HOW STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PEER-TUTORS CAN INTERACT ON-LINE: THE CASE FOR THE COURSE ITALIAN LANGUAGE @ CULTURE BY THE UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES L'ORIENTALE.

Maria De Santo

CILA, University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Elisa Pellegrino

CILA, University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Luisa Salvati

CILA, University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Abstract : In the last 15 years World Wide Web has changed the nature of work and social relationships and it is also impacting another important field such as education. On the one hand, the web applications are bringing a lot of easiness for both students and teachers because they provide new teaching and learning resources. On the other one, the spread of distance education is also playing a crucial role in dismantling the traditional teaching praxis and redefining the teacher-student interaction. In this paper we focus on the way Polish students, Italian teachers and peer tutors of interact in a blended course of Italian.

1. The architecture of the course: a theoretical framework

The Italian Language and Culture Course was conceived within an international agreement between the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and the University of Silesia, Katowice, with the aim of promoting the diffusion of the Italian language and culture in a cross-cultural perspective. The Italian course was created for Polish students with an entry level in Italian corresponding at the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Polish students generally begin the Italian distance course, after a three-month course of Italian with a Polish teacher in Katowice. Student should reach, at the end of the Italian Language @ Culture course (100 hours), the B2+ level.

The language centre of "L'Orientale", CILA, developed this blended course integrating the resources offered by the e-learning platform Moodle with Web 2.0 communication tools both internal and external to the platform. We designed speaking activities based on videoconferencing software (Skype) to develop oral production and we created a group of Italian learners and speakers on a social network (Facebook) to foster a sense of community, as the social dimension has an essential role in the Italian Language @ Culture course. Students were given the opportunity to extend language learning beyond the boundaries of the virtual classroom in an informal environment and to share, with peer-tutors and teachers, thoughts, questions and doubts about the Italian language and culture.

The course is structured around five thematic modules (Living in Italy, Italian politics, How to get in Italy, Fashion and way of living, Italian economy); each module consists of four units; each unit presents a learning object, developed with the software Exelearning, a series of interactive activities, developed with the authoring software Hot Potatoes, and communication tools, both synchronous and asynchronous. In this way students learn the language through a series of task-based activities and through authentic interaction with peers and teachers. The course also provides some self-assessment questionnaires, developed with the software SurveyMonkey.

We designed the course with the aim of providing an environment that could facilitate greater exposure to the Italian language offering authentic and meaningful resources and that could give, through Computer-Mediated Communication, the means for intercultural exchanges and for real communication with Italian native speakers.

The architecture of the course was developed according to Jonassen's theory of meaningful learning: "in order for meaningful learning to occur, the task that students pursue should engage active, constructive, intentional, authentic, and cooperative activities" (Jonassen 2008). The structure of the course reflects these five tenets since the core of each unit is represented by a multimedia interactive learning object which presents the content in such a way that students can interact with the course, manipulate and work with the language, through the resources, activities and tools made available in each section of the course; each activity of the course is task based and goal-directed and is based on authentic materials, resources and context – the Italian culture and society. Students receive a feedback both from the technologies and from other participants through forums, chats and online questionnaires. In this way, they observe the results of their performance, articulate and construct their learning. Obviously, learning in this context is collaborative, as learners, peer-tutors and teachers interact to meet the same objective: learning/helping to learn Italian language and culture.

The layout of the course is also the result of our intention to overcome some of the constraints of most distance language courses as reduced opportunities for immediate support, guidance, interactivity and feedback (White 2003). Distance language learners need a

considerable amount of support to overcome the lack of guidance from the teacher; indeed, to prevent students from feeling disoriented in the virtual classroom, we designed a learner-friendly interface with easily accessible resources, clear instructions and online help and guides throughout the course. The teacher, acting as a facilitator, accompanied learners through vocal guides, vademecum, written information and suggestions; so Polish students can freely move in an environment that encourages Italian language learning and makes it enjoyable.

