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Lingua e comunità in coro: A community choir as a space for language learning, social interaction and well-being

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This article concerns a special kind of learning space (Long & Ehrmann, 2005) populated by Italians and Italian learners: the choir formed as a joint initiative between a community association and the Italian teaching staff at a local university. Our aim, in involving our university students in the choir, was to bring them together with L1 speakers in an environment that would be stimulating but supportive, given the collective creative activity as its focus. We envisaged that interaction in this space would help develop the students' language proficiency, intercultural competence and cultural knowledge, while also bringing the psychosocial benefits of choral singing identified by recent research. These benefits include positive emotions, social support and friendship, an antidote to anxiety and stress, and a requirement of commitment to a collective goal (Judd & Pooley, 2014; Livesey, Morrison, Clift & Camic, 2012). In the article we outline our rationale for this project and the approach we have taken to integrating choir participation into the Italian program. We then present some findings of an evaluation carried out in the first semester of the choir's life, which suggest that the choir did provide the student participants with an environment that fostered learning hand-in-hand with well-being.

Introduction

“What I really got out of it... was that feeling, that happy, exhilarated, sense of achievement kind of feeling.” (S18, second-year student)

“...it's a wonderful opportunity to learn further Italian, to learn through music, learn through a group atmosphere” (S1, first-year student)

These students' assessments of their experience of participating in a choir as an integral part of their university Italian studies suggest that, for them, this environment synthesised learning and well-being. The choir concerned, baptised *Unicoro* by its student members, was formed as a joint initiative between a community association - the Dante Alighieri Society - and the Italian team at [name] University. Our aim in involving our university students in the choir was to bring them together with L1 speakers in the community in a collective creative endeavour conducted in Italian. We hoped that participation would provide opportunities for the students to develop their language proficiency, intercultural competences and cultural knowledge, while also enjoying the psychosocial benefits of choral singing that have been identified by recent research. The project is part of our ongoing work to promote and support students' interaction with proficient speakers outside class, both through ICTs and face-to-face, and to create learning environments conducive to developing positive self-concept and interpersonal relationships for students.

In this paper, we outline in more detail below our rationale for this project and the approach we have taken to integrating choir participation into the university Italian program. We then discuss the findings of our evaluation conducted in the first semester of the choir's life, which suggest that the choir did provide the student participants with an environment that fostered learning hand-in-hand with well-being. We also discuss prospects for extending the

experience to additional learners, and some of the implications and issues to be addressed in attempting to do so.

Rationale for the project

Research into the extra-musical effects of music education has shown music to be a valuable tool in the classroom, not least for its power to enhance memory and recall (Campabello, DeCarlo, O'Neil & Vacek, 2002). Specific benefits have also been identified in terms of L1 development. For example, the interaction between music and language can not only activate working memory but aid speech development and improve reading and listening abilities (Fonseca-Mora & Herrero Machancoses, 2016; Legg, 2009; Cozzolino, 2013 cited in Murphey, 2014).

Integrating musical activities in L2 programs can be expected to bring these and related benefits into the language classroom. First of all, the use of music - such as through enjoyable musical repetition of new language items - should lower the learners' 'affective filters' (Krashen, 1982), thereby unlocking the potential for acquisition. While negative emotions such as anxiety and lack of confidence can raise the affective filter, musical activities can engender positive emotions, hence lowering it (Sposet, 2008). Musical activities tend to be fun and to lessen anxiety caused by difficulties in understanding and speaking. They can help create a comfortable atmosphere, which adult learners need in particular, in order to cope with the frustration of having to express their ideas in a childlike manner (Fonseca-Mora & Herrero Machancoses, 2016; Fonseca-Mora, Toscano-Fuentes & Wermke, 2011).

Research also shows ways in which characteristics inherent to music - sound, rhythm and melody - support language acquisition more specifically. As music stimulates auditory sensitivity and aids the memory of sounds, musical activities in the L2 classroom can educate learners to refine their listening skills (Fonseca-Mora & Herrero Machancoses, 2016; Fonseca-Mora et al., 2011; Ludke, Ferreira & Overy, 2014). Songs can be used to teach phonetics and their repetitive nature makes them effective for pronunciation practice; they can also stimulate vocabulary memory and help recall unfamiliar words (Engh, 2013); indeed, songs that are easy to learn can turn ordinary texts into information that is successfully kept and retrieved (Salcedo, 2010; Wallace, 1994).

Songs can also provide a window onto the sociocultural context of use of the target language, giving students in the L2 classroom access to the ideas, beliefs, traditions and experiences of the peoples whose language they are learning. And listening to songs can be a relaxed and enjoyable way to encounter culture, and therefore may find greater receptiveness among some students than lectures (Engh, 2013).

The benefits of musical activities outlined above can be expected to be enhanced when language learners take an active role - in singing, especially group singing. Singing in a group or choir requires intensive oral and aural work: participants need to listen carefully to others and monitor their own sound, so as to blend their own voice with the rest; this in turn demands alertness and focused attention (Phillips, 2010). At the same time, choral singing can bring psychosocial and physical health benefits, as an increasing body of research demonstrates. Livesey, Morrison, Clift and Camic (2012, p.12) refer to various studies reporting psychological benefits of choir singing, found to: "reduce perceived levels of anxiety and depression, boost perceived confidence, improve subjective self-esteem, provide a sense of achievement and increase a sense of self-control", and social benefits "including

building friendships, improving bonding and co-operation, and creating a sense of belonging”. Indeed, one study of a university choir by Clift and Hancox (2001) found that choral singing can promote participants’ well-being in several dimensions - physical, emotional, social and spiritual - as choir members reported they had benefited from getting to know new people, feeling more positive, gaining better control over breathing (which reduced stress), and feeling more alert and spiritually uplifted (p. 251). Judd and Pooley (2014, p. 1) summed up their study of individuals from a range of different community choirs with the statement: “group singing is a joyful activity that promotes well-being and is life-enhancing for those involved”.

