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Captioning and Revoicing Activities to Learn Italian as a Foreign Language: a Didactic Proposal for Children

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## **Captioning and Revoicing Activities to Learn Italian as a Foreign Language: a Didactic Proposal for Children**

### **1 Authentic video material and the theoretical framework**

According to Bacon and Finnemann (1990), authentic materials are those texts, which are made by native speakers for non-pedagogical purposes. All of this material is available everyday on TV on national channels such as movies, commercials, newscasts and so on. Although scripted and generally delivered by professional actors, these target language samples resemble what learners are most likely to encounter in real life. Not only can students associate the spoken work to a visual element, but also, they are afforded a great opportunity to appreciate how native speakers interact in daily conversations providing them with linguistic aspects (regional accents, register and grammatical and syntactical structures), as well as paralinguistic cues (body language, gestures) allowing them to see language in use in a cultural context (Diaz Cintas & Marco Fernandez Cruz, 2008).

The language learning and cognitive theories that will be mentioned in the next paragraphs, underline the importance of using authentic video material in the classroom and imply that learners of a foreign language (FL) can derive great benefits from the exposure to and the use of authentic video (visual element, images) together with a written support (subtitles or script).

The Input hypothesis explains how learners tend to improve when they receive L2 input that is one step beyond their current stage of linguistic competence, in other words, comprehensible input. This can be defined as the target language that the learner would not be able to produce but can still understand; it goes beyond the choice of words and involves presentation of context, explanation, rewording of unclear parts, use of visual cues and negotiation of meaning (Krashen, 1982). The meaning successfully conveyed constitutes the learning experience. Díaz Cintas (2008) sees a direct relationship between the implications of this hypothesis and the use of video materials for second language instruction, in that video material can provide students with masses of comprehensible input (notably images and noises) at the same time as they provide lots of extralinguistic cues to help them understand the linguistic meaning of the message (intonation, rhythm, gestures, movements and the like). Additionally, as students are familiar with authentic video material outside of the classroom, they generally feel comfortable in using this type of resource; tasks based on authentic videos can be highly motivating for learners and increase confidence in producing the output (Weyers, 1999).

In this respect, it is important to mention another hypothesis formulated by Stephen Krashen that concerns what he calls "affective filter". The filter refers to the levels of anxiety, stress, motivation and self-confidence that a particular task or learning situation can produce in a student. A task or a situation that generates stress in students (higher affective filter) is more likely to have a negative impact on their performance, which will be of little learning value to them. Conversely, students who are highly motivated by a certain task that produces a lower level of anxiety (lower affective filter), normally succeed in their performance and therefore are more likely to acquire the language. If conveniently exploited by teachers, video materials have the power to lower the affective filter and thus make the class more enjoyable to students and of greater learning value. However, not all the contextualised, unstructured native speech provided by authentic video material is always picked up by students. In order to overcome the limitations of video alone, the input can be made accessible to learners using captions and subtitles, which can increase the pedagogical effectiveness of the visual medium. According to the Dual-Coding Theory formulated by Paivio (1969, 1971), the association of the written word to a visual element improves the retention and the memorization of the language. As Paivio and Lambert claim (1981: 532):

Dual Coding Theory is based on the assumption that memory and cognition are served by two separate symbolic systems, one specialized for dealing with verbal information and the other with nonverbal information. The two systems are presumed to be interconnected but capable of functioning independently. Interconnectedness means that representations in one system can activate those in the other, so that, for example, pictures can be named, and images can occur to words. Independence implies, among other things, that nonverbal (imaginal) and verbal memory codes, aroused directly by pictures and words or indirectly by imagery and verbal encoding tasks, should have additive effects on recall.

Paivio's Dual Coding Theory suggests that video materials should help the viewers in recalling words that appear on the screen and further research supports the idea that visual stimuli foster students' comprehension of the message of the video. This theory suggests that verbal and non-verbal processing have equal weight and that presenting information in both visual and verbal form enhances recall and recognition of target language elements.

