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LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF A WEB-ENHANCED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: INSIGHTS FROM A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a longitudinal study on the perceptions of a Web-enhanced learning environment by a group of beginning-level students of Italian. A Website was specially designed and implemented as a complement to the existing syllabus, in order to enhance interactivity, variety, and authenticity of materials and tasks, as well as flexibility and learner control. The aim of the study is to ascertain whether the introduction of computing technology can promote learners' positive attitudes, as suggested in much of the current literature on Computer-Assisted Language Learning. Quantitative and qualitative data collected from a variety of sources confirm that the introduction of computing technology can contribute to learners' positive perceptions of the opportunities offered by their learning environment. However, a few drawbacks are also identified which suggest that the introduction of Web-enhanced learning in itself cannot be expected to promote and sustain learners' positive attitudes and motivation in the long term, and that more research is needed to explore effective ways of using Web-based materials, particularly at introductory levels of competence in the target language.

INTRODUCTION

Learners' perceptions of the opportunities offered by their learning environment have been attributed a fundamental role within recent proposals for a multidimensional model of second language motivation (e.g., Dörnyei & Ottó, 1999; Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997; Schmidt, Boraie & Kassabgy, 1996). Computing technology has been presented as an ideal tool to promote learners' positive perceptions, due to its ability to support flexible, on-demand instruction, thus allowing learner control over time, pace and modalities of material access, and ensuring correspondence of instruction to individual learning styles and interests (e.g., Curtis, Duchastel & Radic, 1999; Egbert & Jessup, 1996; Hubbard, 1996; Osuna & Meskill, 1998; Oxford, Rivera-Castillo, Feyten & Nutta, 1998; Pusack & Otto, 1997). Hence, it is not surprising that computing technology has become an integral part of university teaching and learning across faculties and subjects, including languages. Indeed, a growing number of Departments of Italian throughout Australia seem to have embraced computing technology as a way to create flexible, learner-centred environments, since many of their course descriptions make at least some reference to the use of CD-ROMs or Web-based materials as part of the curriculum.

While partially supported by research findings (e.g., Collombet-Sankey, 1997; Gu & Xu, 1999; Tudini & Rubino, 1998), such enthusiasm overlooks two main facts: (i) relatively little is known about the long-term impact of computing technology on language learners, given the fact that most CALL studies have adopted a cross-sectional approach; and (ii) most studies have involved learners at intermediate or advanced levels of competence, while the vast majority of Italian language students in most Australian universities is to be found in courses at introductory levels.

In an attempt to fill these gaps in the research, and contribute to the establishment of sound pedagogical practices, this article presents the findings of a longitudinal research project involving a group of beginning learners of Italian language at the University of Sydney, and their perceptions of a Web-enhanced learning environment over two academic semesters.

THE STUDY

Theoretical framework

This study takes as its point of departure a number of proposals for a multidimensional model of second language motivation focusing on the influence of the learning environment, among other factors, on learners' choice to engage and persist in the learning process (e.g., Dörnyei & Ottó, 1999; Gardner et al., 1997; Schmidt et al., 1996). More than the actual features of the learning environment, however, it is the "psychological meaning" (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p.87) attached to them by individual learners, in other words their perceptions and interpretations of their interactions with the learning environment, that can be expected to exert the greatest influence on learners' motivation (see also Ames & Archer, 1988; Williams & Burden, 1997).

Research also suggests that students' positive perceptions can be triggered by designing environments that accommodate a variety of individual learning styles, interests and skill levels (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Williams & Burden, 1997). Computing technology, and especially the World Wide Web, can contribute to the establishment of such environments, for three main reasons.

Firstly, the World Wide Web can cater for a multiplicity of learners' interests and needs in terms of skill levels and perceptual modes, due to its multimedia nature and to the abundance and variety of tasks and authentic documents that can be accessed in self-study mode over the Internet (Soo, 1999; Underwood, 1988). Indeed, the possibility for learners to select their own path through an instructional Website has been recognised as a fundamental step towards increased flexibility and learner control in the language classroom (e.g., Bradin, 1999; Hoven, 1999; Stevens, 1992).

