

ORGANISING A “SERATA ITALIANA”: A PROJECT-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCE WITH FLEMISH STUDENTS OF L2 ITALIAN

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the European Council has undertaken a comprehensive revision of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020), synthesising extensive research and practical insights from the field of language teaching and learning. Despite incorporating new and pivotal content to align with the ever-evolving, multilingual, and multicultural global society, the foundational conceptual framework of the CEFR 2020 remains consistent with that of 2001: the core principles of holistic and lifelong learning find their pedagogical application in the action-oriented approach (Boldizsár *et al.*, 2003; Piccardo, North, 2019). The action-oriented approach is learner-centred and envisions language users as *social agents*, that is participants actively engaged in the process of language acquisition. It entails the development of a broad spectrum of competencies for the realisation of *tasks*, both general and specific to communication. Within this perspective, the primary objective of language education is the development of *agency*, defined as the ability to execute social actions across diverse societal contexts through language (Delibaş, Günday, 2016). Language users as social agents thus acquire pragmatic skills alongside communicative skills, and emphasis is placed on «the acquisition of skills [rather] than learning of knowledge» (Delibaş, Günday, 2016: 146)². Communication becomes meaningful through actions learners perform autonomously, under the guidance of teachers, who take the role of facilitators (Amorati, Hajek, 2021; Boldizsár *et al.*, 2003; Van Lier, 2007). Derived from the principles and guidelines of the action-oriented approach, numerous language teaching methodologies have emerged in recent decades, including task-based, content-based, project-based, experiential, and computer-assisted methods (refer to Van Lier, 2007, for a comprehensive overview). These approaches share a focus on the learner’s role as an active individual with linguistically-mediated social objectives.

This study delves into a didactic experience situated within the framework of project-based learning (PBL) realised with adult learners of Italian as a second language (L2), i.e. master students enrolled at the Department of Applied Linguistics at Ghent University in Belgium. The project examined in this study involved organising an event as part of the “Italian Business and Public Communication” course within the students’ master program. To our

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² Scholars highlight a complementary relationship between the action-oriented approach and the communicative approach, with the former introducing a social dimension to the latter (Bourguignon, 2006; Delibaş, Günday, 2016).

knowledge, this project configuration represents an innovation in the realm of PBL. As suggested by its name, the fundamental characteristic of PBL is the fact that language learners are engaged in the realisation of a project beyond the traditional classroom setting (Gras-Valázquez, 2019; Stoller, 2012). As highlighted below, notable strengths of this approach are its authenticity and its versatility (Stoller, 2012): the project can align with learners’ interests and be customised for diverse educational settings. Through the analysis of students’ auto-reflections, we investigate the efficiency of event organisation as a versatile didactic tool, and we demonstrate that it offers several advantageous aspects for language learning.

In the next section, the existing literature on PBL is revised (section 2). In section 3, we present our study describing the project, the rationale behind it, as well as the university course in which it has been realised. Sections 4 and 5 respectively describe the methodology and illustrate the main findings, which are discussed in section 6. Finally, section 7 draws the conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-based learning has received significant academic attention in recent years and it has been applied to several fields at all levels of education (Kokotsaki *et al.*, 2016). The theoretical background of PBL is provided by learning theories that underline the importance of autonomy and creativity in fostering motivation and academic attainment in different curricular fields (Deci, Ryan, 2009; Fisher, 2004; Masciotra *et al.*, 2007; Ryan, Deci, 2002). Across its different declinations, it appears from the review of extant literature that basic ingredients and principles of PBL are:

- the learner, who is seen as an active participant in the learning process and as immersed in a social environment in which he/she achieves communicative goals through social interactions;
- the teacher, who assumes the role of facilitator, scaffolds the students through the various phases of the learning process while promoting autonomy and critical self-evaluation;
- the project, which entails an authentic, real-world goal that learners must collaboratively achieve.

While PBL shares this view on learner and teacher with other pedagogical approaches (e.g. problem-based learning and experiential or collaborative learning; cf. Kokotsaki *et al.*, 2016), the centrality of the project as the end product of learning constitutes its peculiarity and novelty. Various types of projects have been proposed and discussed in PBL scholarship, and there appears to be an ongoing effort to establish clear criteria for defining what constitutes a high-quality project within the PBL framework. Given the adaptable nature of PBL, its application spans diverse disciplines, leading to the identification of discipline-specific types of projects deemed suitable and effective within each domain. Amidst the diversity observed across disciplines, a notable consensus emerges within the literature concerning the essential characteristic that a PBL project should embody: the project must be authentic, in the sense that it is inherently tied to the resolution of a genuine, practical issue that extends beyond the confines of the classroom. The prevailing view in the literature underscores the significance of fostering a learning environment where students are actively involved in addressing and contributing to real-world challenges. This emphasis on authenticity not only enriches the

educational experience but also aligns with the overarching goal of preparing students for meaningful and impactful contributions beyond academic settings.