## 2. Task-based language learning

The approach chosen for the present course draws upon the task-based language learning (hereinafter, TBLT). TBLT spurs learners to make use of their deduction skills as well as carrying out independent language analysis. For this reason, TBLT can be regarded as a learner-centred approach where the teacher works through learners' needs and interests and selects materials, activities and tasks accordingly. Motivation becomes the fundamental driving force since it places the emphasis on communicative fluency rather than the achievement of unflawed utterances. Furthermore, exposure to the target language should take place in naturally occurring contexts; therefore, any material adopted should not be purposefully created for the language learner but should be selected (and adapted when necessary) from authentic sources made for native speakers of a given target language. The initial drive for the development of this approach comes from Prabhu (1987) who believed that students learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. Central to this approach is the definition of task and Prabhu proposes the following one:

An activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a 'task'. (Prabhu 1987, p. 24)

The nature of task is often depicted in general traits and a review of relevant literature shows that various definitions of this concept have been attempted by scholars over the years (Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 1989; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 2001). One of the first definitions of tasks was attempted by Long (1985: 89) who described it by looking at what people usually do in real life; in his view a task is '[...] a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child or filling out a form [...]. Another definition proposed by Skehan (1998) highlights four characteristics that a task must have; according to him, a task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is a problem to solve; the performance outcome is evaluated; there is a real-world relationship (Skehan, 2001: 12-13). By presenting the task as a problem-solving activity Skehan highlights the real-life like nature of it where its completion is the ultimate goal and main concern; in this view

the learner is thus presented as a 'language user'. Expanding on a first definition given in 1989, Nunan distinguishes between real word (or target) task and pedagogical tasks, the latter defined as follows:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused in mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end (Nunan 2004, p. 4).

It follows that a key feature of this approach is a focus on meaning over focus on form and learners are actively involved in communication in order to carry out a task and achieve a predetermined goal. A task-based approach is integrated into the course described in this paper, insofar as the tasks consist in the production of subtitling and revoicing projects. The combination of active audiovisual translation (AVT) tasks calls for the simultaneous use of a variety of skills that can be honed through engaging activities that trigger students to work resourcefully.

### **3. Subtitles in Language Learning**

According to the previously mentioned Dual-Coding Theory, the association of the written word to a visual element improves the retention and the memorization of the foreign language. Research has shown that the support of subtitles helps to develop oral comprehension and therefore, the overall understanding of the message and its interpretation. It is important to distinguish between three different types of subtitles:

- Standard or interlingual: the audio is in the L2 and the subtitles are in the L1.
- Bimodal or intralingual: both audio and subtitles are delivered in the L2.
- Reversed: the audio is in L1 and the subtitles are in L2.

When using subtitles as a teaching tool, instructors must take into account students' levels of language. The information delivered by a certain type of subtitled material may not be accessible to all students, as they might not have the linguistic abilities necessary to

acquire the input provided (Vanderplank, 1988; Guillory, 1998). Vanderplank's study (1988) suggests that, for instance, intralingual subtitles benefit learners with higher level of language proficiency rather than beginners and lower intermediate students. Guillory (1998) tested 202 American students of French as a FL and found that captions do not support learners' comprehension when the video features a fast speech rate and when they are not familiar with most of the vocabulary used in it. Besides supporting Krashen's hypothesis of comprehensible input, these findings suggest that instructors need to carefully match learners' competency level and linguistic difficulty of the audiovisual material. Another factor to take into account is the length of the exposure. Exposure to subtitled material has proven to be more effective when long-term (d'Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1997). Perego and Ghia (2007-2012) noted that when the exposure time is prolonged, the acquisition of L2 syntax increases. Therefore, for the purpose of this course, standard interlingual subtitles were chosen, taking into account the absolute beginner level of the pupil.