Secondly, the ease of communication provided by electronic tools promotes the establishment of close interpersonal relationships within the classroom; as a result, learners' interests, goals and difficulties become known to teachers, who can easily provide individualised instruction (Egbert, 1999; Koppi, Lublin & Chaloupka, 1997).

In turn, a direct connection with the teacher promotes students' awareness that assistance is easily available, and facilitates learners' perceptions of the tutor as helpful and personally interested in their problems (Paiva, 1999).

Thirdly, even when it is used for rather 'traditional' forms of practice, computing technology can enhance learner control. This is especially evident in relation to activities involving exposure to and comprehension of oral texts, in which students can manipulate audio or video files, by stopping, rewinding, and re-playing them as necessary to ensure input comprehension (e.g., Bradin, 1999; see also Joiner, 1997; Hoven, 1999; Meskill, 1996; Pusack & Otto, 1997; Rubin, 1994).

In keeping with these observations, for the purpose of this study it was decided to design and implement a Web-based component that would support and complement an existing language curriculum, adding interactivity, variety and authenticity of materials and tasks as well as flexibility and learner-control. In turn, this was expected to foster learners' positive perceptions of their learning environment.

Method

This study focuses on a group of beginning learners of Italian language and investigates their perceptions of a Web-enhanced learning environment in a longitudinal perspective, in order to ascertain (i) whether computing technology can be expected to promote students' positive attitudes in the long term; and (ii) whether other environmental or learner-internal variables may contribute to influencing learners' perceptions and attitudes.

The study was conducted in the Department of Italian at University of Sydney in 1999. The participants were recruited from the cohort of students enrolled in the courses *Beginners' Italian Language 1101 and 1102* (ITLN 1101, ITLN 1102). One language tutorial group among the nine initially scheduled for the course was randomly assigned to the study at the beginning of the first semester. At the outset of this study, there were 18 students, 15 female and 3 male, in the group of participants. Their age ranged from 17 to 32, with 13 students aged between 17 and 19. Fourteen participants were first-year students, three were enrolled in their second academic year, and one in her third year.

The ITLN 1101-1102 courses at the University of Sydney are designed for absolute beginners. At the time of this study, contact time included three language tutorials per week, complemented by a Grammar and Reading lecture in the first semester, and a cultural component in the second semester. These courses followed what could be defined as a structural, or grammatical syllabus, in that their main focus was placed on the acquisition of linguistic competence, that is, knowledge of the target language code and of its grammar (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986).

The curriculum and syllabus adopted in the group of participants had to follow very closely those implemented in the regular tutorial groups, to allow student withdrawal from the study at any time during the semester, and to ensure that the participants would be able to join regular tutorial groups in the following year. In particular, no special form of assessment could be introduced and the strong focus on written skills and on accuracy had

to be maintained. This represented an evident limitation, since the curriculum constitutes “a statement of policy” (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p.40), which will influence learners’ perceptions of what is valued within their learning environment.

However, modifications were possible to some extent, particularly through the introduction of a Website, called *It@li@no*, which was specially designed to complement and enhance the existing syllabus. The Website was used every week during one of the three scheduled contact hours, as well as for homework and self-study. No specific form of assessment was linked to the Website, although student self-access to on-line materials was obviously encouraged.

According to the categorisation proposed by Levy (1999), *It@li@no* Website can be described as a hybrid system, in that it contained elements characteristic of ‘holistic’ learning environments, as well as ‘discrete’ elements, and was employed not only as a ‘tutor’ but also as a ‘tool’. In other words, together with structured practice activities, focusing on specific linguistic aspects, the Website offered resources and tools that allowed a more flexible and learner-centred approach to language learning.

The front page of the Website provided access to relevant information about the course, such as announcements of new resources made available, due homework, and test dates. This allowed increased flexibility in course organisation, since changes to the syllabus resulting from negotiation with the students could be posted onto the Website, ensuring that all participants would have access to current information. Links were also provided to the course description, aims and syllabus, including assessment requirements, language activities, grammar notes, other Websites of interest, a list of email addresses for the group, a discussion list, and other resources, such as dictionaries and a technical help section.