2. Teachers-students asynchronous interaction: thematic forums and corrective feedback from the teacher/e-tutor

Like all virtual learning environments, the learning units are not only inclusive of grammar, task-based comprehension and production activities, but they are also linked to synchronous and asynchronous communicative tools (chats and forums) in order to facilitate spontaneous and authentic interaction among students, teacher and peer tutors. Teacher and students can interact both asynchronously and synchronously. As for the asynchronous communication, it is carried through two types of forum: a news forum and a thematic one. The first one called *News from your teacher* is a special forum displayed on the main course page. It works like a bulletin board where both e-tutor and students can post their messages and reply to each-other's communications. In such a kind of forum the e-tutor plays different strategic roles. Indeed, he acts both as a "facilitator" and as an "instructor" (Rivoltella, 2006). As a facilitator, he/she has to contribute to create a friendly learning environment, sending welcome message to the students, introducing himself/herself to the students, telling them how to contact him/her and giving them feedback in friendly tone.

At the same time, the e-tutor is also the course-instructor, in fact, he/she is the one who sends messages of importance to the course. For instance, he/she gives information concerning duration and changes in schedules and course materials. He/she also fixes the dates for students to post their task-based activities completed and arrange with learners on-line meeting. In addition, once defined the exact date, the e-tutor creates course-events in the calendar, that is displayed on the homepage of the course, so that the students can immediately see and take notice of them.

Besides the news forum, there is still a thematic forum, named *Task* . This is a forum, developed on one page, where the topic of the unit is discussed. Here students post the task-based activities proposed in the unit and receive general and corrective feedback about the assignments from their e-tutor. In order to indicate to learners that their use of the target language is incorrect, the e-tutor adopts different kinds of corrective feedback strategies, depending on the level of accuracy of their students' productions. Following the classification of corrective feedback proposed by Long (1996), in the forum e-tutor usually provides negative evidence and explicit information about what is unacceptable. When the composition is very well-done, e-tutor edits directly the post of the student and writes the correct form in the brackets. Through the command "Edit" displayed at the bottom of every post, the correction is highlighted in blue.

Figure 1: Corrective feedback in the thematic forum

When the composition is less accurate and more revisions are required, instead, the e-tutor copies and pastes the text in a separate document. Here he/she marks the mistakes with a bar, rewrites the correct forms and highlights them in yellow. The mistakes are not deleted because it is important for the students to reflect on their mistakes and to compare the right form with the wrong one. Once completed the revision, the document is saved and attached to the teacher's reply to the original post.

Figure 2: Corrective feedback in the forum

When the students commits the same kind of mistakes more the once, the teacher provides some metalinguistic information in the forum and short grammatical explanation so that every course participant can reflect upon it.

Figure 3: Grammar explanation in the forum

3. Teacher-students synchronous interaction: the chat

In the course Italian Language @ Culture e-tutor and students can also interact in real time through words in the chat room named *Students meet their teacher*. It is a sort of on-line counseling session guided by the e-tutor, who like a moderator, does and answers to questions, discuss with learners about their problems and gives them materials to expand the vocabulary and the grammar of the unit
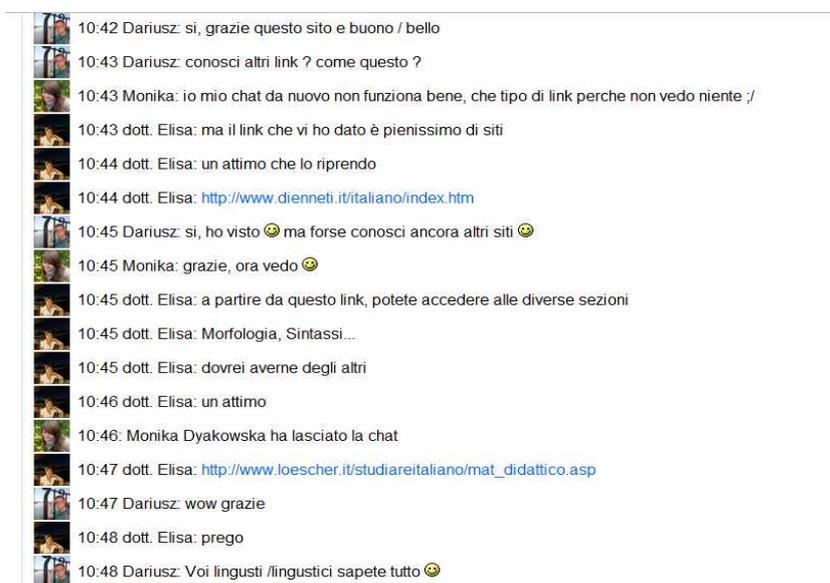
Figure 4 Teacher-student inetraction in chat

The chat represents an excellent occasion of cultural exchange between Italian and Polish customs and habits. At Christmas and at Easter, for example, course participants compare the traditions of the two countries. In order to facilitate the comprehension of the vocabulary related to specific national cooking traditions and as a consequence to foster the intercultural exchange, learners and the e-tutor rely on "Google Images" to elicit the ingredients of traditional meals.

