

# E-Learning and Teaching Italian as a Second Language for Special Purposes

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## Abstract

*This paper reports an experience which took place during the academic year 2006-2007 at the Università per Stranieri di Siena in teaching Italian as a second language for special purposes by means of an e-learning environment. The aim of this course was to enhance the linguistic and communicative competence of non-native speaker bank staff (mainly with a B1 linguistic competence level), in order to allow them to master on-the-job communication with Italian colleagues. The fundamental instructional materials were learning units, implemented on a learning platform, that aimed to develop several language skills; listening, reading, writing and speaking abilities, concerning the banking field. Students were asked to go through the materials and to participate in a virtual class and in group activities under the guidance of a tutor.*

*Within this framework, various related issues were considered, such as students' learning needs, syllabus and learning object design, teaching techniques, assessment methods and the use of Internet materials to enhance language skills and as grammatical references. The emphasis was put on how to combine and harmonize instructional materials, web resources and cooperative learning principles in order to produce learning paths targeting a specific variety of language and meeting learners' language and communicative needs.*

*The applied solutions suggest that ICT can be successfully used to teach a foreign language for special purposes, as e-learning environments offer several opportunities and facilities for learners and teachers.*

## Introduction

Second languages such as Italian, the international success of which is not traditionally linked to pragmatic motivation, have gained new interest thanks to the global economy, increasing economical exchanges with new European Community partners and the abolition of national borders within job markets. The experience, reported in this paper and carried out in the present academic year, deals with the demand of teaching Italian for special purposes within this context.

In order to enhance the linguistic and communicative competence, related to on-the-job-situations, of Romanian mother tongue employees, UniCredit Processes & Administration SpA (the company that develops and provides the accounting and administrative services for the banks of the UniCredit Group, from now on UPA) asked the *Università per Stranieri di Siena* to develop an on-line language course.

The choice to deliver the course through e-learning was due to the flexibility of this educational means which allowed students to attend a language course at an Italian University; accessing learning materials any time, any place and to cope with job needs, especially when a large part of the department was involved, as in this case.

According to Calvani [1], the educational intervention, carried out by FAST (*Formazione e Aggiornamento anche con Supporto Tecnologico*), consisted of four stages:

- learning path design
- learning unit content development
- course delivery
- monitoring and evaluation.

This paper describes stages 1, 2, and 4. For an illustration on course delivery see S. Maffei's paper, in this book.

## 1. The learning path

The starting point of the learning path planning was the learners' needs analysis. Based on the daily activities the bank operators were required to carry out in Italian, the choice of which language abilities to develop and textual genres to use as input for the learning materials were established and linguistic content was specified.

Content selection was also based on the initial linguistic level of the learners (B1 level on the QCER [2]), and on the linguistic forms used in financial-banking language. Course workload played an important role in planning the learning path. According to the agreement with UPA the required workload of each learner was to amount to 110 hours, divided as follows:

- 1 hour for course and platform presentation
- 24 hours for asynchronous content surfing
- 25 hours for community activities
- 9 hours for language assessment
- 51 hours individual (26 of which to be carried out working with downloadable learning materials)

Quantifying the activities was important to match learning tasks with job needs, as the main part of the course would be carried out during working hours. A learning programme flexible enough to meet those needs and the individual learning pace was essential, not only for an accurate schedule, but also for moderate use of synchronous communication tools, such as web conferencing and chatting. Finally, the learning path was also shaped by working possibilities that the *A-tutor* platform offers.

Presently the web-based Learning Content Management System (LMS) was used for all the didactic activities planned at the FAST Centre, as this open source platform has proven to guarantee a high degree of accessibility, adaptability and usability. In fact, managing *A-tutor* can also be easily used by learners with little experience in e-learning technology. Within this framework, the *Aula Web – Italiano bancario* was set up, which consists of four main areas:

- the *Surfing content* area made up of ten learning units including the oral and written textual genres. Linguistic forms related to on-the-job-situations were presented. This area, which represented the core of the learning path and which all of the learning activities rotated around, was mainly based on individual work (see § 2);
- the *Supplementary educational tools* area included the *Downloadable Material* section, the *Link* section and the *Glossary*. These instruments fulfil the function of providing additional materials and learning activities to those given in the *Surfing content* area;
- the *Community* area, which required the learners to work in groups with other classmates and to interact with the tutor. Meanwhile the *Surfing content* area represented the backbone of the learning path, the *Community* area was the part that allowed transit from a mainly individual learning mode, belonging to traditional distance learning model, to a social learning one, supported by e-learning literature. In this were tools such as *Forum*, *Blog*, the sharable writing system *Wiki* and the sub-area Groups;
- the *Service tools* area, where tools that allow better management of the learning path and usability of the platform could be found (*FAC*, *Map*, *Learner List*).

The developed learning path was the outcome of an intensive planning activity that required the involvement and the cooperation of different professional level figures. The instructional designers, expert teachers of Italian L2, carried out the tasks to analyse the language used in a bank environment, to elaborate the learning unit structure, to select text to be used as input, to specify learning objectives and linguistic content, to plan the learning path and to monitor its realization. Learning path development was assigned to two work teams:

- collaborators, expert in didactic material production, who worked on the construction of the learning units;
- collaborators engaged in the research of web resources. Their task was to look for and select materials to teach Italian as L2, which could be integrated with those of the learning units.

These people were assisted by the web master staff, who created the *Aula Web* and other environments necessary for set-up, tool updating and software and network application