While our decision to create an Italian choir and involve our university students in it was informed by the potential learning and psychosocial benefits to be expected from engaging them in *any* group singing, outlined above, an essential part of our rationale had to do with the special type of choir and membership we envisaged. We conceived our choir primarily as part of our overall strategy to support effective practice for students outside class, through authentic interaction with Italian-speaking members of the community. Not only is this kind of practice highly desired by our students but studies of community involvement in language learning have shown such interaction in an informal environment helps lower students’ affective filter, with positive effects on self-confidence and fluency (Lear & Abbott, 2009; O’Connor, 2011). A key element of our strategy for facilitating out-of-class practice for many years has been the pairing of our second-year students with volunteer community members (CMs) for regular informal meetings.¹ We envisaged the choir as a further, complementary, element of the strategy, featuring a collective creative goal and possibilities for more spontaneous interaction over a longer period of time, with a range of Italian speakers at various proficiency levels. Furthermore, although rehearsals resemble classes, with the conductor in control, they are characterised by a flexible use of space, as the disposition of choir members shifts frequently between a single large group and several small semicircular clusters, with singers often in close physical proximity. We saw this, along with a mid-rehearsal tea-break, as likely to encourage the type of psychological closeness and social interaction which Falout (2014) argues is facilitated when the traditional row-and-column classroom layout is abandoned.

The opportunity to create this kind of choir arose thanks to a colleague who offered her expertise as conductor, with experience leading a community choir in Italy and as an Italian teacher to adults in Australia.² The availability of this L1-speaker conductor and numerous Italian-speaking members of the wider community keen to participate in a choir made it feasible to construe rehearsals as an immersion environment. The support of a community association - the Dante Alighieri Society - and our university, and a small grant through a scheme for language-learning innovations, were also valuable.

In sum, we aimed at providing an outside-class immersion experience that would offer our students authentic language practice in an environment conducive to social support and friendship. We hoped this would engender positive emotions in the individual learners and a sense of belonging to the target language community.

Integration of choir participation in the university Italian courses

We launched the choir in the second semester of the year in order to support participation of our first-year students in particular: they join our program in first semester as complete beginners but by second semester have some basic conversational language at their disposal.

Second semester was also appropriate for the second-year students - who are generally at lower-intermediate level (having completed Year 12 Italian at school or first-year courses with us) - because they were already expecting the outside-class component of their course mentioned above. After that first season, we decided to run the choir every semester - indeed it has a life of its own beyond our project - but to publicise it heavily to students only in the second semester of each year.

Rehearsals were held over the 13 university teaching weeks, once a week in the evening for 2 hours, with a 20-minute interval for tea/coffee and socialising. Membership was free to full-time students. Publicity through various channels at the start recruited a range of non-student participants who spoke Italian as their first language or, at various levels of proficiency, as additional language. The repertoire drew from three sources: the folk tradition; popular music (including both pop songs and those of politically-oriented singer-songwriters); and opera. The choir gave two public performances, after the 8th rehearsal and after the end of semester, respectively.

When planning the integration of choir participation into our language program we had two main pedagogical concerns. The first was to support the students, especially those in their first year of Italian, in this challenging immersion environment. To help them follow her instructions and presentation of the songs, the conductor used carefully chosen language, together with step-by-step PowerPoint slides, and abundant para-linguistic and extra-linguistic cues. Other choir members were encouraged to support the students when needed and we the teachers were also with them as fellow choristers, ready to answer questions or give clarifications. Furthermore, rehearsals had a consistent structure so that, after the first week, everyone knew what sequence of activities to expect. The plan for each rehearsal - warm-up of breathing and voice, rounds, practice of songs in unison and in parts, and tea-break - was presented in the form of a suite, made up of dances at different tempos. Figure 1 shows the plan for the first rehearsal and steps in the work on the song “Bella ciao” arranged in four singing parts. The activities in the rehearsal plan are: “introduction; breathing and warm-up; a round; break; a folk song; a Verdi chorus; pop music (but not too light)”.³





Figure 1. Selected slides from the PowerPoint presentation for the first rehearsal.

Our second pedagogical concern was to help the students exploit the choir as much as possible for learning opportunities. We focused on those in first-year and second-year courses; while third-year students were also welcome we made no explicit link between the choir and their courses. The first-year students were targeted in the preparation of the weekly PowerPoint presentation and the design and presentation of some of the singing activities, through use and highlighting of vocabulary and grammar elements being covered in their course. In order to encourage their participation in the choir we allowed them to skip one hour of normal class each week, and therefore made ourselves available to them during the rehearsal tea-break for questions and clarifications on course content so that they would not feel disadvantaged. We also provided optional game-based activities related specifically to those they were missing in class, for carrying out with us during the tea-break. Some of those activities - such as “*Dove sono i Tim-tam?*” [Where are the Tim-tam biscuits?], designed for practice at using prepositions of place - successfully engaged the collaboration of other choristers alongside the students.

As part of their assessment, the second-year students were required to complete a set of worksheets reporting observations and reflections on their conversations with CMs during semester. The comments were expected to cover cultural elements as well as language (cf Appendix for the worksheet guidelines), and discussion of ‘languaculture’ - the ways culture is manifested in language - had been conducted in class with particular reference to recommendations by Carroli, Pavone and Tudini (2003). Students participating in the choir were encouraged to use conversations with L1 speaker choir members during the tea-break for this purpose, or make arrangements with them for meetings outside rehearsal times. In their worksheet comments they could also draw on language input and interaction during the formal rehearsal time.

Suggested tea-break conversation topics were included in the PowerPoint presentation each week, so that non-student choristers were aware of the current focus of course content in the first-year and second-year courses, and therefore of topics on which the first-year students might feel relatively confident to chat. Beyond these course-related initiatives, we also envisaged the tea-break as simply providing opportunities for socialising, and debriefing on the musical dimension: all students had the chance to relax and interact with other choir members.

