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Transformation through telecollaboration: A working hypothesis on the transformative potential of blended spaces for (Italian) foreign language acquisition in South Africa

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Abstract

This article formulates a working hypothesis on the transformative potential of telecollaborative projects in a foreign language classroom in South Africa. It is based on a project which has been already successfully implemented in Australia. The working idea is to transfer this project into the South African context, where the use of technology may be helpful both to improve the quality of students' learning experience and to address the transformative demand coming from the South African society. The essay both illustrates the transformational potential of digital spaces of blended foreign language acquisition and suggests how current blending strategies deployed abroad may be re-thought and re-shaped so as to better match the peculiarities of the South African context.

Keywords: *blended learning, curriculum transformation, Italian language, Skype project, South Africa*

1. A working hypothesis

After analysing the South African peculiarities in relation to the academic environment, the status of Italian language in the country and the social demand for transformation, this essay explores how a blended, telecollaborative project for Italian as a foreign language acquisition, already implemented in Australia, could be implemented in a South African University. To date, there are still no scientific data on the South African case and, therefore, the nature of this article is that of a working hypothesis on how the aforementioned Italian-Australian project could work in South Africa and what the implications of adopting this project might be.

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2. Understanding the South African context

In order to understand what can be an efficient practice in teaching Italian in South Africa, one must first consider the specific context of South African society, in which, for historical reasons, the issue of language is a particularly sensitive one. The legacy of colonialism and of half a century of Apartheid regime has left South Africa – and the entire African continent, for that matter – entering the democratic era and debating the question of what language to use and on which occasion to use it. The discussion revolving around languages is both a political and social one: after all, "One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language" (Ashford *et al.* 1989, 7).

Anti-colonial activists and postcolonial critics have shown how imposing the colonial language on the colonised people was an effective means of oppression and another weapon in the hand of the coloniser. Martinican intellectual, Franz Fanon, opened his seminal *Black Skin, White Masks* with a chapter entitled "The Negro and Language", in which he shows how, for a black person, speaking the colonised language means "to become whiter": "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (1967, 18). One of the principal vehicles of culture is language, as Fanon states: "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (*ibidem*, 38). Speaking the colonised language, therefore, is a form of social promotion for the colonised person, who in this way gives up his/her own culture and language which s/he regards as inferior.

Kenyan intellectual, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, clearly recognised that "language was the most important vehicle through which that power [the colonial one] fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (2005, 9). Furthermore, Ngũgĩ identifies language as a key point for the construction of one's identity: "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe" (*ibidem*, 4). According to Ngũgĩ, the imposition in particular of English, French and Portuguese in Africa deprived African people of their own identity and convinced them, still in the contemporary time, of the necessity even for their own sake to speak and write using the language of the coloniser.

It is then clear how, in today's postcolonial societies, the question of the language is a key element in discussions around decolonisation, national identity and the relationship with European coloniser countries in general. Language is not just a tool to convey a message or to enable communication; it is a place of freedom/oppression, of social and of personal identity-building, hence of social and political fights.

It is, therefore, not accidental that in South Africa the language issue was also at the core of the Apartheid programme. The Bantu Education Act (passed in 1953) implemented segregation at the level of schooling and uni-

versity system. In 1974, the regime enforced a law making Afrikaans (and, to a lesser extent, English) the official languages of teaching and learning for all black students. This led to the Soweto Uprising in 1976, in which black school children protested against the imposition of Afrikaans – the language associated with the Apartheid regime itself. The protest resulted in a massacre in which officially 176 students lost their lives, but also marked a turning point in the black struggle against Apartheid. This single episode alone points out the centrality of languages within colonial and consequently postcolonial societies and how it is so deeply related to discourses on imperialism and oppression.

With the fall of Apartheid and the beginning of the democratic era for South Africa in 1994, the new constitution recognised eleven official languages, adding nine indigenous languages to English and Afrikaans. Furthermore, South African sign language enjoys the status of a proper language: although not listed as an official one, at university level it is constituted as a discipline in its own, with its own department and a full programme spread over three years leading to a bachelor degree[1].

