



Expanding design skills for language teachers: a corpus-based web application for ‘language for work’ content creation in Italian L2

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Abstract. Many adult migrants lacking L2 linguistic autonomy cannot afford the time to master host countries’ languages before providing for their basic needs. Thus, second language training that focuses on occupational integration is at times more urgent than a more generally social one, as the European ‘language for work’ approach suggests. Given the shortage of both support sector experts in Italian L2 classes and an appropriate variety of teaching materials for beginners, this paper introduces a PhD work-in-progress project proposing an IT procedure which enables language teachers to collaboratively design specialised multimedia content for beginners, thus enhancing work-related second language development. The article discusses the results of some preliminary surveys and argues the importance of the use of technology when expanding teachers’ design skills.

Keywords: ‘language for work’, wikis, collaborative knowledge creation, teacher training, specialised corpora.

1. A ‘language for work’

European policies require migrants to demonstrate their proficiency in host country languages before they may participate in all aspects of society. Yet many adult migrants lacking L2 linguistic autonomy cannot take the time to master them before providing for their basic needs. Obstacles to professional integration can have a major impact both on the status of the individual, and on the quality of the socio-economic tissue of the host community.

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The ‘language for work’ approach² promoted by the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe (Beacco, Krumm, Little, & Thalgott, 2017; Braddell & Grünhage-Monetti, 2018), proposes to develop language skills and professional competence at the same time. This methodology has had no adequate response in Italy, even if the country is dealing with stable migratory flows (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2019). At the institutional level, the country lacks specific courses for migrants wishing to enter the workforce, an appropriate variety of teaching materials for beginners, and experts supporting language teachers (Michelini, 2020).

Therefore, language teachers struggle to find specific teaching aids. In the focus group and surveys conducted for the AMIF³ project *La lingua italiana per l'integrazione e per il lavoro*, all Italian L2 teachers reported difficulty in finding both beginner-specific teaching materials and specialised content which is reliable and responds to work-related needs (Cognigni, Michelini, & Vitrone, 2022, pp. 80-93).

With the shortage of both sector experts and an appropriate variety of teaching materials for beginners, the objective of this project is to enable language teachers to create work-related teaching content. Awaiting reorganisation from the Italian government training scheme aimed at adult migrants, the idea is to enable teachers to undertake this mode in their educational institutions, hence improving beginners’ likelihood of access to work.

2. Prototype and procedure

To identify the most strategic economic sector in Italy, statistical research was conducted, the chosen realm being catering (Michelini, 2020). The focus was placed on an A2 CEFR⁴ level audience, a wide group who relies on a limited number of sector-specific training aids (Cognigni et al., 2022, pp. 80-93). Hence, a web application and an IT procedure were introduced to enable language teachers to collaboratively design specialised multimedia teaching content, applicable as *the most reliable* in relation to the work context.

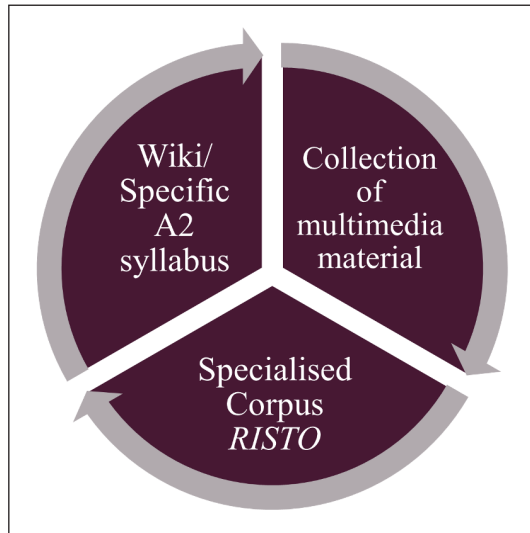
2. European experiences on LanguageforWork at <https://languageforwork.ecml.at/>

3. Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

4. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The IT prototype for content creation consists of different IT environments (Figure 1), such as a web application, a wiki⁵ aimed for collaborative implementation, a storage space for multimedia teaching items, and potential future training. Furthermore, a sector-specific A2 level syllabus as training model and wiki's interface is needed, as well as a tailor-made specialised corpus – *RISTO* – and a collection of specialised multimedia material.

Figure 1. IT prototype structure

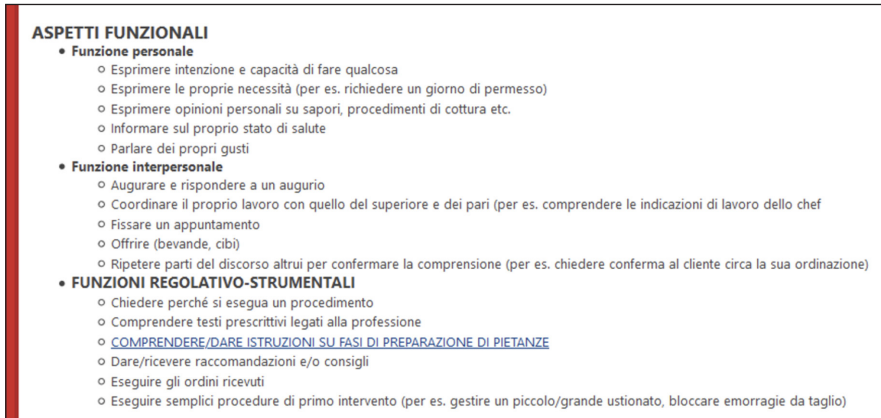


The wiki application was created in PBWorks⁶. Its interface shows the syllabus with its typical catering communicative acts – the necessary learning objectives (Figure 2). It enables teachers to implement entries of the virtual syllabus picking elements to be processed from a multimedia collection – which stores previously selected multimedia items – or from outside of it, thus enriching the collection and the corpus with new context-related material. Thanks to teachers' skills, content can be refined through the specialised corpus, then adapted to meet learners' language levels, and finally, redeposited within the digital syllabus-wiki entry, ready to deepen a precise learning objective.

