

Original Article

THE AUGMENTED HORIZON OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION: THEORETICAL, METHODOLOGICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL SYNERGIES IN THE TEACHING OF ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the epistemological and pedagogical coordinates that shape the professional practice of university instructors of Italian as a foreign language in contemporary higher education. It argues that effective language teaching requires the integration of three interdependent dimensions: a sound theoretical understanding of language and language acquisition, principled methodological choices, and the critical integration of digital technologies.

Drawing on major developments in twentieth-century linguistics—from Saussurean structuralism to Chomskyan generative linguistics—and on constructivist and sociocultural approaches to learning, the article traces the development of language teaching towards inductive, communicative and task-based approaches. Particular attention is devoted to the contribution of Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Selinker's theory of interlanguage, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Bruner's concept of scaffolding. Within this theoretical framework, digital technologies and Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) are considered not as inherently disruptive forces, but as pedagogical affordances whose educational value depends on their principled integration into language-learning environments. Their potential lies in supporting differentiated input, extending opportunities for interaction beyond the classroom, facilitating personalised scaffolding and encouraging collaborative and multimodal forms of meaning-making.

The final section examines a selection of contemporary digital tools—including AI-based educational platforms, conversational large language models, gamified vocabulary applications and multimodal collaborative environments—in order to illustrate how technological practice can be meaningfully connected to established principles of language education.

Keywords: Language Education, Italian as a Foreign Language, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, Digital Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Teaching Italian as a foreign language in higher education increasingly requires a professional profile that extends well beyond the transmission of grammatical paradigms. The contemporary university language instructor acts as a designer and mediator of learning, operating at the intersection of three interdependent domains: theoretical knowledge, methodological competence and the critical integration of digital technologies.

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This multidimensional role requires teachers to make informed decisions about what language is, how languages are learned and how learning environments can be designed to promote meaningful communicative development. Technological innovation, in this perspective, cannot be considered independently of pedagogical theory. Its value depends on the extent to which it can support, extend or transform established processes of language learning without obscuring their fundamental human and social dimensions.

The purpose of this article is therefore to bring these dimensions into dialogue. It provides an integrated overview of the theoretical and methodological resources available to the contemporary instructor of Italian as a foreign language and examines the extent to which emerging technologies can be understood as a continuation—and, in some respects, an expansion—of established principles in language education.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: FROM LINGUISTIC SYSTEM TO COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Any informed pedagogical practice is ultimately grounded in assumptions about the nature of language. Contemporary language education has inherited important insights from the major linguistic theories of the twentieth century, while progressively moving beyond those elements that prove insufficient for understanding language as situated communicative action.

One of the most influential conceptual distinctions was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure between *langue*, understood as the abstract and socially shared system of language, and *parole*, the individual act of linguistic use [Saussure \(1916\)](#). Whereas more traditional forms of language teaching often concentrated primarily on the formal system of language, contemporary approaches increasingly recognise actual language use as a privileged point of access to the development and internalisation of that system.

The development of generative linguistics further transformed the theoretical landscape. Noam Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence—the speaker's implicit knowledge of language—and performance—the concrete use of language in actual communicative situations—provided an influential framework for understanding the relationship between underlying linguistic knowledge and observable production [Chomsky \(1965\)](#).

However, models centred primarily on an idealised speaker-listener proved insufficient for the pedagogical needs of foreign language education. A decisive conceptual shift was introduced by Dell Hymes through the notion of communicative competence [Hymes \(1972\)](#). From this perspective, knowing a language involves more than possessing formal grammatical knowledge. It also entails knowing how, when, where and with whom particular linguistic resources can appropriately be used.

The implications for language teaching are substantial. The educational objective cannot be limited to the acquisition of an abstract linguistic system. Learners must instead develop the capacity to mobilise linguistic resources appropriately in socially and communicatively situated contexts.

PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL MODELS: LEARNER-CENTRED LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The acquisition of a foreign language is a complex process involving cognitive, affective and social dimensions. Several influential theoretical models continue to provide useful conceptual tools for understanding the relationship between linguistic exposure, learner processing and language development.

