Blending Italian at Monash University through an Italian-Australian Digital Project: An Analysis of Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper discusses a foreign language acquisition project developed at Monash University (Melbourne, Australia) – in collaboration with the University of Urbino (Italy) – and aimed at incorporating Skype-mediated digital learning into an Italian studies advanced 1 Unit, in order to improve the students' perceived exposure to spoken Italian and Italian culture. After discussing the project's context, theoretical framework, and digital contents, the paper will focus on its results from the viewpoint of the students' perception, by analysing the data collected via weekly online questionnaires completed by the participants throughout the course.

Keywords: *blended learning, desktop videoconferencing, digital materials design, foreign language learning, international Higher Education projects*

1. Introduction[1]

The international project "Let's go digital! Contemporary Italy 'surfs' to Monash: discovering literature, culture and language" expands the scope of an undergraduate Italian studies advanced 1 Unit in an Australian university in order to encompass Italian-culture-specific digital learning. In this Italian-Australian project, digital learning, which "is the application of technology to the learning and teaching process" (Carrier 2017, n.p.), is implemented through

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digital education technologies, digital content, multimodal texts, online activities, and desktop videoconferencing with distant language instructors. The project, which is an integral part of the Italian studies advanced 1 Unit taught at Monash University, Melbourne, was developed in partnership with the University of Urbino, in Italy, as the result of a bottom-up teacher initiative.

1.1 Online learning

In a globalised world, online learning has greatly contributed to the development of cosmopolitan distant learning in higher education (HE). International e-learning experiences are usually implemented on campus through blended learning, which consists of a mix of face-to-face and online instruction modes: "A common theme in each description of blended learning is the integration, or configuration, of global network technologies with technologies commonly used within face-to-face classrooms" (Gruba, Hinkelman 2012, 4-5). Bonk and Graham (2006) highlighted the transformative affordances of the blended learning type to foster pedagogical shifts and student agency:

Here, educators are seeking to substantially change learners from being passive receivers of information to active co-constructors of knowledge. Instructors and students […] may […] produce their own video clips, use mobile technologies […] and set up an interactive website. Here, blended approaches require the full and principled use of interactive technologies to foster agenda for transformation of learning. (Gruba, Hinkelman 2012, 4)

Research has been undertaken in the pedagogical affordances of blended learning in HE (Garrison, Vaughan 2008; Means *et al.* 2010) as well as in relation to foreign language learning (Ushida 2005; Blake *et al.* 2008; Gleason 2013). In both cases, positive results have emerged. In particular, in the last few decades, online foreign language learning has been increasingly enhanced through online intercultural exchanges (OIEs):

Online intercultural exchange (OIE), also referred to widely as telecollaboration or virtual exchange, is […] [the] nomenclature [used] for denoting the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partner classes from other cultural contexts or geographical locations under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. (Lewis, O'Dowd 2016a, 3)

Research on OIE focusing on students' foreign language learning acquisition (Belz, Vyatkina 2008; Ware, O'Dowd 2008; Kern 2014) and intercultural awareness development (Liddicoat, Scarino 2013) has highlighted positive outcomes, with significant results in these areas also emerging from other scholarly work in the field (O'Dowd 2006; Helm, Guth 2010). A challenge

to foreign language development in OIE contexts is that learners generally lack the pedagogical skills necessary to foster their peers' foreign language acquisition: "sufficient opportunities for focus on form, negotiation of meaning and corrective feedback do not occur naturally in online exchange and need to be promoted through careful task design and training of the learners to work as linguistic guides and tutors for their partners" (Lewis, O'Dowd 2016b, 66). To solve this problem, an increasing number of pre-service teachers (PSTs) have been recruited for involvement in OIE projects. Research on OIE implemented through desktop videoconferencing (DVC) has investigated the development of pre-service language teachers' distance-learning-specific digital and pedagogical skills, highlighting significant improvements in PSTs' distant language teaching skills (Guichon 2009; Develotte *et al.* 2010; Murphy *et al.* 2010). As Develotte *et al.* suggest, in order to teach in a DVC learning environment, language teachers need to make effective use of the various digital modalities available, developing:

Semio-pedagogical skills […][, namely] the capacity to mediate a pedagogical interaction by combining or dissociating modalities (written, oral, and/or video) that are adapted to objectives and to the cognitive requisites of the task […]. [For instance,] the informational input of a webcam image for a language learner must be determined in relation to the oral message and the necessary cognitive treatment appraised, whether the webcam image of the teacher be redundant (correspondence between the image of the teacher's face and the oral message […]) or distracting (it contradicts the oral message, either because it is senseless and adds nothing to the oral message or because it actually diverts the learner's attention). (2010, 293-300)