Italian, in the democratic era, is considered a "critical" language, meaning a language that is rare and needed in South Africa for business related purposes. By virtue of one's proficiency in Italian[2], it is possible for a foreign national to apply for a "critical skill visa". However, it is clear that Italian has to compete with many other languages in South Africa; not only the eleven official ones, but also those considered more relevant for the African continent: Portuguese (spoken in Mozambique and Angola), German (spoken in Namibia) and French (spoken in Democratic Republic of the Congo). In addition, Mandarin has been gaining importance in Africa, given the great economic interest that China has in the continent in general and in South Africa in particular, with a significant increase of Chinese migration toward the country[3].

Therefore, teaching Italian language has to be understood in this context. However, it is also necessary to take into consideration the current debate revolving around the africanisation of the curriculum and cultural activities in general – not only at university level – and the decolonisation of knowl-

[1] At the beginning of 2018 the Department of Education recognized South African Sign Language as a home language in the country's education system.

[2] As per the official Government Gazette (2014), the other languages considered critical skills for business are German, Swiss German, Flemish, Greek, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Spanish, Mandarin and French (Home Affairs 2014, 20).

[3] According to an official statistical report released in 2014, China is listed among the top ten countries in terms of migration to South Africa and the first one in terms of recipients of all work permits with a percentage of 22,6 (Statistics South Africa 2015, 26). In the city of Johannesburg there are several different China malls, and a Chinatown. In a small town called Bronkhorstpruit, 50km east of Pretoria, a Chinese Buddhist, Cultural, and Educational Complex, with the Nan Hua Temple at its centre, has been erected on 14 hectares of land.

edge. Since the start of the democratic era in 1994, great emphasis has been put on the re-appropriation of black cultures by black people, on the rejection of the imposition of Western cultures, and on the centrality of African matters. This plan has been conceived as the cultural side of addressing the historical social injustice perpetrated during colonisation and the Apartheid era. However, as the redistribution of land is still an outstanding issue[4], in the same way the cultural aspect of the decolonisation of the country is still an ongoing process. This is indeed one of the main reasons behind the FeesMustFall student movement erupted at the end 2015 and, with even more force, again in 2016[5].

In October 2015, towards the end of the academic year, students organised themselves in a protest movement called FeesMustFall, following the RhodesMustFall[6] movement started in early 2015 for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, erected in 1934 on the campus of the University of Cape Town. The demand for the removal of the statue received international attention and brought into the national public debate the discussion around the decolonisation of education across the country. FeesMustFall protests began later in the year in response to the annual increase in fees at South African universities; however, students' desires were not confined to the economic sphere. By protesting against the fees increase and then demanding free education, emphasis was put on the accessibility to higher education in South Africa, raising the question of the historical injustice and white privilege. As stated by Karodia, Soni, and Soni,

> The higher education system is presently geared to safeguard education for the elites. Transformation therefore, remains incomplete after two decades of democracy. Observation reveals that even though higher education and basic education in South Africa has expanded access, education has maintained and reinforced their elitist character. In other words, the efforts to preserve elite education, reinforces an understanding of education that undermines the development of quality mass education. (2016, 78)

[4] During the 2018 State of the Nation Address that officially inaugurates the political year in South Africa, the newly elected President Cyril Ramaphosa listed in the government programme for the year the "redistribution without compensation" issue of the land, revivifying the long unattended hope of many South African people to get the land back from the white occupation.

[5] As Davids and Waghid (2016) point out, the students' protest did not start suddenly at the end of 2015. The protests had been going on since 1994, but in poorer and traditionally black-only institutions. Protests hit the national – and international – news only when they started in historically white universities like UCT (University of Cape Town) and Wits (University of the Witwatersrand) in Johannesburg.

[6] Both names are often preceded by # to indicate the topic on Twitter, one of the most used social media by the people involved to communicate and exchange information during the protests.

