The Learning Mission:
Gamification and L2 Italian in Action
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Abstract

This brief conference paper explains what gamification is about and how to use it to teach Italian, thus increasing student motivation an in-class participation.

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Welcome to this short yet exciting mission. Yes, you understood correctly: it's a mission I'm talking about. The mission being, learning how gamification can change teaching, in general, and – more specifically in your case – teaching L2 Italian, thus making it engaging, pro-active, and fun!

What is *gamification*? Just imagine, for a second, to walk into a classroom not holding a book or a handout but with a challenge to overcome, a riddle to solve or a team to motivate. This is the essence of gamification: to share game features in non-playful contexts (such as a school lesson) to increase motivation, interest, and even build team spirit between us and the students. Why does it work? It works because playing is a very strong human dynamic common to all cultures and people of all ages, no matter how young or old they are. When we play, we become proactive, we get involved, we want to test ourselves, we build relations and – above all – we learn. If we only think for a moment about our professional context (that is, teaching Italian as a foreign language) we immediately understand that this can make a difference. This particularly applies to non-Italian students who may face language barriers of all sorts, happen to have high expectations, tend to be anxious or are simply still jet lagged.

Gamification turns *learning* from something imposed on students into something they experience from within. Also, they experience it to-

gether with other students by collaborating, getting to know each other, helping one another and – through that process – developing a vivid, almost tangible kind of energy inside the classroom. And if just one shy student manages to speak up because he or she wants his or her team to win, well… we – as teachers – have already won!

But let's take a look at these advantages, let's see them in action, so to speak. This is what we are talking about:

- *Improving both comprehension and memory*, as games make it easier to learn and to remember things.
- *Boosting motivation*, especially on those days when the whole class seems tired.
- *Better collaboration*, thus turning the class into a small community.
- And *fun*! Fun reminds us that laughter can be conducive to learning.

It all sounds great. But how do you do it? It's a simple process, consisting of four stages:

- **Introduction:** introduce the game and stimulate curiosity.
- **Interaction:** have students actively participate.
- **Direct use:** students use the Italian language in a practical context.
- **Discussion:** let's talk about what we've learned.

Here is an example: my beloved *Language Treasure Hunt*! Students are asked to solve riddles, walk around the classroom (or the streets of Florence, if they feel adventurous enough) always speaking Italian, to the point that they are not even aware of it anymore. Another example is role games: students pretend to be waiting on tables, travel as tourists, work as doctors or just be friends who speak "real" Italian, that is, the colloquial language Italians use in every-day life, outside the classroom.

And then we can also count on digital tools, of course. They can serve as great allies, sparking student interest from the very first "click".

I'm speaking of the following:
- **Quizizz:** it allows students to work at their own pace.
- **Quizlet:** to make flashcards, design customized games and, above all , team tournaments.
- **GooseChase:** a wonderful resource if you wish to organize digital treasure hunts. Students can make short videos, become "language detectives" or explore Italian culture.

There is one caveat, though: gamification cannot work without clear objectives, realistic challenges, immediate feedback (corrections cannot be given a week later!), incentives (points, badges, applause, candies etc.) and healthy social interaction. Learning together is more intriguing; and it is "contagious" too!

And in the end? In the end it is always we (the teachers) who are running the game. Gamification does note replace us: it assists us, it improves our performance, it gives us new tools to speak with our students, not only using Italian but also thanks to the "language" of enthusiasm and team spirit. This way we feel less like "professors" and more like "allies", learning together, reducing the generation gap, and establishing a true, sincere dialogue.

All right: my mission is over. It's your turn now, my dear friends and colleagues! Good luck with your work. I wish you plenty of laughter and memorable games… inside and outside the classroom!