Based on this recognition, the way in which PSTs orchestrate the multimodal functionalities (webcamming and text chat) available in synchronous videoconferencing sessions has been investigated, and positive results have emerged (Develotte *et al.* 2010). The virtual co-presence established through webcam-mediated learning environments (de Fornel 1994) in DVC is operationalized through practices and behaviours (such as interactional structures and non-verbal communication) which differ, to a certain extent, from those in face-to-face interaction, given that "presence at a distance […] invents another realm of perception" (Weissberg 1999, 14 in Develotte *et al.* 2010, 298). In this light, as Develotte *et al.* suggest, "a webcam-mediated communication situation would eventually lead to the development of a specific interactional body language, one that is adapted to this other realm of perception" (2010, 298). Hence, in the process of investigating an OIE, Develotte *et al.* elaborated a framework classifying five degrees to which instructors use webcams in synchronous videographic setups: "The different uses that are identified vary according to the perceived usefulness of webcamming to monitor teaching and to the teacher trainees' capacity to manage different workspaces" (293). In order to teach effectively in webconferencing learning environments, PSTs

thus need "to develop critical semiotic awareness to gain a better perception of the image they project of themselves in order to actualize the potential of the webcam and add more relief to their online teacher presence" (Guichon, Wigham 2016, 62). DVC appears to foster students' motivation in technology-mediated interactional exchanges as a consequence of its visual component (Marcelli *et al.* 2005), which PSTs therefore need to learn to manage effectively. Positive results have also emerged from the investigation of both the impact that the affordances of desktop videoconferencing environments can have on interactions in video-mediated foreign language learning (Hampel, Stickler 2012; Codreanu, Celik 2013; Malinowski, Kramsch 2014) and the extent to which webconferencing-supported teaching mediates pedagogical interaction and language development (Codreanu, Celik 2013).

The analysis of student perceptions in a wide range of OIEs has shown overall positive results and learners' appreciation of the experience in terms of foreign language learning ranks highly (Guth, Helm, O'Dowd 2012, 42-43). Student perceptions regarding the improvement of their language skills and intercultural awareness through OIEs are mostly positive; learning how to communicate effectively with native speakers within an intercultural framework has emerged as one of the key assets of the OIEs investigated (46). However, research has also highlighted some critical issues. In this respect, students hold that OIEs are often too time-consuming – a perception that may be due to the fact that universities are not likely to grant credits for participating in the projects (44). Furthermore, learners mentioned challenges such as technical problems and the process of learning how to interact effectively in a foreign language in a technology-mediated learning environment (45).

The present study focuses on a transnational online HE digital project conducted with the (inter)actors situated in geographically distant locations. In dyadic partnerships, Italian language instructors in Italy and learners in Australia interact in Italian through desktop videoconferencing and connect through a digitally mediated context. In the joint international project, each Monash University student in the Italian studies advanced 1 Unit is partnered with a veteran instructor of Italian as a foreign language, with sound pedagogical preparation and experience in face-to-face instruction and, in most cases, Skype-mediated foreign language teaching. In particular, the majority of instructors involved in the project had previously participated, as part of their pre-service teacher training at Masters level, in an OIE where they developed the skills required to teach over desktop videoconferencing and foster language acquisition in digital learning environments: distance learning skills, semio-pedagogical skills, critical semiotic awareness, and the ability to help learners focus on form, foster negotiation of meaning, and provide corrective feedback during synchronous videoconferencing sessions. For the rest of the instructors, the project worked as in-service teacher training in

terms of online foreign language teaching. The face-to-face instruction conducted constituted the lead mode of the Italian studies advanced 1 Unit, while the digital project, although an integral part of the course, was the subsidiary mode.

A key factor demonstrating the innovativeness of this digital project in terms of content is that it was developed as part of a literature class. The project aimed to create a connection between nineteenth-century Italian literature and contemporary Italian culture on the basis that "learning is most meaningful when topics are relevant to the students' lives, needs, and interests" (Marsh 2012, 8). From an internationalization perspective, the type of joint international online learning environments implemented, operationalized through digital collaborative interaction, can be envisioned as a form of virtual mobility in HE: "With adequate preparation and planning, and with the benefit of strong institutional links, courses should be able to facilitate joint efforts at sharing teaching and learning using technologies, including webinars and other information exchange, research tasks and joint projects" (Sweeney 2012, 25).

1.2 The digital learning project: theoretical framework

1.2.1 Blending the course

The international blended Italian studies advanced 1 Unit was designed drawing upon the four-stage checklist developed by Tomlinson and Whittaker, consisting of context (stage one), course design (stage two), learners and teachers/tutors (stage three), and evaluation and development of the blend (stage four) (2013, 243).

1.2.2 The Australian context

In terms of context (Tomlinson, Whittaker 2013, 243), the limited exposure of students to Italian culture and the very few opportunities they had to interact in Italian with Italian native speakers were the main reasons for blending the course internationally. Student Evaluation Teaching Units (SETU) reports of the past five years, collected across all four levels of Italian Studies at Monash University (introductory, intermediate, proficient, advanced) revealed that a significant number of students experienced, along with a general lack of opportunity for Italian native speakers-related interactions outside of university, a decrease in their exposure to oral language-focused classes within the academic setting. This may be due to the shift in language acquisition from a grammar and oral/aural type of class to an approach which favours language learning through the interaction with literary and filmic text-based cultural

topics. Students tend to perceive such an approach as contributing to a decline in the number of contact hours dedicated specifically to language structures, and an increase in the amount of time dedicated to culture-focused seminars; specifically, there is a 50% shift (four hours of grammar, oral/aural language classes to two hours per week) occurring when progressing from first year (introductory) to second and third year Italian Studies (intermediate, proficient, and advanced) while the culture component increases substantially (from one hour to two hours per week). The same happens to learners entering Italian studies at Monash University after a secondary level examination (Victoria Certificate of Education); for contact-time of these learners reduces from 220 minutes during VCE preparation (6 weekly blocks) to four weekly hours (two blocks) in Italian Studies Proficient 1, divided weekly into a language structures-based workshop and a culture-based seminar. The primary aim of the project was, therefore, to tackle this perceived lack of exposure by providing students with a further weekly opportunity for interaction with an appropriately trained native speaker of Italian.