Evaluation of the students’ experience

The composition of the cohort that participated regularly in the choir throughout the semester was:

- 7 students enrolled in our first-year course (identified below by the randomly-assigned codes S1-S7);
- 3 other near-beginners not enrolled in our courses;
- 13 students enrolled in our second-year course (identified by the codes S8-S20);
- 3 students who had recently completed our third-year courses (identified by the codes S21-S23);
- 1 other advanced learner;
- 9 L1 speakers (identified by pseudonyms);
- the conductor and 3 teachers (the authors and 1 other, identified as T1, T2, T3).

Relative to the enrolment numbers in the courses (on the city campus), the participation rate was therefore 16% for first-year students and 43% for second-year students. The higher rate among second-year students may have been influenced by their higher proficiency, making them more confident of coping, and/or a perception that choir participation made for an easy way to complete part of their assessment. They had also had longer to form friendships with fellow Italian students and several came to rehearsals as a group.

We were pleased that so many of our students were prepared to try this experience, considering that joining a choir does not necessarily appeal to young adults. In general, community choirs in Australia are most popular among middle-aged people, with 65% of members over 45 and only 13% under 25 (Masso, 2013).

Our evaluation of the students' experience of the choir in its first semester was aimed at understanding whether and in what ways it had provided an environment conducive to learning. We collected data through various instruments, both quantitative and qualitative:

- an anonymous end-of-semester questionnaire, administered in class and at rehearsal, seeking student-choristers' perceptions of the learning benefits of choir participation and any difficulties they encountered;
- individual half-hour interviews with those student choristers who volunteered to be interviewed, in response to our email invitation to all student choristers. The interviews sought deeper insight into their perceived learning experiences through choir participation, difficulties encountered and strategies for addressing them;
- the worksheets submitted by second-year student choristers as part of their course assessment, which included their reflections on conversations with other choristers and perceived learning outcomes through choir participation;
- teachers' diaries containing observations and reflections made during and after rehearsals, on interactions, actions and reactions of choristers, especially students. The entries could not be systematic or comprehensive, however, given the context of lively rehearsals and tea-breaks with 40-odd participants.

While the aim of the evaluation did not encompass investigating student-choristers' well-being (and the interview questions did not explicitly address emotions), the interviews and our diaries provided extensive comments on the students' personal and emotional experiences. To explore those experiences and the students' perceptions of constructive choir dynamics, we analysed the comments to detect expressions of the five elements of Seligman's PERMA well-being framework - "positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment" (2012, p. 12)

The questionnaire was completed by 17 student-choristers: 5 of the 7 enrolled in the first-year course and 12 of the 13 enrolled in the second-year course. Those interviewed included: 1 first-year student and 1 non-enrolled near-beginner; 5 second-year students; and 1 student who had recently completed third-year courses.

The questionnaires provided ample evidence that the great majority of the students participating had found the choir a positive experience, beneficial to their learning in various ways and challenging. In response to the two most general questions (“How would you rate your choir experience overall?” and “Would you recommend the choir experience to other learners of Italian?”), 11 (65%) rated the choir experience overall as ‘very rewarding’ and 5 (29%) as ‘rewarding’, with 1 (6%) undecided, while all 17 agreed they would recommend the choir to other learners. For 15 (88%) that recommendation was applicable to all learners, while 1 specified “except for tone-deaf people” and 1 gave the proviso “only... to learners who would value the experience because I don’t believe they would learn as much if not”, suggesting she felt participants were responsible for their own experience of the choir.

When asked “How would you rate your choir experience as part of your language learning?”, 10 (59%) selected ‘very useful’ and 6 (35%) ‘useful’, with 1 not responding. They also showed a considerable degree of agreement with statements about benefits to their language learning *process* in terms of opportunities and motivation, as shown in Figure 2, with at most 2 undecided and none disagreeing with any of the statements. Most also declared the experience to have been helpful specifically for developing their command of Italian vocabulary and grammar.

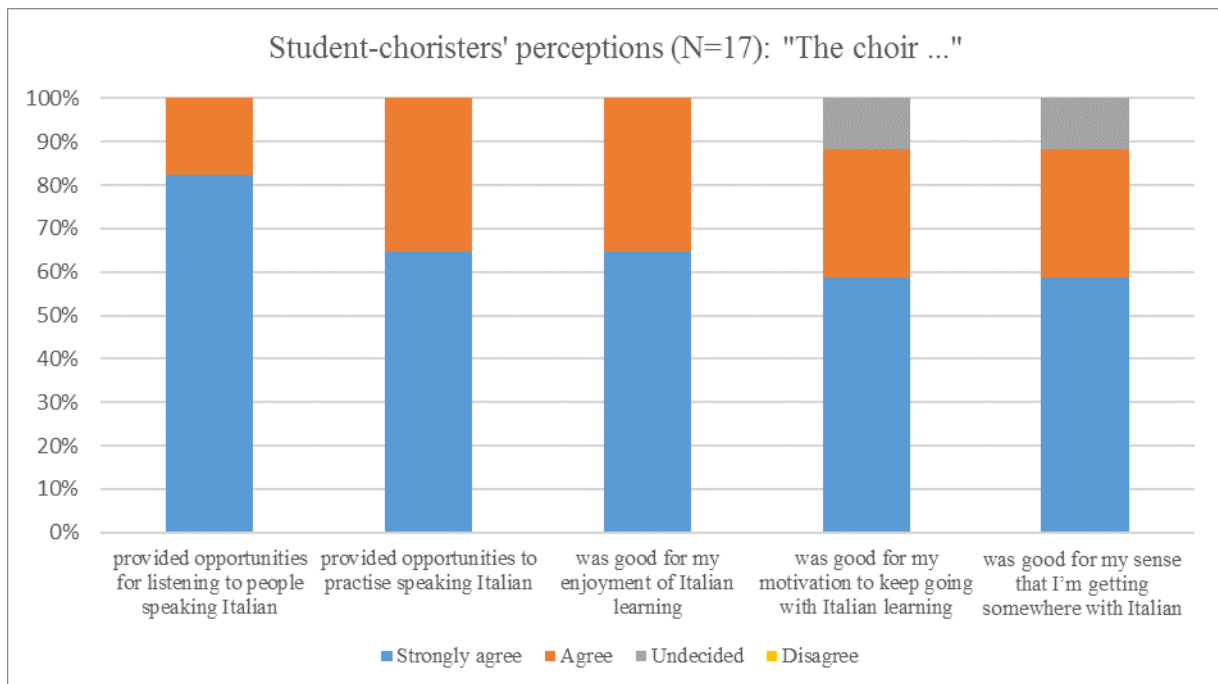


Figure 2. Questionnaire responses on perceived benefits of choir participation⁴

Responses to statements regarding other dimensions of learning that we considered important - learning about Italian culture, and developing intercultural awareness - also indicated considerable agreement, as shown in Figure 3.