Applied to L2 acquisition, this translates into a language syllabus that goes far beyond a classroom environment based on unilateral teacher-student instruction (Diadori *et al.*, 2015; Jones, Richards, 2015; Krauss, Boss, 2013; Larmer *et al.*, 2015; Noels, 2009; Richards, Cotteral, 2015). Language learning takes place through meaningful language use (Ortega, 2007), within the realisation of a project connected to real-world issues, thus offering an «authentic learning experience» (Vega, Brown, 2013: 8). The ideation of the project can be done by the teacher alone or in collaboration with the students. Still, it must have a clear outcome, often resulting in learner-created content (Moreno-López *et al.*, 2017; Stoller, 2012), and it is realised through peer collaboration (Davis, 2015: 6; English, Kitsantas, 2013). In fact, collaboration and group work are crucial aspects of PBL: students as social agents learn through social interaction³. Several studies have shown that PBL can be an effective way to introduce in the language curriculum novel, varied activities that have real-world relevance and can stimulate the students’ interests and foster their motivation, both being crucial ingredients for successful language learning (Amorati, Hajek, 2021; Busse, Walter, 2013; Dörnyei, 2001, 2009; Magid, 2014; Noels, 2001; Noels *et al.*, 2000). The engagement level of students is enhanced by the collaborative work for the design and realisation of the projects (Kokotsaki *et al.*, 2016). The role of the language teacher is that of facilitator and guide: learners are encouraged to take responsibility for the actualisation of the project and thus self-direct their language learning process (Amorati, Hajek, 2021).

By engaging in real-life issues with a social dimension, the project enhances «students’ sense of self as language learners and as individuals» (Amorati, Hajek, 2021: 1007). The students are holistically engaged in the realisation of a project and this leads to high attainments in the target language, alleviation of anxiety in the L2 (Miguel, Carney, 2022), and personal growth (as defined by the Affective Humanistic approach as well (Sudati, 2013a.o.)). It has indeed been shown that, through PBL, learners develop several transferable skills, such as problem-solving autonomy, critical thinking, creativity, and auto-reflection (Amorati, Hajek, 2021; Dawkins *et al.*, 2019; Knutson, 2002; Moreno-López *et al.*, 2017; Supe, Kaupuzs, 2015). The development of auto-reflection and self-awareness is particularly relevant for the present study, as the analysis of the proposed PBL experience is grounded on data of self-evaluation and metalinguistic reflection realised by the learners involved in the realisation of the project.

Previous studies have shown that engagement and motivation can be enhanced by bringing the learners’ attention to their own learning process (Birello, Ferroni, 2016). In PBL applied to L2 teaching, this means for teachers to guide students in reflecting on both the realisation of the project outcome itself (focusing on crucial aspects such as team dynamics, possible drawbacks, and milestones) and the language use involved in such realisation. Since one crucial aspect of PBL is the fact that language learning happens in a rather subconscious way while the learners are focused on the project (Delibaş, Günday, 2016: 4), the metalinguistic reflection constitutes a crucial moment in making the L2 not only the principal means to the final goal, but also a substantial part of it (Birello, Ferroni, 2016). Our data show

³ For these characteristics, PBL is very similar to the Task-based method (Birello *et al.*, 2017; Long, 2014). However, while tasks are small pedagogical units in which learners «do in the new language» (Long, 2014: 6), a project can be thought of as a sequence of different tasks aimed at the achievement of the same, general goal (Van Lier, 2007).

that indeed students were constructively reflecting on their project-making and developed self-awareness in the L2.

This study thus adds evidence to the effectiveness of PBL in L2 teaching by presenting an original project – the realisation of an “Italian culture” themed event – that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been discussed in previous studies. Moreover, although numerous studies have explored the use of PBL in English language teaching (Hidayati *et al.*, 2023; Supe, Kaupuzs, 2015 and references cited there), additional efforts are required to extend the understanding of the effectiveness of PBL with other languages, such as Italian (but see Amorati, Hajek, 2021; Danesi *et al.*, 2018), and across diverse cultural contexts.

