Distance Teaching and Autonomy in Language Learning: a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This contribution presents a case study on the development of autonomy in learning Italian as a second language (L2) related to the use of new technologies.The aim is to enhance the way in which distance teachingand the proposals currently available on the network can help learners to become more autonomous in the study ofItalian.

The work consists of two parts.The first contains a theoretical introduction on the concept of autonomy in language learning and the relationship between new technologies and the development of autonomy.The second partconcerns the transformation from a face-to-face course to an online course, with the consequent initiativeto integratethe online lessons with the hours of self-study.

At the end of the course, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire, the results of which made it possible to verify the effectivenessof the introduction of the development of autonomy in language learning through the web.

Keywords: Autonomy in Language Learning, Adult Education, Second Language Distance Learning, Italian as a Second Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of autonomy in language learning is a widely debated topic which has beenexamined by numerous authors over the course of several decades (Gremmo& Riley 1995) and it is also still in constant evolution.Today, with the advent of new technologies and with the need for distance learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the theme of the development of autonomy is taking on a fundamental role in teaching methodology, especially at an academic level, since it presupposes a high degree of maturity, awareness and responsibility, qualities that university students should possess.This work presents a case study on the development of autonomy in learning Italian L2 for university students that took place during the period of lockdown.

The case study is based on an Italian L2 course at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan; the course, which began in October 2019, was for 8 foreign students whose aim was to reach the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by April 2020.During the month of February 2020, asis now known, the first Covid-19 positive patients were registered in Italy, and this led to a sudden closure of state schools and universities.

Therefore, all the teaching, from kindergarten to university, had to adapt to the new ways of transmitting knowledge through web platforms: teachers had to reschedule the courses by changing programmes and integrating the work of students with new effective solutions that could be managed and evaluated remotely.This is why the teacher of Italian L2 of the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy proposed to integrate the language lessons, which took place via the Skype web platform, with activities aimed at introducing the development of autonomy in learning Italian.

The questions that we will try to answer concern the effectiveness of the experiment and the ways in which it was possible to encourage the development of the autonomy of learners, with the aim of providing good practices and concrete proposals.

In the first theoretical part of the work, the main theories on autonomy in language learning will be discussed and commented on, from the famous definition of Holec, who in 1981 in his *Autonomy and foreign language learning* considered autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning"(Holec 1981: 3), to the most recent considerations on the different perceptions of the concept of autonomy according to different cultures (Esch 2009; Dang 2012).

Subsequently, still on a theoretical level, the concept of developing autonomy in language learning in online courses will be considered, and the working methodology will be analyzed.In the second empirical part of the study, the results of the questionnaires completed by L2 Italian learners will be explained and commented on. The activities to promote the development of autonomy proposed to international students during the lockdown period will then be examined.In this case study, the role of the teacher of Italian L2 is no longer based exclusively on traditional language teaching, but on language advising and providing incentives for metacognitive reflection.The final part of the article will include a reflection on the effectiveness of the work carried out, on the actual role that the Italian L2 teacher assumed during the lockdown period and on the results that the proposed activities produced and how they could be improved in order tosuggest good practices useful for the development of autonomy in learning Italian L2 in distance learning.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Autonomy in language learning

The theme of autonomy in language learning is the focal point of this contribution on the distance teaching of Italian L2. The precursor of the concept is, as already mentioned, Holec (1981) for whom autonomy refers to knowing how to take responsibility for one's own decisions regarding learning, from the definition of objectives to the choice of the most appropriate contents and strategies, and from the selection of materials to self-assessment.

Several studies were carried out over the following years, notably the one by Dickinson (1987) who describes autonomy as: "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions" (Dickinson1987: 11). For Dickinson, therefore, beingautonomous means that the learner must be able to make decisions responsibly and without necessarily having to involve the teacher.
Little defines autonomy as:

> A capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little 1991: 4).

For Little, autonomy is the capacity for critical reflection followed by action. He extends the confines of the concept as what is learned autonomously becomes effective when it is transferred to larger contexts.