### **Subtitling and revoicing as active tasks**

Besides being exposed to subtitled video material, pupils in this course also engaged with the creation of subtitles and with revoicing practices. Research shows that subtitles can be a powerful didactic resource as they promote task-based learning, and it fosters both independent and collaborative learning. Subtitling as an active task is a fairly recent area of investigation, however, relevant research has been carried out in the last decade to prove the efficacy of this AVT mode in the FL classroom. The first monograph including a section on the didactic applications of subtitling, was edited in 2011 and it features much of the up-to-date studies in the field. In 2009, McLoughlin conducted a study on different groups of students of Italian as a FL (A1, B1, C1 and C2 level); the students were divided into two groups one of which was given a script as well as instructions on how to subtitle. Results of this study show that students at A1/B1 level attempted to find equivalences between the two verbal systems; C1/C2-level students focused more on improving their translation skills and their pragmatic and socio-cultural competencies. In 2011, Sokoli, Zabalbeascoa, Fountana, presented and evaluated the LeViS (Learning Via Subtitling) project, whose general aim was to develop educational material and tools for active FL learning based on video subtitling. The evaluation showed that the software LvS in use

for this project was positively perceived by the users as a reliable pedagogical tool. In the same year, Talaván (2011), investigated the benefits of the creation of interlingual subtitles and she demonstrated that this practice can be a valuable resource to the enhancement of listening comprehension skills within communicative, task-based context (Talaván 2015). Finally, Lertola's experiment proved the effectiveness of subtitling as a resource for incidental vocabulary acquisition (Lertola, 2012).

On the other hand, revoicing tasks can be exploited in multiple ways in order to enhance all four communicative skills. As far as oral comprehension is concerned, students can improve their skills by listening to the original audio tracks or their classmates' recordings; reading comprehension can be enhanced inasmuch as students are provided with the original script of the video clip they work with. Students can write a translation of the script, which is used for the recording; in so doing, they would have to take into account the need for lip-synchronization, which impels them to pay close attention to writing features such as style, cohesion, register and so on. In order to produce a dubbed version of a video clip, students will work on pronunciation and fluency, trying to imitate the natural, flowing communication of native speakers in the original version. Danan conducted an extensive study (2007-2010), where US soldiers dubbed American films and TV series into Dari, Farsi and Pashto. The findings of this study show that the translation of the original script helped the learners to acquire new vocabulary; the rehearsal of the translated text for the dubbed video fostered oral communication and in particular, learners put effort into delivering the speech as fluently as possible and with an accurate pronunciation. Generally dubbing was perceived as an engaging and entertaining activity. The improvement of pronunciation through dubbing projects is further investigated by Chiu (2012). His study concluded that synchronous dubbing presentation was effective, and learners also felt highly motivated. The number of studies on the pedagogical potential of this AVT practice is quite limited compared to aforementioned studies on subtitling tasks as didactic tools, however, research suggests that dubbing projects are a rich source of activities in all language skills areas and such activities can foster advanced grammar and vocabulary acquisition. They also foster both collaborative (students usually work in groups to produce a dubbed video clip) and independent learning.

### **Combining subtitling and revoicing**

The last few years have witnessed the application of combined and revoicing tasks in FL education, although the number of studies is still very limited (Beltramello, 2019; Lertola, 2019). One of these studies is particularly interesting because it involves children and presents AVT activities similar to those used in our course. The combination of subtitling and revoicing has been explored by Lopez Cirugeda & Sanchez Ruiz (2013). Their study combines these two practices within a didactic experience carried out with 54 second year undergraduate students (B1-B2 levels) in primary education in the Faculty of Education in Albacete of the Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. The primary task-based activity was intralingual subtitling; however, participants also performed intralingual revoicing tasks. While their project created an opportunity for learners to develop their own teaching material suitable for target children, it also required them to write a script for their video, making appropriate use of their English oral and written production. Furthermore, in the context of this study, students learned how to subtitle a video and integrate subtitled videos, audio recordings, and slide presentations in their language teaching practice. The project unfolds in four stages: (1) initial (group and topic assignment); (2) research (legal education framework study, materials and bibliography research, and subtitling workshops); (3) production (script planning and writing, and video design with audio recording and subtitling); (4) and post-production (video editing, final language review, and final activity presentation). In stage 2 students used AVI Subtitler, DivXLand Media Subtitler and Subtitle to create and adapt subtitles to a target audience of 8-year-old children. In the following stage they added English intralingual subtitles to their recordings. During the final classroom presentation, the teachers-to-be presented the activities they had developed for primary school children. These activities required children to perform activities with subtitles as a support, such as practising listening and reading skills by filling the gaps with vocabulary available on the blackboard.