1.2.3 The role of culture in online language teaching and learning

Before progressing to the pedagogical framework within which the project has been developed, it is important to address one further theoretical and methodological point which has guided the very design and implementation of the course, namely, the relationship between language and culture in foreign language acquisition, and its implications in the context of online language teaching and learning. As Kramsch points out, amongst others, the tendency of Computer Mediated (CM) language teaching has often been aimed "[at] a reorientation of language learning toward conversation fluency, online chatting ability, the negotiation of surface feature of speech and a focus on common experiences in the here-and-now" (2013, 70). "That" – Kramsch continues – "has not, however, necessarily led to in-depth exploration of cultural difference, the negotiation of incompatible worldviews and a focus on different interpretations of historical events" (71). Kramsch then joins Levine and Phippsin calling for the maintenance of a focus on culture in Computer-Mediated language teaching, as it was and still is in more traditional pedagogical contexts (*ibidem*).

Kramsch's point regarding the importance of culture in CM language acquisition is all the more valid in light of the nature and scopes of the Italian Unit within which the shift toward CM learning has taken place. Following Kramsch's classification, The Italian Studies Advanced 1 Unit (as per Unit Guide) can be understood as adopting a postmodernist approach to culture. Such an approach combines the analysis of so-called "big C" cultural items ("canonical" Italian literary texts by Foscolo, Leopardi, Manzoni; Kramsch

2013) with the intention of bringing them into the present of the Italian cultural situation. This is done in such a way as to highlight how the nation-building-oriented cultural processes, enabled by that cultural production, are still evident in contemporary Italy and affect the "small culture" of Italian everyday life. Given that the original structure and scope of the course itself encouraged intercultural competence and/or intercultural awareness, the Skype-mediated component has been designed as a means to further expand such intercultural awareness by inviting diachronic and synchronic connections between the Italian and the Australian (historical and current) cultural landscapes.

1.2.4 Project development

As the Italian studies advanced 1 Unit Guide illustrates, the Unit aims to provide learners with an "overview [of] Italian socio-political history leading to Italian Unification and the literary production of that period" (Unit Guide)[2] during classroom instruction. In terms of course design (stage two) (Tomlinson and Whittaker 2013, 243), in order to integrate face-to-face instruction and online learning effectively, the digital learning project provided Monash students with the opportunity to converse with distant Italian native-speaker instructors about contemporary Italian cultural topics deeply interrelated with the literary and historical topics dealt within class, through a synchronous video communication tool. The project thus allowed for the opportunity to "add realism to the course […]and make good links between the classroom and the real world" (Motteram 2016, 96). Furthermore, while in-class instruction promoted students' reading comprehension and writing skills in Italian (Unit Guide), the out-of-class technology-mediated activities fostered the development of students' Italian speaking and interactional skills. Likewise, while in-class language-related instruction aimed to "consolidate and expand [students'] knowledge of basic grammatical concepts and vocabulary" (*ibidem*), the out-of-class digital activities were instead devised to foster students' fluency in Italian. The in-class face-to-face instruction and online teaching/learning modes – each featuring different pedagogic purposes – complemented each other. In particular, the digital project was aimed at enabling students to talk about Italian-culture-specific topics with distant native Italian speaker instructors, fostering the development of students' speaking and interactional skills in Italian and, as a by-product, assisting students to develop further intercultural awareness by enhancing their understanding of and ability to articulate differences and similarities between Italian and Australian cultures.

[2] Monash Unit Guides are only available to Monash staff and students with authcate credentials.

The digital project was integrated into the Italian studies advanced 1 syllabus, and a customized assessment framework was devised for the project. Incorporating the project into the course syllabus fostered the normalization of the digital practices: "The key factor in achieving the normalization of technologies, Chambers and Bax (2006) write, is syllabus integration" (Gruba, Hinkelman 2012, 6). Blending the Italian studies advanced 1 Unit through this global form of co-design and content delivery entailed also – to a certain degree – the internationalization of the curriculum, defined as "the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the preparation, delivery, and outcomes of a program of study" (Leask 2009, 209).

With regards to stage three of Tomlinson and Whittaker's checklist, namely learners and teachers (2013, 243), eight instructors of Italian as a Foreign Language, who had previously completed the Masters' degree in "Teaching Italian to Foreigners" at the University of Urbino, collaboratively devised, together with the project coordinator[3], a theoretical framework for the digital learning project and the technology-mediated contents. After analysing the Italian studies advanced 1 course structure and students' needs together with the Monash course instructors, the project designers set out to develop a student-centred context-driven digital learning model. As Marsh suggests, "Blended learning is, by its very nature, 'student-centered' […]. In student-centered teaching, […] learning is most meaningful […] when the students themselves are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge" (2012, 8). The project designers thus developed a socio-constructivist online learning environment, which envisions learners as active meaning constructors and instructors as facilitators (Harasim 2012, 60-69). Within a sociocultural framework, which conceptualizes language as a symbolic tool linking cognitive processes to the outside world, language learning is viewed as socially constructed (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf, Thorne 2006). In this light, dialogical interaction, which is instrumental in fostering knowledge construction and foreign language development (*ibidem*), played a pivotal role in the design of the digital project, particularly the interactional patterns implemented in DVC. In keeping with this theoretical framework, in terms of interactional patterns as well as learners' and teachers' roles (stage three) (Tomlinson, Whittaker 2013, 243), the digital project featured eight weekly 30-minute one-on-one (student–instructor) Skype meetings, with the goal of "face-to-face learning at a distance" (Sharma, Westbrook 2016, 321), spread over a ten-week period in Italian Spring/Australian Autumn 2017. Seventeen Monash students were partnered with