In the 1990s, research on autonomy in language learning continued.Gremmo and Riley highlight the fact that the idea of autonomous learning became popular thanks to social contingencies and political factors that contributed to the spread of the educational idea of autonomy; among them, the authors note, there is no doubt that the following aspects stand out:the wave and the interest in minority rights movements; the reaction against behaviourism; the development in technology; interest in foreign languages; and the increase in the number of school and university students(Gremmo& Riley 1995). Autonomy in language learning is therefore a consequence of the cultural and social revolution that began between the 1960s and 70s.

Among the most recent definitions, those of Benson (2001) and Macaro (2008) are particularly relevant.The former underlines the importance of autonomy regarding the role that the individual has in society and argues that autonomy is a precondition for any type of effective learning, and when language learners succeed in developing autonomy they "not only become better language learners but they also develop into more responsible and critical members of the communities in which they live" (Benson 2001: 1). For Macaro, on the other hand, being autonomous means being aware of the learning strategies to be used not only in a single context, but in the long term (Macaro 2008).

As Dang (2012) points out, although all these definitions and ideas of autonomy in learning differ to some extent, they always maintain a central core, namely the ability to understand and manage learning processes in a responsible and effective way.

For Dang, the idea of autonomy isrooted in cultures, and the variety of perspectives reflects the numerous social contexts and points of view:

> These variations in the definition of learner autonomy reflect a developmental trend that one should expect. As the notion of every learning construct is embedded in and developed from a situational occasion, its interpretation should be modified by users according to changes in political belief, language learning theory, technology, employment demand, and learning objectives. This becomes even more important for learner autonomy, and it has been argued in contemporary literature that this capacity needs to be localized and addressed in particular social contexts(Dang 2012: 53).

Therefore, having different perceptions about autonomy in learning could affect the attempts and practices to promote it (Esch 2009).

2.2 The intertwined relationship among new technologies, autonomy in learning and the language teacher

The use of the Internet and the development of autonomy in language learning are now two themes that go hand in hand. In fact, for several decades, Gremmo and Riley (1995: 153) argued that "developments in technology have made an undeniable contribution to the spread of autonomy and self-success"; while, more recently, Reinders and White (2011) noted that technology has the potential to not only provide access to resources for learning in a superficial sense, but also to offer increased opportunities for autonomous learning.

More and more language teachers interested in the development of the autonomy of their students have therefore had to open up to the possibilities offered by new media. Therefore, the relationship between language teaching, new technologies and the development of autonomyneeds to be carefully examined.

Büchel(2010) highlights the significant increase in the online educational offer in recent years. He argues that the spread of the Internet has changed the way of acquiring knowledge and has given space to the increasing opportunity to be autonomous:

> The Internet has generalized the accessibility of certain sources of knowledge in an encyclopedic way and has become a means of information, of communication and transmission of instruments[1] (Büchel 2010: 50).

Today, language teaching can take place in computer-assisted or computer-mediated mode, and there are also plenty of opportunities for the authentic use of language for students in a synchronous and asynchronous way (Gardner & Miller 2014). As the Internet has become ubiquitous and new tools and options are given to students, there has been a radical rethinking of the role of teachers and the perspective on pedagogical practices in general (Reinders & White 2016).

The role of the teacher can no longer be limited to traditional teaching; rather, it must be to guide the student around the vortex of materials that the network offers:

> This can move into the area of supporting language learning through the development of e-environments; […] or it can involve (on-line) support of individual or collaborative e-learning through a gradual exposure of the student to different ways of exploiting its opportunities (Lamb 2008: 278).

Mozzon-McPherson (2003: 179) stresses the need for a "repositioning of the teacher and the acquisition of new skills, with consequences for professional development programmes."

Language teachershaveto direct the students towards a metacognitive and metalinguistic reflection, thus contributing to the development of the ability to manage their own learning. In the digital age, the teacher

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[1] The author'stranslation from Italian "Internet ha generalizzato l'accessibilità di certe fonti del sapere in maniera enciclopedica ed è diventato un mezzo di informazione, di comunicazione e trasmissione di strumenti" (Büchel 2010: 50).

must be able to find the right compromise between study programmes and extra activities to be carried out online to allow and promote the development of autonomy. According to Gardner and Miller (1999: 38), teachers should reflect on their experience as learners and teachers, and on the approaches, strategies and methods that can make their teaching more effective.