Consequentially, soon after the beginning of the protests, the debate expanded to incorporate, among other issues[7], the demand for a decolonisation and africanisation of the curriculum. Therefore, the demand was not only for free education, but for free and decolonised education. In 2015 the protests lessened with the end of the year examination session approaching. However, the following year, the unresolved matter of students' requests resulted in even more violent protests, forcing politicians, academics, higher education institutions and all stakeholders to face the issues posed by students and the hopes and promises that had not been addressed after the fall of Apartheid. The decolonisation of the curriculum then became a priority on the universities' agendas.

3. Italian language in South Africa and curriculum transformation

Given the historical, social and political context in South Africa and the recent development in the areas of higher education and cultural environment, it is clear how the teaching and studying of the Italian language has diminished over the years and especially after 1994. At the same time, the population of those with Italian origins has been progressively integrated into the South African society, decreasing the number of students interested in taking the path to a degree in Italian at the university level.

Since 1994, many Italian departments have been closed: those in Stellenbosch, Bloemfontein and Rhodes in the 1990s and, more recently, the Department of Italian at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria, in 2015[8]. Currently, there are only two departments of Italian Studies in South African universities, one at the University of Cape Town and one at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and an Italian course currently active at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, for students of music[9].

The Italian language not only has to "compete" with several other languages, but it is also seen as a Eurocentric language, and therefore studying and promoting it seems to run contrary to the decolonisation and africanisation agenda that is increasingly being pushed within the country. Hence, the only way for Italian to survive at university level is for it to be able to fit into this transformation-focused agenda. Curriculum change in the universities – not only in the Italian departments – is now being implemented to make it more

[7] Other demands included an increase in the number of black academic staff and insourcing of workers.

[8] For a brief history of Italian department in South Africa, see Bellusci, Santipolo (2016).

[9] Even if they are still called "departments", actually they are "sections" within broader departments which comprise other languages. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the course of Italian is offered only at first year level and does not lead to a major; it is, however, possible to study Italian at postgraduate level.

relevant for South African students. For instance, many literature courses, across languages and departments, now feature colonial and post-colonial texts as well as methodologies. However, two considerations need to be made in this regard: transforming the curriculum does not mean, and cannot be limited to, changing content; secondly, in the area of language pedagogy it is hardly possible to change the content as such.

As Carr (1998) states, curriculum is not just the content taught, but it also involves methods, objectives, assessments, and is part of the process of training students to becoming an active part of society. Thus, changing texts can be a first necessary step towards the transformation of the curriculum; it cannot be the only one. In fact, quite the contrary: it is more transformative to change how a text is taught than simply replacing the text per se. In recent years many journal articles have advocated this view. Indeed, Quinlan and Sayed, explained it with a brilliant example:

> A transformative curriculum emphasises less the specifics of content and more how students critically engage with it. For example, instead of claiming Shakespeare was part of a 'colonial curriculum' and omitting it, teach why Shakespeare was taken out of the curriculum for black schools and the significance of John Kani playing Othello under apartheid in 1987. Help today's students, who never experienced apartheid, understand their own history intellectually. Share the humour of how disappointed Kani was with the English version of Shakespeare having first been exposed to a more passionate Xhosa translation. (2016, n.p.)

Thus, the only way for Italian language at university level to survive in South Africa is to take on the challenge posed by the current times and meet students' and societal demands, rather than feeling threatened by them. If it is not easy to radically change the content and if it is not possible to deny or elude the fact that Italian is almost exclusively a European language linked to a European country[10], it is nevertheless possible to change the way in which Italian is taught.