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[3] The theoretical framework of the project and the digital teaching materials have been devised collaboratively by Giovanna Carloni, Giorgia Bassani, Margherita Bezzi, Alessandro Droghini, Luca Ma, Maira Marzioni, Ilaria Pasquinelli, Jacopo Pettinari, and Ilaria Puliti.

eight instructors of Italian as a Foreign Language based in Italy (and thus geographically distant from the learners). During desktop videoconferencing, students and instructors worked in dyads, the most commonly used interaction format in synchronous communication along with triads (Belz 2006; Jin 2013); the project designers preferred dyads to provide each student with more time to speak and interact with instructors. During the Skype-mediated lessons, Monash students interacted in the target language with their distant instructors.

For foreign language acquisition to occur, students need to be provided with comprehensible input; input is made comprehensible by means of scaffolding provided by instructors in various ways (Krashen 1985), including digital tools. Likewise, students' pushed output (Swain 2000) and negotiation of meaning featuring modified input (Long 1996) are pivotal for foreign language development. To explain, in oral interaction, input is made comprehensible to learners through interactional modifications (Long 1996). Interactionally modified input, triggered by negotiation of meaning and provided by native or competent speakers by means of modifications in the linguistic forms, is instrumental in promoting language acquisition (Long 1996). Corrective feedback targeting linguistic elements, such as vocabulary and grammar, can also foster language development in this context, since it is likely to lead students to notice form (*ibidem*). Schmidt (1990)'s Noticing Hypothesis asserts the role of noticing in language development, arguing that learners need to first notice a linguistic feature in the input in order for the acquisition process to start. Furthermore, as the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis suggests, it is of paramount importance for students to produce actual language output to test their hypotheses about the target language and to help them become aware of the limits of their language competence – when this situation occurs – and thus try to stretch or push their language resources to produce more accurate and appropriate output, that is, modified comprehensible output (Swain 1985; 1995). Output production may in this way develop students' language proficiency since, as "Swain (1985) argues[,] […]production may encourage learners to move from semantic (top-down) to syntactic (bottom-up) processing. Whereas comprehension of a message can take place with little syntactic analysis of the input, production forces learners to pay attention to the means of expression" (Ellis 1994, 283). Within this theoretical framework, during video-mediated lessons, instructors in the present study provided students with the scaffolding, including corrective feedback, necessary to help them more effectively engage in output production, negotiation of meaning, and dialogical interaction. In keeping with the communicative approach (Savignon 1997), Skype-mediated activities therefore aimed to trigger students' language development through activities and tasks fostering output production and dialogical interaction in authentic, communicative language learning environments.

During desktop videoconferencing, students' competence in Italian was enhanced through oral interaction in a technology-mediated learning environment. By means of this video-mediated dialogical interaction, learners acquired Italian mostly through incidental learning, namely subconscious language acquisition occurring as an unplanned process while students are engaged in tasks or activities:

Language acquisition is very similar to the process children use in acquiring first and second languages. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. […] Conscious language learning, on the other hand, is thought to be helped a great deal by error correction and the presentation of explicit rules. (Krashen 1981, 1-2)

Before the Skype meetings, students were required to carry out Italian culture-specific digital activities made available online in a self-study mode, which was expected to foster students' autonomy (Fuchs, Hauck, Muller-Hartmann 2012). The digital project's tailored content was embedded into six Weebly-generated[4], password-protected websites; each website featured three or four personalized webpages. Students accessed the customized content and activities directly on their own personalized webpages, at any time and in any place; "the ubiquity of digital learning" (Carrier 2017, n.p.) was therefore a main asset of the project. Furthermore, students' knowledge artefacts were embedded into the websites: "online learning […] environments are constructivist in that they facilitate user-generated content; they can be structured by the user (teacher or learner)" (Harasim 2012, 76).

The project required a "digitally aware learner" (Motteram 2016, 88), namely those who knew how to learn effectively in the devised online learning environment. Thus, in order to assist students in switching to the newly developed blended approach effectively, both Monash instructors and distant instructors of Italian explained to the students their role in the project and the pedagogic aims of the digital activities, since for online learning to be successful, instructors "must provide [learners with] explicit guidance to the resources and activities" (Carrier 2017, n.p.). As previously mentioned, the transition to digital teaching was relatively simple for the instructors of Italian, as not only did they have previous experience teaching Italian face-to-face and (almost all) in Skype-mediated settings, but also they were partly responsible for the project design and digital content creation.

