EXPLORING ITALIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SELF-DIRECTED EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH INPUT IN INFORMAL SETTINGS
Insights into motivation and agency

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Abstract – Exposure to comprehensible input is essential for second language (L2) acquisition. In our globally interconnected era, technological advancements offer ample opportunities for accessing English. Understanding how Italian university students navigate this landscape is important, particularly considering the challenges they encounter in achieving English proficiency. In this study, we explored the reasons for university students' self-directed exposure to English input during their leisure time. Using the self-determination theory (SDT) framework, we conducted and analysed 21 semi-structured interviews with students at a medium-sized university in northern Italy, and conducted a thematic analysis to classify their motivations as intrinsic or extrinsic. A custom scale was also developed to assess the elaborateness of their expressions of agency. Our analysis revealed the presence of both intrinsic (e.g. immersion, entertainment, and personal interests) and extrinsic (e.g. improving English proficiency) motivations, together with elaborate expressions of agency being linked to specific behaviours, particularly when accessing English to enhance language skills. The results suggest that university students can capitalise on the abundant input that is available via technological resources by leveraging their motivation and agency.

Keywords: Self-directed informal contact with English; L2 English input; intrinsic motivation; extrinsic motivation; agency.

1. Italian university students and the learning of English: A complex relationship

The English language is evolving continuously and has a unique position on the global stage, resonating differently with diverse communities and exerting varying degrees of influence on language policies and education (Aronin *et al.* 2013). It functions as a lingua franca across multiple domains, including academia, business, technology, and diplomacy (Seidlhofer 2018). Proficiency in English has significant implications for individual mobility, economic opportunities, and cultural exchanges, representing both symbolic and tangible investments of time and energy (Bourdieu 1991; De Swaan 2001; Doiz *et al.* 2014; Norton 2016).

However, Italian students have reported difficulties in learning English, as shown by surveys conducted amongst university students. Landolfi (2012) created a corpus of written texts from over 500 first-year university students majoring in English as a second language (L2) in Naples. These students expressed their beliefs and attitudes regarding their experiences with English. A qualitative analysis of the corpus revealed an overly optimistic perception of their proficiency and an inaccurate awareness of their weaknesses in areas such as syntax, sentence construction, and paragraph development. Costa and Mariotti's (2020) survey explored undergraduate students' perspectives regarding English-taught courses at the University of Pavia, a medium-sized northern Italian university, and compared the views of local and international students across all disciplinary areas. This survey involved 357 participants and revealed notable differences between the two groups regarding their attitudes towards learning English in formal settings. While 78% of the international students perceived learning English positively, only 52% of the local students shared this sentiment. Furthermore, the international students exhibited higher levels confidence across all their English skills compared to their local counterparts. For example, in informal settings, 93% of the international students felt confident speaking and understanding English compared to 64% of the local students. Disparities were also evident in academic contexts. These findings revealed significant differences in the perceived English proficiency and confidence of local and international students in both formal and informal settings.

More recent data, based on the assessment of actual performances, have shown that Italy still lags behind in the European context, although it is slowly improving. According to the EF 2023 English Proficiency Index (EF EPI[1] 2023), an online, adaptive test of reading and listening skills comprising the results of 2.2 million adults, Italy is reported as being in 25th position out of 34 European countries, which suggests that competence in English is still somewhat modest amongst Italian speakers. In addition to the findings of the EF EPI, results obtained by Italian students in their final year of upper secondary school in the 2024 Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione (INVALSI - National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System) tests[2] further highlighted the challenges in English proficiency in Italy. These tests, which are conducted annually for all Italian students, assess fundamental skills in Italian, mathematics, and English. The results indicated that 60.3% of the students achieved level B2 (CEFR) in the reading test, an increase of

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[1] EF EPI 2023, EF English Proficiency Index, https://www.ef.com/epi (4.4.2024)., https://www.ef.com.tr/epi/regions/europe/ (4.4.2024).
[2] Rapporto INVALSI 2023 https://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/index.php (4.4.2024).

4.2 percentage points compared to 2023, and 45.4% in the listening test, an increase of by 3.7 percentage points from the previous year. Despite these improvements, the majority of the students were still around the 50% mark, indicating substantial room for improvement.