The novelty of the project presented here also resides in the fact that, whereas most PBL proposals result in a tangible, academic product (e.g. a presentation or a paper; see Van Lier, 2007: 49) or a «simulation of real-world events» realised with a «real audience in mind» (Stoller, 2012: 38-40), our students took a further step outside the classroom setting by organising an authentic, non-academic event, which provided real engagement with the public, thus obtaining a real-world achievement via their second language.

3. PROJECT-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH EVENT ORGANISATION: A CASE STUDY

3.1. *Project description*

The project described in this section consisted in the realisation of an event themed around Italian culture as part of the master course *Italiaans: Bedrijfs- en publiekscommunicatie* (“Italian Business and Public Communication”) of the master program *Meertalige Communicatie* (“Multilingual Communication”) of the department *VTC: Vertalen, Tolken en Communicatie* (“Translation, Interpreting and Communication”) of Ghent University (Belgium).

The development of communication skills constitutes a core component of the course. The course curriculum usually encompasses, among other aspects, critical analysis and task-based learning, such as the creation of both online and offline promotional material for public events and institutions, crisis communication, and media literacy, all conducted in the target L2. Learning activities of this course (as well as of equivalent courses in other language programs offered by the same Department) are designed with a dual purpose: to enhance professional and theoretical skills and insights and to deepen proficiency in the L2, which, in this case, is Italian.

Since the academic year 2018-2019, the “Italian Business and Public Communication” course has adopted an action-oriented approach to language learning (see above), structured around the organisation of a ‘genuine Italian’ cultural event. In previous iterations of the course, students engaged with a series of fictional cases, creating promotional materials for nonexistent events and organisations. With the event-centred approach introduced in 2018-2019, task-based learning components from earlier years have been integrated into a project-based learning context. Guided by the instructor, students are empowered to choose a theme for the event, with the stipulation that it be intricately tied to Italian culture. The event is mandated to feature at least one activity centred around the Italian cultural theme, complemented by an *aperitivo* sponsored by external commercial sponsors.

The themed activity constitutes the content-based component of the project. A requirement for the activity is that it reflects the students’ MA level in its approach to Italian

culture, fostering specific knowledge or critical thinking about Italian culture, whether gastronomic, literary, artistic, political, or otherwise. By elaborating on this knowledge through playful activities such as quizzes, interviews, and workshops, for which students are encouraged to make use of scientific resources, the event ideally serves as a form of science popularisation and a critical reflection on perceptions of Italian culture in Flanders. Examples of past events include: speed friending in Italian (2018, 2020, online); a workshop on Italian gestures and body language led by an actor (2018); a workshop and performance on sign language (2019); a pub quiz (2019, 2020, online); a book presentation with an author interview (2021, online); a cooking workshop (2021, online); and a multi-stage game (2022).

The *aperitivo* is to be realised with the assistance of commercial sponsors contributing bites and drinks. Finding such sponsors is among the responsibilities of the students: several weeks before the event, all students have to establish contact with local eno-gastronomic entrepreneurs specialising in Italian products. The profits of the event (earned from selling food and drinks to the audience) are dedicated to a charitable organisation selected by the students.

As part of the final evaluation of the course, the compilation of an individual portfolio by each student is required. These portfolios include all project-related documents, such as the produced promotional materials, all written and visual content produced by a single student, alongside auto-reflections on the project’s execution. Students are invited to contemplate successes and pitfalls in the process and critically assess their personal growth and collaboration with fellow students. Furthermore, students engage in metalinguistic reflection, critically assessing their acquisition of the Italian language (the target L2) throughout the duration of the project.

3.2. *The rationale behind the project*

This project is driven by the ambition to integrate the development of professional and creative communication skills with the execution of a tangible result. The Italian culture themed event was chosen as an effective way to implement the guidelines of the action-oriented approach promoted by Ghent University, as well as the principles of PBL applied to language teaching. The rationale behind this choice is illustrated below.

