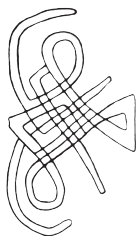


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Informal Contact with English

A case study of Italian postgraduate students

Maria Pavesi, Elisa Ghia



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List of abbreviations

AV: audiovisual
CALL: Computer Assisted Language Learning
CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning
EFL: English as a Foreign Language
ELF: English as a Lingua Franca
EMI: English Medium Instruction
ESL: English as a Second Language
ESP: English for Specific Purposes
ICT: Information and Communication Technology
L1: first language
L2: second/foreign/additional language
LBC: language learning beyond the classroom
Ln: any other foreign/additional language
LOTE: Languages Other Than English
MALL: Mobile Assisted Language Learning
MMORPGs: Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games
OILE: Online Informal Learning of English
OTT: Over-the-Top (referred to video platforms)
RQ: Research Question
SLA: Second Language Acquisition

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Introduction

In today's globalised and multicultural world, English has become a part of everyday life for many people and has crossed regional borders, spreading to countries where it is not spoken as a national or official language. New affordances are available through which the language can be used, learned and appropriated by new speakers, in a constant reshaping of identities, communicative and multilingual practices. At the same time, English is increasingly moving out of the domain of formal education to be accessed informally by learners, users and expert users of the language for recreation, study and work. As these shifting scenarios are highly diversified across Europe and worldwide, research is called to address several key questions: what is the status of informal L2 learning in different countries, regions and communities – and in different sections of the population? Which position does English hold in the picture – and what are the extent and modalities of spontaneous contact with this language? What are the profiles of the typical users of English? And which implications does informal access to the language have for L2 input, output, and users' attitudes towards English and other foreign languages?

This volume addresses some of these issues by reflecting on informal contact with English in Italy. It offers a snapshot of students' patterns of exposure to the language within a specific setting, i.e. that of postgraduate education – a hub of contact with English and a place at the forefront of change in linguistic behaviour. The research presented here is a case study involving a varied group of participants at a medium-sized university in Italy. As such, it was conceived as an initial exploration of students' behaviours that, while still broadly undetected, may be drastically changing and resulting in novel uses and acquisitional patterns of English as a foreign language and a lingua franca. Although small-scale and with no pretence of wider representativeness, the study can be envisaged as the testing of a perfectible tool of data collection suitable to gather relevant information from different sections of the target population.

The outcomes encourage further refinements and future developments, while highlighting the need for replications and larger-scale observations.

The book is structured in seven chapters and is ideally divided into two parts. The first two chapters introduce the background to the case study, which is presented and discussed in the following part of the book. Chapter 1 focusses on the unique status of English as the language of international communication in today's world. The spread of English and multilingualism are complementary rather than contrasting phenomena that lead to a wide diversification in language usage and functions. Both the use and the acquisition of English as a foreign language are thus becoming increasingly dynamic processes, as are the identities and the practices of L2 English speakers all over the world. In this complex landscape, new affordances are also changing the environments in which English is accessed and learned, encouraging the shift towards untutored and naturalistic contact with the language. If these transformations are affecting the world at large, there are great disparities among different geographical areas. Against this background, Italy is shown to be lagging behind both in terms of proficiency in English and contact with the global language.

Informal language learning is discussed in Chapter 2, where different denominations for this key phenomenon are presented, including 'out-of-school', 'extramural', 'beyond the classroom language learning' and 'online informal learning of English'. Crucial for any characterisation of informal language learning are the constructs of incidentality and informality of context and language, and the type of language users encounter. The centrality of language input brings about an assessment of how English is used on the web and in audiovisual dialogue; it also leads to a review of the acquisitional impact of exposure to popular media in several European countries. Special attention is paid to subtitled audiovisual input, showing how different types of subtitles can variously benefit incidental learning processes.

Chapter 3 shifts the attention to the empirical investigation itself, a questionnaire-based study that tackles participants' frequency and intensity of contact with English through different media. The dual focus of the study is introduced by the two main research questions, the first one probing the different sources of informal contact with L2 English, the second one addressing access to English-language telecinematic input. After illustrating the study's rationale, main aims and sample, the chapter describes the design and structure of the survey and the data collection procedure. The questionnaire, which contains 83 items, draws on previous research on profiles of language contact and recent investigations of students' motivations and attitudes towards L2 English. Data were collected during university lectures from a total of 305 Italian students at

the University of Pavia. At the end of the chapter, an overview of respondents' majors, language learning background and self-assessed proficiency level in L2 English is offered to frame the ensuing analyses and discussion.

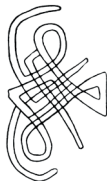
Chapter 4 describes the findings on overall informal access to English in the sample. Frequency and intensity of exposure to the different input types are presented and discussed highlighting some of their specificities as well as common features. Different input sources are grouped together, including films, TV-series and YouTube videos; social networks, web pages, blogs and forums; songs; face-to-face interaction, while data analysis taps how often and for how long participants engage in these activities. On the basis of these data, exposure indexes are generated and provide profiles of participants' informal contact with English. Factor analysis is used to obtain groupings and correlations among different informal activities.

Chapter 5 focusses on exposure to films and TV-series in L2 English. It includes an analysis of whether students prefer to watch dubbed or subtitled audiovisual products, which subtitles they opt for and which supports they like best. Additional sections investigate the reasons for participants' preferences as well as additional choices of favourite audiovisual genres, translation and subtitling modalities. Respondents' beliefs about the learning outcomes of this input source are discussed in the final part of the chapter, with a conclusive exploration addressing exposure to films and TV-series in other foreign languages.

Chapter 6 draws together the data gathered through the questionnaires and discusses the implications of the findings. With a view to highlighting general trends, it compares Italian postgraduate students against their peers from other European countries. It also develops a reflection upon the target input and its main characteristics. The Italian students are placed close to French and German peers who also access English prevalingly via receptive activities and adopt other similar modalities of exposure to the language. The input which is accessed by the participants in the study is predominantly multimodal, with important potential repercussions on memorisation and cognitive processing. It also contains specialised registers of English and is generally spoken or oralised, a fact that calls for a more thorough characterisation of telecinematic discourse in view of second language acquisition. Hybridity and interactivity are additional features that typify the language of the media and the web and may affect language learning. The multifaceted nature of access to English by the students in the survey brings the discussion back to EFL, ESL and ELF and to the status and shifting identities of learner-users.

Chapter 7 wraps up the volume and offers some concluding remarks. The complexity of English language use and learning in our contemporary world

comes to the fore as does the overall fluidity of mediated and face-to-face communication. The behaviours emerging from this survey may reflect more general trends, suggesting that the status of English in Italy is changing in line with what is happening in other countries in Europe and worldwide. This shift is likely to intensify in the future and as a result of growing informal contact with English in an increasingly multilingual, complex society.



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