5. A wiki is a collaborative website which allows authors to edit and store information in a shared environment using a browser interface (Cantoni & Tardini, 2008, p. 31).

6. PBworks. (<https://www.pbworks.com/>).

Figure 2. Wiki's interface⁷



Teachers can store various multimedia resources in each syllabus-wiki entry (Figure 3). These could be portions of written language, images, audio, files in various formats, external links, and videos (Figure 4), which are particularly valuable as a context for simulation, preparatory to real practice.

Figure 3. Wiki's resources⁸



7. Excerpt of the wiki's interface showing virtual training objectives to be implemented.

8. Excerpt of multimedia resources provided in each wiki entry.

Figure 4. Videos



Multimedia teaching items are designed to meet basic training needs, supplementing traditional paper-based teaching aids. Moreover, a complete training course using only the application is imaginable as a stand-alone digital textbook. In this regard, students report a positive reception to the use of wikis for L2 learning and their participation in courses significantly increases (Sánchez-Gómez, Pinto-Llorente & García-Peñalvo, 2017).

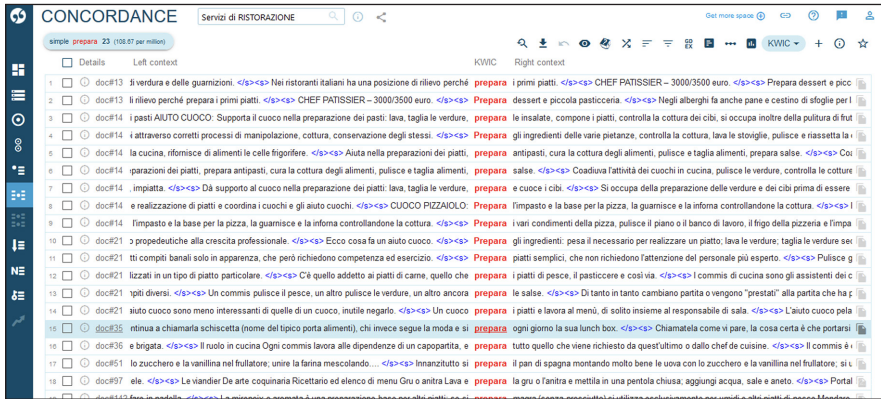
2.1. *RISTO* corpus

Tailor-made in Sketch Engine⁹, the specialised corpus *RISTO* represents the language of catering. BootCat¹⁰ was added for the semi-automatic retrieval of texts from the web. Currently, it contains about 350 texts and is continually expanding. Its focus is on researchers of specialised languages and their examination of communicative productions “in their social use” (Pietrandrea, 2012, p. 272). In addition, teachers can benefit from corpus resources to improve pedagogical practice, and when designing data-intensive teaching activities (Römer, 2011).

RISTO compensates for teachers’ limited specialised knowledge, enabling both searches and checking of specialised linguistic models, and helps teachers create portions of written language useful for various educational purposes. In the absence of a sector expert, teachers are brought closer to information *accuracy* and trustworthy introductory professional information is provided (Figure 5).

9. Sketch Engine. (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>).

10. BootCat. (<https://bootcat.dipintra.it/>).

Figure 5. Concordance in *RISTO*¹¹

2.2. Technology, collaboration, and teacher's skills

A preliminary survey was carried out through close and open-ended questions in Google Forms during a teacher ‘language for work’ training course in digital environment within the AMIF project. A sample of 44 respondents of teachers and teachers in training provided the analysed data. Regarding the corpus, 88.6% of beginner-user respondents¹² would use it again ‘to compensate for limited domain knowledge’ or simply ‘to find good examples of specialised language’. Asked about their main needs in creating teaching materials, the majority emphasised ‘finding textual content’, immediately followed by ‘finding audio-visual content’.

In this collaborative project – taking its cue from *constructivism* (Jonassen, 1994), numerous teachers can contribute, intervening in the creation phase, relying on the expertise of other members, to the benefit of time and quality of the final product. In this regard, 95.5% of the sample rated the co-construction of ‘language for work’ teaching activities in the digital environment ‘very positively’. Finally, 97.7% declared their interest in repeating a course focused on the collaborative creation of multimedia teaching materials, thus attesting to a growing interest in the use of technology in design and classroom training.

11. Excerpt of a concordance in *RISTO* corpus.

12. The sample received training and tried the tool during the course.

3. Conclusions

In this project, technology has been adopted to exploit the advantages of multimedia use in future language training. As preliminary data suggest, specialised teaching content design can happen in an IT collaborative environment, utilising the teaching teams' competence and the impact of technology on educational design. With the study still ongoing, definitive results are yet to be reached and final surveys need to be conducted. However, preliminary results demonstrate the strength of the content creation method and a first digital prototype for adult migrant's work-focused training has been created. Moreover, surveys confirm that IT brings significant advantages in strengthening teachers' design skills, as well as facilitating the sharing of common knowledge and expertise. Finally, this model can easily be replicated for other professions and language levels.

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