a) *Motivation*

The project aims to enhance students’ motivation, sense of accomplishment, and sense of responsibility by granting them ownership of their own project (cf. Amorati, Hajek, 2021). Students are largely responsible for determining their common vision and mission, the nature of the event, and the activities comprising the event. The instructor provides guidelines and intervenes when issues of quality or feasibility arise, but the ideas originate from the students themselves, and they actively lead the decision-making process in brainstorming sessions. The project becomes more meaningful in their perception due to this increased autonomy and appeal to their creativity, which facilitates the learning process. Additionally, students are encouraged to transform their project into a charity event by donating proceeds to a cause related to the theme of their activity. This social dimension further motivates them to adopt a result-oriented approach within their project. Another factor contributing to their sense of responsibility is their awareness of themselves serving as representatives not only of Italian

culture but also of their own Department (Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication, Ghent University). In class discussions, there was regular dialogue on the best way to fulfil this representative role, including exploring the internal hierarchy and mission of the Faculty, and presenting the project to the Head of department for approval.

b) *Professional development and collaboration*

The project management activities in Italian L2 are designed to offer valuable and relevant experiences in the student’s professional development, complementing more theoretical approaches to communication. Most importantly, the nature of the project necessitates excellent collaboration. Students are required to communicate effectively among themselves and with various stakeholders, including the instructor, the lecturer-in-charge, the Head of Department, the Faculty’s technical staff and secretaries, external collaborators (such as actors, musicians, cooks, writers, translators, experts in communication etc.), and sponsors. Special attention is devoted to the processes, methodologies and tools of professional communication in project management (Project Management Institute, 2021). For instance, students are encouraged to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of various internal communication tools, such as OneDrive (for documentation) and WhatsApp (for urgent, informal communication but not for extensive discussions). Ideas are evaluated with the help of a SWOT analysis and reflections on the Project Management Triangle (i.e. on the three key constraints that can impact the success of a project: scope, time and resources). Decisions regarding internal organisation and planning are recorded in a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS), a Responsibility Assignment Matrix (RACI chart), a Gantt chart, and a budget plan. Students are encouraged to explore and define their individual talents and interests within the group dynamics. Moments of tension and interpersonal challenges are viewed as opportunities for discussion and collective reflection.

c) *Use of the target language*

Throughout all their activities, students are encouraged to speak Italian whenever possible. The correct use of the Italian language constitutes one of the four components of the final grade. Although it is impossible to control this outside the classroom, to ensure a minimum level of communication in Italian by each student, they are all required to speak Italian in class and prepare promotional material for social media. Collective brainstorming about branding issues (such as a suitable Italian title) necessarily encourages linguistic reflection. Furthermore, a prerequisite for the event is the engagement of Italian-speaking external collaborators, including Italian entrepreneurs sponsoring the *aperitivo*. Through role-playing and preparatory discussions, students are equipped to present their project and negotiate in Italian.

3.3. *Course structure and student assessment*

The classes themselves follow a guided structure in which students, under the guidance of the instructor, outline, execute, and discuss tasks. New tasks are introduced with the help of concise goal-oriented explanations, which sometimes provide theoretical background. The program roughly appears as follows:

Table 1. *Course program*

Class/week	Activities
1 Initiation	Introduction, brainstorming. Reflection about group identity.
2 Definition and planning of the event	Definition of the mission (goals) and tasks, division and planning of tasks.
3 Execution of communication plan	Contact collaborators. Create infrastructure (website/Facebook/Instagram).
4	Seek sponsors.
5	Conceive advertisements and content for website/social media.
6	Creation of content. Invitation/circular letter; press release.
7	Event refinement.
8	Event.
9 Completion	Reporting, acknowledgements. Finalising the portfolio.

In each class, space is dedicated to briefings and discussions through which students update each other and the instructor concerning the status of their tasks, and hand in newly produced or revised documents pertaining to the project. The instructor corrects these documents (e.g. sponsor contracts, personal e-mails, promotional materials) before they are put into use, aligning weekly feedback with input and updates given by the students. Such moments of collective reflection create suitable opportunities for addressing linguistic issues and common mistakes. Outside such moments of linguistic reflection, the emphasis is usually more on pragmatic language use than on correctness and systematic training. For example, the instructor intervenes to correct utterances when they hinder effective communication or when students ask for help, and not merely for the sake of linguistic accuracy.

As mentioned above, the students’ development is assessed through a portfolio, to be handed in at the end of the course. The final assessment is based on the following set of criteria:

Table 2. *Components of the final assessment*

Weight	Skills and attitudes
20%	Effectiveness and linguistic correctness in oral/written correspondence and execution of tasks
30%	Collaboration skills
30%	Proactive and enterprising attitude
20%	Critical thinking, originality, creativity

As indicated in this scheme, project management skills and attitudes take precedence over linguistic competencies. The final result of the project, however, i.e. the realisation of a cultural event, is not directly assessed: although students themselves often prioritise this result in evaluating the project’s success (in terms of participants, charity fundraising, and

atmosphere), its assessment involves numerous external factors and does not focus on the student’s learning process.