Figure 5: Intercultural exchange in chat

Like the forum, e-tutor provides corrective feedback during the on-line synchronous interaction. Nevertheless, unlike the forum, in the chat room the students are not offered with negative evidence and explicit information about the mistake. On the contrary, the e-tutor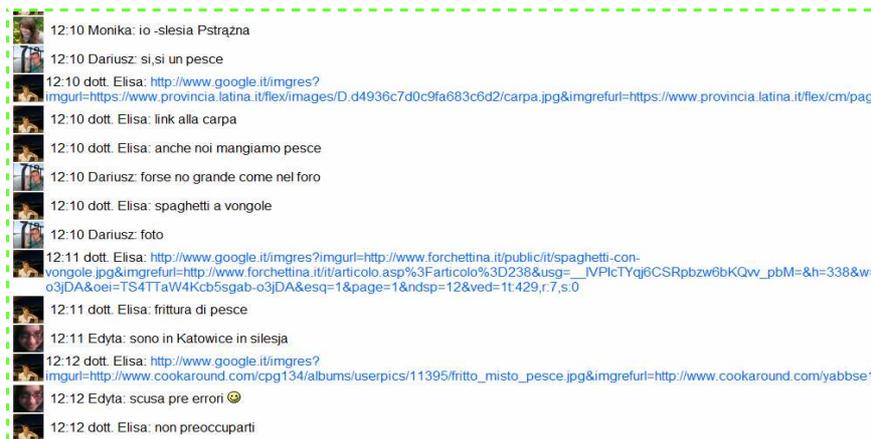 reacts to their mistakes with what Schachter (1991) names "implicit correction", that is repetitions, recasts, clarification requests or he/she rewrites the correct form in capital letter.
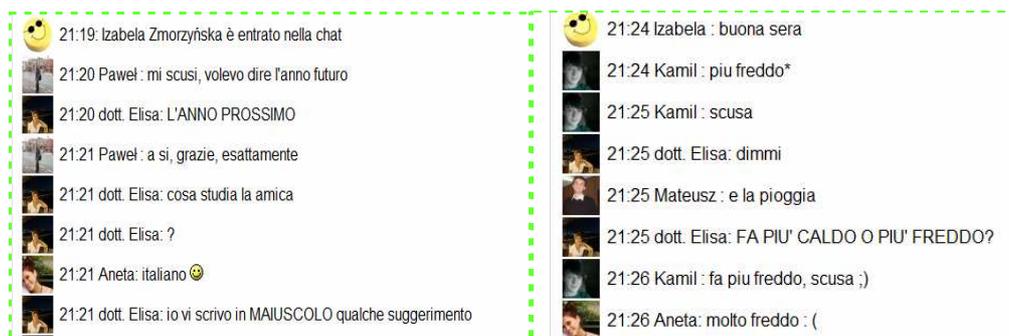
Figure 6: Implicit correction in the chat

These strategies proved to have positive effects on the learners because they show to understand the mistakes and repair shortly after.

In the end, Polish students do not use the chat only to communicate with their e-tutor in Italian, but also with each other in Polish after the teacher has left the chat.

4. Teaching/learning interaction

One of the main educational purposes of the course Italian Language @ Culture has been to integrate teaching-student interaction with the presence and supporting activities of peer tutors. According to the teaching targets of the course, the peer tutors are Italian students with a B2 or C1 level in two foreign languages at least. Moreover, they have all received a deep and complete education in language teaching in order to play their role - as a partner in guided conversation activities and as a facilitator of learning process (Fratter, 2004) - with competence and proficiency.

4.1. Collaborative interaction: e-counsellor/peer-tutors/students. The peer-tutoring programme

In order to carry out a successful tutoring programme during the course, the three main phases of Gordon's guidelines (2005) were followed: a) the selection of participants and targets; b) the training of peer tutors; c) the monitoring of tutoring activities.

Firstly, the tutoring roles were assigned to some Italian trainee students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University "L'Orientale" since they were supposed to better understand their foreign partners' difficulties in the learning process. Secondly, the selected peer tutors were trained about educational and social skills, all the learning units and the communicative tools implemented into the course. During the second phase, every Italian peer tutor was coupled with a Polish student and asked to follow him/her during the whole course.

