

Olga Vasile
Instructor in Italian
Department of French and Italian
University of Colorado, Boulder
olga.vasile@colorado.edu

Faculty Fellows Project Report 2020-21

ITAL 2110 Hybrid (Zoom/in person + asynchronous) & Fully remote

My original project was to develop a hybrid course for the third semester of our Italian language courses, however due to the COVID-19 pandemic I adapted material and planned a course that would work both for hybrid and fully remote delivery. Class dynamics for the two formats are different, therefore I had to find a middle ground that would be suitable for both and make adjustments for one, or the other.

When I started this project, there was no pandemic in sight, and the project would have developed over time. Due to the emergency, I had to adjust quickly to what was needed in the immediate circumstances. Moreover, due to the numerous uncertainties, planning required just-in-time solutions that did not really allow me to assess the effectiveness of the outcomes beyond students' response and overall good performance.

The "phases" of the original project collapsed, some of my original ideas did take shape and others did not.

Here is a recap of the phases of the original project

Summer and Fall 2020. Exploratory phase

Exploration of technologies and resources available to achieve learning goals.

Fall 2020. Production phase

In concurrence with the traditional ITAL 2110 course, planning and designing the hybrid version creating alternative activities around selected topics.

Spring 2021 complete the project and make it ready for review by the Italian language program coordinator and for **a first run in Fall 2021.**

What actually happened was quite different, I taught ITAL 2110 in a mix of hybrid and fully remote in Fall 2020 and fully remote in Spring 2021. In addition, unfortunately, what should have been the first run in Fall 2021 will also be the last because 1) Italian 2021 hybrid will not be offered in the fall and 2) the textbook will be discontinued. All the work done for this course will need to be adapted to the new and very different instructional material. Unfortunately, this information was unknown to me at the time of my project proposal. I plan to incorporate some of my changes in a fully in person course that I will teach in Fall 2021 as the changes were well received by the students and gave positive results in terms of students achievement.

I gained precious experience in the exercise and I might be able to recycle or adapt some of what I did for the new Italian 2110 hybrid.

The course

The full title of the existing 4 credit course “ITAL 2110” is “Intermediate Italian Reading, Grammar, and Composition 1.” This course is required for students who need to complete their MAPS requirement. It is also required for Italian majors and minors. The course has been offered fully in person meeting 4 days a week, while in the hybrid form it should have met 3 times a week with an asynchronous component for independent learning. The pandemic redefined the notion of hybrid, which became a variable notion depending on the level of viral spread: in person/ remote plus an asynchronous component. In Spring 2021, I offered the course fully remotely with 3 or 4 times a week “lectures” and additional synchronous and asynchronous activities.

Course Objectives

The main objectives of the course are to enable students to communicate effectively in Italian at a low-intermediate level, to expose them to essential grammatical concepts and vocabulary that will ease their progression to higher-level courses. Students learn to simply discuss in Italian topics of general interest such as their life and career goals, their travel plans and vacations, running errands and shopping, giving and receiving directions around town, talking about health issues, healthy lifestyles, the environment, the institutional and political organization of Italy in comparison with the USA and finally exploring the subject of immigration (within Italy, from Italy to the rest of the world and vice versa)

In addition to developing students' linguistic and metalinguistic abilities the course aims at expanding their intercultural awareness by comparing and contrasting Italian culture to their own culture.

Hybrid/ remote course modifications

As mentioned in my proposal my project was in response to a departmental request to complete a series of already existing hybrid courses at lower levels (ITAL 1010 and 1020).

The benefits of hybrid courses are many and their existence has been crucial to overcome the educational crisis created by the pandemic.

For instance, we could retain students by offering them more flexible and personalized learning opportunities. Students could study with more independence and at the same time receive sustained support when needed. They could, to a certain extent, demonstrate mastery of content in line to their personal interests.