Nkoane, more than 10 years ago – but the observation is unfortunately still valid – noted that

> most modules and/or academic programmes (such as education, science, law, psychology, sociology, political science) in different disciplines at African universities are not linked to African cultures and realities. The disciplinary problematisations, classifications, examples, illustrations, comparisons, models, social systems and structures, institutions, interpretations and misinterpretations, mistakes and solutions all

[10] In reality, this statement, too, can and should be challenged by recognizing that Italian culture is actually more Mediterranean than European. It should be very valuable to think and teach Italian language and culture in relation to the Mediterranean identity, rather than to its European one. However, this will lead to a broader discussion which is beyond the aim and scope of this article.

come from Western realities and socio-cultural constructs. African students are trained in these systems but expected to work and follow a career on African soil. (2006, 62)

For Italian academics the challenge is to be able to teach the language in a way that does not involve the exclusive use and imposition of Western modalities. I argue that a valid way to reach this goal is the introduction of blended learning methodologies. The aim of this essay is to show an example of how blended learning can be employed in order to produce teacher-learner shared meanings, offering an alternative to learning modes in which meaning is usually transmitted unilaterally from the teacher to the learner. Therefore, before illustrating a specific case, I would like to briefly discuss the potential of blended learning methodologies in transforming the curriculum.

4. Blended learning potentiality in transformation

Here, blended learning is understood as defined by Bonk and Graham for whom "blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction" (2006, 5). From this fairly simple statement, blended learning proceeds to become a very complex system[11] in which different factors must be considered. According to Graham, there are three different categories of blended learning: enabling blends, enhancing blends and transforming blends. Enabling blends "primarily focus on addressing issues of *access* and *convenience*" (2009, 375). It reproduces online learning experiences offered in the classroom, in order, for example, to give access to the content to distant learners. The second category encompasses modalities that "are often characterized by the inclusion of supplemental online resources and/or the implementation of online activities that are small in scope when compared to the overall course" (*ibidem*). Transforming blends "allow for a significant change in pedagogy that facilitates active learner construction of knowledge" (*ibidem*). Gruba and Hinkelman summarise this third category as follows:

> Here, educators are seeking to substantially change learners from being passive receivers of information to active co-constructors of knowledge. Instructors and students, for example, may engage in a collaborative project to produce their own video clips, use mobile technologies to record field data 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. (2012, 4)

[11] Garrison and Kanuka write that "Blended learning is both simple and complex" (2004, 96). While the definition is quite straightforward, the implications and the countless possibilities that blended learning opens up make it a complex system with many factors to consider.

In a context where the scope is decolonisation and transformation of the curriculum, the third model is the one which offers the best possible outcome. As transformation is not about teaching one book instead of another, in the same way, an effective blended course should be not just about delivering some content online. What should be paramount when designing an Italian blended language course that will achieve an effective transformation of the curriculum is the potential embedded in the technology of a shared construction of knowledge. Indeed, the South African Council on Higher Education recognises that:

> Decolonisation would therefore require deliberate attention to surfacing, and inducting students into, specific forms of meaning-making, with a move away from thinking of curriculum as something received, but rather as a co-constructed set of understandings. This shift also implies a different understanding of the student, not as a passive recipient of knowledge, but as an agent of his or her own learning. (2017, 5)

Blended learning can foster the process of dismantling of the concept of the "sage on the stage" (King 1993), where knowledge derives exclusively from the teacher, and definitely overcome the lecturer-centred lessons still much in use in South African higher education institutions. Creating a learning environment in which the production of knowledge can be shared between the teacher and the learner opens up space for the learner to bring into the lesson his/her own perspective and culture. In a language course, where the grammar content cannot be changed, the experience of learning can be totally different when embedded into a cultural meeting with cognisance of the learner background, rather than being taught as a superior truth coming from the teacher. Although this goal can and has to be reached within the physical borders of the classroom, I argue that technologies, thanks to a certain productivity that characterises them, can be the ideal tool to achieve it.