Krashen's work remains particularly influential in discussions of the transition from linguistic input to acquisition [Krashen \(1985\)](#). His distinction between learning—a conscious and explicit process involving attention to linguistic form—and acquisition, understood as a more implicit process associated with meaningful communication, has had a significant impact on communicative approaches to language teaching.

Two concepts are especially relevant in this context: comprehensible input and the affective filter. The $i + 1$ hypothesis proposes that learners benefit from exposure to language that is broadly comprehensible while also containing elements slightly beyond their current level of competence. The affective filter, by contrast, draws attention to the role of psychological variables such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and low motivation. When such factors become particularly strong, they may interfere with learners' capacity to engage effectively with linguistic input.

The pedagogical management of learner error can similarly be illuminated by Larry Selinker's theory of interlanguage [Selinker \(1972\)](#). Learner production should not simply be interpreted as a collection of deviations from the target language. Rather, it may be understood as evidence of a developing and internally structured linguistic system. Errors can therefore provide important information about the hypotheses learners are constructing and testing as they progress towards greater competence.

A learner-centred approach also draws substantially on constructivist and sociocultural perspectives. Knowledge is not simply transmitted from teacher to learner but is progressively constructed through activity, interaction and participation. Two concepts are particularly important in this regard: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development [Vygotsky \(1934\)](#), understood as the space between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with appropriate support, and Bruner's concept of scaffolding [Bruner \(1983\)](#), referring to the temporary support structures that facilitate learning and are progressively withdrawn as learners become increasingly autonomous.

Together, these perspectives suggest that the teacher's role is not primarily that of a transmitter of knowledge but of a designer of conditions in which learners can progressively develop autonomy.

FROM THEORY TO CLASSROOM PRACTICE: INDUCTION AND THE TASK

The theoretical perspectives outlined above acquire pedagogical relevance only when translated into principled classroom practice. One of the most significant methodological developments in contemporary language education has been the increasing importance attributed to inductive learning.

Rather than presenting an abstract grammatical rule and subsequently requiring students to apply it, an inductive approach begins with meaningful linguistic data. Learners are exposed to texts and communicative situations and are encouraged to identify patterns, formulate hypotheses and engage in guided metalinguistic reflection. The teacher's role is therefore to structure opportunities for noticing and discovery rather than simply to transmit predetermined rules.

Within the Italian tradition of language education, this process may be organised through the *Unità di Apprendimento* (UdA), which follows a sequence inspired by the holistic principles associated with Gestalt psychology [Balboni \(2015\)](#): an initial global encounter with the text, followed by analytical exploration, subsequent synthesis and creative reuse, and finally a phase of explicit reflection and formal systematisation.

A further development of communicative language teaching can be found in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Within task-based approaches, the central organising principle is not an isolated grammatical structure but a meaningful task requiring learners to use language for a communicative purpose [Long \(1985\)](#).

A task may involve activities such as negotiating the terms of a rental agreement, resolving a problem with accommodation or collaboratively planning an event. In such contexts, grammar does not disappear from the learning process; rather, it is repositioned as a resource that learners draw upon in order to achieve communicative goals. This functional integration of form and meaning can contribute to the development of learner engagement and intrinsic motivation.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL ECOSYSTEM AND GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Within this theoretical and methodological framework, digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence should not be understood simply as external innovations imposed upon language education. Rather, they may be conceptualised as technological affordances capable of extending established pedagogical practices.

Their potential lies, among other things, in expanding opportunities for contact with the target language beyond classroom time, facilitating differentiated learning pathways and providing additional forms of personalised support. However, technology does not possess pedagogical value in itself. Its educational significance emerges from the relationship between technological functionality, learning objectives and instructional design.

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE DIFFERENTIATION OF LINGUISTIC INPUT

Generative Artificial Intelligence offers new possibilities for differentiating and adapting linguistic input. AI-based educational platforms may allow instructors to transform authentic materials into versions that are more accessible to learners at different levels of proficiency. A single text can potentially be simplified, reformulated or adapted to different CEFR levels and accompanied by comprehension activities or language-focused tasks calibrated to particular learning needs.

From this perspective, digital technologies may support a more flexible form of textual scaffolding. Rather than preparing multiple versions of the same material manually, teachers can use AI-assisted systems to generate differentiated resources which they subsequently evaluate, revise and integrate into their pedagogical planning.