#### **4. Animated cartoons for language learning purposes**

The arguments in favour of the use of cartoons as didactic input must first be sought from their own specific characteristics. Cartoons can be entertaining, compelling and carefree,

and they witness characters and life situations in which the meaningful foreign culture aspects are involved and the language used reinforces stereotypes found in nowadays society. They can have a powerful informational and affective impact, while the content is mostly full of comic speeches. Watching cartoons makes people laugh, which undoubtedly stimulates the soul and boosts the immune system, thereby contributing to the psychophysical wellbeing of the spectators. Cartoon characters are lively as children can observe not only gestures and facial expressions but also can pay attention to the prosody of speech to enhance the verbal aspects of conversations. Moreover, this leisure activity is a fruitful method to fight boredom and break the daily routine. The itself audiovisual nature which involves a visual colourful catchy representation as well as the power of pleasant sounds, theme song and music (Schoppe, 2001) make cartoons particularly appealing and keep learners engaged in terms of productivity, creativity and positive attitude. For all these reasons, the use of cartoons in the classroom resulted in the development of a relaxing atmosphere and fosters favourable conditions for strengthening the relationship between teacher and students (Bahrani & Soltani, 2011). Furthermore, an enthralling storyline seems to capture learners' attention and motivate them to absorb new language (Barhani & Sim, 2012).

In relation to the use of authentic materials for educational purposes, Ziegler (1998) suggests that cartoons could be employed to analyse everyday social behaviour and as stimuli to reflect on attitudes; while Clark (2000) highlights their potential to model thinking processes and to guide learners in the enhancement of discussion skills. Recently, an anecdotal study has explored how to employ cartoons from a constructivist point of view, according to which teachers need to stimulate students to generate new thoughts and actively debate on the topic (Abuzhara et al., 2016). The authenticity of cartoons often allows learners to relate the language acquired through them settings to the real world. A study has indeed demonstrated how children succeed in transferring a number of new words and expressions acquired from the context of cartoons in their real-life situations (Sarko, 2008).

Many studies on second language acquisition indicate that mere exposure to cartoons has an impact on language learning. First, watching cartoons enables students to improve listening comprehension skills (Danan, 2004). Second, cartoons feed children imagination and fantasy and encourage them to produce ideas and employ new

vocabulary into meaningful written tasks (Baralt et al., 2011). Third, findings from an interesting study on the development of reading comprehension skills reveal that students exposed to cartoon movies for six weeks were able to interpret and analyse the text more efficiently (Ouda, 2012). Lastly, cartoons contribute to the enhancement of speaking skills to the extent to which using proper linguistic content can prompt learners to interact with each other, while acquiring high confidence (Doring, 2002)

The literature reviewed so far has emphasised the pedagogical value of animated cartoons in the acquisition of a L2. However, it is necessary to make some considerations when using them in the foreign language classroom. Being authentic materials, animated cartoons were not initially produced for the teaching of foreign languages. Even though cartoons are particularly tailored for beginners (Bahrani & Sim, 2012), one of the limits of their didactic usage is closely linked with the different language proficiency levels. As far as listening comprehension skills are concerned, low level learners may have a hard time watching cartoons (Martinez, 2002) for instance with separating individual sounds or chunk sounds into words, especially if the rate of speech is very fast (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990). As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, the linguistic content should be consistent with learners' current level of competence in order to provide students with a comprehensible input. The following section introduces the material used in the course, that was carefully selected by following criteria derived from the studies mentioned above.