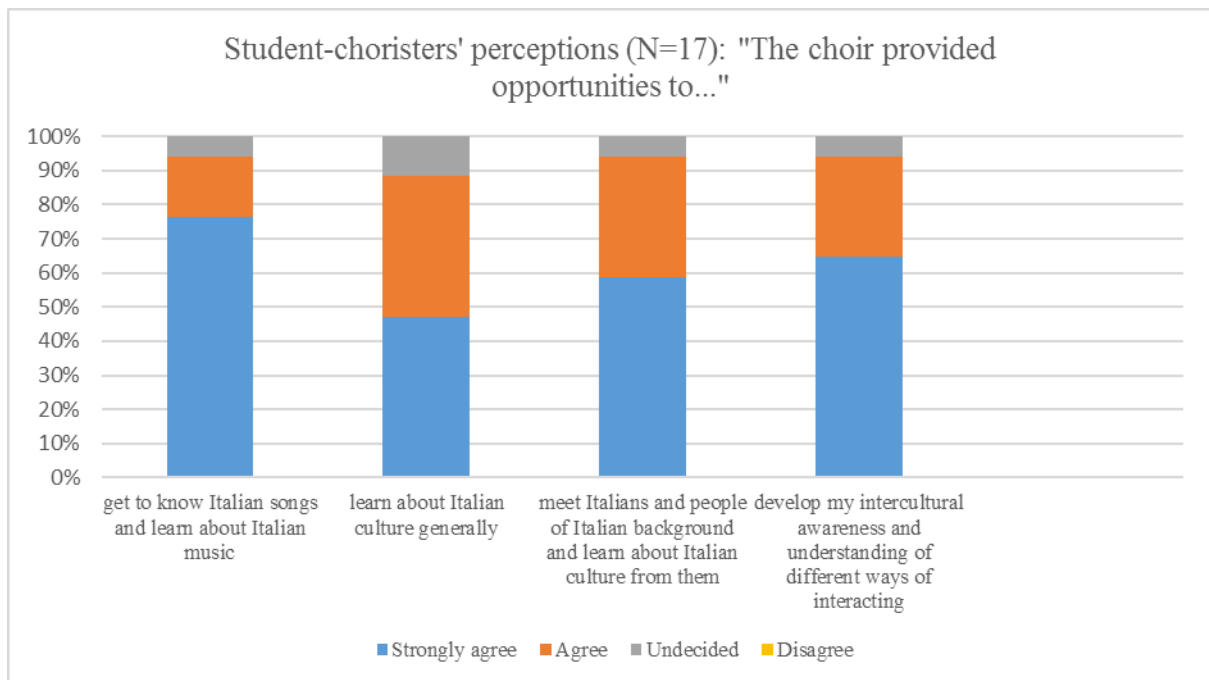


Figure 3. Questionnaire responses on perceived opportunities for cultural and intercultural learning

Overall, the students seemed to have coped well with the immersion in Italian during the formal rehearsal time, in the sense of the constant input in the target language, which included joking and repartee. Although they admitted to having had difficulty understanding at times, the majority declared themselves largely unfazed by this (see Figure 4).

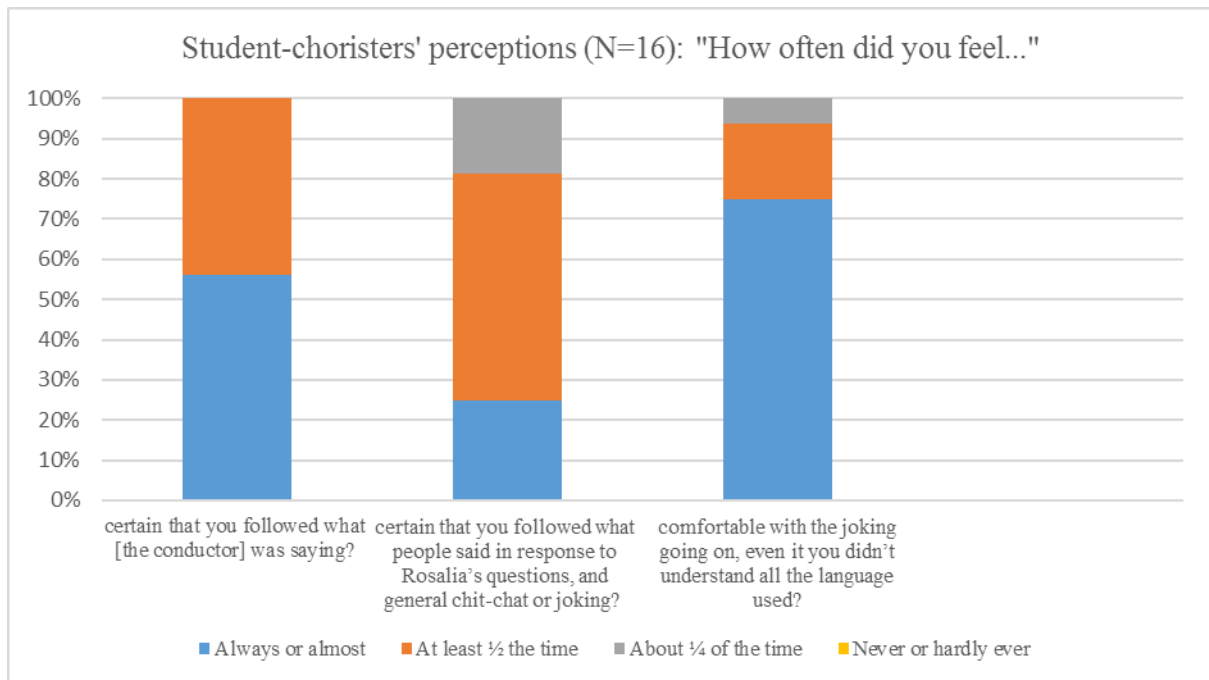


Figure 4. Questionnaire responses on coping with input during formal rehearsal time

It was primarily in the tea-breaks that we expected the students to have opportunities to converse in Italian themselves, and we were pleased that most reported having participated in conversation conducted in Italian more than in English there (see Figure 5).