Some of the challenges of planning this type of courses, especially for a relatively numerous class taking place on Zoom, have been to incorporate active learning strategies, to maintain a high level of student interaction with the instructor and their peers, to encourage metacognitive reflection and research curiosity. Moreover, it was necessary to customize learning material and assessment strategies both for the specific delivery format and for students with disability or other types of impediments such as for instance

lack of readiness for the hybrid/online/remote learning environment, limited access to proper technologies and disruptions in their normal student life.

In my view, while a proper evaluation of the effectiveness of my modifications could only emerge in the course of more extensive reiterations, I feel the outcome has been successful and that, once the disruption is overcome, new instructional modes combining in person, asynchronous and remote learning opportunities should be seriously considered as a positive enhancement and as an alternative to the traditional in-person teaching. Again, under the pressure of the emergency, my impulse was to act for the best on the basis of my experience, to be alert and flexible with regard to students' needs in order to support their learning regardless of the circumstances.

Here follows a list of the interventions and relative technologies I used to expand beyond the classroom student interaction and linguistic output.

1. PowerPoint presentations

Italian 2021, already had an electronic textbook with audio features and an abundant set of online resources, such as videos, interviews, exercises, flashcards, verb charts etc. (Pearson's Percorsi MyItalianLab, discontinued as of June 2021). These resources allow instructors of in-person classes to adopt a "flipped-classroom" methodology so that students can use class time for active practice and small group work on what they have learned at home. The Zoom reality, as well as the unpredictable mix of in person and remote learning, made it quite difficult to count on "flipped classroom" strategies and I felt students appreciated reverting to more traditional teaching and learning approaches. However, in line with standard communicative language learning methodologies, the class entailed continuous interaction rather than lecturing. For this purpose I created for almost each class, a presentation that included advanced visual stimuli that could be used as prompts for language input and output in a conversational manner. These visual presentations were very helpful to practice selectively long lists of vocabulary offered in the textbook that are otherwise tedious to memorize. The images had in most cases "caption" in writing (with an animation so that they were not immediately available but they confirmed what was being said right after) to help students with various learning styles to retain the information.

In addition to adding a visual dimension to what was learned, my presentations exemplified grammatical rules and contained prompts for practicing those grammatical rules in a contextualized manner, that is to say in connection to the theme of the unit. Thus, presentations were used to integrate and simplify textbook grammatical content especially where I felt the textbook lacked sufficient advanced organizers, or required adaptation.

In analogy with what I did with the images, as students carried out the exercises I recapped correct output by modeling correct answers both in speaking and with captioning. In this respect my animated presentations were essential time savers. Their advantage was also that I could post them on Canvas and students could "play" them again. I felt this was way more effective than playing again full Zoom recordings. Presentations did not have the audio feature but at least they summarized the

“essence” of what had been covered in class. In addition Zoom recordings were also available if needed and the e-text could be used for practicing pronunciation.

2. Canvas Discussions.

In order to prolong interaction outside class time I made extensive use of Canvas Discussions both in Italian and in English.

2A discussions **in Italian**

Students participated in a total of 6 discussions by responding in writing to prompts related to the specific units. In addition to writing paragraph length entries they had to read other entries and leave sentence long comments/responses.

Discussions were preparatory to longer individual summative writing assignments that students had to complete on related topics. They forced students to use the necessary vocabulary and structures to express their own meanings as well as to brainstorm as a group on what they could possibly say and how to say it.

These were formative graded assignments and participation was relatively high. I gave students some feedback on their work by correcting selectively major inaccuracies, but I also felt that it was important to keep a low anxiety atmosphere so that students could actually try out their linguistic abilities in a non-judgmental manner.

2B Discussions **in English**

I created prompts for 4 discussions in English around a cultural topic, the history of Italian-Americans.

The textbook “Percorsi” introduces this topic since the preliminary unit as a way of having students connect to something potentially familiar to them. The book concludes by presenting the vocabulary related to immigration. Students are exposed to the history of Italian immigration within Italy and abroad and they learn to formulate their opinions on these topics in Italian while using rather sophisticated grammatical structures. I felt that this topic could be used more extensively throughout the course to develop students' intercultural awareness and move beyond stereotypes about Italy and Italians. Students could compare and contrast the Italian reality with the American reality and gain an insight in aspects of American history that are not frequently explored: the Italian immigration to the United States and its contribution to the nation.