## **5. The didactic proposal**

### **Aims, setting and participants**

The aim of the present project is twofold: 1) to investigate how AVT activities based on the use of cartoons can be integrated in the FL curricula to make the learning process more engaging and motivating for children; 2) to collect preliminary evidence on childrens' response to this type of activities used in the context of a language course.

"Impariamo coi cartoni! Learning Italian by captioning and re-voicing cartoons" was designed as an introductory Italian language course focused on the needs and interests of children. This 6-week course (for a total of 15 hours) was carried out as a part of the Youth Academy at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), which works with

high-ability primary school children in the local community and hinterland of Galway County to support their learning and academic development. The Youth Academy Project aims to inspire entry into the higher education system by introducing children and their families to university life and by creating positive perceptions of the university and its academic programmes. So far, the course has run for five semesters within three academic years (from 2017 to 2020) involving a total of 45 children, aged between 9-12 years. Overall, the outcomes concerned the development of linguistic and intercultural skills in line with the A1 beginner level as described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL, 2000). In addition to that, using technology as independent learners, children practiced transferable skills such as IT, media literacy and problem-solving skills within the same language course.

### **Didactic materials and the online Clipflair platform**

The cutting-edge course presented in this paper exploits the didactic potential of both animated cartoons and audio-visual translation modes. The following criteria were taken into account for the selection of animated cartoons: 1) authenticity: the fact that cartoons were ideated by Italian cartoonists facilitate to the retrieval of contents which belong to the Italian culture; 2) children interests and needs, with the aim to boost their motivation, stimulate creativity and enrich the learning experience; 3) language content, which must be simple and somewhat repetitive in order to make the content easy to understand and consistent with the guidelines of the CEFRL; in addition to that, self-contained video-clip were chosen as suitable for language reusing and for strengthening linguistic structures learned in the first part of the lesson. 4) accessibility: materials are suited to self-access and without copyright.

The cartoons chosen for this course are currently broadcasted on national Italian TV: *the adventures of La Pimpa* and *Lupo Alberto*, both created by Italian comic artists<sup>1</sup>. Images from the cartoons were employed in the creation of the booklets that were used in the first part of the lesson classroom, while subtitling and revoicing tasks based on the video-clips from these cartoons were performed in the language laboratory. Cartoons were free

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<sup>1</sup> La Pimpa is an Italian comic strip, created by Francesco Tullio Altan. Lupo Alberto was designed by Guido Silvestro (stage name: Silver).

downloaded from YouTube channels. When the lesson plan envisages the viewing of a whole episode, this was subtitled in English by the instructors using the software VisualSubSync<sup>2</sup>. As far as intralingual revoicing activities are concerned, the video was edited for pedagogical purposes. All the AVT activities were made accessible to pupils through the online platform Clipflair<sup>3</sup>, which provides an open and user-friendly space where learners and teachers can create, access and carry out captioning and revoicing activities.

## Procedures

The 6-week course was delivered by two native Italian instructors and a classroom assistant. Each lesson ran for the duration of approximately two and a half hours and it was divided into two parts. The first hour was spent in the classroom where children learned Italian lexicon, melody and basic grammar rules. After a 15/20-minutes break the second part of the lesson took place in the language laboratory, where children worked with the videos.

In order to help children following the lessons and practice the language learned, two booklets were designed *ex novo* and were based on a thematic approach whereby every lesson focused on a different language topic. One of them was given to each child at the beginning of the course, and the other one after the mid-term. The course started with the Italian alphabet and pronunciation, and then gradually moved on to learn verbs and basic grammatical structures, as well build up vocabulary. Some of the exercises included in the booklet involved crosswords, cartoon bubbles to fill in, pictures to color, listening to songs and completing the lyrics. Icons representing cartoon characters were used to help children visualise the different types of activity to carry out. The four icons indicated grammar rules, exercises for language practice, a glossary to update and the language laboratory activity of the day.