The aim is to create an environment where the focus is not for the students to learn notions but to create ideas. According to the knowledge building tradition, learning is a spontaneous experience that happens without awareness and it is based on the information that the teacher "vertically" transmits to the students, whereas "knowledge creation/knowledge building is, in stark contrast, a type of deliberate, conscious action, which produces knowledge that has a public life" (Bereiter, Scardamalia 2014, 35). The idea behind knowledge-building applied to the classroom is that knowledge can be an experience shared by the teacher and the students and it leads to the creation of ideas which can have a "public life", a social utility beyond the classroom. As Bereiter and Scardamalia explain, "all serious educational programs aim to improve students' ideas, but overwhelmingly it is the teacher's responsibility to make this happen, whether through direct instruction, guided discovery, or some means of inducing cognitive conflict" (Bereiter, Scardamalia 2010, 11).

With the knowledge-building approach, instead, the final result is obtained through the active and collaborative efforts of the teacher with the students. This approach goes in the direction of the transformation goals, where students should have an active role in the learning process and be able to play a fundamental part in it, instead of being only receivers.

Below, I will give an example that can be adopted in an Italian class, combining the use of technology with a transformation aim. Since the method I am going to describe has not yet been introduced in South Africa, I can only advance a proposal and reflect on it rather than reporting on the results of a study-case as such.

5. "Let's go digital!": An Italian-Australian digital project

In 2017 the Italian Department at the Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, launched a collaborative project, called "Let's go digital! Contemporary Italy "surfs" to Monash: discovering literature, culture and language", in collaboration with the University of Urbino, Italy. This was aimed at increasing students' exposure to Italian culture and language through the use of digital tools. The results of the pilot project, applied to an undergraduate advanced level, are presented in an article (Carloni, Zuccala 2017) that describes the theoretical layout of the project and analyses the data collected through weekly questionnaires.

The project was divided into eight lessons, each structured in three phases conceived around a video uploaded online: brainstorming and pre-viewing activities, while-viewing activities, post-viewing activities during a video Skype conference with teachers in Italy. The 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" (Carloni, Zuccala 2017, 26). The videos were on contemporary Italian culture topics linked to the content developed in a specific in-presence lesson. While viewing these videos, students were asked to answer closed questions on the comprehension of the video for which they received immediate, automatic feedback. The last part – the post-viewing activities – was carried out during a video Skype conference with a teacher from Italy. Eight teachers with a Master degree in Teaching Italian as a Second and Foreign Language (L2/LS) from the University of Urbino took part in the project.

The video conference session is the moment in which a more vivid cultural interaction takes place. Questions to be answered in this part revolved around a comparison between Italian and Australian cultural aspects. The reflection about these topics did not happen as a solitary moment, but within an interaction with someone coming from, and situated in, the target culture.

In addition, the comparison did not derive from someone – like a native speaker teacher in the student's country – who might have a good experience of both cultures and can already communicate his/her own conclusions and observations to the learner. On the contrary, the reflection was carried out as a dialogue between two people who (possibly) do not have enough experience of the other's culture. According to Carloni and Zuccala,

> 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. (2017, 121)

While the interaction happens in the target language, the learner is put in the position of using and producing his/her knowledge (in this case, Australian cultural elements and reflections on them compared to the Italian ones) in a meaningful context. In this way, there is not an imposition of one culture upon the other (e.g. "we are in an Italian classroom, I – the teacher – will explain my culture to you"), and not even a translation from one to the other (e.g. "as you do in that way, we do in this other way"), but there is an encouragement for the learner to think in a critical and comparative way, while practicing the target language. The student, therefore, builds his/her own knowledge together with the teacher, in line with the knowledge building approach that informs the project.

Before the beginning of the eight lessons, the student is immediately put at the centre by asking him/her to produce a video in which he/she has to present him/herself to the teacher in Italy in the target language. The presentation through the production of a video, rather than in person or at the first Skype meeting, calls for more creativity from the student, underlining his/her role as a centre of elaboration rather than the receiving ending of someone else's elaboration.

Carloni and Zuccala concluded that the project was successful on the whole, having reached the main objectives set for it (more exposure to spoken Italian and intercultural interchanges via digital tools), and to the general satisfaction of the students (2017, 134). With some changes deriving from students' feedback, this blended course will become a permanent part of the Italian Studies curriculum at Monash University for the foreseeable future.