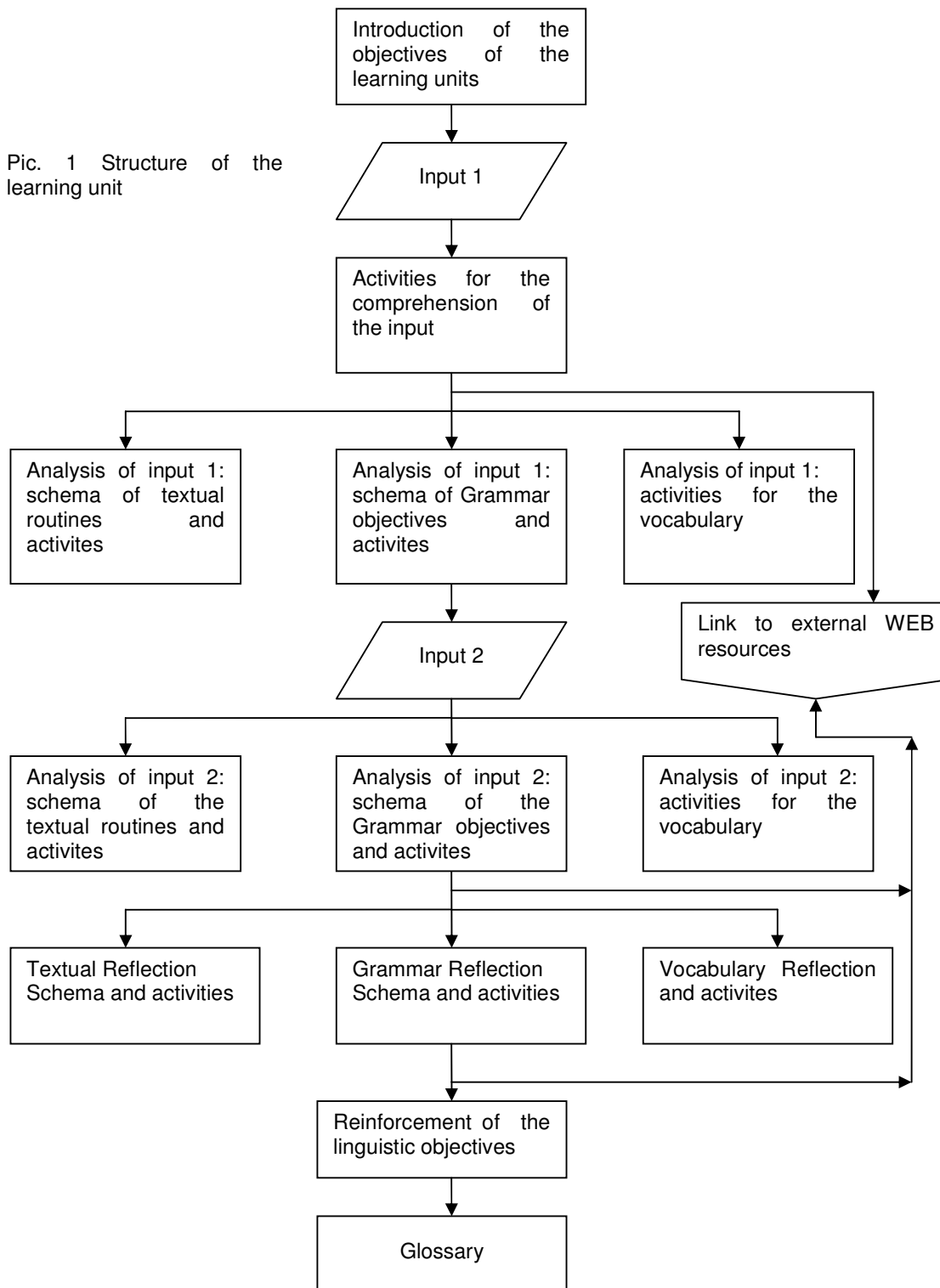
## 2 Learning unit content development

Considering the needs of UPA and the particular context of learning, the course was organized into ten learning units. Moreover three separate tests, entrance, verifying and final assessment, were used. As far as the learning unit was concerned, each unit was based on two different textual inputs. Sometimes, two totally different texts, other times it was same text that had been divided into two parts

in order to help the learner with the comprehension of the text. In both cases, special care was taken to look for the internal coherence of the learning unit, concerning the topic and the linguistic objectives (particularly for the morphosyntactical one). In other words, we tried to reflect the same linguistic objectives in each text, in order to get reciprocal reinforcement.

Starting from these two textual inputs, a learning path was created that followed the usual interweaving of linguistic abilities and competences: from a guided L2 towards the creative and free use of the language (Balboni [3]; Giacomantonio [4]). It has to be taken into account that the learners had previously been divided into ten groups, each one consisting of ten members. Each group was provided with a tutor whose role was to oversee and support the learning path (see Maffei's paper in this volume). In picture 1 this path has been schematized.

Pic. 1 Structure of the learning unit



The learning units were always preceded by an introduction of the linguistic and textual objectives. The first step was listening to or reading the two input items. Around each text was a variety of language activities that went from comprehension activities, to activities for analyzing grammatical points, textual structures (routines, connectors), lexical items that were the target of the linguistic unit. Each of these texts was followed by activities aimed at reinforcing target structures. At the end of the second input and of the linguistic activities of comprehension and reinforcement, a phase of linguistic

reflection was placed. Its function was to synthesize the linguistic characteristics highlighted in the two input items and, in a certain way, to join and reinforce them with a new schema and new activities.

For each of the three points mentioned (even if without a pattern) it was possible to link web resources in order to elaborate on some linguistic aspects (grammatical, textual etc.). Finally, during the last reinforcement phase, we tried to provide opportunities for further open, non-guided activities on the linguistic objectives introduced.

Moreover various strategies of use more or less correspond to each phase, which were planned during the initial set up stage. In other words, to the moment of use of the input text and explanation and reinforcement, correspond strategies of "tutorial" character. They are strict, sequential and focus on the explanation of the contents.

However, in the reinforcement phase interactive strategies were used based on the collaboration of the other members of the learner group (cfr Giacomantonio [4]). In particular, this last type of strategy was realised through written activities based on the cooperation of the learners, who had to agree on one version of a text. Generally, instruction was given on the drawing up of the text with a set communicative objective compatible with the needs of the learners (write an email, notify a colleague etc.). The learners from the same work group had to collaborate using an asynchronous tool from the platform better known as *wiki*, specifically destined for the drawing up of shared texts.

Apart from this, although with less regularity, the learner unit could foresee another activity based on shared writing, this time explicitly centred around and aimed at the technical knowledge background of the learner. In reality, the learners were asked to create a definition of some technical terms (presented in the two input texts). Each group of ten was divided into two subgroups and each subgroup was given a word to define together. The collective linguistic forms described were logged into a technical glossary in progress. This type of activity, besides being founded upon shared written work, was also based on the learners' knowledge of their field of work. They could then each collaborate on a distinct line of discussion in the forum group. On the other hand, the tutor had to participate in the work group by sharing their linguistic and didactic competence, but not disciplinary (Cassandro [5]).