During the hours spent in the language laboratory, children practiced the language learned during the previous in-class hour, while learning how to give voice to cartoon characters, complete subtitles of videos, narrate stories and rearrange plots using the Clipflair

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.visualsubsync.org/home>

<sup>3</sup> <http://studio.clipflair.net>

platform. A brief Clipflair User Manual was included as an appendix in the booklet, so that children could use the platform at home and show their parents the videos they subtitled and re-voiced. All childrens' work was saved both on the PCs and on their personal USB sticks.

### **Integrating AVT modes as task-based activities**

One of the aims of this project was to integrate the AVT modes as based-tasks in the teaching of Italian as a FL to children. Besides promoting foreign language learning, it was deemed crucial for this project that children enjoyed themselves and kept engaged with the activities proposed. Children were not asked to translate the video clip and target words (lexis to retain) first were presented in classroom and later contextualised within the activities carried out in the language laboratory. Intralingual revoicing activities were instead conceived as an imitation of the original L2-spoken language or a storytelling exercise. The six AVT task-based activities are outlined in table 1.

	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Learning Outcomes</b>
<b>Week 1</b>	<i>'La Pimpa e il pavone Alfonso'</i> Intralingual revoicing activity	Review of greetings and introductions + Retain vocabulary + Reinforce speaking skills
<b>Week 2</b>	<i>'La Pimpa e la balena Milly'</i> Fill-the-gap captioning task	Review of greetings and introduction + Retain vocabulary (nouns, adjectives) + Develop intercultural competence
<b>Week 3</b>	<i>Lupo Alberto: 'L'ultimo spettacolo'</i> Captioning task	Retain vocabulary (numbers and hours)
<b>Week 4</b>	<i>Lupo Alberto: 'Cappuccetto Rosso'</i> Revoicing: audio narration	Reinforce grammar rules (Present tense of regular verbs)
<b>Week 5</b>	<i>'La Pimpa e la fabbrica delle pizze'</i> Intralingual revoicing activity	Retain vocabulary (food) + Review regular verbs + Reinforce L2 speaking skills
<b>Week 6</b>	<i>'La Pimpa e i coniglietti'</i> Intralingual revoicing activity	Retain vocabulary (colours) + Review of greetings and introduction + Reinforce L2 speaking skills

As an example of the tasks that children carried out in this course, the first intralingual revoicing activity will be described in the next paragraphs. This activity aims at practicing the vocabulary explained in the classroom and sees students working on communicative skills by practicing the use of intonation to convey a specific message. Before the onset of the AVT activity, for approximately 15 minutes students underwent basic training so that they were able to use basic computer commands in an autonomous way and to initially get acquainted with the Clipflair platform. The video-clip used is a 40-seconds excerpt from the entire episode, in which the two characters meet for the first time. The peacock Alfonso is a rather complacent animal and bumptiously shows its beauty, while the dog is just searching for a friend to play with. The dialogue between them consists of eight lines including interrogative, exclamatory and declarative sentences and vocabulary previously learned. The first part of the classroom lesson presented children with words and greeting expressions contained in the revoicing activity. Before the language laboratory hour, some exercises were carried out to encourage children to greet and introduce themselves in Italian; for instance, a “guess the word” type of activity was used to practice the Italian alphabet and reinforce spelling while it gave teachers the opportunity to introduce words that students later came across working with videos. Initially, the clip was shown to the children and in as follow-up brainstorming activity, the teacher asked some questions to ensure oral comprehension was achieved by all students and briefly highlighted the presence of vocabulary they may have already encountered. Subsequently, after the teacher briefly reviewed how to record voices on the Clipflair platform, students were asked to watch the clip again and record themselves while they reproduce the dialogue between the characters. They could record themselves and watch the video as many times as they needed until they were happy with the outcome. Once all the students accomplished the task, with the help of the teachers and the classroom assistant, they saved their work on the folder and into their own USB stick. While concluding the lesson, the instructors choose some the best performances to show to the class as a reward to students who committed to the task. They really enjoyed watching their revoiced video on the big screen outside of the Clipflair platform.