It seems that the kind of blended learning-informed methodologies described here help reach the "ideal environment" for learning a foreign language. According to Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999), there are eight conditions which make the environment optimal to learning a foreign language: 1. learners have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning; 2. learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience; 3. learners are involved in authentic

tasks; 4. learners are exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative language; 5. learners have enough time and feedback; 6. learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process; 7. learners work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level; 8. learner autonomy is supported. Out of these eight points, only the seventh one does not fall directly under the project objectives, whereas all the others can be achieved through the online part of this blended course, thus surely bringing advantages to teaching the target language.

In addition to the project carried out at Monash University, there is an increasing amount of literature on similar initiatives that use Skype to teach a foreign language. The outcomes observed are always in agreement, showing positive results both in terms of language acquisition and in terms of learning experience for students. For example, an article discussing the project between Fordham University in New York City and a Jesuit University in Bogotà on teaching Spanish language states that:

> The results of the pedagogical experience of this pilot project suggest that students felt more interested in engaging in conversation with native speakers and exchanging personal and academic information as well as other aspects of their culture using the target language rather than completing language laboratory activities or writing compositions (Guerrero 2012, 33).

These conclusions are perfectly in line with the aims of introducing the Monash-Urbino Skype project into an Italian course in a South African university. Another article on the use of Skype for the Japanese language attests the interest of the students for this kind of projects, confirming the incremental increase in their engagement (Mullen, Appeal, Shanklin 2009). Results such as those discussed in (among others) these aforementioned scholarly contributions, provide an encouraging precedent for adopting the Skype project in South Africa, where the concepts of knowledge building and of a central role of students in the learning process is fundamental for the transformation agenda.

6. Transformation through digitalisation: a proposal for the South African case

The suggestion is, therefore, to introduce a similar project in South Africa. There have already been discussions between the Italian Department at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Urbino[12] to evaluate the opportunity to adapt "Let's go digital" to the South African case. Some current limitations of the project have been considered, together with the necessity of transferring the already existing material from the Australian scenario into the South African one. These limitations are inherent to the specifics of this

[12] Prof. Giovanna Carloni and I are the two people directly involved in this first explorative phase.

project, but it is not difficult to envision them to be present in any kind of similar projects involving a counterpart in the target country.

The most immediate obstacle is the number of students who can take part in the project. Since the blended course is based on the presence of native speaker teachers located in the target country, and taking into account that the Skype part is carried out in a one by one interaction, the number of students is directly dependent on the number of teachers available. In the Australian case, the eight teachers could not accommodate more than one or two students each. Italian language classes at first-year level at the University of the Witwatersrand can have up to 35 students[13]. Even considering implementing the project with the help of other universities or institutions, the number of students in a class and the teachers available in the target country remain a crucial factor. This is one of the reasons for which the choice will probably fall upon a more advanced course with fewer students, rather than a beginner one. The South African curriculum for a B.A. is structured over a period of three years and, to be able to graduate in a discipline, it is necessary to take courses in that specific discipline each semester from the first to the third year. This project is, therefore, proposed for students at the third year level, either first or second semester; that is students who had already taken four semesters of Italian language class and should be at B level according to the CEFR. At this level there are usually between 5 and 10 students, which is an ideal number for the project. Such students will be able to carry on a conversation via Skype with a native speaker in the target language.

A second limitation is the adaptability of the content already developed for the online part to completely different courses. According to the feedback received from students during the Australian project, one of the main suggestions was that "the topics discussed during the face-to-face culture seminar and the topic discussed during the Skype interaction should be more closely interrelated" (Carloni, Zuccala 2017, 134). If the original project is already showing a weakness in the harmonisation between the face-to-face part and the online one, it raises further concerns when exporting that content into a different course. Obviously, this is said after taking into consideration that a certain degree of adaptation will have to be done, such as the replacement of all the Australian references with South African examples. The third year level course in which this project will first be tried out is called "From Colonialism to Postcolonialism and Beyond", and it comprises a literature section and a cinema section. It is necessary for the online and Skype components to be

