

Passport to Italy

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Are you interested in learning the Italian language but you are fed up with studying hours and hours out of a book? Do you need a smarter way to learn? Would you like to know more about Italian culture? Since June 2008 there has been a better solution: Passport to Italy!

SUBJECTS

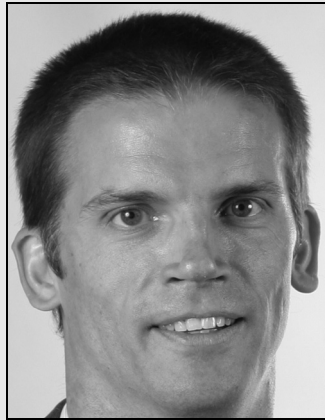
The idea of the project "Passport to Italy" originated at a convention between the Fondazione Ugo Bordoni (FUB) and the Tuscia University of Viterbo. This convention mainly dealt with research concerning phonetics and voice.

Fondazione Ugo Bordoni is an institution of high technological culture that

works on inventing new strategies to be developed in the communication field. It also assists the Department of Communication in undertaking and solving possible technical, economical, financial, managerial, normative, and regulatory problems encountered in its activities.

As written in the official Web site,

FUB has a sound experience, recognized at an international level, in several areas which include radio broadcasting, optical communications, security in telecommunication, network issues, multimedia communications, and others. At an international level, it cooperates with several institutions by participating in relevant standardization matters for European research programs.



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Tuscia is an Italian University close to Rome with six main faculties: agriculture; cultural heritage; economics; languages and foreign modern literatures; mathematical, physical, and natural sciences; and political science. It is one of the main research centers in Italy about languages—Italian and others—and about the Italian culture in particular.

Two years ago, Tuscia University and the Fondazione Ugo Bordoni decided to work together on a new project concerning the Italian language, to be applied to an e-learning course. In order to achieve this goal, Tuscia University of Viterbo was committed by Fondazione Ugo Bordoni to provide content by creating a team led by Barbara Turchetta, a specialist of Italian and foreign languages, with long research experience in local dialects.

Andrea Paoloni of the Fondazione Ugo Bordoni was the project leader.

The technical part of the project was managed by Infobyte S.p.A., a private company founded in 1989, provider of integrated communication, multimedia, virtual reality, and learning, whose mission is “technology to communicate!”

All the information presented in this article was gathered from interviews of Barbara Turchetta (Tuscia), head of content, Andrea Paoloni (FUB), and Jose Luis Sanchez Soler, Infobyte broadcasting project manager.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the project was to manage and plan a clever Italian course, much more Italian-culture oriented than the traditional ones already available.

In particular, as Turchetta said,

the aim of the project was to give a general idea of culture and daily life in Italy instead of giving a traditional vision of our nation that is set in course books. Books indeed are mainly dedicated to history, literature, and history of art. The main reason was to give a chance to for-

eigners to better understand Italy and Italians: the way they think, the way they work together, the way they live. For example we have some modules which are focused on the family, the daily life in Italian families.

This objective was pursued through many educational choices: the most important one was to use some videos from an open archive of RAI Radio Televisione Italiana, the Italian public service broadcaster. During the design phase, the instructional designers gathered from this huge archive several videos concerning daily life in Italy in order to represent the Italian culture.

TARGET

The course Passport to Italy has been thought to be useful for those who are not able to attend Italian classes, for example those given by the Italian culture institutions in foreign countries. They are able through their computers to learn something more about the Italian culture and language. The course was therefore planned for different types of people who would be interested in the Italian language: it is intended for professionals, for example, who might use the language to interact and converse with Italian professionals. And also to Italian or foreign students—school or university ones—who wish to learn a little Italian to keep in touch with Italian friends.

The course is also intended for specialists, for example those working in technical subjects such as restoration or art history who might need to learn some technical Italian words, in order to be more closely connected with the Italian working context.

METHODOLOGY AND COURSE STRUCTURE

The original idea of the Passport to Italy project was to plan a course of seven lessons, but in the end it was decided to move



Figure 1. The cartoon-like tutor.

to a shorter course of 30 modules of about 30 minutes each.

Each of these modules has been divided into three educational units and each unit contains a video chosen from the open archive of RAI Radio Televisione Italiana. This archive includes all the videos of the last 20 years which RAI has broadcasted on several channels. Each unit of the course is run by a cartoon-like tutor.

The last section of each unit concentrates on grammar and structural exercises. The instructional choice of these exercises is really interesting: they are inserted in each unit in a way that the learner doesn't know that they are grammar and structural exercises. This method has been used

in order not to force people to think about exercises: the evaluation section is in a way confused with other things that appear on the screen. All these exercises allow each student to know where he or she is during the course, if he or she has understood all the things he or she encountered in the unit.