Finally, in the third phase of monitoring, a linguistic e-counsellor has the aim to control all the tutoring activities by collecting information through on-line questionnaires, posts and e-mails, and giving participants suggestions about targets, methods and learning techniques. The e-counsellor is always available for both foreign students and Italian peer tutors to clarify doubts and give guidelines about teaching and technical problems.

Shortly after the training period, Italian peer tutors start interacting with their foreign partners through two communicative channels: one synchronous, the other asynchronous.

The synchronous interaction is carried out in the chat *Web Cafè*, which allows a free and true communication not necessarily related to the topics of the learning units. It is an on-line space where foreign students and Italian peer tutors can chat freely, in order to socialize and improve their mutual knowledge in an informal environment without the presence of teacher. Coming back to the virtual e-learning platform, the relationship among peer tutors and students is developed through the asynchronous communication as well, in the forum *Let's communicate in the class*, which was conceived as a virtual space where students can meet each other, also at the presence of teacher. This forum represents a moment when students can introduce themselves to their teacher and course mates, exchange ideas and opinions with their Italian peer tutors and ask for help during their learning process.

4.2. Task-based oral production: Skype conversation activities

The analysis of the peer tutor-student interaction can be completed by mentioning the possibility for Polish students to discuss orally through Skype about the topics of the unit with their Italian partners.

At the end of every unit, during the guided conversation activities, foreign students can practice and improve their language abilities. Indeed, through Skype, they cannot only talk with their peer tutors in order to extend their knowledge of Italian language and culture, but they can also learn the right pronunciations and get the inside scoop on local slang.

This type of informal learning is encouraged through multimedia tools which are external to Moodle platform as well, since the social and collaborative dimension has always a crucial role in the Italian Language @ Culture course. Indeed, the virtual classroom on the platform, where students learn in a structured formal context, has been integrated with a group on Facebook dedicated to students of Italian, where they learn more by interacting with Italian students in an even more motivating informal space without any constraint of time, rhythms and objectives.

In conclusion, several and significant advantages have been observed about the tutoring programme. One of the most important regards the type of environment where the linguistic interaction with a peer tutor happens: it is a virtual but also friendly space which helps to neutralize the emotional factors that may often set back learning process, such as the fear of receiving corrections or to be judged by teacher. Moreover, the role of peer tutors is crucial

because they are able to facilitate the comprehension of the proposed contents, by being as mediators among Italian linguistic and cultural input and Polish students.

5. Developing awareness and autonomy

According to Little (1990), autonomy is a "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action". One of the aims of the Italian Language @ Culture is the promotion of learner awareness and autonomy.

This course has a fundamental role not only in improving Italian language learning but also in fostering a student-centred environment. Here, instruction is not simply delivered through a traditional teacher/learner relationship; we tried, indeed, to design a course where students could act as producers and not only as consumers of their learning (Holec 1987) giving them the opportunity to participate actively in the learning process taking a more interactive relationship with the language course. At the same time teachers acted as facilitators of the learning process giving advice, providing explanations, suggesting methods and techniques and the learning materials were considered as potential resources that students could choose to use according to their preferences (Holec 1987).

Since among the competencies required by distance language teachers White (2003) quotes the ability to "support students at a distance in taking responsibility for their learning", we have tried to develop this responsibility through awareness, understanding and reflection.

These three processes are developed at the end of each learning unit, where we proposed to Polish students and Italian peer tutors three online self-assessment questionnaires (*What did you learn?*, *What about peer-tutoring* - for Polish students and for Italian peer-tutors – see par. 5.1) , to help them reflect upon both their learning process and tutoring activities.

The Italian language counsellor has also helped students to develop autonomy through chats, forums and periodical e-mails with the aim of monitoring not only the peer-tutoring project but also the individual learning activities that students could develop through some the online resources available in the virtual classroom.

The structure of the course emphasizes the importance of learner independence also providing learners with resources helping them to develop a certain degree of control by making choices. Indeed, in one section of the course we provided a selected and commented webography to give learners the opportunity of building autonomous learning pathways using online resources dedicated to Italian language learning.

The webography section offers a great variety of resources dedicated to the Italian language and culture. It has been conceived to allow students to work independently and in a more flexible way creating individualized Internet pathways, based on the resources available on the web, to practice the Italian language. The section provides a web guide with a list of links to websites, previously selected and classified by level, skill and subject, with a short description of the activities available to students.