4. METHOD: DATASET AND CODING PROCEDURE

The dataset for our analysis comprises two components:

- a) Auto-reflections on language acquisition, collected through a questionnaire (cf. Appendix A). This section includes questions about the learning process of the target language (Italian), such as the major linguistic challenges encountered, the areas of competence (oral, written, formal/informal) that they believe have seen the most improvement, etc.
- b) Auto-reflections on project activities, contained in 10 of the portfolios compiled by the students (age range: 20-23; 2 males and 8 females) throughout the realisation of the project during the academic years 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021 (1 student portfolio for each year) and 2021-2022 (3 portfolios), 2022-2023 (4 portfolios)⁴. The selected portfolios are from students who responded to the questionnaire. The students were all native speakers of Belgian Dutch, studying Italian and another language (French, English or German) as part of their master’s program. As mentioned above (section 3), the portfolio was progressively built up individually by the students as part of the final evaluation of the “Italian Business and Communication” course of the MA “Multilingual Communication” at Ghent University, and it consisted of all the project-related materials produced by the students as well as auto-reflections on the project realisation. The auto-reflection parts of the portfolios, which are analysed in the present study, include questions about the pitfalls and possible points of improvement encountered during the realisation of the projects, such as attitudes during the brainstorming sessions, assets and/or difficulties in the planning phase, group dynamics, etc. (cf. Appendix B).

The data was analysed through the application of Thematic Analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006 and subsequent work). This qualitative methodology was chosen to gain a deeper understanding into the perceptions of students in the PBL experience.

Our analytic procedure consisted of several iterative cycles of coding. Recurring themes were identified inductively – through a bottom-up approach – allowing for variations in themes to emerge from the data (Saldaña, 2016). This type of data-driven coding is often adopted in order to fully capture participants’ views (Xu, Zammit, 2020). A theme refers to a specific pattern found that captures some crucial information about the data in relation to the research questions and features patterned meanings across the data set (Braun, Clarke, 2006). It pertains to a shared topic concerning areas of focus rather than summaries of data domains (Braun, Clarke, 2019). For our coding procedure, we followed the main six steps based upon Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to TA: 1. familiarising yourself with your data, 2. generating initial codes, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining and naming themes, and 6. producing the report. To code the data we used the qualitative software NVivo 12.

⁴ The content of the analysed portfolio is not sensitive and, in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of Ghent University, all sensitive data about the students have been anonymised for the purpose of this study.

Table 3 below summarizes the themes that emerged from the coding procedure applied to the students’ portfolios (auto-reflection on project activities) and answers to the questionnaire (auto-reflection on language acquisition).

Table 3. *A Summary Table of Codes*

Auto-reflections on project activities	Positive feeling about the project
	Awareness of complexity of organising an event
	Gaining flexibility
	Collaboration between students
Auto-reflections on language acquisition	Improvements written , oral skills
	Improvements vocabulary , idiomatic expression
	Use of different registers
	Talking to different Italian native speakers
	Lower threshold to go out of comfort zone

In the following section, we present and briefly discuss our findings, eliciting actual students’ reflections extracted from our dataset⁵.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. *Auto-reflections on project activities*

A first finding reveals that all students considered the project-based activity a positive one. In particular, students described their final product as a ‘success’, something to be ‘proud of’.

1. In my opinion, the event was a real success.
2. I am proud of the result, the course of the evening and the profit we raised for the charity.
3. It was a very successful evening. We received many compliments and realised that all our work was paying off.

A second recurrent theme concerns the awareness gained by students on the complexity of organising an event.

4. I learnt that there is much more to organising an event. At first I thought it was all easy and not much work, but that’s where I went wrong.
5. There are so many things one has to think about and prepare in advance. Organising an event takes more time than I had planned.

⁵ The students’ auto-reflections were written in Italian and have been translated for the present study.

These statements show that this type of activity may boost not only their language abilities but also their planning and organisational skills.

An additional frequently mentioned theme was the flexibility required to work on and complete the event organisation. Indeed, the project might unfold in ways different from the initial plans. Furthermore, students had to learn to deal with unforeseen events and situations.

6. I learnt to change the plan of action even at the last moment.
7. we learnt many things, like the art of last-minute haggling.
8. There were some technical problems but we were able to react quickly and in the end we were able to solve all the problems.