With regard to language practice, *It@li@no* Website contained numerous activities that allowed learners’ exposure to, and interaction with, a variety of input sources, both from the point of view of content and medium. Listening comprehension exercises represented a large proportion of all activities provided (40% in the first semester), for several reasons. Firstly, it seemed necessary to counterbalance the strong orientation of the existing syllabus towards written rather than oral skills, thus providing a more comprehensive approach to language learning. Secondly, activities that involve exposure to the target language while limiting learners’ involvement in output production in front of an audience have been indicated as particularly suitable for learners at lower levels of proficiency (e.g., Pica, 1987; Willis, 1996). Finally, as previously noted, computing technology can facilitate comprehension in that it enables learners to work at their own pace.

The Website included also communicative tasks to provide opportunities for learner-learner interaction and a meaningful use of the target language. These activities required learners’ access to authentic Websites to retrieve information, which was then to be exchanged with other students. Following Pica and colleagues (Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993), these tasks were designed to maximise opportunities

for learners’ exposure to authentic input and engagement in negotiation of meaning.

Finally, the Website offered numerous structural activities, focusing mainly on morphological and syntactic aspects of the target language. However, completion and transformation exercises were designed to promote also a meaningful use of the target language, in order to make the materials more relevant to the students. For example, several grammar-based activities required learners to exchange personal information, therefore creating an information gap, and making them more similar to a “creative exchange in the target language” (Egbert, 1999, p.28).

Most importantly, *It@li@no* Website allowed learners to follow their own path, selecting on-line activities and materials that best corresponded to their needs, interests and abilities. Students could attempt a task several times or decide to access the correct answers at any stage. Opportunities for control were also provided in relation to different types of media, since several activities allowed students to choose whether to access input in audio, audiovisual or written form. Transcripts were always provided in listening comprehension activities, for learners experiencing comprehension difficulties. As a result, different skill levels could be accommodated.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through a variety of procedures, such as surveys, focus-group interviews and direct observation.

Among the several questionnaires distributed during the study¹ were the Course Evaluation questionnaires, administered at the end of each semester by the Department of Italian to all students attending language tutorial groups (hence Surveys A and B, respectively). Since the focus of the questionnaire is placed on students’ perceptions of the learning environment, particularly perceptions of the tutor and of the course, these surveys represented an opportunity to collect data on variables that were central to this study. Surveys A and B comprise 23 items on a five-point Likert-type scale and three open questions that asked students to indicate the most positive aspects of the course and to offer suggestions for further improvement. Internal consistency reliability for the entire questionnaire was judged to be satisfactory both for the first ($\alpha=.92$) and second semester ($\alpha=.89$), after exclusion of four items that were considered irrelevant for this study.

A Questionnaire on Language Learning (hence Survey C) that included several statements referring to the participants’ perceptions of their learning environment and reported strategy use was also specially designed and administered at the end of the second semester, in order to investigate further any aspects that had not emerged from analyses of Surveys A and B. Survey C included 41 statements on a five-point Likert-type scale, extracted from instruments already tested for validity and reliability in previous studies, including Gardner’s (1985) Attitude Motivation Test Battery (ATMB), the Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz and associates (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986), and Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). Internal reli-

bility, after exclusion of four items which did not appear to bear any relationship with the remaining statements, was considered satisfactory ($\alpha = .89$).

Quantitative data extracted from the questionnaires were submitted to exploratory Principal Component Analysis, in order to identify relationships among items and therefore subscales that could be taken as measures of the considered variables. Measures of central tendency and variability were calculated on questionnaire results.

Focus-group interviews were also employed in this study to cross-validate and complement data collected through surveys and direct observations (Crompton, 1997). Additional qualitative data were collected through a variety of instruments and procedures, such as field notes, email messages, and messages posted in the electronic bulletin board. Qualitative data, including focus-group interview transcripts and open-ended items included in the surveys, were submitted to content analysis, in order to identify emerging themes and trends.

Results and discussion

The results of analyses on both quantitative and qualitative data show that the participants' perceptions of their Web-enhanced learning environment are largely positive. Of the four subscales extracted from Surveys A and B, which relate to learners' perceptions of (1) their tutor, (2) enjoyment and interest associated with the course, (3) course effectiveness, and (4) course difficulty, three return mean scores well above the average scale point (Figure 1).