5.1. Self-evaluation and self- monitoring

In the course we tried to develop the responsibility for students' learning through awareness, understanding and reflection, which have been elicited by three online end-of-unit questionnaires, created by the SurveyMonkey software. Addressed to both foreign students and Italian peer tutors, these forms are aimed at inviting them to reflect upon both their learning process and tutoring activities. The first form *What did you learn?*, addressed only to foreign students, consists of specific questions focused on verifying the real achievement of the initial targets in each learning unit.
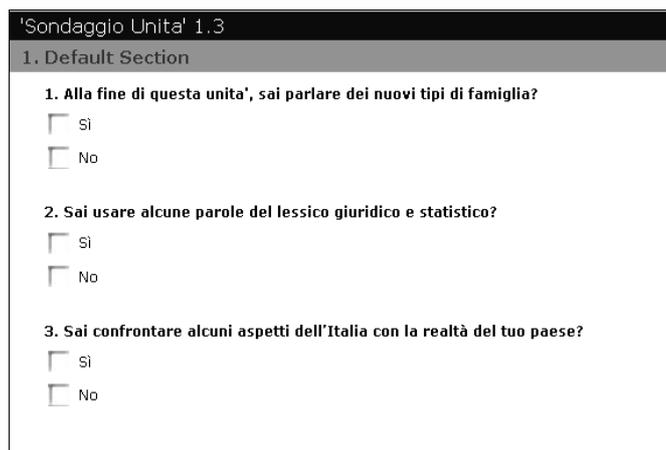
Figure 7: Questionnaire - *What did you learn?*

The second form, *What about peer tutoring?*, instead, has two different versions, one for Polish students and one for Italian peer tutors. The questions, aimed at a self-monitoring about practical, organizational and cognitive aspects, regard the duration and frequency of on-line meeting among students and their learning partners, the communicative tools they used during guided conversation activities at the end of each unit, the type of help needed by students, and the student's satisfaction degree about the tutoring program.

Finally, the on-line questionnaires non only allow students to become aware of their learning process, but they also allow teachers to analyze - from a cognitive, compensative and social point of view - the learning strategies used by foreign students and suggested by Italian peer tutors, and to intervene with extra-activities and suggestions to facilitate students.

5.2. Meta-cognitive reflection: assessing learning strategies

"Monitoring the procedure of acquisition" and "evaluating what has been acquired" are two of the key concepts of Holec's definition of learner autonomy (Holec 1981). To promote autonomy and to help student reflect on their learning process, we designed a phase of meta-cognitive reflection, carried out through the online questionnaire dedicated to peer-tutoring activities: *What about peer-tutoring?*

Since according to Oxford, language learning strategies are "keys to greater autonomy and more meaningful learning" and " teachers play an important role in helping students develop and use strategies in more effective ways" (Oxford 1990), in our survey, Polish students and peer-tutors were also asked to investigate about the strategies used during the collaborative interactions. The online questionnaire was designed on the basis of Oxford's taxonomy of learning strategies with a particular emphasis on the reflection on meta-cognitive, affective and social strategies used during students and peer-tutors online oral interactions through Skype.

This phase has also been useful to teachers and course designers who could evaluate indirectly student's learning and the peer-tutoring programme and suggest resources, activities and strategies to help students to reach their objectives. In the Italian Language @ Culture course, meta-cognitive reflection has taken the form of an assessment of the strategies used during the learning process. As self-assessment provides "one of the most effective means of developing both critical self-awareness of what it is to be a learner, and skills in learning how to learn" (Nunan 1988), through the process of self-assessment of language learning strategies, we tried to help Polish students to develop awareness of the learning process and to take more responsibility for their learning.

9

6. Conclusions and further developments

In the courses entitled "Italian Language @ Culture" traditional language teaching techniques and innovative computer applications for distance education merge togetherThe teacher is not a disseminator of information anymore, but a facilitator of learning (O'Neil, 2009) who uses the technologies their students are familiar with to meet their educational needs. At the same time students cannot limit to absorb passively the input from their teacher, but they are encouraged to become autonomous learner and accountable for their learning process.