Finally, an additional core theme was the collaboration between students. In general terms collaboration was perceived as successful, even though students often referred to group members who contributed less to the project or did not react when collaboration and help were explicitly requested, thus impacting the project’s critical path. It also emerged that this kind of project-based activities improved understanding of and respect for ideas different from our own.

9. There were some people who did not always participate. It was often the same people who took the initiative.
10. I also learnt to put myself in other people’s shoes.
11. Collaboration could have been better at times. People would often ask for something in the chat and nobody would respond. This made it very difficult to work together, because the fact that we often had to wait for someone’s answer delayed everything else, so we could not continue working.

As elaborated in the subsequent section (6: Discussion), these statements demonstrate the students’ keen awareness of group dynamics (such as task allocation, the pivotal importance of effective communication among peers, and adept management of free-riders), which are crucial not only in a PBL setting, but also in any professional environment.

5.2. *Auto-reflections on language acquisition*

A first result is the unanimous consensus among students of having improved their Italian language skills. In general terms, they all state to have perceived an advancement in their language abilities in Italian.

More specifically, the majority of the students declared to perceive an improvement in various aspects of language acquisition, particularly in both oral and written production, as stated for instance in (12):

12. I improved in spoken interaction, but also written expression (writing emails, social media posts).

A few students also underline more practice and awareness in the use of informal and formal registers. Remarkably in (15) we notice how a student also reflects on the necessity and practice of adapting the register to the interlocutor:

13. I think I have improved especially in spoken interaction and formal/informal communication.
14. Organising such an event ensures that you cross the threshold of speaking Italian also in more formal situations.
15. It was really about adapting your language to the moment and to the type of people you were communicating with.

Another aspect often mentioned by students was the improvement of their vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. In particular, the use of specific vocabulary during concrete communicative actions (for instance talking to the sponsors) has contributed to the acquisition of specific words and expressions.

16. The tasks] also involve certain specific vocabulary (for example, around sponsorships), which was less obvious and interesting to learn.
17. We worked on finding the appropriate expressions for the situation.

An additional remarkable observation is that most students acknowledged that such project lowered their threshold to communicate in Italian inside as well as outside the classroom. Indeed, students appear to appreciate the challenge of talking to Italian natives other than their teachers. For instance, they referred multiple times to their interaction with a native Italian classmate (Erasmus student participating in this course). Further, students highlighted how this project boosted their contact with Italian native speakers outside the university walls, as they had to talk to numerous Belgian-based Italian entrepreneurs to join the event or get sponsorship (as in 18). Some students also appreciated these new contacts and the fact that they enlarged their network (as in 20).

18. By repeatedly looking for people who could help us at our event you easily get in touch with other Italian speakers from the professional world.
19. The organisation of the event gave me the opportunity to speak in Italian with other students event participants and donors.
20. Thanks to the event you also build a network that you can possibly contact in the future.

A recurrent theme is also the concept of going out of one’s comfort zone and the ‘courage’ of making mistakes and doing new things

21. To start looking for sponsors, I had to step out of my comfort zone a bit. Nobody is waiting for some student to come and ask for money or products, but if you don’t ask for anything, you can’t get anything either.
22. I think the key here [during the event organisation] is the courage to make mistakes and learn from them.

This shows how the organisation of the event made it possible for students to prove themselves in the L2 outside the comfort of the classroom setting, in which the interaction in the L2 is limited to fellow students and the teacher.

Alongside the positive comments on the effect of the project realisation on L2 acquisition, some less optimal points also emerged from the students’ reflections:

23. when you organise an event for a mixed audience (not only Italian participants but also Belgian and international ones) it is difficult to focus only on the use of Italian. During the event I spoke in Italian Dutch and English.
24. Outside of class communication within the group of students organising the event was sometimes easier to conduct in Dutch/English for more nuance or convenience.
25. In case the project becomes an ambitious plan students may be too focused on the event itself and less on the language aspect.

These statements highlight a noteworthy aspect: while PBL is inherently not centred on the target language, certain settings, such as the one presented here, may witness the utilisation of alternative languages and instances of code-mixing. This and the preceding findings are further discussed in the next section.