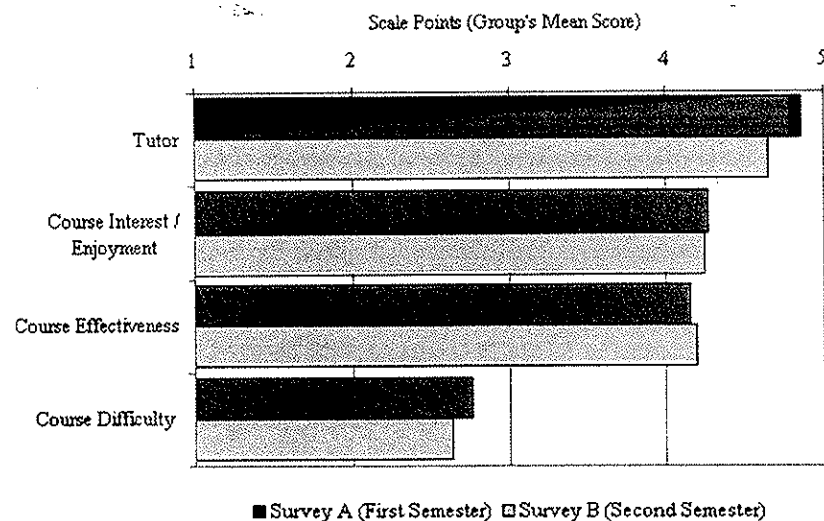


Figure 1: Subscales results of Surveys A and B

These results indicate that the participants tend to perceive their learning environment as interesting, enjoyable and effective. The highest mean scores are returned by statements measuring learners' perceptions of their tutor as willing to collaborate with students and to provide assistance, and able to present materials in an interesting way (Table 1). The low mean score returned on the fourth scale suggests that the participants perceived the course as less difficult than other courses they had taken in the same faculty.

Statements	Survey A (First Semester) (N=14)		Survey B (Second Semester) (N=12)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Scale: Tutor ($\alpha = .80; .80$)	4.86	.35	4.65	.60
The tutor welcomes student feedback on the classes	5.00	.00	4.83	.39
The tutor is willing to help students	5.00	.00	4.75	.62
You can discuss difficulties with the tutor	4.71	.47	4.50	.80
The tutor presents material in an interesting way	4.71	.47	4.50	.52
Scale: Course Effectiveness ($\alpha = .82; .84$)	4.15	.74	4.19	.84
I have received a good introduction to the language	4.31	.72	4.25	.75
You get feedback in tutorials which helps you learn	4.29	.73	4.25	.75
I have gained a good understanding of the language system	4.00	.78	4.17	1.03
I have learned a lot in this course	4.00	.68	4.08	.90
Scale: Course Difficulty				
The course was more difficult than others I have taken in the Faculty	2.77	1.16	2.64	1.21
Scale: Course Interest and Enjoyment ($\alpha = .84; .84$)	4.27	.68	4.25	.67
I would recommend this language course to fellow students	4.46	.63	4.42	.79
All things considered, how would you rate this course?	4.34	.52	4.35	.57
I found the language course interesting	4.00	.78	4.00	.60

N= Number of respondents. M=mean score; SD=Standard Deviation. Cronbach's Alpha (α) relative to individual subscales indicated in parentheses for first and second semester respectively.

Table 1: Results of Surveys A and B

The lowest variation in students' opinions is observed in relation to perceived tutor's availability for assistance and open attitude towards students' comments, particularly in the first semester. Reasonable agreement among the participants is also observed on items measuring learners' interest and enjoyment associated with the course. Conversely, high indexes of standard deviation are noted with regard to perceived course difficulty and understanding of the language system gained through the course. This suggests that, while appreciating almost unanimously the opportunities offered by the learning environment, the participants tend to vary greatly in terms of skill levels and related self-efficacy beliefs.

Similar results are obtained in Survey C, which was administered at the end of the study. In particular, among the highest mean scores returned on the nine identified subscales (Table 2), are those referring to: (i) positive classroom atmosphere and collaboration in the learning environment, (ii) learners' self-efficacy and satisfaction with their achievements, and (iii) interest and enjoyment related to learning Italian.