The goal of the language teacher who is attentive to the development of the student's autonomy is to ensure that the learners become autonomous in the acquisition of their ability of "learning to learn"[II], and to make them active participants in their cognitive process.

The range of opportunities offered by the web is practically unlimited, and it is up to those who have the task of educating to autonomy to select and direct learners towards the resources deemed most effective.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this period of time, it is of fundamental importance for students to know how to manage their own learning, by identifying their needs and reflecting on the strategies and the choice of the most suitable materials to achieve their goal.

During the lockdown period it was possible to put into practice some of the theoretical principles listed above to encourage the development of autonomy in learning Italian L2 through distance learning.

The teachinginvestigation took place within an adult course that began in October 2019 and ended in April 2020. The course was addressed to eight foreign students whose aim was to acquire the PLIDA[III] level B1 certification. The eight adult students, six of whom were of African origin and the remaining two were Asian, all graduates from different universities in their respective countries of origin (only one with a degree in linguistic disciplines), were in Italy to complete their studies at the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy in Milan.

The Italian language classes that took place during the first five months of the course were face-to-face lessons, while from 24 February to 8 April 2020, due to the closure of schools and universities, online classes were held through the Skype platform. In addition, activities and learning materials were proposed to introduce and encourage the development of autonomy in Italian L2 learning.

The aim of the activities offered was to put the students on a path towards autonomy and metacognitive and metalinguistic reflection in order to make them more aware of their learning and thus be more productive.

We posed the following question regarding the effectiveness of the method: what tools and new technologies can help language learners become more autonomous?We tried to find an answer to the question through the administration of a questionnaire, through Google Forms, which took place at the end of the language course. The students were asked to answer seven questions anonymously.The first two questions involved a self-assessment of the student's level of knowledge of Italian at the beginning and at the end of the distance course. The third question concerned the teaching materials most used during the lockdown period, while the fourth concerned the usefulness of the proposed activities.Question number five investigated the usefulness of self-assessment of homework.The sixth question, a closed yes/no answer, referred to the future

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[II] European Commission, in 2006, defined *Learning to learn* competence as the ability to pursue, persist and organize one's own learning, also through the management of time and information, both individually and in groups.

This competence includes awareness of one's learning process and needs, identifying available opportunities and the ability to overcome obstacles to learning successfully. It means acquiring, processing and assimilating new knowledge and skills. Learning to learn requires learners to build on previous experience in order to use and apply knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts: at home, at work, in education and training. Motivation and confidence are crucial for acquiring this competence.

Source: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32006H0962 (Last accessed: 21/08/2020).

[III] PLIDA is the acronym for "Progetto Lingua Italiana Dante Alighieri" (Dante Alighieri Italian Language Project). This language exam, divided into the six levels of the CEFR, is part of the certifications for the Italian language recognized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (https://www.linguaitaliana.esteri.it/chisiamo/home.do- Last accessed: 21/08/2020). The exam includes four tests: oral comprehension, written comprehension, oral production and written production (http://plida.it/ - Last accessed: 21/08/2020).

prospect of continuing with the autonomous learning of Italian.Finally, question seven required an opinion from the learners regarding the experience of self-study.

Before moving on to the analysis of the collected data, it should be emphasized that during the distance learning course, the Italian L2 teacher was very involved in the process of the development of autonomy, having also played the role of "language advisor" (Gardner & Miller 1999: 180), making the learners aware of their objectives, and their strengths and weaknesses, not only during the lessons on Skype, but also with the exchange of numerous emails.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we will analyze the data collected through the questionnaires completed by the students at the end of the Italian course, with the aim of investigating how and through which tools it is possible to start a path of development of autonomy through distance learning.

In order to make the learners more aware, first of all, they were given an explanation of the objectives of the course and the methods by which the certification exam would be delivered. Furthermore, as mentioned above, there was guaranteed constant support by email from the language teacher for the resolution of doubts relating to the language, the materials proposed and the learning strategies.The exchange of emails constituted a sort of remote linguistic advising: in case there were any doubts about the assigned exercises, corrections of the themes or unclear topics, the students could ask the teacher.