The increased availability of digital technologies has expanded opportunities for accessing authentic, multimodal materials in English and, potentially, for learning the language. Contemporary English learners are increasingly engaging with informal English across diverse digital platforms, including subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services, social media, online communities, and Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) (Dressman, Sadler 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Sockett 2014; Sundqvist, Sylvén 2014). Considering that exposure to comprehensible input is essential for second language acquisition (SLA) (Krashen 1985), the fact that there is an abundance of media available in English, both in the form of telecinematic and Internet-based affordances (Dressman, Sadler 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Reinhardt 2022), presents promising opportunities. SLA research has indicated that engagement in these settings correlates with positive effects on various aspects of L2 acquisition, including enhancements in L2 vocabulary (Sundqvist 2019), L2 speaking skills (Lee, Dressman 2018), scores on standardised English tests (Lee, Dressman 2018), and school grades (Lai *et al.* 2015). In addition, these activities are linked to psychological factors associated with SLA, such as motivation (Lee, Drajati 2019), confidence (Lai *et al.* 2015; Lee 2019; Lee, Drajati 2019), and L2 enjoyment (Talebzadeh *et al.* 2020).

However, the availability of abundant English input does not inherently guarantee that young people will engage with these opportunities. In an information society, this access has significant potential power in determining the quantity and quality of the knowledge one seeks to acquire. Research on motivation and agency can provide valuable insights into university students' behaviour regarding informal exposure to language input, offering potentially useful information to stakeholders who are involved in the process of learning English. Within the wider framework of informal contact with English, in this article, we focus on how Italian university students enrolled at a medium-sized university in northern Italy described informal, self-directed exposure to L2 English by adopting the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT), a psychological perspective that investigates motivation in human behaviour. Before delving into the study and its outcomes, we will provide a concise review of motivational theories in SLA research (Section 2) and in psychology (Section 3). Subsequently, we will explore the relationship between motivation and agency (Section 4) and the relevance of these constructs for research on informal contact with English (Section 5). After outlining the study's rationale (Section 6) and describing our research design (Section 7), we

will then present and discuss our findings (Sections 8 and 9) and outline their implications for future research (Section 10).

2. Motivation in SLA

Affective factors in SLA have been explored since the 1970s (Chastain 1975; Dewaele, MacIntyre 2014; MacIntyre *et al.* 2016). Drawing on the concept of the affective filter proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977), Krashen (1982, 1985) suggested that emotions could either hinder or facilitate the processing of L2 input. For example, learners who experienced enjoyment while studying English would have a lower affective filter, thus promoting language acquisition. Expanding on Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, research has examined the impact of both negative emotions, such as anxiety (Gkonou *et al.* 2017), and positive emotions, like foreign language enjoyment (FLE), on L2 learning in classroom settings (Dewaele, MacIntyre 2014; Dewaele *et al.* 2018).

Amongst the affective factors identified as influencing the L2 learning process, motivation is acknowledged as a crucial factor (Gardner 1985; Dörnyei 2005). For example, Dörnyei (2020) maintained that, without a sufficient level of motivation, even L2 learners with the highest levels of language aptitude may not complete language-learning tasks or achieve long-term learning goals successfully.

Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012) delineated four distinct phases in the evolution of L2 motivation research in SLA, each characterised by different foci and methodologies. The first phase, called the social-psychological period (from 1959 to 1990), was marked by the foundational work of Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1985) in Canada, who explored attitudes to language learning and motivation, and highlighted the importance of integrative and instrumental orientations in L2 acquisition. In particular, Gardner (1985) proposed that integrative and instrumental motivations played key roles in language learning. Integrative motivation refers to language learners' desire to integrate into the target language community, while instrumental motivation focuses on the achievement of practical goals. It is important to highlight that integrativeness has been subjected to significant re-evaluations in recent decades (Coetzee-Van Rooy 2006; Ushioda 2009) as a result of the evolution of English and its current hyper-central status (De Swaan 2001). Accordingly, English is no longer solely linked to specific geographical or cultural Anglophone communities, but is increasingly becoming associated with globalised cultures (Aiello 2018).

The second phase, the cognitive-situated period, began in the 1990s and focused on the role played by the integration of cognitive theories into research on L2 motivation. Scholars aimed to understand motivation within

specific learning contexts, such as classrooms, and explored concepts like intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. The studies that were conducted during this period showed that motivation could influence learners' oral and written communication skills, cognitive processes, and their ability to self-regulate their learning (Dörnyei 2001).