On the basis of the brilliant results in the end of the course achievement test, it is possible to assert that the combination between face-to-face instruction and distance education is a winning strategy to teach and learn a second language. In addition, the experience of the course represents a powerful means for research on second language acquisition. The collection of materials produced by the students – both writings and talks - is a significant corpus both for the language teacher, who can constantly verify the progress in students' interlanguage and for the second language acquisition researcher, who could use these materials in order to analyse errors, understand reasons for successful acquisition or fossilization, and to infer new acquisition strategies depending on the different learning styles.

7. Bibliography

Benson, P. & Voller, P. (eds.) (1997). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning.* London: Longman.

Fratter, I. (2004). Tecnologie per l'insegnamento delle lingue. Roma: Carocci.

Gordon, E.E. (2005). Peer Tutoring. A teacher's resource guide. Oxford: Scarecrow Education.

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning.* Oxford: Pergamon.

Holec, H. (1987). "The Learner as a Manager. Managing Learning or Managing to Learn?". In Wenden, A. & Rubin, J. (eds.). *Learner Strategies In Language Learning.* London: Prentice-Hall International.

Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition.* London: Pergamon.

Jonassen, D. et al. (2008). *Meaningful Learning with Technology* (3rd edn). New Jersey: Pearson.

Elia, A. & De Santo, M. (2011). "Moodle & didattica dell'italiano L2: un percorso di "Lingua e Cultur@ Italiana online". In Baldoni, M. et al. (eds.). *E-Learning con Moodle in Italia: una sfida tra passato, presente e futuro.* Torino: Seneca Edizioni, Torino.

Little, D. (1990). "Autonomy in Language Learning". In Gathercole, I. (eds.). *Autonomy in Language Learning.* London: CILT.

Long, M. (1996). The role of linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W. C. Ritchie & B. K. Bahtia (Eds.), *Handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 413-468). New York: Academic Press.

Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner Centred Curriculum.* Cambridge*:* Cambridge University Press.

Rivoltella, P.C. (ed.) (2006). *E-tutor. Profili, metodi, strumenti*. Roma: Carocci.

Schachter, J. (1991). "Corrective feedback in historical perspective". In *Second Language Research,* n° 7, pp. 89-102.

Herring S. (ed.). (1996). Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Publishers Company.

O'Malley*, J.M. &* Chamot*, A.U.* (*1990*). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Neil, T. (2009). "How Distance Education Has Changed Teaching and the Role of the Instructor". In *Information Systems Education Journal,* vol. 7, n° 48, pp.1-11.

Oxford, R.L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know.* New York: Newbury House Publishers.

Tyler, T. R. (2002). "Is The Internet Changing Social Life? It Seems The More Things Change, The More Say The Same". In *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 58, n°1, pp. 195-205.

Warschauer M. & Kern, R. (eds.) (2002). Network-based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice. Cambridge: CUP.

White, C.(2003). Language Learning in Distance Education. Cambridge: CUP.

Biodata

Maria De Santo is self-access centre manager and language counselor in the language centre of the University of Naples "L'Orientale". Her main research interest focuses on English and ICT and autonomy in language learning. She has published on the use of self-access centers and on independence in language learning..
Email: mdesanto@unior.it
Address: CILA, University of Naples "L'Orientale", 59, Nuova Marina street. 80133. Naples. Italy.

Elisa Pellegrino is Assistant professor of Intercultural approach to Language learning at the University of Naples "L'Orientale". She defended her Phd dissertation on Biolinguistics and Language Acquisition in April 2010. Her research interests focus on Italian as L2, deafness and vocal language acquisition, spoken communication and prosody.
Email: pellegrino.elisa.1981@gmail.com
Address: CILA, University of Naples "L'Orientale", 59, Nuova Marina street. 80133. Naples. Italy.

Luisa Salvati is a doctoral candidate in Linguistics at the University of Naples "L' Orientale" about the prosody-pragmatics interface in argumentative speech in Italian L2. Her research interests are: second language acquisition and teaching, pragmatic, prosody, intercultural communication.
Email: luisa.salvati@gmail.com
Address: CILA, University of Naples "L'Orientale", 59, Nuova Marina street. 80133. Naples. Italy

The authors discussed and elaborated together the article. Maria De Santo has the responsibility for the following paragraphs: 1, 5, 5.2; Elisa Pellegrino has the responsibility for the following paragraphs: Abstract, 2, 3, 6; Luisa Salvati has the responsibility for the following paragraphs 4, 4.1, 4.2, 5.1,6.