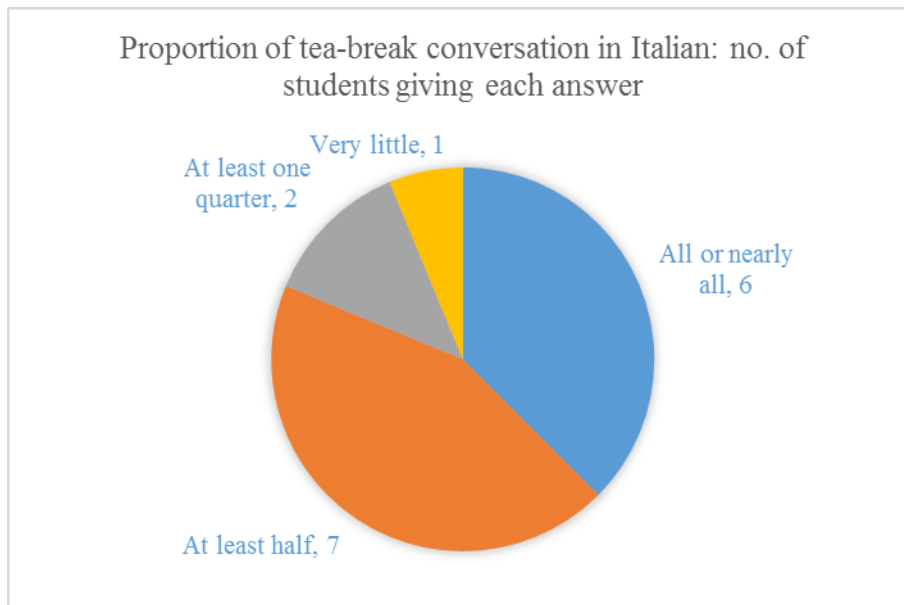


Figure 5. Questionnaire responses to "What proportion of the tea-break conversation that you participated in was in Italian?"

In all, the students surveyed seemed to have recognised the learning opportunities offered by the choir. More detailed insight into the kinds of learning perceived by individuals comes from the worksheets completed by the second-year students as part of their course assessment. A sample of worksheet comments is shown in Figure 6 (in translation, wherever the original was in Italian). These serve to illustrate the range of observations by students during their conversations with CMs and during formal rehearsal time and general tea-break interaction.

	Type of comment	Student comment in worksheet
Language elements	observed in the conductor's talk	Among the many vocabulary items noted by S11, for example, were the verbs ' canticchiare ', ' fischiare ', ' rallentare ' ['hum', 'whistle', and 'slow down'] and expressions ' pelle d'oca ', ' appena ', ' diamo un'occhiata ' ['goose-bumps', 'very slightly', 'let's have a look']
	observed in deciphering a conversation	When I asked Lucia "Che cosa le piace fare nel tempo libero?" [What do you like doing in your spare time?] she replied "Mi piacerebbe fare" [I would like]. At the time I thought she was making a correction to my sentence, but when I listened to the recording I identified it was a conditional and I realized she was making a little bit of a joke because she has no spare time but if she did have it she would do ... (S10)
	observed in lyrics	The song <i>Volare</i> is beautiful; I really like it. The words are happy, with lots of references to nature like 'il sole', 'il cielo', 'la natura'... [the sun, the sky, nature]. My favourite line is "io continuo a sognare negli occhi tuoi belli che sono blu come un cielo trapunto di stelle". (S10)
	observed in lyrics	The song <i>Bella ciao</i> seems a cheerful song when I'm singing it but I think maybe I've got it wrong. I'm wondering what these words mean: "...e questo è il fiore del partigiano morto per la libertà". (S13)
Languaculture elements	greetings	I greeted the choir members with a simple 'ciao' or 'buon sera'. But the Italian members usually greet each other with a kiss twice on the cheeks. (S11)
	formal/familiar address	With the terms of address - I used 'Lei' but in each different initial conversation with a CM I was corrected with 'tu' but was never asked if I wanted to use 'tu' instead of 'Lei' . There was only one elderly lady who I had a brief conversation with that didn't change it to 'tu'. (S14)
	turn-taking overlapping	I find turn-taking in Italian conversation to be one of the most difficult parts for me. It's hard for me to be okay with interrupting someone else in order to have my say; my culture tells me that it's rude to interrupt other people, and to be a good listener is more important than being a good speaker. I feel that in Italian culture it is almost the opposite. (S9)
	loudness	Not all the Italian native speakers at choir follow the stereotype of being loud and animated in conversation. They are all very friendly but some are more reserved, for example Patrizia. (S14)
	gestures	Elena did seem to use her hands and her face (eyes in particular) to help send her message across to us regardless of the fact she was holding a cup of tea! (S15)
	personal space	I've noticed that the NSs tend to leave very little space between you and them while in conversation , and it's common to be given a passing pat on the shoulder or arm when greeting or walking by, but ... I don't find it confronting or uncomfortable. (S9)
	expression of emotions	I've noticed the CMs are very free with personal information. They seem generally less 'guarded' than Australians. I've discovered that even if I don't know the choir members they are happy to divulge information to me. (S11)
	expression of disagreement	It seems that people tend to outwardly express disagreement in Italian conversation. It's almost as if conflict in conversation is seen as something positive rather than negative. I think this is different in Australia, where conflict in conversation, especially when people don't know each other well, is seen negatively. (S11)

Figure 6. Examples of language and languaculture elements noted by students in worksheets

The worksheet comments show the students acknowledging, reflecting upon and learning from the diverse language contexts they were immersed in at rehearsals.⁵ They evidently appreciated the conversations that took place among choir members and found they were able to play an active role both as speakers and listeners. They noticed a great variety of words

and expressions, commented on phonetic explanations given by the conductor, and appreciated the poetry of song lyrics. They also valued being immersed in a cultural milieu different from their own and seemed captivated by the verbal and non-verbal ways in which L1 speakers communicated, as they commented on greetings, turn-taking in conversation, gestures and expressivity of emotions, for example.