As homework, students watched a series of documentaries on the History of Italian-Americans available in the Kanopy database: The Italian American series (John Maggio, PBS, 2015) <https://colorado.kanopy.com/video/italian-americans> In the discussions, they had to write a reaction to the episode, to read other entries and comment on them. I did not impose any particular length to the assignment but students produced at times page long reflections. Also, as they watched, they had to select one of the persons or phenomena portrayed in the documentary for their final oral project in Italian (next point).

To conclude, discussions created a place for collaboration and interaction for students who did not know each other in person. They were very helpful in creating a community of purpose, which is in my view an essential motivational factor for learning.

3. VoiceThread projects

As mentioned, students had to choose people from the documentaries, or other famous and less famous Italian-Americans to produce in Italian a final oral presentation. They had to create a presentation of images with minimal written text, to narrate in Italian the life and achievements of these individuals.

This was a summative task aiming at assessing oral presentation abilities in Italian, as a completion of their MAPs requirement.

This assignment also entailed some simple research in Italian, and/or in English in order to gather essential information.

I provided students with clear instructions and a simplified “rubric” on how they would be graded. I explained the simple functionalities of Voicethread.

The assignment also entailed watching classmates work and leave comments on their projects. Students felt they were not only “judged” by the professor but by the wider audience of their peers. In my view, having a small but real audience makes students feel accountable and creates a sense of real communicative purpose. While the outcome was varied and obviously depended on students' actual linguistic abilities, I felt students took the project seriously, learned from it and enjoyed doing it.

Please find some examples of the projects in the Appendix (1). Permission to share has been requested to the students.

4. Small group oral discussions

In Spring 2021 my fully remote ITAL 2110 had 21 students, which might seem small, but it is actually quite numerous for a language class. It is very difficult to give everyone a chance to speak in a 50 minutes session and “break-out” rooms can only be used in moderation when one cannot really supervise them and there is limited time to cover a significant amount of material. For this reason I created over the course of the semester a number of small conversation groups. Small groups would come for half the class period and had to be ready to discuss some pre assigned questions/topics. I had 4 groups that came 3 times each for ½ hour during the semester for a total of (6 hours) Students who were not scheduled for that particular conversation hour were assigned some activity to conduct independently.

This strategy allowed me to know the students better and it allowed them to interact with me and peers in a more personalized way. Students could be heard with more attention rather than being little squares on a Zoom wall uttering an occasional sentence. Students expressed the need of more conversational practice and this was in my view the best I could do to satisfy this request without compromising the regular progression of course.

5. Assessments

Initial Diagnostic assessment

I used two tools to assess students one is a very basic initial questionnaire that we use in all courses where we ask students to describe their prior language experience to express initial concerns about their ability to perform well in the course

The second tool is in the form of initial personal introduction to classmates: It is a guided written assignment in which the students need to demonstrate knowledge of what they have learned in

previous classes. I have this in all the first and second year classes, but while the first semester it is in English, in the second and third semester students are required to enter progressively more complex information in Italian.

Mid-term reflection questionnaire

Around mid-semester I want to know how the students are feeling about the course, their perception of what they have learned, and how I can best meet their needs. I have created a survey in Google forms that allows me to gauge the level of confidence and satisfaction and give them an opportunity to reflect back on what they have learned in the first half of the semester.

A number of questions are formulated as “can do” statements and students answer on a 3 points Likert scale, if they feel they can perform specific tasks in Italian.