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[4] Weebly is a user-friendly website-builder tool. See Weebly Education, <https://education.weebly.com> (11/2017).

1.2.5 Digital content

The project designers developed pedagogically sound learning materials integrating content, foreign language pedagogy, and technology knowledge dimensions, as envisioned in the Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra, Koehler 2006; Koehler, Mishra 2008). In particular, the task design of the project was created in keeping with the "strong approach" to telecollaborative task design devised by O'Dowd (2016, 287). In order to do so, the tasks were constructed to foster students' reflections on intercultural awareness, intercultural citizenship, and culture-specific issues including stereotyping (*ibidem*). In this context, the following dimensions of intercultural citizenship, considered pivotal in foreign language learning for the development of intercultural competence, were taken into account:

> Learning more about one's own country by comparison
> Learning more about 'otherness' in one's own country. (Byram 2008, 130)

The eight weekly digital lessons featured authentic videos as input to balance the mainly written input provided to students during in-class instruction. The videos, made available on the project websites, dealt with contemporary Italian cultural topics deeply connected to the literary topics presented in class. For example, Italy's brain drain was selected as a contemporary topic connected to issues dealt with in *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (2011 [1816]) and some poems, such as "In morte del fratello Giovanni" and "Alla sera" (both 1803), by Ugo Foscolo. Weekly cultural topics were sequenced carefully to avoid discussing sensitive issues, such as those of a controversial nature, before a good and trusting student-teacher relationship had been developed, which is an essential precaution in desktop videoconferencing learning environments (O'Dowd, Ritter 2006; Müller-Hartmann, Kurek 2016). Within a socio-constructivist framework, each technology-enhanced lesson was comprised of the following online elements: a brainstorming activity, a pre-viewing activity, a while-viewing activity, and two post-viewing activities. The various activities were orchestrated to effectively trigger and integrate both top-down and bottom-up processing, since both are instrumental in comprehension:

> Bottom-up processing requires prior knowledge of the language system (i.e. vocabulary, morphology, phonology, syntax, and discourse structure) and interpretation of physical (graphic and auditory) clues. […] Top-down processing can compensate for the linguistic limitations to some extent by allowing learners to guess the meaning of words they have not encountered before, and to make some sense out of larger chunks of written and oral text. Both for L1 and L2 speakers, top-down processing utilizes prior knowledge of content, context, and culture. (Saville-Troike 2008, 154)

The activities provided suitable scaffolding to help learners manage content effectively (Vygotsky 1978). In particular, brainstorming and pre-viewing activities aimed at providing students with the content and language knowledge necessary to trigger the top-down processes instrumental in fostering the comprehension of the videos provided as input for each lesson. While-viewing activities consisting of close-ended questions guided students' comprehension of the videos, thereby scaffolding their cognitive processing as learners by activating their expectations and hypotheses, and providing the opportunity to test them. Students carried out the online brainstorming, pre-viewing and while-viewing activities autonomously before the videoconferences, whilst they engaged with the post-viewing activities together with their instructors during the Skype lessons. They had weekly deadlines to complete the pre-Skype lesson assignments, the submission of which being a pre-requisite for the online meetings. The pre-Skype digital assignments played a pivotal role in activating students' prior knowledge and helping them construct content and language knowledge, as anticipated within a socio-constructivist framework (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf, Thorne 2006); this knowledge allowed them to discuss the topics and interact effectively in Italian with their instructors on Skype.

Content designers used a wide variety of digital tools to create the projectware and "ensured that tasks [were] appropriate to the medium used and that [they took] into account the affordances […] of the modes available" (Hampel 2006, 111). Digital content and activities were made available on students' personalized webpages on the Weebly-generated websites mentioned above. In particular, instructors used MindMeister[5], a digital tool, to create the brainstorming activities, with the aim of activating students' prior knowledge. The MindMeister-generated, interactive, image-rich mind maps required students' active engagement, in that they had to fill in different topic-specific sub-sections building upon their existing knowledge.

The pre-viewing activities, which were targeted to introduce key words (that is, vocabulary items that are pivotal in understanding the input provided), were devised with Padlet[6], a digital noticeboard. Students were required to match vocabulary items with definitions and/or images presented alongside in sticky notes on the noticeboard. With pre-viewing activities, new concepts related to the topic of each lesson and in particular to the content of the video were introduced. Thus, culture-specific ideas and vocabulary items related to content knowledge, namely "background information about the topic that is being read or listened to" (Saville-Troike 2008, 154), and culture knowledge were presented:

[5] MindMeister,<https://www.mindmeister.com> (11/2017).
[6] Padlet, <https://it.padlet.com> (11/2017).

Culture knowledge subsumes content and context in many ways but also includes an understanding of the wider social setting within which acts of reading and listening take place. Precisely because this knowledge is taken for granted by the writer of the text being read […], it is rarely expressed explicitly, so that its role in the process of understanding […] is rarely recognized. (Saville-Troike 2008, 154-155)

For each lesson, students were introduced to the concepts they needed to know in order to carry out the post-viewing activities in DVC through short videos between five and ten minutes long. Students could stream the videos for playback at any time and place. In order to foster students' comprehension of the video content, instructors created while-viewing activities available online; students were expected to stream the video and concurrently to carry out the while-viewing activities (featuring mainly closed questions, such as matching, true/false, and multiple choice), created with Google forms[7]. Upon submission of the answers, students received immediate automated feedback. At the beginning of each Skype session, students also received instructor feedback on the first two activities, which had been carried out in a self-study mode before the Skype meetings. Students thus had access to extensive formative assessment throughout the project, which allowed them to self-monitor their learning process. The use of formative assessment also enabled instructors to monitor students consistently and to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and on that basis to tailor their teaching practices and strategies to the students' needs.