Subscale	M	SD
Classroom atmosphere and collaboration ($\alpha=.67$)	4.12	.65
Self-efficacy and satisfaction with ones' achievements ($\alpha=.66$)	4.02	.70
Interest and enjoyment associated with learning Italian ($\alpha=.71$)	3.90	.93
Disposition towards oral interaction and risk-taking ($\alpha=.69$)	3.33	.98
Comprehension anxiety / efficacy ($\alpha=.75$)	2.97	1.09
<i>Reported Strategy Use</i>		
Grammar inferencing ($\alpha=.60$)	4.12	.77
Reading inferencing ($\alpha=.56$)?	3.64	1.06
Asking for Assistance $\alpha=.46$) ²	3.31	.88
Metacognitive strategies and knowledge ($\alpha=.71$)	3.17	.92

M=mean score; SD=Standard Deviation. Cronbach's Alpha (α) relative to individual subscales indicated in parentheses.

Table 2: Summary of results of Survey C

Interestingly, the subscale measuring learners' perceptions of classroom atmosphere and collaboration returns the lowest overall index of standard deviation. This indicates wide consensus among the students in viewing their learning environment as friendly and non-threatening, and in believing that support was easily available from other learners or the tutor, when needed.

The lowest mean score in the survey, on the other hand, is recorded in relation to the participants' comprehension efficacy. In fact, the relative subscale is the only one returning a score below the average scale point. This suggests that the students' comprehension anxiety may have been independent from the level of general self-efficacy experienced, on which the group scored relatively high, and also from the perception of mutual support and collaboration in the learning environment. Disposition towards active engagement in oral interaction and indexes of metacognition also return lower scores, compared to the remaining subscales.

These subscales also record the highest indexes of standard deviation, which indicates that, while some participants were relatively self-efficacious and willing to experiment with the target language, others tended to experience some anxiety and frustration when asked to comprehend input or produce output that was perceived as beyond one's attained level of competence. This could be partially attributed to the low level of competence among the participants, and to the fact that several on-line tasks involved students' direct access to authentic texts in the target language. Although these tasks were designed so that only a limited part of the input needed to be comprehended, the students seemed to believe that everything should be fully understood in order to achieve a satisfactory result. Consequently, some anxiety and frustration were experienced at times.

Qualitative data largely confirm the observations made during quantitative analyses, and allow further clarification and identification of elements of the learning environment that contributed to learners' positive perceptions and attitudes. In particular, the results of content analyses point to three main areas of satisfaction associated with the Web-enhanced environment: (i) enhanced opportunities for interaction and collaboration, both with other students and the tutor; (ii) enhanced opportunities for flexibility and learner control; and (iii) variety, interest and enjoyment offered by Web-enhanced materials and tasks.

As a result of the increased opportunities for tutor-students and student-student interaction and negotiation, group cohesion was greatly enhanced and a collaborative atmosphere was established. Some students specifically indicated the friendly and supportive classroom atmosphere among the most positive aspects of their experience in this study:

I felt everyone was comfortable working together, no one was afraid to ask questions.

We interacted and knew each other well, and the use of computer made the class more enjoyable.

The vast majority of participants also appreciated the possibility of frequent contact with the tutor, often through email, for help requests and discussion of personal issues:

[“What is the best thing about the course?”] Access to the Website for our group - very helpful as you can access it at any time and any questions you have can be emailed directly to your tutor.

The flexibility provided by computing technology represented an important contribution towards the establishment of a learning environment able to cater for individual learning styles, skill levels and personal interests and goals. From the tutor's point of view, such flexibility translated into the possibility of offering feedback and support, as well as input, that was personally relevant to individual students' needs and interests. The association of visual and auditory stimuli in multimedia materials available from the Website also seemed to respond to learners' needs:

Visual associations often help the memory, a lot of the activities we do on the computer are good this way, with accompanying pictures, etc.

I find that I learn a lot more when I do computer exercises because I can listen as well, and things stick b/c what I hear consolidates what I see.

The possibility of working at one's own pace represented a major source of learners' satisfaction, as suggested in the following comments:

The range and depth of the exercises offered; the access to contemporary Italian Web-sites; the independence of working at one's own pace were all certainly motivational factors for me.