Conversational Large Language Models (LLMs) may also provide opportunities for guided language practice. Systems such as ChatGPT and Claude can be used as conversational partners in structured role-play activities, allowing learners to rehearse communicative situations in a relatively low-pressure environment.

For students who experience anxiety when speaking in front of peers, such interaction may offer an additional space in which to experiment with language, test hypotheses about their interlanguage and receive forms of feedback before participating in more demanding interpersonal communication. The pedagogical effectiveness of such activities, however, depends on careful teacher guidance and on learners' awareness of the limitations of AI-generated feedback.

Recent research on AI-assisted language learning has increasingly examined the potential of large language models to support language practice and interaction [Kohnke et al. \(2023\)](#). These developments suggest that human-machine interaction may become a complementary environment for language development, provided that it does not replace the social and interpersonal dimensions of authentic communication.

GAMIFICATION AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Digital environments can also support the consolidation of vocabulary and morphosyntactic structures through elements associated with gamification. Applications such as Quizlet provide learners with interactive activities and opportunities for independent study, including forms of spaced repetition that may support the retention and retrieval of lexical items.

Tools such as Wordwall enable teachers to create interactive classroom activities—including quizzes, matching tasks and other game-based formats—that can be used during introductory activities, revision or formative assessment. Their pedagogical value lies not simply in their capacity to make learning entertaining, but in their potential to increase participation and provide repeated opportunities for retrieval.

Similarly, platforms based on songs and audiovisual materials, such as LyricsTraining (now also associated with the name LingoClip), can introduce gamified forms of listening and language practice. The combination of auditory and visual input may support learner engagement and provide opportunities to work with authentic or semi-authentic linguistic materials through interactive completion activities.

MULTIMODALITY AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Contemporary communicative competence increasingly involves the ability to interpret and produce meaning through multiple semiotic resources. University students are therefore required to develop forms of multimodal literacy that extend beyond verbal language and involve the interaction of written, visual and auditory modes.

Platforms such as Flip, formerly known as Flipgrid, can extend opportunities for oral production beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom. Through asynchronous video discussions, students may record short contributions—for example, a review of an Italian film—and respond to the contributions of their peers.

Such activities can support collaborative learning, provide additional opportunities for oral production and allow instructors to offer more targeted feedback. The asynchronous format may also reduce some of the pressures associated with immediate public speaking by allowing learners greater control over the production process.

Similarly, visual design environments such as Canva for Education make it possible to move beyond conventional written assignments towards more complex multimodal products, including historical infographics, tourism brochures and short-form digital publications. Students working collaboratively can construct texts in the target language while simultaneously considering visual organisation, audience and communicative purpose.

In this way, linguistic accuracy becomes integrated with broader considerations of multimodal communication.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of Italian as a foreign language in the digital age requires a coherent epistemological and pedagogical architecture. The introduction of educational software and Artificial Intelligence should not be treated as a decorative addition to established teaching practices or as a temporary technological trend. Their use should instead be critically connected to established understandings of language, learning, interaction and learner development.

When integrated purposefully, digital technologies may extend several principles associated with influential theoretical traditions in language education. They may facilitate differentiated input, provide additional forms of scaffolding, create opportunities for interaction and support learner autonomy. Nevertheless, these potential benefits do not eliminate the central role of the teacher.

The contemporary university instructor must therefore be capable of managing the increasing complexity of the learning environment. This involves not only selecting and operating digital tools, but also determining when, why and under what pedagogical conditions they should be used.

The most productive relationship between technology and language education is consequently not one in which Artificial Intelligence attempts to replace the teacher. Rather, it is one in which technological tools, under informed human guidance, extend the teacher's capacity to design learning environments that support interaction, motivation and learner autonomy.

Only through such a critical synthesis can technology move beyond its status as a digital artefact and become a genuinely meaningful resource for language education. The future of Italian as a foreign language teaching may therefore be understood not as a choice between human expertise and technological innovation, but as the construction of an augmented pedagogical environment in which technology remains firmly embedded within—and accountable to—the fundamentally social nature of language learning.

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