In addition to the evidence outline above on opportunities for learning, the data collected on the students' choir experiences - especially through the interviews - provided numerous comments that can be linked to the PERMA well-being framework. Like Oxford (2014), we found Seligman's (2012) five elements of PERMA difficult to identify independently of each other in our data. In our students' accounts of their experiences, references to positive emotions, relationships and a sense of accomplishment were often intertwined, and an implication of meaningful engagement seemed to underlie the account as a whole rather than this being rendered explicit.

Each student chorister's interview included some mention of positive emotions. S18's comment given at the start of this study is one example; some others are:

- "I can't sing and I don't have a huge interest in music and singing, but it was still really enjoyable" (S10)
- "I just thought it was fun. ... Initially it was sort of like 'we are the students' and we didn't want to, you know, mingle, but then you start to know people from having different conversations when you have the breaks, so you feel more confident just having a little chat to them between stuff and yeh, having a laugh when you are trying to sing together." (S14)
- "It was fun, and it wasn't a chore. We had that social aspect. ... we had the opportunity to giggle and laugh and interact." (S16)

Notably, S16 described the choir as fun four times in her interview, in responses to four different questions.

As S16's and S14's comments illustrate, positive emotions were often linked to humour stemming from comfortable interaction and a sense of shared experience. Indeed, S16 described one of the best rehearsal moments for her as an occasion when she made a mistake that seemed rude in Italian but, thanks to the reaction of her interlocutor, triggered shared laughter rather than shame:

- "The lady sitting next to me was a contralto, and I'm soprano. I meant to say to her 'don't move because we're in the right groups', and I actually told her to shut up. She just died laughing. It was really - she understood that it was - there was no intention. ... It was a really good moment, because even though I was completely embarrassed, she made it fun, and 'don't worry about it, we all do those sorts of things'."

Some of our diary entries refer to students being prepared to expose themselves to entertain the group, or making self-deprecating comments in a humorous way. These seem to exemplify the point made by Oxford and Cuéllar (2014) that humour can help students cope with the stress of a demanding language-learning situation and dispel negative emotions. Both the following diary entries concern first-year students - that is, those at most risk of feeling out of their depth:

- "Amusing moment tonight: conductor asks whole group '*Volete delle fotografie del concerto?*' [Do you want some photos of the concert?]

S4: *'volete?, volere?'* looking at me, querying whether he has understood the right verb. I nod and say *'volere, desiderare'*. He then announces to all *'Sì, voglio a fotografia del concerto per favore'*. [Yes, I want a photo of the concert please]

Conductor: *'Allora devi parlare con T3.'* [Then you must talk to T3]

S4: (still in stage voice, addressing T3 on the far side of the room) *'[Nome], voglio a fotografia del concerto per favore'*

T3: (playing along, also in stage voice) *'Certo!'* Everyone laughs” (T1’s diary, 9th rehearsal)

- “There’s a nice moment during tea-break when S1, S2 and I are sitting in the corner ... After something I explain in response to a question, S1 says *'Ho capito'*. S2 looks puzzled for a moment, then says *'Ah, that means understand, doesn’t it?'* S1 says ‘yes’ and then, grinning, *'I don’t often get to use it'* ” (T1’s diary, 11th rehearsal).

Mentions of positive feelings in the interviews tended to be linked to appreciation of interpersonal relationships. S10 felt accepted - “it was nice that even if you weren’t a good singer you were still really included in it all and it really didn’t matter” - while S16 was pleased that she “made some really good friends”. A student who had completed third-year, S21, stressed that conversing with L1 speakers at choir meant less worrying about getting the grammar correct than in class, because “We’re just having a conversation, you’re you, I’m me...”. She also appreciated the supportive environment:

- “Yeah, we’re together. A sense of togetherness... it was fun. ... You’re in an environment that’s safe ... People want to help you with your language, particularly the CMs. I think they’re so enthusiastic to help as well.”

For second-year student S18 the fact of sharing challenges and goals was an important part of her relationships with other choir members:

- “During choir practice, we are all working together towards a goal, towards something. So it makes it a lot easier to approach someone and talk about the music, talk about the practice.... Or sharing the challenges that we have, like ‘I’m not getting the tune’ or ‘I really like this song’ ... Everybody is relaxed and everyone is talking and chatting after practising together.”

Also interesting in terms of relationships were the changes in those between students and teachers, in this environment in which we were all thrown together as choristers - including teachers with much weaker musical credentials than many of the students. The diary entries include this observation of role reversal:

- “T3 was flustered as she couldn’t find the point we were restarting from in the song sheet... At the same time as the conductor answered T3’s question, S16 reached over and showed T3 on the sheet, and reassured her with a pat and saying something like ‘it’s ok [name]’. It looked as if she enjoyed being in a position of being patronising to a teacher!” (T2’s diary, 6th rehearsal).

This was possible because S16, although not confident in speaking Italian, is a fine singer, accustomed to reading music and following choir directions, unlike T3. In another diary entry (11th rehearsal), T1 noted that a second-year student, S13, had helped her out by answering a first-year student’s question about the words the conductor had used, when she (T1) could not answer because she had been distracted. S13 would not usually have the chance to help that teacher out in class.

