MANCHESTER 1824

Dr. Elena Polisca

Project: Hear IT!

School: Languages, Linguistics and Cultures
Course: ITAL10200 Italian language and ITAL30200 Italian language
No. of students: 50 + 40   **Level:** UG
Themes: Audio Feedback, Personalised Learning

TESS 2010
Teaching Enhancement and Student Success

TESS is a University-wide initiative, funded by the Faculty of Humanities. Working with the Faculty elearning Teams, academics set up projects aimed at developing course content specific to their needs, through elearning tools and skills development.

What was the problem?

ITAL10200 Italian language is the core language course for complete beginners in Italian Studies. Throughout the course, students learn the fundamental rules of the Italian language and start writing compositions in the target language as early as week 4 in semester one. Students write 8 compositions per semester, and these increase in length each week. By the same token, ITAL30200 Italian language is the core language course for final year students in Italian studies, who, after a year spent studying abroad, return to the UK to complete their final year of study at the university. This language course helps students get re-acquainted with writing in the target language: students write several compositions per semester practising various registers and prose types. Both ITAL10200 and ITAL30200 are taught by the same tutor and have very intensive marking loads. For both courses, the tutor has to mark the piece of work and give students individual feedback by filling in SLLC's feedback sheets, print them and staple them to the piece of work. Whilst this process is very time-consuming, it also raises the issue of whether students actively engage with the amount of formative and summative feedback given through both semesters.

How successful was the solution?

Data collected from the evaluation questionnaires need to be analysed in more detail in order to understand the different results obtained by the two test groups. A diachronic study of audio feedback will continue for the next three years until the test beginner group reaches final year level. A similar evaluation questionnaire will then be repeated to compare results with this year's finalists, for whom audio feedback was a novelty and not firmly embedded in the feedback process, with results from the original test group, who will have been exposed to audio feedback throughout their period of study. The provisional results of the pilot project were presented at the national *Innovative teaching and learning at university: enhancing the learning experience of Modern Languages students* conference at Newcastle University in May 2011. Conference proceedings may be published later this year. Audio feedback is highly transferable and can be used by colleagues in many other disciplines, as proceedings from an audio-based conference recently have shown (http://research.shu.ac.uk/lti/awordinyourear2009/docs/AWIYE-proceedings-final.pdf).

 Audio feedback is an easy and fun way to engage students with the feedback process. It helps students understand what feedback means, and fosters a process of feedback 'ownership'. As a result, the student's learning experience will be more personalised, in line with goal 2.1 of the 2015 agenda ('to ensure that all students have a high quality personalised learning experience and frequent personal contact with academic staff').

Any colleagues interested in discussing audio feedback in all its shapes and forms, can contact elena.polisca@manchester.ac.uk

How was the problem solved?

With the TESS project, the tutor created *Hear IT!*, and experimented with audio feedback with the aim of a) reducing the time spent in filling in feedback forms, and b) offering an alternative way to engage students with the feedback process in a more proactive manner. For both year groups, one test group and two control groups were created. The control group would receive corrections and feedback through the standard feedback sheet forms. The test groups, on the other hand, would receive MP3 file recordings with comments from the tutor. The same amount of feedback would be given for all students: the test groups would simply experience a different format. In theory, audio feedback would reduce the time the tutor spent writing, and would encourage students to listen to comments before obtaining the mark for the piece of work. However, just listening to comments would not probably help to engage students actively with the feedback process. Thus, students were asked to fill in their own feedback sheet according to the content of their individual MP3s. Beginners students were required to put their completed feedback sheet inside the formally assessed Independent Language Learning Portfolio (ILLP); final-year students were asked to fill in the sheet as part of the process of formative assessment for the course. Creating MP3 files was very easy and user-friendly. Messages were recorded on a hand-held voice recorder and all files were then saved within the University's media server. From here, URL links were created in Blackboard 8 (for the beginner group) and Blackboard 9 (for the finalist group) using the 'Selective release' facility, so that individual students would only be able to see the link to their personalised recording.

What did the students think?

After one semester of piloting, the project has had some positive, interesting results. Firstly, audio recording has achieved its aim of cutting down time spent by the tutor filling in forms. Recording MP3 messages is faster than writing. Students can benefit from listening to the tutor's voice intonation for praise or suggested areas for improvement, and initial results have shown that students perceive audio feedback as a more 'personal' experience compared to conventional written feedback. At the end of semester two, evaluation questionnaires were circulated to both test and control groups. Although virtually all groups rated the feedback received as 'excellent' or 'good' regardless of the format used, the beginner control group showed an increased appreciation of audio feedback, which was marked as 'excellent' by 92% of students (a figure of 59% for 'excellent' was obtained with conventional feedback). When asked whether students felt engaged with the feedback process, both test groups scored 100%, whereas control groups scored 85%. An interesting result for the test groups was obtained when the completion of the feedback sheet was considered. 85% of the beginner test group enjoyed this part of the feedback experience and 62% found it 'useful'. On the other hand, the finalist test group did not enjoy filling in the feedback sheet (85%), and described the process as 'dull' and 'time-consuming'. When asked which type of feedback the test students preferred, the beginners rated audio feedback higher than the conventional written feedback that they had experienced in semester 1 (77% audio, 8% written, 15% both). Interestingly, the finalists' result was different, and both formats received equal appreciation (38% audio, 39% written, 15% both).

The Humanities eLearning Team are on-hand to provide advice, guidance and demonstrations to academic staff on the opportunities for using technology in teaching, learning and assessment.