## **6. Data collection: questionnaires and teachers' notes**

In relation to learners' responses to the overall didactic experience and the use of captioning and revoicing activities, it was stated at the beginning of this paper that this project would collect some preliminary data in order to shed light on the feasibility of such innovative didactic approach. The main data collection tools comprised a final questionnaire and teachers' notes. In an attempt at describing the learners' sample, a background questionnaire was developed and handed out to children at the onset of the 6-weeks course as a means to gather information on their age, previous knowledge of Italian and experience with cartoons in language learning contexts. These data collection tools allowed us to describe the profile of tot. 45 participants as follows: none of participants had learned Italian neither captioned and/or revoiced a video clip before attending the course; a very small percentage (4.4%) watched cartoons in Italian.

At the end of the six lessons, students filled out a final questionnaire that was designed to appraise their response to the course. The structure of the questionnaire is based on the question answering process-model (Tourangeau, 1988) and the Satisficing Theory of Krosnick (1991) and complies with the guidelines for the creation of effective questions for children (Bell, 2007). Simplicity is considered a cornerstone, thus questions must be short, clear and with straightforward syntax so as to avoid cognitive overload. Questions formulated with a complex structure and with negations can be difficult for children who have problems with logical forms, contrarily to adults (Borgers & Hox 2000). Children tend to read questions literally and often misinterpret the meaning of certain expression: vague and ambiguous words should be avoided (Borgers & Hox, 2002) in favor of straightforward language (Holaday & Turner-Henson, 1989; Scott, 1997). Children who are bored about a certain topic tend to avoid unnecessary cognitive effort (Borgers & Hox, 2000), therefore it is crucial to make tasks motivating and attractive. Four is considered the optimal number of options with children respondents (Borgers et al., 2004). Furthermore, response options need to be carefully ordered because both adults and children often tend to select the first option due to memory retrieval (Borgers et al., 2002). Scales must be clear and easy to interpret for the children first completely-labelled scales are considered to produce better-quality responses than partially-labelled ones (Borgers et al., 2004), second verbal labels are more easily understood than numeric one (Borgers

& Hox 2000), while visual images as smiley faces have produced good results (Scott, 1997).

The students enrolled in this project are aged from 9 to 12 years and belong to the fourth cognitive stage which is characterised by an appropriate use of logic, where language and reading skills develop and thought processes become more mature (Piaget, 1929). The questionnaire was divided into three sections in which students were asked to give feedback on the educational activities proposed, to express which type of task they preferred and briefly comment on any difficulties they encountered. Finally, they were asked to rate each one of the activities carried out during the course. Section A aimed to gather students' opinions on the structure of the course, the lessons, the didactic material employed and the platform. This section consists of eight-close questions, in which a completely-labelled, verbal and visual scale was inserted together with emoticons to engage children in, and four response options were offered. Section B is dedicated to collect responses on children's interest in learning Italian language, their preferences on the AVT activities and difficulties encountered throughout the course. It consists of one close-multiple choice question and two open-questions. Section C required children to rate each AVT activity through Likert-scale questions with complete and verbal labels from 1 to 4: 1) I really did not like it; 2) I did not like it; 3) I liked it; 4) I liked it very much. The title and the image of each activity was added to facilitate the reading and makes the questionnaire more appealing.

Besides the questionnaires, the instructors availed of classroom observations and notes in order to gain further insights into children's language learning process. While one of the instructors taught the first hour in the classroom, the other one observed and took notes on the development of the lesson. In the language laboratory, children were constantly monitored and provided with technical support. At the end of lesson, the instructors discussed the progress of the class.