Other examples of role reversals are noted in diary observations about choir members asking the person next to them for help or clarification. In these situations, they did not always know the proficiency of a speaker they were addressing for help; when the addressee was a first-

year or second-year student it was a novel and pleasing experience for her/him, to be assumed to be knowledgeable.

We detected signs of a sense of accomplishment of two different kinds in the students' interviews. The first involved pride in the achievement of public performances. A near-beginner learner who was not enrolled in our courses described the second concert and singing jointly with another choir as "a triumph". Various students evidently saw the good relationships within the choir, and team work, as essential to that kind of sense of accomplishment, which in turn generated positive emotions:

- "Definitely the camaraderie, like when we sing together and it comes out really, really well. ... Yeah, that team work that comes out of it ... I play team sports now and then, so that's the feeling. It's like you know, achieve something in a group and it's a successful one so everybody feels happy and really good." (S18)
- "When we did our first performance ... that was fun. I think everybody felt very proud after it that we finally pulled ourselves together. [Laughing]" (S10)
- "[W]hen the group finally got it and we all came together as a group. ... That was awesome. It was great that we got to perform in public." (S21)

S21 also stressed the importance of responsibility towards the group, in reaching that sense of accomplishment:

- "I'm really uncoordinated... It was challenging to try and control that part of me. But I knew it was for the greater cause because by doing, by controlling myself there I was able to be part of a group as opposed to being an individual... So it was nice to be just a little voice in a bigger picture."

The other kind of sense of accomplishment we identified in the students' interviews had to do with overcoming the challenges they perceived in the situation, as language learners, by developing their own strategies. S10 described ways she had coped as follows, indicating that she deliberately sought to relax her concern with correctness in favour of communication and developed her paraphrasing skills:

- "[T]he first few weeks I was - yeah, I was shy and I think I kept a bit more quiet. Then as it went on - I don't know, I think I just tried - I did try not to worry about - when I speak I'm always worried about the grammar, things agreeing and things like that and I thought I might try and let that go a little bit and just try and say what I want to say more."
- With the ... native speakers, I don't know, I guess I learnt a lot more how to - if I didn't know a word, how to try and explain the word. ... If I didn't know the word for something, trying to describe it."

S14 too had discovered a strategy that worked for her:

- "I found I actually enjoy listening to native speakers talking to each other as it's a good way to experience the language and think about the structure and try to understand what the conversation is about. When I'm involved [in a conversation] I find it hard to notice these things or to listen properly as I'm panicking thinking about what to say next."

While it is hard to pinpoint specific comments that convey students experiencing meaningful engagement, we see a general sense of intrinsic motivation underlying the interview texts as a whole, and especially around the references to progress, both in music and language learning. The sense of meaningful engagement can be summarised in a view of the students as consciously applying themselves to challenges and aware of being committed to a process

that is taking them beyond their comfort zone in various ways, and changing them. The comments from interviews reported above flesh out some ways in which the students felt these aspects of the experience - positive feelings, learning benefits, going beyond their comfort zone - to be interlinked and also linked to the satisfaction of contributing to a collective creative project.

One student, S1, whose interview encapsulated all the PERMA elements, in our view, was an especially significant case given that she was in the first-year course. Her comments included:

- “I see the choir as a wonderful additional... extension of the learning, but with enjoyment. Not that I’m saying that classes aren’t enjoyable, but it’s a different learning environment, a different atmosphere. A little bit more camaraderie than you can engender in a classroom.”
- “just being with other people passionate about the language and the culture.”
- “It was very challenging, with only one semester of [Italian course] experience, to listen and to understand. ... but the expectation was fulfilled in that it was a safe learning environment.”
- “being able to take part in ... the joint choir for one of our performances..., it was wonderful to see the Italian community gathered and embracing the Italian singing”.

Taken together, these comments paint a picture of S1 enjoying music and language learning, in an environment that felt supportive and characterised by shared passion, proud of the collective achievement and especially of being engaged in a performance which gave something to the Italian community.

It also transpires from the interview that S1 had had serious doubts about continuing at the start but had made herself persevere, and had risen to the challenge by developing personal strategies. For example, she had realised that seeking out second-year students for tea-break conversation rather than L1 speakers was good for her confidence and for being able to participate more in a conversation, but she had also embraced the opportunity to “enjoy hearing more of the language, because in class there’s only a limited number of words that the tutor can use”. She noted: “So, at tea-break time I would just stand next to a couple of fluent speakers, just to listen to the flow of the words and also how some of the words are pronounced.”

S1 was pleased at having progressed from understanding just “some” to “most” of what the conductor said. Her experience is particularly important as she moved from a position of lack of confidence at the start to being convinced of the benefit to her and recognising that she had risen to the challenge and devised strategies for tackling it. One episode recounted in T1’s diary features S1 in this state of well-being:

- “S4 brought his guitar and suggested a sing-along of ‘*La vasca*’, which he and other first-year students had enjoyed in class in the context of work on reflexive verbs. First-year students S1, S5 and S6 are out the front leading the singing with S4, clustered tightly around a single copy of the words, and evidently enjoying it. I notice shy S1 smiling as she returns to her seat afterwards” (T1’s diary, 7th rehearsal).

We must acknowledge, however, that not all students were keen to take up the opportunity provided by the choir. We administered a brief questionnaire to first-year and second-year students who had not joined at all, or had dropped out, asking them to identify the main reason and optionally a second. A large majority - 27 students, or 70% of respondents - indicated logistical problems as their main reason: that the rehearsal time or venue made it

impossible for them to attend. While some of these students would undoubtedly have had immovable obstacles to attendance, for others the selection of those reasons may simply indicate that joining the choir did not appeal enough for them to change their commitments or habits to fit it in. Meanwhile, 7 (18%) ticked as either their main or second reason their lack of proficiency or confidence in Italian, 16 (41%) ticked “The idea of being in a choir doesn’t appeal to me at all” and 18 (46%) felt they did not sing well enough. It is perhaps not surprising that so many responded that they did not find joining a choir appealing, given the statistics on ages of community choir members noted above. And it may be that joining an organisation such as *Unicoro* with members from various age groups and backgrounds is intimidating or ‘uncool’ for young students.