A computer doesn't get cross at you for getting every second thing wrong. You can go back time and time again and practise, and at home too.

The ability to receive automatic, immediate feedback was also frequently indicated as one of the most positive aspects of using computing technology, in spite of the fact that the responses provided by the marking script were extremely mechanical and only minimally informative:

I like to get the answers straight away so I can learn from my mistakes. When we have to hand things in and then wait to get them back, I find that I have lost all motivation to go through my mistakes.

Other positive aspects of Web-enhanced learning identified by the participants were the variety, interest and enjoyment that on-line materials and tasks could provide:

I think the computer exercises are fun and provide variety.

I think it would be a great idea to have the homework activities on computer, they are more interesting than using books and there are more things to access that are useful.

Having computer sessions varied the way we learnt, making it more enjoyable and fun.

Variety and interest were indeed among the most often cited features of the tasks and materials available from the Website, and direct observation of learners' behaviour in the Computer Laboratory confirmed that the participants enjoyed working with these materials. In particular, their enthusiasm was palpable when accessing authentic Websites that provided a direct contact with the target culture.

Despite the overall positive evaluation of their Web-enhanced learning environment, a few areas of concern were identified in this study, which possibly hindered a more extensive and beneficial use of the resources provided, namely:

- Lack of computer and/or internet access from home and technical problems, particularly in the first semester, due to the unreliability of the Web server. Some technical difficulties remained in the second semester, mostly related to the download and play of audio and video files during Web access from outside the University campus. Combined with other factors (see below), technical and access difficulties contributed to a decline in Website usage for self-access and homework in the second semester.
- Novelty effect. The participants recognised that the enthusiasm they had experienced during the first semester, due to the novelty associated with using computing technology and accessing the Internet for language learning, had worn off to some extent.
- Limited integration of on-line materials and tasks with the language syllabus, especially in the second semester, when less focus was placed on structural activities and comparatively more communicative or problem-solving tasks were made available.
- High level of language complexity of authentic materials. Some participants observed that, at times, having to access authentic documents available from Italian Websites could cause feelings of apprehension and frustration. As previously noted, this happened in spite of the fact that tasks were designed so that only a limited amount of information needed to be comprehended for successful completion.

- Time constraints, particularly in the second semester, when an increase in workload was noted by some participants, due to the introduction of a rather demanding cultural component as part of the course. This reduced the time available for language practice in general, and for computer self-access in particular.

As a result of the difficulties experienced, the students rejected the idea of an exclusive use of computing technology, and commented specifically on the importance of maintaining a face-to-face component in the course. In particular, they felt that, while computer-based exercises were useful, opportunities were also needed to receive the kind of informative feedback that only a teacher can offer. As one of the students put it:

The problem with computers is that, well obviously they are programmed to do what we tell them to, and if you type something, it may be right, but it only corrects you on what it thinks is right. It can't sit there and explain to you what is wrong with the way you are thinking, when a teacher can...

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the perceptions and attitudes of a group of beginning learners of Italian at tertiary level towards a Web-enhanced language learning environment. Quantitative and qualitative data collected from a variety of sources suggest that the introduction of computing technology contributed to learners' positive perceptions. In particular, the participants regarded their learning environment as providing enhanced opportunities for interaction and collaboration with the tutor and other students; opportunities for personal control, coupled with assistance and support when needed, and interesting, enjoyable and useful materials and tasks. Therefore, the findings of this project lend support to claims made in other studies indicating computing technology as an effective tool for the establishment of learning environments likely to promote learners' positive attitudes and, consequently, learners' motivation (e.g., Collombet-Sankey, 1997; Egbert & Jessup, 1996; Felix, 2000; Gu & Xu, 1999; Tudini & Rubino, 1998).