6. DISCUSSION

The qualitative analysis of the students’ portfolios brought to light some interesting points about the organisation of a cultural event as a PBL experience. First of all, the event appears to be a very good example of how learning through the realisation of a project can foster students’ motivation. In particular, our study shows the added value of engaging the students in the actualisation of a real event, rather than a simulation (Amorati, Hajek, 2021; Dörnyei, 2009; Noels *et al.*, 2000): students’ motivation is bolstered by the authenticity and real-world impact of the project and the visibility of the final result, as they are expected to reach an audience both within and outside their personal circles, comprising friends, family, fellow students, potential future students and italophiles (Amorati, Hajek, 2021: 1010). The organisation of a real event further proved to be an effective occasion for the development of transferable and organisational skills (Delibaş, Günday, 2016; María, Fallas Gabuardi, 2021; Musa *et al.*, 2011; Saenab *et al.*, 2018). Among these, a special place is reserved to auto-reflection and self-awareness (as demonstrated by the students’ ability to critically consider the progresses in the portfolio), problem-solving and teamwork.

The latter skill in particular deserves some further attention. The allocation of roles and responsibilities plays a crucial role in the project, not only because it demands a precise breakdown of individual tasks but also because students have to negotiate and decide on each person’s responsibilities. Given that it is impractical for all students to be involved in every task, they have to distribute responsibilities (e.g., internal communication, sponsorship, budget management, external communication, on-site management, copywriting of promotional material, and social media management) and develop skills in task delegation. However, as emerged from our data, it was not always easy for students to equally divide and implement the tasks, and the management of group dynamics poses some pivotal challenges

for the achievement of language learning. Moreover, whether the linguistic competences are trained depends, in part, on the tasks individual students undertake as a result of the collective division of roles. For instance, communication with some stakeholders (such as other Faculty members involved in on-site management) required the use of Dutch instead of Italian, while communication with sponsors and other Italian partners created opportunities for using Italian. Such disparities are inherent in the versatility of this particular PBL approach, which allows students to choose tasks aligned with their ambitions and interests. Consequently, some students may get more practice and feedback in specific skills than others, generating unequal opportunities to develop L2 skills. These considerations underscore the critical importance for teachers to keenly observe group dynamics. It is important for teachers to be proactive in potentially intervening to reallocate efforts and opportunities for L2 practice among students.

Furthermore, the “real-life” goal of reaching a broad audience with the event conflicts with the didactic objective of using Italian as much as possible during the course. Event activities, to be accessible for a Flemish or international public, require the use of Dutch or English (at least in translation). Promoting the use of Italian during the event thus requires specific attention and creative solutions. A heightened awareness of the linguistic and cultural environment in which the event organisation unfolds is essential: the use of Italian could be inherently raised, for example, in L2 learning settings⁶ in which students organise the event for an Italian-speaking public.

Other relevant factors that can influence the quality of this PBL method are the linguistic composition of the group and the presence of Italian native speakers. In a mixed class with students of different nationalities, it might be easier for the teacher to promote the use of Italian as the *lingua franca* for the completion of the project. This contrasts with a monolingual group, as in some cases included in the present study, where all students share the same native language (in our case: Belgian Dutch), posing potential challenges in promoting Italian as the primary means of communication. PBL has been shown to be effective also in virtue of the fact that the focus is not on language itself (Delibaş, Günday, 2016): this comes with the challenge – especially for teachers – to promote the use of the target language as much as possible.

Additionally, the presence of Italian students enhances the depth of intercultural debate and the group’s critical attitude towards Italian culture. Each time Flemish students integrate Italian students into their group, it increases cultural sensitivity from both sides and sometimes leads to temporary situations of friction. Such situations increase language and culture sensitivity as well as social debate, as overcoming them requires authentic group reflections on intercultural diversity. Moreover, Italian students are inclined to look beyond cultural stereotypes that characterise perceptions of Italy as the country of *Dolce Vita* and Made in Italy, which are common among many Flemish students in the program. This way, Italian students contribute to critical thinking about Italy and its perception abroad.

Some final considerations on L2 acquisition are in order. The students’ reflections have revealed that the organisation of the event was perceived as useful mostly for the acquisition

⁶ Second Language Learning settings are generally intended as contexts in which learners are acquiring a language that is spoken and used within their immediate environment (e.g., studying Italian in Italy), as opposed to Foreign Language settings in which the learner acquires a language that is not generally spoken in the surrounding community (cf. Balboni, 2015). According to this distinction, our setting would be an instance of the latter case.

of pragmatic aspects of Italian (e.g. the appropriate use of register and idiomatic expressions). This is in line with previous studies showing how PBL provides real chances for language use and allows students to use linguistic tools that would remain purely theoretical in the traditional classroom setting (Gras-Velázquez, 2019; Nuzzo, Santoro, 2017; Petersen, Nassaji, 2016; Wahyudin, 2016). Our students expressed appreciation for the chance to venture beyond their comfort zones and engage in networking with Italian native speakers. Such opportunities are relatively uncommon in settings similar to ours⁷. However, it should be noted that such development of pragmatic skills can take place only when solid grammatical knowledge is already acquired. Given the project-oriented nature of this approach, emphasis is placed on the communicative aspects of language while little time could be dedicated to grammatical accuracy during the realisation of the event. As such, we believe that the PBL model presented here is more effective with students with an advanced level of proficiency in the target language, as opposed to beginners.

