force the learner's trajectory among the resources and activities provided by the teacher. For example: a learner may be forbidden to advance to the next didactic unit until she has posted a given number of discussions/replies in the forum of the current unit, or until she has obtained a sufficient grade in a quiz, etc.

4. Some examples of learning resources in our B1 online Italian course

Our B1 online Italian course is organized within the Moodle platform and is divided into 12 learning units, articulated in six sections. Each section is divided into multiple paths that include tools to foster the building of a learning community in which students can explore language structure and function through text related activities, developing the ability to understand and deepening the use of linguistic forms and pragmatic aspects. Texts often consist in videos that are also used for developing sensitivity to meaning expressed by tone and words' choice, followed by activities where students are guided to discover social perception and values attributed to certain expressions and to understand in which pragmatic errors could potentially cause miscommunication.

Following this path is important because, as we mentioned before (§2), the pertinent input is not sufficient to acquire pragmatic knowledge: first of all, students have to notice the relevant aspects and then they need to develop control by practicing. In order to focus the attention of the student on the relevant parts of the didactic content of the video-lessons we have used the functionalities offered by the H5P plugin.

Conversely, for developing the control of structures and expressions discovered, we mainly use discussion forum: individual activities are accompanied by interaction on discussion boards, through which students negotiate significates, compare opinions, activating metacognitive resources that lead to reflection on individual and community knowledge and skills. In fact, among the collaborative communication tools above mentioned, the online discussion forum is one of the most used in our course: the discussions that take place in the virtual *agorà* are characterized by users' own thoughts and observations regarding a topic and the communication unfolds through messages which can be consulted at any time by each member of the community, providing learners with possibility to learn from others' experiences creating shared knowledge [15].

Research have demonstrated how discussion forums foster students' intercultural competence allowing at the same time the focus on grammatical forms [16] and how students' pragmatic awareness is increased as they notice that they may misunderstand or be misunderstood [17]. Due to the asynchronous nature of communication, learners

can spend more time reflecting on the connections between forms and functions and at the same time they can develop strategies in order to avoid miscommunication. Quoting Withworth [18], “Forums can be an effective tool for language learners and for language teachers. Learners can read and observe various pragmatic conventions used on message boards and become more comfortable with their second language. Teachers can guide their students to certain message boards, allowing their students to be more independent and assertive in their language learning”.

The constantly evolving scenario of the use of technology in language teaching is characterized by the use of approaches that emphasize and encourage the active role of students, that build and share contents by interacting and creating continuous opportunities for comparison. In online learning environments, on one hand student can learn autonomously without limitations of time and space, and on the other, is involved in a learning community that proposes continuous stimuli. In this direction, the variety of tools for computer-mediated communication offer great opportunities to raise socio-pragmatic and pragma linguistic competence providing new communicative contexts and enhancing the co-construction of knowledge. Moodle platform can be a tool to improve the pragmatic awareness of all the participants, that can both take advantage of the activities present in the course and of the mutual exchanges that take place on the various sharing spaces, created to expand the pragmatic learning venues.

5. Future directions

In order to assess our students, we chose to test all the aspects characterizing communicative competence, in which pragmatic competence is included. Pragmatic competence is a multi-aspected ability that involves many properties, e.g., adaptability, negotiability, variability. As a tool to evaluate pragmatic competence we use multiple choice quizzes in which students are called upon to identify the most effective strategy in the given context, avoiding miscommunication and effectively achieving the communicative goals. Every answer will be accompanied by a feedback, intended as a guided analysis tool that will help students to develop an awareness of their own way of acting.

Another interesting line of research is the use of learning analytics' tools to provide valuable information on what really happens in the learners' learning processes. We expect that such analytical process will offer to teachers and tutors detailed indications on possible intervention methods to make improvements, in order to understand and optimize both learning and the environments in which it takes place. Moreover, we also think that learning analytics will be interesting in order to perform statistical analysis on the data produced by the learners in such a way that it will get possible to derive learners' profiles useful for comparison purposes, both for the teacher and the learners themselves.

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