As previously mentioned, within a socio-constructivist and sociocultural framework, social construction of meaning and dialogical interaction are instrumental in fostering both active meaning-making and foreign language acquisition/content knowledge construction by students (Vygotsky 1978; Lantolf 2000; Lantolf, Thorne 2006). In keeping with these theoretical principles, the post-viewing activities were devised to foster students' social meaning-making through intercultural dialogical video-mediated interaction in the target language. Post-viewing activities elicited the analysis of intercultural perspectives and fostered the development of intercultural awareness; the latter, as research shows, can be enhanced successfully in telecollaboration projects (O'Dowd 2011; Vinagre 2016). In order to foster intercultural awareness, instructors assisted students in explicitly considering the value systems underlying the Italian and Australian cultural practices targeted in the weekly lessons:

The goal of language learning within an intercultural perspective is for learners to participate in communication to exchange meanings and to discover, in and through experiences of interacting in communication with others, the variability in meaning-making, the linguistic and cultural assumptions made in constructing

[7] Google Forms, <https://www.google.com/forms/about> (11/2017).

knowledge and, ultimately, to develop self-awareness of their own interpretative system. (Liddicoat, Scarino 2013, 64)

This practice was adopted to avoid the misconception that "intercultural learning […] [may occur] as an automatic result of communication or engagement with others [in technology-mediated learning environments]" (117). In the digital project, culture was envisioned as the aggregate of social practices entrenched in culture-specific value systems: "culture [was seen] as a lens through which people mutually and reciprocally interpret and communicate meaning" (Scarino 2014, 391). Conducive to the fostering of intercultural awareness in digital learning environments, tasks provided to students need to "involve […] learners in moving between cultures and reflecting on their own cultural positioning and the roles of language and culture within it" (Liddicoat, Scarino 2013, 117).

The first post-viewing activity comprised a set of open-ended questions aimed at guiding students to thoroughly analyse and critically evaluate the concepts presented in the videos. Students were required to answer the questions, embedded into the personalised webpages, whilst interacting in Italian with their instructors during the Skype-mediated lessons. Students first answered factual questions, involving low-level cognitive skills. Convergent questions, involving mid-level cognitive skills, and divergent questions – requiring students to analyse, evaluate, and create – followed; the latter were aimed at triggering higher-order thinking skills. Students thus engaged with the topics at an increasingly deep level, as instructors encouraged students not only to answer but also to generate questions. During videoconferences, instructors provided the scaffolding necessary to elicit students' views and opinions and help them voice their ideas and questions. Students' voices, experiences, and background knowledge were central to discussing topics within an intercultural framework:

In language learning, interpreting and creating meanings involves an intercultural act of decentering as learners examine phenomena and experience their own cultural situatedness while seeking to enter into the cultural worlds of others. It requires an act of engagement in which learners compare their own cultural assumptions, expectations, practices, and meanings with those of others, recognizing that these are formed within a cultural context that is different from their own. The learner is not simply situated in one culture and observing another; the learner is an intercultural participant, interpreter, and mediator. (Scarino 2014, 391)

The second interactive post-viewing activity, which was devised using a multimedia storytelling tool, UtellStory[8], featured a series of tasks such as problem-solving, opinion exchange, and role-play tasks. As Skehan suggests, "a task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to

[8] UtellStory, <http://www.utellstory.com> (11/2017).

the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of outcome" (Skehan 1996, 38). Through a series of UtellStory-based slides, the contexts, characters, roles, intercultural issues, and problems or requirements of the various tasks were presented within a narrative frame. The tasks encouraged students to use the concepts and language acquired thus far in new contexts. In particular, to enhance language acquisition, tasks were devised to foster sustained complex output in Italian, instrumental in fostering pushed output. In this way, interacting with their instructors, learners used the foreign language to evaluate content, formulate hypotheses, role-play, and problem-solve. The activity fostered a high degree of student engagement and creativity within an intercultural awareness framework.

Students' participation in the project was assessed through learner-generated knowledge: "student-generated content is a valued outcome of learning as it provides evidence of knowledge construction" (Lee, McLoughlin 2008, 16). In particular, acting as knowledge producers, learners were expected to show deep learning and understanding of the intercultural perspective underpinning the digital learning project. For the last Skype meeting, learners created a multimodal presentation on a topic they had selected on the basis of macro-categories such as food and sports; the topic needed to be presented within an intercultural framework. Learners were provided with a template, but in keeping with the user-generated content theory – holding that "the principle of active learner contribution must inform the learning task design, and provide opportunities for learners to become producers of resources as opposed to consumers of content" (*ibidem*) –, students were free to pick a topic, find suitable resources, and select a multimodal digital tool appropriate to the specific characteristics of their intended presentation. Students' artefacts were embedded into their personalized webpages, and learners could watch their peers' user-generated content. The last videoconference focused on discussion of the students' artefacts; this time, it was the instructors' responsibility to go over student-generated knowledge before the Skype meeting. Students' degree of agency was thus significantly increased for the final assignment, and learner-centred learning was implemented to a high degree on this occasion. In this context, agency, "socioculturally mediated" (Ahearn 2001, 112) and deeply interconnected with autonomy and identity, is conceived as the learners' ability to self-determine and self-regulate their own learning process, to make decisions autonomously, and to take responsibility for their own learning (van Lier 2010).