In this online language course, the role of the teacher was therefore to integrate the skills of developing autonomy with the transmission of language skills, providing adequate resources and ensuring, when required, the necessary support.

With reference to the first two questions (self-assessment of the student's level of knowledge of Italian at the beginning and at the end of the online course, on a scale from 1 to 5 in which 1 is the minimum and 5 is the maximum), it emerged that the average of the self-assessment before the start of online lessons was 2.24, while after the course the average reached a level of 3.38, with an increase of 51%.

In this specific context, it is important to underline not only the raising of the level of knowledge of the language (a more than satisfactory goal achieved by the class, despite the difficulties presented by distance learning), but also the impulse for reflection and self-assessment to stimulate the critical spirit and awareness of the level of preparation achieved, encouraging the development of autonomy (Reinders & White 2011).

Self-assessment was useful for students, sinceit brought out their shortcomings and highlighted the need to enhance aspects of the language which they treated in a superficial way.

From question number three, useful to understand the effective use of the resources suggested by the teacher during the distance learning period, it emerged that the most used materials were grammar cards prepared by the teacher (with a preference of 75%). This was followed by: videos on YouTube, chosen by the teacher, based on the topics covered during class hours on Skype (50% of preferences); dictionaries, verb conjugators, encyclopedia, and websites with Italian L2 exercises (37.5% of preferences); the RAI website, that is the *Radiotelevisioneitaliana* (Italian radio and television) website with a section dedicated to Italian L2 (25% of preferences); and online newspapers and magazines (0% of preferences). The preference for grammar cards is probably attributable to the usefulness of the materials with regard to the learning objective set by the students (passing the certification exam) and their simplicity and usability.

Question four concerned the usefulness (on a scale of 1 to 5) of some activities offered to the students during the entire Italian course. They established the following activities as the most useful: face-to-face lessons, then homework, their self-corrections and the exam simulations.The activities considered less valid were, on the other hand, the Italian classes on Skype and watching videos on YouTube.

The data regarding self-correction of tasks is important. As Gardner and Miller (1999) point out, encouraging students to reflect on their errors is one of the keys to making them more autonomous. A greater awareness and an increase in the sense of responsibility emerges from the recognition of errors; moreover, students learn to manage their own learning more effectively.

Question five confirms the data we have just discussed: six out of eight students thought it was a good idea to correct their homework on their own. The idea of self-correction arose also from the teacher's need: the lack of direct contact with the learners led the teacher to the decision to let the learners correct the

exercises themselves. Obviously, all the solutions were provided,and the teacher was more than willing to help regarding any kind of clarification or in-depth analysis.

During the months of distance learning, the teacher assigned the tasks related to the lesson of the day via Skype and, after a couple of days, she sent corrections. These were used by the students to verify autonomously the work they had done and to encourage their reflection in order to correct or improve unproductive aspects and attitudes.

Regarding the sixth question, on the prospect to continue to study Italian autonomously, six out of eight students answered in the affirmative. This is positive if we consider the fact that none of them had ever had any experience with autonomous language learning, and therefore the idea of introducing the development of autonomy was welcomed by most of the students.

Regarding the last question, the answers were very varied. The students indicated the absence of a face-to-face relationship with the teacher as the main negative aspect of self-study: if on the one hand it is true that self-study presupposes greater responsibility on the part of the learner, on the other hand, the figure of the teacher is crucial. However, in this case study, the teacher was present, as can be seen, in numerous ways: exchanging emails;spending hours of distance teaching via Skype; sending materials; and supporting the students in the correction of exercises and exam tests.Reporting a lack of relationship with the teacher is therefore not to be considered as a negative aspect of autonomous learning; rather, it is a negative aspect of distance learning.

Among the other negative aspects that the students identified, it is necessary to point out the difficulty in self-correcting certain grammatical errors and in exploring grammar rules which, according to the students, cannot be carried out without discussion with the teacher.