[13] Considering the second semester; in the first semester students' ability to interact via Skype in the target language might be too low to be successful. However, if an experiment has to be carried out in the first semester of the first year, we would need to consider a number of students that can range between 35 and 50.

aligned as much as possible to the topics developed during the face-to-face lesson. It does not mean that the online lesson has to be on the exact same topic dealt with in the classroom: for example, if the text of the day is an Italian colonial film like *Lo squadrone bianco*, the online part does not have to revolve around the same film. It will rather be on a daily life topic which can be relevant to students, but it will need to have some links to topics such as colonialism and neo-colonialism. For instance, the topic can be food and students can consider how colonialism and neo-colonialism influenced the production and distribution of food. The aim of the online component is, in fact, to stimulate students to speak in the target language without the pressure of the classroom and of the lesson to be understood. The suggestion is, therefore, to have some links to the classroom contents but to differ somewhat, in order to avoid repetition and the impression of simply extending the face-to-face phase into the online one.

Besides the relevant changes to be made, the very same project conducted in South Africa will certainly pose more challenges in comparison to the original Australian version, being South Africa a country with a much more diversified and multicultural society. For example, a suggestion is that the comparison between the target culture and the students' one should not be completely performed only at the level of nationality, i.e. Italian vs South African, but it should be more individualised towards the specific student's culture.

There is a great transformation potential in taking into account the multicultural aspect of the South African society – the Rainbow Nation, as once defined by the Apartheid fighter and Nobel Prize Laureate, Desmond Tutu, where the image of the rainbow morphed into the ideal of different cultures living in the same space. When we deal with South Africa, therefore, we need to consider the specificity of each individual before considering the group as a whole. It means that each and every student will be called on to think and perform in terms of his or her own cultural background. The aim of putting the emphasis on the individual, rather than on group, characteristics depends on overcoming the pressure to adapt to the mainstream/dominant culture. In this way, it could be possible to create a cultural exchange in which the student is at the centre and is not forced to reproduce the dominant culture of the university, which is still a Western/white male dominated one.

At the same time, it is imperative to carefully consider certain implicit assumptions that might be overlooked during the process. A collaborative blended course, carried out by four universities (two in South Africa, one in India and one in New Zealand) in theatre and performance classrooms, was based on the assumption that "the project might facilitate transnational cultural citizenship" (Cloete *et al.* 2015, 471). The assumption originated from the international nature of the project, which involved three different countries, and from the fact that participants were "keen to learn from each

other and to collaborate together on teaching, using the broad understanding of the Global South as our starting point" (*ibidem*). At the end of the project, the scholars involved had to revise some initial ideas:

> Our initial almost unquestioned acceptance of the notion of cosmopolitanism and transcultural citizenship was vigorously challenged in this project as we realised there were different meaning systems at play, resulting in contentious assumptions being made. For instance, the very notion of blended learning might be criticised for its inherent privilege in how it presumes access to resources. (*Ibidem*, 479)

It is, therefore, important to keep in mind this kind of experiences and questions right from the start. The suggestion here is that rather than assuming, for example, that a certain international project will foster students' global citizenship, it would be better to place this assumption as one of the research questions in assessing the project outcomes.

More specifically, these considerations are key-factors in our case of adapting an Italian-Australian project to a South African context, especially if one of the aims is to meet the university's demand for transformation. Therefore, not only the content has to be changed in order to refer to South Africa instead of Australia, but also the weekly feedback questions have to be revised. At stake here are not only language achievements, but also broader matters such as enabling cultural exchanges, increasing students' agency, dismantling power relationships, decolonising the study of a European language. If, as I stated earlier, technologies and blended learning modalities have the potential of achieving these results, it does not necessarily mean that simply by using these tools we will achieve the goal. Hence, the research questions need to assess not only the validity of the project in terms of the improvement of the students' language abilities, but also in terms of transformation. Questions, such as the following, must be posed: did the online activities and the Skype video conference increase students' agency? Was the project, according to the students' feedback, able to create an intercultural exchange in which both the student's culture and the target one were posed at the same level? Did students feel free to express their own cultures and values? And so on…