Overall, the digital learning project aimed to foster instructor-student co-creation of digital learning experiences, enabling learners "to access authentic language learning inputs at any time" (Carrier 2017, n.p.) and to experience authentic language use by taking advantage of the affordances of a video-mediated learning environment. Through the various activities, the project was targeted at fostering students' active learning – during Skype-mediated lessons, as the video recordings show, learners engaged in meaningful

interaction with instructors, thought critically, and constructed knowledge effectively in the target language. Learners' high degree of engagement in the learning process was triggered by the various digital activities that were provided – fostering analysis, evaluation, creation, and self-evaluation.

The students' self-evaluation in particular was enhanced by means of post-Skype meeting questionnaires leading them to reflect on their own learning processes and outcomes. Students were thus "able to constantly assess and reassess [their own] learning successes, strengths, and weaknesses" (Carrier 2017, n.p.), and metacognitive reflection was thereby fostered: "Ultimately learning (i.e. e-learning) and evaluating may become one process that engages users in self-awareness, develops meta-cognitive skills and self-regulation and elevates intrinsic motivation, by also leading to more learner autonomy" (Caws, Heift 2016, 132). Overall, students' agency increased as the project developed; as Carrier suggests, "digital learning puts students in control of their learning" (2017, n.p.). Students' sense of self-efficacy increased through a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, which also entailed a shift from external to internal locus of control in students (Bandura 1977).

2. Students' perceptions: an analysis

2.1 Research questions

To the end of evaluating the effectiveness of and improving upon the blended format – stage four of Tomlison and Whittaker's framing checklist – the following two research questions have been formulated. Both questions draw on the reasons from blending, that is, both are developed within a student perception framework (see 1.3.1): 1) To what extent and how did the students perceive the blended course helped their foreign language development?; and, 2) To what extent and how did the students perceive the blend enhanced their understanding of the cultural topics discussed in class?

2.2 Participants

Seventeen students from the 2017 Italian studies advanced 1 cohort (Monash University, Faculty of Arts, Italian Studies) took part in the project. The learners' entry level was B1 of the European Framework. The Italian studies advanced cohort was selected over lower-level students for two main reasons: 1) Italian studies advanced is the highest offered at Monash, thus the last opportunity for the students to fill their perceived gap in conversational Italian while at Monash; 2) the Italian studies advanced 1 cohort consists of either second or third year students, who are better acquainted with the

HE environment, and arguably more flexible in experimenting and assessing innovative approaches. Eight instructors from the University of Urbino took part in the project. All the instructors were native speakers of Italian as well as experienced teachers who contributed to the co-development of the blend.

2.3 Method

All data on students' perception were collected throughout the course by means of weekly online questionnaires to be completed by each student after each Skype meeting. The first seven questionnaires focused exclusively on the weekly Skype meeting. Each questionnaire consisted of five questions on overall usefulness (Questions 1 and 2), most relevant linguistic aspects (Question 3), most relevant cultural aspects (Question 4) and suggestions (Question 5). The eighth and final questionnaire covered a wider range of topics related to the entire course length as well as to the students' willingness to be involved in a similar project in the future.

2.4 Analysis and discussion

The data gathered through online questionnaires show extremely positive in relation to student perception, with 93.3% of the participants stating that they "would be willing to take part in a similar course in the future". These results, in turn, mirror the entire Unit's over 85% approval rating shown by SETU.

As to students' assessment of the project's overall usefulness, data shows a steady approval rate throughout the course. Over 70% of the students either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement "I found the meeting useful" (Question 1), while no student assessed any of the meetings as being non-useful (either "disagreeing" or "strongly disagreeing"):

Meeting n.	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neutral%
1	73	20	9
2	83	8.7	8.3
3	57.1	42.9	-
4	80	13	7
5	90.9	9.1	-
6	92.3	-	7.7
7	69.2	30.8	-

Table 1 – Meetings' Usefulness

When asked to "explain [their] answers" (Question 2), students referred to (perceived) linguistic improvements, cultural improvements, or combined-cultural/linguistic improvements as the blended course's main benefit. The table below reports students' comments along the aforementioned three trajectories:

Meeting n and number of answers (ans.)	Mainly linguistic improvement (in n. of students)	Mainly culture-related improvement (in n. of students)	Combined improvement (in n. of students)
1 (15 ans.)	10	4	1
2 (12 ans.)	10	1	1
3 (14 ans.)	11	2	1
4 (15 ans.)	9	4	2
5 (11 ans.)	10	1	-
6 (13 ans.)	10	2	1
7 (13 ans.)	8	4	1

Table 2 – Types of Perceived Improvement

The table shows that (perceived) linguistic improvement is strikingly predominant, with at least 60% of the students after each interaction stating the Skype videoconference helped them "developing [their] linguistic skills". Conversely, no more than 30% of the students found that increasing their knowledge of the weekly cultural topic was the main benefit of the Skype-mediated lessons. Only up to 22% of the respondent found that the benefit was equally linguistic and cultural. The same predominance of linguistic over cultural improvement is reflected by how students responded to the question: "Describe a particular aspect you enjoyed about the project" posed in the eight and final questionnaire: 66% of the respondents referred to "the consistency of being able to speak Italian every week" and "the ability to […] practise the language" as primary benefit of the Skype-enhanced course.