Finally, it should be noted that factors intended to foster motivation, such as high degrees of autonomy, responsibility, and meaningfulness, contribute to increased pressure. Time constraints, coupled with the focus on the event’s ‘external’ success (as opposed to personal growth) often lead students to prioritise linguistic accuracy and development less. Consequently, the refinement of their linguistic skills is perceived as a side effect rather than a primary goal.

This limitation was partially mitigated in the current study by incorporating self-reflection on language acquisition into the class discussions. Potential enhancements for this approach may involve extending the portfolio to encompass structured language exercises. Additionally, introducing a section where students document unfamiliar phrases or terms, along with corrections received, could further refine the language learning process.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the organisation of a cultural event as a Project-Based Learning experience designed for the acquisition of Italian as a second language. Our data illustrate that organising a cultural event serves as an exemplary instance of PBL, compelling students to function as social agents collaboratively engaging in linguistic and non-linguistic tasks for the realisation of a project that goes beyond the academic setting. This approach has proven to be effective in fostering the acquisition of Italian as a second language alongside essential transferable project management skills. The event’s authenticity and flexibility emerge as pivotal assets within the PBL framework. Moving forward, future research opportunities involve expanding this model to encompass other languages and diverse contextual settings, presenting promising avenues for enhancing our understanding of language acquisition through innovative pedagogical methodologies.

⁷ That is, in Foreign Language settings in which the target L2 is not spoken by the learner’s surrounding community.

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APPENDIX

A. Questionnaire (auto-reflections on language acquisition)

The questionnaire contained the following questions:

1. *Complessivamente, pensi di aver migliorato il tuo italiano attraverso l'organizzazione dell'evento?*
Overall, do you think you improved your Italian through the organisation of the event?
2. *Se sì, in quali ambiti in particolare (es. espressione scritta, interazione parlata, pronuncia, comunicazione formale e informale...)?*
If yes, in which areas in particular (e.g. written expression, spoken interaction, pronunciation, formal and informal communication...)?
3. *Dal punto di vista linguistico, quali sono state le sfide maggiori per l'organizzazione dell'evento? Come le hai affrontate?*
From a linguistic point of view, what were the biggest challenges in organising the event? How did you deal with them?
4. *Credi che la realizzazione di un progetto (come l'organizzazione di un evento) sia un metodo efficace per l'apprendimento linguistico? Perché (no)? Cosa pensi si potrebbe cambiare per favorire l'apprendimento dell'italiano? Motiva la tua risposta.*
Do you believe that carrying out a project (such as organising an event) is an effective method of language learning? Why (not)? What do you think could be changed to promote the learning of Italian? Justify your answer

Respondents were asked to provide open-ended responses (not limited to *sì/no*) and could reply in either Dutch or Italian.

B. Portfolios (auto-reflections on project activities)

All students were required to respond to the following questions after completing each task (that is: brainstorming session; definition and planning of the project; requests for collaboration and sponsoring; event promotion; final event):

1. *Quali difficoltà avete/hai incontrato?*
What difficulties have you/have you encountered?
2. *Come le avete/hai risolte?*
How did you solve them?
3. *Che cosa avreste/i potuto fare meglio?*
What could you have done better?

At the conclusion of the project, students were tasked with expressing their final reflections:

1. *Riflessioni finali sullo svolgimento dell’evento (da compilare dopo l’evento):*
Final reflections on the course of the event (to be filled in after the event):
2. *Commenti sulla collaborazione: sei soddisfatto/a della divisione dei compiti e della dinamica del gruppo?*
Comments on collaboration: are you satisfied with the division of tasks and the group dynamic?
3. *Commenti sui progressi: complessivamente, che cosa hai imparato da questo corso riguardo alla gestione degli eventi?*
Comments on progress: Overall, what did you learn from this course regarding event management?