Other questions concerned the various activities of the course (discussions, documentaries, small group conversations). Finally a question or two on what they would like to do more and I could do more to help them learn. The responses to these last questions are obviously varied and I cannot always satisfy the requests but at least I have a sense of what I can possibly do for the rest of the semester. Overall the results of the survey on these questions were positive. (Please find link to the survey in the appendix)

End of Unit Exams and Final exam

I developed all Exams in Canvas Quizzes (5 chapter exams and the final exam). The base for these quizzes is the exams students normally complete on paper. The transfer and adaptation to Canvas was quite time consuming. In addition, since the exams were not taken in person, I had to partially randomize questions in order to minimize students' possibility to cheat. I

duplicated several exercises with variations so that students took equivalent but different tests.

I selected a mix of assessment typologies which included listening and comprehension, reading and comprehension, with Canvas standard quiz functionalities such as multiple choice exercises, fill in the blank, matching, short essay questions, true and false.

The advantage of Canvas quizzes is also that I could easily customize length of the test to the individual students for those who required accommodations.

Oral component of the Exams

In order to develop and test students' oral skills I added to each Exam an oral exercise. Prompts were available before the exam so that students could prepare and record the exercise beforehand and simply upload it. These oral exercises were varied but usually students were responding in Italian to some open-ended question such as for instance: what would you do if you won the lottery (this particular example requires students to use the conditional tense)

Exam reviews on shared Googledocs

Before each exam we had in most cases a review session.

For each exam I developed a set of exercises in Google docs. I shared the documents with the students who collaborate in completing the exercises. Before the actual review I encouraged students to make a copy of the document so they could work on it independently.

On the day of the review, I assigned them random numbers and they would just enter the answers corresponding to their number. This allowed the class to complete the exercises rapidly and devote most of the time to discuss the answers.

I would check for accuracy, answer students' questions, and recap grammatical rules.

While collaboration is possibly a big word in this case, I felt students shared the pressure of lengthy grammar exercises and learned from each other.

For the final exam in addition to a longer set of review exercises.

I prepared a final PowerPoint presentation containing a synthesis of all the grammatical points studied during the semester.

Conclusion

In my original project I had hoped to achieve more elaborate reading and comprehension activities as opportunities for additional collaboration and discussion among students as well as a basis for additional writing exercises, but they were replaced by the Italian-American videos which as mentioned were discussed in English and nevertheless helped students define their “research” projects. The latter allowed students to engage creatively with course material and to develop presentational and interpersonal skills.

Students reflected on their own learning via the mid-term survey and during the review sessions in preparation for the exams. I would have liked students to create a portfolio of their written and oral but the semester moved very fast and I felt in the end it would have been an aggravation for them. I encouraged them, however, to keep copies of their writing and recording for future reference. This will be especially useful for students who plan to continue studying Italian.

Given more time, I would have liked to test my material to make sure that it was easily accessible to students with the help of a UD specialist. I must say, I did not receive any request in this regard from students, nor from the disability office, so I felt I would leave the fine-tuning to another time.

I succeeded in introducing the changes listed and at the same time in maintaining a workload equivalent to a fully in person class. I would have liked to assign an additional Voicethread “project” but we follow a quite rigid grammar based schedule and there was just not space for it.

I felt the Faculty Fellow program gave me the opportunity of being more mindful in the changes that I implemented. It helped me think of the use of technologies as tools enabling active and accessible pedagogies. I look forward to continuing my collaboration with ASSETT in the future.

Appendix

1. Student Final oral projects samples:

Carlo Petrone

<https://colorado.voicethread.com/myvoice/thread/17557300/111027812/103252501>

Stanley Tucci

<https://colorado.voicethread.com/share/17554754/>

Joe DiMaggio

<https://colorado.voicethread.com/share/17545863/>

Carlo Gambino

<https://colorado.voicethread.com/share/17577540/>.

2. Students mid-term feedback on their progress and of the course
[Mid-term questionnaire](#) in Google Forms
Or
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1WB-EifOXSiin33EJieCAWyPczAhEucOSR7QEat1s8ts/edit>
3. Students discussions in Italian and in English sent as “screenshot” attachments
4. Sample PowerPoint presentation sent as attachment.