Conclusion

The outcomes apparent in the evaluation data discussed above are heartening. For the students who chose to participate in this community choir, the experience of this creative activity conducted in Italian, in a supportive environment characterised by interaction with Italian-speaking community members, was beneficial for their language learning and development of intercultural competence. At the same time, they exhibited characteristics of well-being consistent with the various dimensions of Seligman’s PERMA model: positive feelings linked to a sense of accomplishment through contributing as a team in a worthwhile collective process - producing music for themselves and for an appreciative public - as well as accomplishment in their individual process of learning.

Ideally, then, our next step would be to seek to extend the *Unicoro* opportunity to more of, or all, our students, and making use of the above findings to that end. The choir certainly continues to thrive, musically and pedagogically speaking, although it faces the challenge of now needing to become self-sufficient financially. However, we appreciate that not all students will desire or be able to take up the opportunity. And on the other hand, providing the extraordinary experience described above for a much larger body of students is not feasible within the model we have used. For its success depends on achieving a synthesis between the aims as a choir and the pedagogical aims - not least because, as we have seen, the success as a choir is important to the language-learners’ well-being in it - and a balance between the expectations and preferences of people who join it to sing in Italian and those of people who join it primarily (at least initially) to learn or practise Italian. In addition to the obvious dependence on our conductor with specific expertise, we need a number of proficient Italian speakers in the choir to maintain the use of Italian as lingua franca and intercultural encounters. While some of the community-member choristers have a strong desire to help the learners by speaking in Italian with them even when it is difficult, they undoubtedly also want to enjoy being in an effective choir. In order for the choir to involve and retain those L1 speakers, the choir experience has to be very challenging for our first-year students who are near-beginners. And therefore the constant engagement of the conductor and teachers among the choristers, supporting those learners, is essential.

A possible path to pursue is that of having two choirs: continuing the community-based choir aimed at providing the ‘complete’ experience, while also creating an on-campus choir with rehearsals timetabled as normal class contact hours. An on-campus choir would not be able to recruit many native speakers but would aim at providing the other kinds of benefits for learning and well-being that constitute a significant part of the rationale for our community-based choir. We would also need to work hard to secure the students’ faith in our promise of

the benefits and our support, in order to win over those concerned about their singing ability and language proficiency.

We share with MacIntyre and Mercer (2014, p.163) the goal of “foster[ing] the positivity of our learners’ educational experiences”, and our experience with *Unicoro* has led us to particularly appreciate their recommendation that this requires attention to “the processes and timescales in which learners can be seen to be happy and experience flourishing in language learning”. Whatever the way(s) we seek to integrate choir participation into our program in future, in our own conception of this and our promotion of it to students, we will need to keep sight of the fact that this is a learning experience for which we can promise no *specific* achievement or proficiency outcomes, especially in the short-term: the processes and timescales will differ for each individual. Nonetheless, it provides an opportunity to develop and sustain learners’ motivation and more generally their well-being, crucial factors for the long-term undertaking of learning a foreign language.

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Appendix: Extract from worksheet guidelines for the second-year course

Reflections on language:

- list new and/or interesting words, expressions and grammatical structures that you noticed the Italians or the conductor use, or that you saw in the songs or the PPTs during rehearsal
- list aspects of your own Italian where you noticed errors or difficulties etc. Include questions to put to your teacher at next class

Reflections on languaculture

Consider, for example:

- Approaches to interpersonal relationships - Terms of address - Formal and informal. (Please try to use 'lei' when first meeting with all native speakers at choir) Did you change these terms of address during the conversation or in subsequent weeks? Why? How? Did you use first name and surname, or just first name?
- Levels of politeness and ritualisation. e.g. Did you interrupt each other in conversation? How?
- Pragmatic routines - greetings, leave-taking, etc. How did you greet the CM? How did (s)he greet you? Did you shake hands? Did you kiss twice? Why? Why not?
- Levels of verbosity. Did you notice differences in terms of loudness and liveliness? Were there silent moments? What about overlapping? Did turn-taking feel different? How did you manage turn-taking?
- Non-verbal communication. Did people use gestures to clarify, add or emphasise aspects of the conversation? How close did the people you interacted with sit/stand? Did you ever feel they invaded your 'personal space'? Did anyone touch you while talking or greeting? How did you feel about this?
- Approaches to interpersonal relationships. Levels of expressivity. Avoidance or love of conflict. Did you notice verbal or non verbal ways in which someone expressed emotions? Were you able to discuss the level of 'emotional disclosure' in Italy and in Australia? Were there instances in which you and a CM disagreed on a specific issue? How did you express your disagreement and how did the CM express it? How did you manage the situation?
- Stereotypes. Were there any moments during rehearsals that led you to reflect on the notions of 'stereotipo' and 'sociotipo' discussed in class?
- Give (if relevant) examples of any misunderstandings arising from cultural/social differences.

¹ The second-year students meet with their allotted volunteer community members regularly during one semester, to talk, shop, watch movies, or carry out any activity they choose, together. Their meetings are held at times and venues decided jointly by them - often the community member's home or a café.

² The choir and the pedagogical project behind it would not have been possible without the gifted and hard-working conductor, [name]. She and we are also deeply grateful to numerous other people who have given their time and energy to the choir and/or the project, including: choir members who support the beginner and intermediate-level Italian learners, and those who provide accompaniment at rehearsals and performances; and our colleagues [names], who contributed to planning and evaluation, and [name], who helped seek funding.

³ 'musica leggera' translates literally into English as 'light music'.

⁴ Questions that sought an answer in terms of degree of agreement all offered 5 options: ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘undecided’, ‘disagree’, ‘strongly disagree’. In cases where no students selected ‘strongly disagree’, that option is not included in the graphs.

⁵ Students recorded their conversations with CMs and therefore had the opportunity to reflect on them at length.