However, some areas of concern were also identified which should be carefully considered when designing Web-enhanced language learning environments. Firstly, this study confirms that lack of computer or internet access at home and technical difficulties can constitute serious obstacles to the learning process, as suggested by previous research (Brown, 1998; Gu & Xu, 1999; Tudini & Rubino, 1998). Secondly, the existence of a novelty effect, often suspected but rarely documented, possibly due to the cross-sectional approach of most CALL studies (but see e.g. Brett, 2000), needs to be taken into account. As discussed above, at the end of the year the participants recognised that the enthusiasm experienced during the initial

phases of the study had decreased to some extent. Coupled with other factors, such as limited computer access and technical problems, low level of integration of on-line materials in the language syllabus, high linguistic complexity of authentic materials, and increased workload over the second semester, the novelty effect represented an obstacle against a more extensive use of computing technology. This suggests that the introduction of Web-enhanced learning in itself cannot be expected to promote and sustain learners' positive attitudes and motivation *in the long term*, and that other contingent factors may intervene to influence learners' perceptions.

In general, the participants appeared convinced that, although extremely useful as a complement, computing technology could not substitute face-to-face interaction for teaching and learning. In particular, while the use of computing technology was greatly appreciated during scheduled classtime, Website access for homework could represent a frustrating and time-consuming experience. Future developments, for example in terms of bandwidth or software development, may contribute to changing learners' perceptions of Web-enhanced learning for home access.

In the meantime, further studies are needed that allow a better understanding of the dynamics observed in Web-enhanced environments, and especially of their long-term impact on learners' attitudes and motivation. It is essential that research on learner perceptions of Web-enhanced environments be conducted in a variety of educational contexts, in order to account for the influence of syllabus orientation, as well as that of other individual and contextual variables. In particular, more studies are needed that take into account the difficulties encountered by language learners at beginning-level of competence when required to access authentic Websites in the target language, as it is imperative that we identify ways of exploiting the potential benefits of computing technology while keeping learners' feelings of frustration and comprehension anxiety under control.

NOTES

- 1 Five surveys were administered in this study, namely: (i) a preliminary questionnaire, (ii) a survey on the use of It@li@no site, (iii and iv) two course evaluation questionnaires, and (v) a questionnaire on language learning. Surveys (i) and (ii) are not mentioned in this article, as they measure variables other than those discussed here.
- 2 Although the value of Cronbach's Alpha is rather low in relation to this scale, it was considered acceptable due to the fact that the scale contains only two items.

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KEEPING IT ALL IN THE FAMILY: *TU, LEI* AND *VOI*. A STUDY OF ADDRESS PRONOUN USE IN ITALIAN

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ABSTRACT

Although the Italian system of address pronouns is relatively complex, scant attention is paid to the issue in L2 manuals designed for English-speaking learners of Italian. After showing that Italian L2 manuals are not necessarily accurate in the limited detail they provide, we examine specifically the frequent claim that so-called informal *tu* is always used within the family. Results of a large quantitative survey conducted with native speakers of Italian in Italy and Australia show the situation to be much more complicated. Alongside *tu*, the more formal *Lei*, and the often ignored *Voi*, are also used, according to the interlocutor in question. Close genetic relation and proximity of age, operating independently of each other, are clear predictors of reciprocal use of *tu*. Otherwise, non-reciprocal use of *Lei-tu* and *Voi-tu* and even the more formal reciprocal use of *Lei* are not unknown in a family setting. Observations are made as to how these patterns group, along with a number of other observations about pronoun use. Finally, pedagogical suggestions that might allow English-speaking learners of Italian to understand address pronouns in Italian better and use them more accurately are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

Amongst the many challenges English speakers face when learning Italian as a second language (L2) is the appropriate use of address pronouns.¹ English has only one address pronoun (*you*) used for both singular and plural referents. Italian is usually reported in L2 materials to have at least two address pronouns in the singular (*tu* and *Lei*) and two in the plural (*Voi* and *Loro*). The issue of pronominal address is impossible to avoid in Italian, since each of these pronouns is associated with a specific verbal desinence. Italian has a significantly more complex verbal morphology than English, coupled with a well-developed system of adjective agreement marked for number and gender. In addition to the obvious grammatical consequences of address pronoun use, from a pragmatic viewpoint, communication in Italian relies on socially appropriate pronoun use by interlocutors in any linguistic interaction. So-called allocutive speech events marked by the 2nd person encode essential sociolinguistic information about who the speaker and addressee(s) think they are and their perceived status relationship. In languages such as Italian, pronoun use is adjusted and encoded accordingly to accommodate different relationship types (Keevallik, 1999; Rintell, 1981).

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