From the students' answers we report:

"The downside is that when we study the grammar of a foreign language it is better to work in the classroom with the teacher, especially for those who start a new language."[IV]

Furthermore, in self-study, in a distance learning context it is difficult to exercise the ability of oral production:

"A negative aspect is that (for me) you have to pronounce the words well. So, self-study is good for reading, but to learn to speak you need to practice and listen to others."

Consequently, for the students interviewed, all aspects relating to pronunciation, intonation and, in general, the correction of oral errors are excluded from autonomous learning.

Among the positive aspects related to the development of autonomy in learning Italian L2 in the distance language course, a greater awareness of students' own weaknesses and strengths emerged, and this led to a reflection on the aspects of the language to be studied in depth:

"I know my language level; I am aware of what I don't know well (grammar). So, if I study alone, it is easy for me to decide what I should study."

One student, after having studied independently, felt a greater confidence in his ability to understand written texts:

"The good thing is that [self-study] can help me read and understand more."

Finally, the opportunity to use materials suggested by the teacher was positively reported:

"The suggested materials are positive; I used the grammar cards a lot."
"A positive aspect of the experience of studying Italian autonomously is that I can use some materials such as dictionaries and websites for mobile phones."

This experience was therefore useful to encourage students to use authentic materials, considered advantageous for the development of autonomy in language learning (Benson2011), such as videos, online newspapers, dictionaries, films, music and Internet sites containing, in addition to online language courses, materials for the study of foreign languages.

[IV] All the answers were given in Italian. The translation was done by the author of the article.

5. CONCLUSION

This contribution investigated the possibility of inserting the component of the development of autonomy in language learning into distance teaching.

The challenge was to integrate the lessons via Skype—organized due to the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic—with the activities to be carried out by the students autonomously to help them acquire not only language skills, but also a greater awareness with regard totheir goals, learning paths, and strengths and weaknesses.

From the beginning, it emerged that in the distance learning Italian L2 course examined, the component of the development of autonomy proved to be a necessity for the teacher and for the learners themselves.For the teacher, this was because the lessons via Skype do not have the same impact and the same value and usefulness of the face-to-face language lessons.

Language teaching, as is well known, is a continuous exchange and enrichment between teacher and students and transforming a face-to-face course into a distance course proved to be a rather difficult challenge. Consequently, the idea of stimulating students to metacognitive and metalinguistic reflection arose by proposing activities aimed at developing their autonomy in the study of Italian.

The students, on the other hand, felt the need to examine aspects of the language that they would not have been able to explore with distance learning alone; they had the opportunity to reflect on their own learning strategies, also discovering materials and opportunities offered by the web. Each student also had the opportunity to start a direct exchange with the teacher which led to a greater awareness of their own preparation.

This leads us to two final considerations on the student and on the language teacher.The first is that if, on the one hand, general progress in the level of knowledge of Italian by the students was noted, on the other hand, not all of them expressed a willingness to continue studying the language autonomously.

There is no doubt that the numerous inputs offered by the teacher had a positive effect on the students, but we still need to work on developing autonomy as a goal to complement language learning.

The second consideration concerns the language teacher. In the case study examined, the teacher assumed the role of advisor, whose task was to guide learners in the study of the language, helping them in their reflection, the definition of objectives and the choice of materials to favour the development of autonomy. The advisor, unlike the teacher, should have a relationship of trust and "discreet guidance" (Cordisco 2002) with all students, an aspect that was not possible to deal with during the two months of online teaching.

In addition to the normal online language lessons, it was therefore necessary for the teacher to make a great commitment that involved the choice of the most appropriate digital resources to help the students achieve theirgoals andprovide support in the self-correction of exercises and examination simulations; the teacher also providedconstant support via email, without assuming the actual role of language advisor.The experience was favourable, although it required an effort from both the teacher and the students.

For the future, it would be desirable—if the teacher deems it necessary—to integrate activities aimed at developing autonomy into online language courses, and to include modules for introducing autonomy in learning in order to start getting students used to reflection and help them become aware of their goals, strengths and weaknesses. Raising students' awareness on the subject could be the first step towards conscious and more effective learning.

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