When asked in more detail "what is the main linguistic aspect the meeting helped you with?" (Question 3), students' answers can be classified in three main categories: 1) "vocabulary"; 2) "grammar" and/or specific grammatical topics covered in class; 3) "sentence structure" and/or "fluency" and/or pronunciation, as illustrated by the table below:

Meeting n and number of answers (ans.)	Vocabulary (student n)	Grammar in and/or specific grammatical aspects (student n)	Sentence structure and/or fluency/confidence/ pronunciation (student n)	Other
1 (15 ans.)	2	5	5	3
2 (12 ans.)	7	3	1	1
3 (14 ans.)	6	3	4	1
4 (15 ans.)	7	4	3	1
5 (11 ans.)	5	2	4	-
6 (13 ans.)	7	4	2	-
7 (13 ans.)	9	4	-	-

Table 3 – Types of Linguistic Improvement

The dataset shows how the perceived importance of vocabulary acquisition increased throughout the course, peaking at 70% after Skype Lesson 7, while perceived grammar-related improvements slightly declined and fluency-related improvement remained stable overall. As to grammar-based (perceived) improvements, students' answers also show increased metacognitive awareness (see above; Caws, Heift 2016, 132), as they were increasingly able to pinpoint with increasing precision which grammatical elements the videoconference had helped them practice.

When asked "what is the main cultural aspect the meeting helped you with?" (Question 4), students generally confirmed that the Skype-mediated lesson was useful in expanding upon their basic understanding of the topic discussed that week. Yet, as to students' assessment of the range of topics discussed throughout the course, the answers to the final question (in Questionnaire 8) about favourite potential topics to be discussed in similar Skype-mediated projects appear more relevant, as a wide range of topics emerged. The most recurrent topics (at least two students) were youth and education, migration, work and lack thereof, food and music, cinema and entertainment. Significantly, in this final questionnaire, too, the most recurrent suggestion (four students) was to address in the Skype-mediated lessons the very same topics discussed during the culture seminars. This discussion would assist in the consolidating of the students' understanding of those topics.

3. Conclusions and future directions

3.1 Conclusions

The data collected through the student perceptions survey has shown that the main objective set for the project was achieved. This objective set included increasing the student (perceived) exposure to spoken Italian and enabling access to intercultural interactions by means of a digitally-enhanced blended course, connecting them with trained native speakers of Italian. In line with the shift from teacher to student characterizing the course, one student-centred way to try and improve upon the existing blend was to ask the participants after each meeting: "What would you change in the way the meeting was conducted?" (Question 5). Beside the consistent percentage of students who found the Skype meetings fully satisfactory, the most relevant suggestions can be grouped into two streams: structure-related and content related suggestions, as shown by the following table:

Meeting n and number of answers (ans.)	Nothing/ no suggestions	Structure related/ technical suggestions	Content-related
1 (15 ans.)	9	4	2
2 (12 ans.)	11	1	-
3 (14 ans.)	10	4	-
4 (15 ans.)	13	1	1
5 (11 ans.)	10	1	-
6 (13 ans.)	12	1	-
7 (13 ans.)	12	1	-

Table 4 – Types of Suggestions for Improvement

The majority of students' suggestions addressed structural aspects of the digital interaction such as the number, type, and length of the pre-viewing and post-viewing activities. As to content-related suggestions, the only well represented response was that the topics discussed during the face-to-face culture seminar and the topics discussed during the Skype interaction should be more closely interrelated. This range of comments was confirmed and broadened by answers to the final and more comprehensive question: "What would you change in the way the project was organized and conducted?" (Questionnaire 8). A general issue was the meetings' and videos' length. Students found the lesson overall too long when exceeding 30 minutes. As to pre-viewing clips, less than 10 minutes was the preferred length. Students

confirmed that pre-viewing activity and brainstorming could be revised. One respondent suggested to replace them with a "2.5-minute video presentation of the weekly topic". Another respondent suggested a set of pre-introductory activities "likes/dislikes, family, pets, past times, etc." preceding the first digital meeting with the instructor might help by "creating a more relaxed atmosphere". The quality of the digital interaction/Skype connection emerged as an issue at times. The worth of the Skype-mediated oral component (10% of the total grade) for the Unit was also perceived as insufficient, relative to preparation and time required.

3.2 Future research and applications

In light of its positive results, the blended course Italian studies advanced 1, after incorporating students' suggestions where applicable, will become a permanent feature of *Italian Studies* at Monash. One further step will be extending "Let's go digital" to other (lower) levels of language proficiency at Monash. More specifically, it may be argued that Victoria Certificate of Education (VCE) graduates beginning Italian proficient 1 – being those who experience the most significant shift in the approach to language learning (see above) – would greatly benefit from a weekly, Skype-enhanced, oral interaction with a native instructor in Urbino.

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