## **7. Results**

The impact of the innovative teaching method on children's interest and motivation towards a foreign language seems to have been positive; not only did they report to have enjoyed the course, but they also expressed their desire to learn other languages using this innovative approach. Children were happy with the activities and reported being

motivated throughout the course. Findings from the final questionnaire show that overall students found the course enjoyable and adequate to their beginner level. All 45 students wished to have more AVT-based activities in other language classes: 92% of children enjoyed learning new skills such as captioning and revoicing within the language class and 100% found Clipflair platform easy to use. With regards to the didactic exercises, captioning was the activity that students liked the most (99%); this might be due to the fact that at an early stage of the learning, watching videos in a foreign language with English subtitles reduces the cognitive load by making the language input accessible and the subsequent activity more rewarding. The analysis of the questionnaires showed that 100% of students reported being actively engaged with the activities throughout the course; in particular, 92% enjoyed the overall course – both in-class lesson and language lab. Moreover, 92% found exercises on booklets stimulating and 100% of students found the video clips for the laboratory activities interesting and engaging. Some of them (%) preferred the classroom activities rather than the didactic experience in the language laboratory possibly as a consequence of different learning preferences.

Teachers' notes on the first class revealed the warm and positive atmosphere and, especially before moving to the language laboratory in the second hour, students seemed to be excited and primed with expectations. Some of them enrolled in the course attracted by the idea that it involves innovative use of computer- assisted language learning, which they considered very challenging but loved testing themselves. Children might not have the opportunity to use a computer at home, when, on the contrary, it is used by adults most of the time which might make it look like something forbidden. In the imagination of a child, only adults enjoy using computers whenever they want and need it, so the exploitation of this device in an autonomous way together with the innovative AVT didactic activities builds the perfect suspense to attract children's attention. The context of university is also thrilling for them and this may have both positive and negative effects. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon and did happen that in the first lesson a child cried due to psychological pressure.<sup>4</sup> However, break-the-ice activities promptly helped to relax the atmosphere and create a welcoming environment, in which children could relieve the stress and defeat anxiety. Throughout the course the enthusiasm increased due

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<sup>4</sup> The authors of the papers were asked to attend the Behaviour Management seminar delivered by the Psychology Department at NUIG before classes start.

to the variety of didactic activities proposed and often children asked teachers to go into the language laboratory before the second hour. The friendly atmosphere created in the classroom fostered collaboration between children; in fact, children who were more proficient in the use of computers were always happy to help the others who were lagging behind. On the last day of teaching, the in-class hour was dedicated to a review of all the topics covered over the six-week period through games and group activities. The final review also showed that children retained most of the language learnt during the course and were able to engage in activities and games using the language they learnt.

## **8. Conclusion**

Results from the final questionnaire are very promising in that they indicate that children would like to carry out these types of learning activities at school in other language learning contexts. The positive result of this didactic experience can encourage language instructors to adopt subtitling and revoicing activities in primary and secondary schools to promote foreign language learning and intercultural communication. This project can be considered successful in stimulating children to learn Italian for the first time while capturing their attention and keeping their motivation high throughout six weeks by using cartoons as carriers of a foreign language and culture. Positive insights obtained through the final questionnaires show that the cartoons used in the course were widely accepted by students as engaging learning material. Children not only took home a new language learning experience, but also tangible products that proved their engagement in the lessons and the various skills they have acquired as they could show the videos they worked on throughout the course to their family and friends.

Proving how the use of cartoons is already successfully integrated in English FL contexts, this project could be replicated in other instructional contexts, perhaps exploring different language combinations. Cartoon material is available in any language and the online Clipflair platform can be used on any computer. Furthermore, this course can be replicated as an experimental research study which could investigate foreign language vocabulary learning, perhaps looking at a bigger sample of informants over a longer period of time and identifying other data collection tools which would strengthen the findings. Finally, it is interesting to note that the number of students enrolled in this course has been steadily increasing every semester and hopefully it will continue to do so in the

future. In fact, thanks to the increasing interest of students, the project was shortlisted for the European Language Label (ELL) Award in 2019 and it could be improved to suit different learning settings and different instructors who would like to tap into the potential of AVT resources as powerful language learning tools.

**Authors' comment:**

Names appear in alphabetical order. The article has been written jointly by the authors. A. Beltramello wrote section 1, 2 and 3; F. Nicora wrote section 4, 5 and 6. Sections 7 and 8 are the results of the two researchers' reflections.

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