As already mentioned, upon explicit request of the client, the activities were always asynchronous, based therefore on the dedicated forum activities. The shared writing activities aim was to create group motivation and to sustain it over time (for an analysis of the learners' responses to the various strategies applied see Maffei). The total working time of each didactic unit was set at two working weeks; however we must not forget that our learners, in some cases, were able to work on the platform at home.

As far as the typology of the activities more closely related to language learning is concerned, we must distinguish between those realized with the instruments belonging to the platform, fundamentally the true/false and multiple choice activities, and activities created with an open source software, downloaded off internet called EXE (v. 021) developed by the university of Auckland ([exe@exelearning.org](mailto:exe@exelearning.org)) this software allowed files to be worked on in the SCORM standard. The authoring computer programme permitted the creation of grammar completion and cloze activities (above and beyond what we are interested in here) to which the means of learning/teaching of a language are to be retained as particularly useful.

## **2.1. Content**

From a didactic point of view, the peculiar aspect of the learning path is the object of the teaching in itself: Italian financial and banking language, especially the on-the-job spoken variety.

Obviously the narrow target language caused several difficulties in carrying out the content development stage of the project. The main difficulty was to focus on the learners' linguistic needs, which were related to formal and semi-formal written production. Through linguistical analysis the following objectives were selected:

- recurrent morphosyntactical structures, such as passive forms, impersonal forms;
- syntactic simplification (preposition, article omission etc.), (Balboni [6]);
- recognizable textual structures, such as opening and closing routines, etc.

As far as the textual input of the learning units are concerned, initially a small data base of authentic texts (mail, internal office communications, organigrams, service orders, etc.), given by UPA, was created. In the developing learning unit stage however, the text repertoire was widened, without modifying the specificity of the teaching object. In particular, written and oral texts, drawn on newspapers and information web sites and dealing with economical, financial, banking subjects, were added. For technical reasons, independent of the *A-tutor* platform, it was not possible to use visual texts. Finally, an unauthentic text was given only in the last unit. It regarded a telephone call, the

realization of which was overseen by UPA in order to protect the conversation of the language content in the simulation.

Another linguistic area taken into particular consideration was lexicon, which is a characterizing aspect of language for special purposes. In particular words belonging to financial and banking vocabulary were distinguished from common vocabulary words used in a special language regarding register. For example, *intrattenere un conto corrente* instead of *avere un conto corrente* (Serianni [7]). Different learning strategies were applied to this set of words. As for the common vocabulary words used in economical banking language, tutorial strategies were used (true/false, fill in etc.), meanwhile special words, which were supposedly known by the learners, were the objects of learning activities based on previous knowledge retrieval, such as the glossary writing, already mentioned.

### 3. Monitoring and evaluation

In order to evaluate the efficiency of the didactic program, a monitoring system was created for the learning path and to assess learning. The monitoring was based on quantitative data, such as the attendance rate in the *Aula web*, questionnaires concerning learning materials, teaching methodologies, platform functionality and usability. In order to obtain a better idea of learner attendance, the tracking record furnished by the platform and related to the activity carried out in the *Surfing content* area were integrated monthly into the data related to the number of learner log ons to *Forums*, in general and in group and to *Blogs*.

The questionnaires were, on the other hand, given to both learners and tutors at the beginning, middle and end of the course. Learner and tutor evaluations provided important feedback, which can be used to revise the course materials for improvement.

Assessment consisted of a placement test, an achievement test (administered at the end of the fifth learning unit) and a final achievement test. As evaluation is a moment of the learning path separate from the time in which the learners work to enhance their linguistic and communicative competence, the conditions of administration must be controlled in order to safeguard the reliability of the test. The tests were not therefore held in the *Aula web*, but in a different environment suitable for testing managed by the Web master and held according to a pre-established calendar.

D. Troncarelli is the author of §: Introduction, 1, 3.

M. Cassandro is the author of §: 2, 2.1.

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