Moreover, in adapting the project to South Africa, consideration of the different power relationships at stake must be given: an Italian-Australian relationship is not the same as an Italian-South African relationship. Somehow, these differences have to be acknowledged and incorporated into the programme. In the same way, we need to recognise the cultural difference in place when dealing with one case or the other. These differences do not necessarily constitute limitations, if considered and integrated into the project; in fact, quite the contrary: only by considering them it is possible to fully develop the transformation potential of this blended course.

On the other hand, a very positive aspect which represents an advantage in the realisation of the project, is the cost implication. The project is based

on a mutual benefit of the institutions involved and does not require any funding to be made available by the university hosting the language course. At Urbino, the teachers involved participate in the project as part of their training; hence, they do not receive extra remuneration for the individual time spent with the students. Each and every semester there is a new cohort graduating from the Italian program at the University of Urbino and, as a compulsory part of their training, they need to complete a placement which can be either in person (i.e. in a school) or on-line. This training is paid for by the Italian graduate students as part of their master fees and does not result in extra charge on the Australian/South African students (for a broader contextualisation, please refer to the essays by Carloni and Zuccala 2017, 2018). At the same time, the hosting institution utilises the project as a way to add expertise and decrease the teaching load without increasing the investment from the department, which is in line with the core of solutions adopted by higher education institutions in South Africa in response to the increasing number of students and limited funding[14].

7. Conclusion

It is foreseen that universities across South Africa will increasingly rely on blended courses and on the use of technologies in teaching (Ng'ambi *et al.* 2016), despite doubts remaining about the actual increase in the quality that such courses can offer[15].

At the same time, there is a great demand for curriculum transformation, in terms of decolonisation, africanisation, and growth in student agency. Curriculum transformation should not only be about content but also to the way in which that content is taught and assessed.

At present, the teaching of the Italian language and other foreign languages in universities is being questioned, and has been questioned in the last

[14] According to the 2017 CHE Report, the ways higher education institutes responded to the increase of students and, consequentially, the increase in the number of academic staff has been through increasing class sizes, relying on short-term staff and developing "blended learning strategies that are considered to be financially more efficient" (82). There is therefore a huge pressure from universities towards the use of the technologies in teaching, not only to be updated with the digital era in which we live but also because of the economic wisdom of this strategy.

[15] The 2017 CHE Report, in assessing blended courses, adopted a quite conservative position: "Online and hybrid educational delivery is no doubt here to stay and will develop fast internationally over the next decade. Although some individual universities are already active in this mode of educational delivery, it will require a major effort to incorporate it systemically into South African higher education. Against the background of the cost analyses given earlier, the maxim for considering specific developments should be: unless cost savings are certain to be substantial in a steady state, maintain the status quo until greater certainty emerges in this regard" (372).

two decades, because of its Eurocentric nature and approach. I suggest that a way to constructively face all the challenges is not by assuming a defensive position where the teaching of Italian needs to justify its presence, but by listening to the demands coming from the universities, the students and, broadly speaking, society as a whole, and observing the on-going changes during this long transitional period. Only in this way, will a new approach that looks at the future be able to become established and succeed.

I, therefore, suggest developing a project based on the blended course piloted at the Monash University in Australia in collaboration with the University of Urbino (Italy). I have attempted to show the potential – which still needs to be verified and assessed – of this project in terms of curriculum transformation within the South African context. I also strongly believe that a South African version of the project, that takes into consideration the peculiarity of this context, can "talk back" to the "centre" of the Italian Studies based in Europe and Western countries in general – especially United States / United Kingdom and Australia. While the transformation of the curriculum is strongly desired by South African society, at the same time, a different approach to teaching Italian and its cultural implications should perhaps be considered in other contexts as well. The South African case could well push other academics worldwide to reflect on their own practices.

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