In order to give more help to the student, the last screen of the unit gives him the idea of how many mistakes he did during these exercises, giving also suggestions on what to do. If he did very well he can go on and he can continue the course. If he didn't do very well, the tutor advises the student not to go on but to go back and start the course again.

So, looking at the whole course structure, each module can be divided into different sections: in the first one the module title is presented with a hint on the unit and a picture or an image related to the topic of the lesson.

The scene is accompanied by an evocative music in the background. Then a 2-3 minute video is presented: students can read the text of the video on the screen. So the idea of the objectives for each lesson is explained by the video (phonetics, morphology, syntax).

Furthermore, some images of the videos are presented separately, in order to underline important actions and concepts that will be treated with more accuracy in the section about the structures. Ten true/false questions follow, which the student should answer by clicking on the corresponding button.

The second section is dedicated to the new words that have to be mastered by the student during the unit. These 15-20 words

are taken from the text in the video or from the same semantic environment. Each word is shown by an image or an animation that represents its meaning. The student can find the same words also in the Glossary.

The third section is dedicated to linguistic structures presented in the unit (phonetic, morphology, syntax). All the explanations are given by the cartoon-like tutor, who writes them on a blackboard and pronounces some key-phrases.

The fourth section of the course is a game. The unit video is presented again, and text appears on the screen in karaoke style. At this point some expressions are read by professional speakers.

The last phase is the learning assessment: each student is provided with 10 true/false questions. Answers are given only to the first two units of each module and access to the third unit is restricted.

At the end there is a "self-contained" course with timing: this means that there is



Figure 2. The words.

no need for a physical teacher. Each student can attend the course from his own house or from the workplace at the time he prefers. This is probably an advantage for foreigners who decide to choose this kind of course.

TECHNOLOGY

The course was developed by Infobyte by assembling different kinds of media. Videos were linked to flash screens using a TV-like interface. On the bottom of the page the navigation buttons are placed to go forward and back through the unit screens.

On the left of the page there is a vertical menu composed of three items: the Guide, linked to some instructions about the course, the Glossary, to quickly reach new

words mastered during the course, and the Close button to log out of the course.

The learning environment is the platform Docent of the company Italdita. The choice of the platform was mandatory because it was the same used for other projects by the institutions involved. Each learning object is SCORM 1.2 compliant, and therefore interoperable with other platforms.

PHASES OF THE PROJECT

The activities were planned by the three parts involved in the process as three different groups that worked together, but also on their own.

Paoloni was committed to managing the whole process, the Tuscia University of Viterbo was engaged in content production,



Figure 3.

and Infobyte was in charge of content development.

The university team was composed of five members who worked on the course in order to create the contents of the 30 modules and the 90 units. All the contents were provided in one year.

The Infobyte team was composed of 4 instructional designers involved in storyboard reading and content analysis. Generally this is a hard job because subject matter experts (SME) are not always experts in distance education, so very good communication between them is necessary in order to have the best results on both the content side and the design side.

So, the instructional designer has to find the best way to represent content provided by the experts, but the last validation must be always given by the subject matter expert in order to avoid misunderstanding about the content.

After having completed the storyboard, the technical part of the job is finished: graphic designers create animations and pictures for the course screens, then they are developed, made SCORM 1.2 compliant, and uploaded on the Docent platform.

The last and most important phase of the whole process is the debug phase. After having uploaded the content, Tuscia's subject matter experts have to debug it by watching each unit accurately, looking for possible mistakes. These mistakes are written on a board and sent to Infobyte for correction.

The prototype of each unit is also submitted to a sample of the target population in order to observe their satisfaction and possible problems in attending the course in order to make it more usable, comfortable, and effective for the students.

All this exchange of materials and ideas is supervised by Paoloni.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

Paoloni, the project leader, told us of some very interesting initiatives—the next steps for this project. First of all, he wishes to give the student a certificate from Tuscia University or another institution, corresponding to the course level attended. This certificate will be given to the student only if he passes a regular exam about the course in a classroom with a residential teacher. It is a great opportunity for foreigners in Italy or worldwide who can write in their resume they have a recognized title of their knowledge of the Italian language.

The second goal Paoloni wants to reach in the next few years is to find an international institution that wants to diffuse the course worldwide.

Last but not least, after having found this institution, they will go on with the project by planning and managing intermediate- and advanced-level Italian courses.

Passport to Italy is a project that is going to grow in the future. In Italy it represents the achievement of a very important goal: for the first time public institutions and a private corporation joined together to create a course not strictly related to formal learning but to the diffusion of the Italian culture and way of life.

Another important strength of this course is the use of the videos taken by the RAI archive: Italian people consider it a cultural legacy and they are proud to diffuse those videos worldwide.

So, if you want to break with the past and learn Italian language in a smarter and more interesting way, click on Play and enjoy yourself!