The process-oriented period (the third phase) in motivation studies, which began at the turn of the century, emphasised motivational change over time. The subsequent socio-dynamic phase (the fourth phase) represented a shift towards understanding L2 motivation as a complex, dynamic system influenced by internal, social, and contextual factors by drawing on complexity theory, which posits that the learner is a complex adaptive system (CAS); in other words, a dynamic, multicomponent system that is composed of different subsystems that interact with each other in a non-linear way (Larsen-Freeman 1997, 2012). The concepts of self-organisation and emergent behaviour, which refer to unpredictable learner behaviour that cannot be deduced from the simple sum of the elements that constitute the system (Dörnyei *et al.* 2015), are typical of complex systems. Using this theoretical framework, scholars have explored the interaction between individuals and their learning environments by considering factors such as motivation and identity (Dörnyei 2005, 2009). Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) integrates motivational concepts with theories pertaining to the self and identity, highlighting the importance of future self-images in motivating language learning. In a recent strand of research, the L2MSS has been applied to informal learning settings, such as self-directed language-learning activities performed in out-of-class (Lin 2023) and informal digital learning of English (IDLE) settings (Lee, Lee 2021).

This discussion highlights a common trend in SLA research: Scholars often investigate motivation by focusing on the participants' ability to reflect on their own L2 learning. However, we explored motivation in self-directed, informal exposure to English from a broader perspective without assuming an inherent intention to learn. The next section presents insights from the psychology of motivation to enable a more comprehensive analysis of the reasons that guide university students to seek informal contact with English.

3. Motivation in psychology

The study of motivation investigates the reasons underlying human behaviour by exploring an organism's needs and their connection to actions. Historically, these theories ranged from mechanistic to organismic views. Mechanistic views saw humans as reacting to physiological drives and external stimuli, while organismic views saw humans as active agents with

intrinsic needs who were capable of initiating behaviour (Deci, Ryan 1985). Early in the history of formal psychology, James (1890) emphasised the importance of concepts such as will, while Woodworth (1918) directly addressed the issue of motivated behaviour. Most psychologists then downplayed or ignored the importance of motivation for decades. Theories of motivation gained prominence starting with psychoanalytic psychology (Freud 1915); the initial focus was on drives, investigated either in the sphere of psychopathology or in behavioural psychology, in which behaviour organisation was attributed exclusively to associative bonds between stimuli and responses (Hull 1943).

In the 1950s, researchers realised that these views were ineffective in terms of accounting for pathology-free developmental patterns and non-stimulus-dependent behaviours, such as the need for exploration (Harlow 1950) and intrinsic motivation (White 1959). In line with this paradigm shift, psychology began to address volitional or non-drive-related aspects of motivation, leading to the development of several theories, each considering volition from a different perspective; examples include the hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943), expectancy value theory (Vroom 1964), cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), and self-regulation (Carver, Scheier 1998).

In recent years, the dual-process theory (Kahneman 2011) has also made significant contributions to research; this theory posits that human behaviour is governed by two distinct systems, namely a reflective, deliberative system and an automatic, impulsive system, which interact and influence decision making, while the neurobiological models (Salamone, Correa 2012) have integrated insights from neuroscience and psychology to contribute to understanding the neural mechanisms underlying motivational processes. Of these, SDT is one of the most influential models in contemporary behavioural science. Developed in the 1970s by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, SDT emphasises intrinsic motivation in human behaviour and explores how individuals' perceptions of social contexts influence motivation and well-being.

3.1 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT considers the study of motivation to be the exploration of two key principles, namely energisation and the direction of human behaviour. Energisation refers to the activation or arousal of motivation within an individual (Ryan, Deci 2000, p. 74); this concept encompasses the initiation of behaviour and the amount of effort an individual is willing to exert in relation to a particular goal or task. Accordingly,

> energy in motivation theory is fundamentally a matter of needs. An adequate theory of motivation must therefore take into account both the needs that are

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innate to the organism […] and those that are acquired through interactions
with the environment.

Direction concerns "the processes and structures of the organism that give meaning to internal and external stimuli, thereby directing action towards the satisfaction of needs" (Deci, Ryan 1985, p. 3). SDT posits that individuals are active organisms that are naturally inclined to grow, develop, and act on the drives and emotions in their internal environment and on their external environment, which has positive and negative forces. Individuals seek to integrate these influences into their internal structure, or self, to function effectively and to satisfy their full range of needs (Deci, Ryan 1985, p. 8). In this regard, Ryan and Deci (2017) identified innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which play crucial roles in fostering an individual's motivation and well-being. Firstly, the need for autonomy refers to the need to experience self-direction and volition in one's actions; individuals with a strong sense of autonomy feel that their actions are self-endorsed and are in harmony with their personal values and interests. Secondly, the need for competence refers to the need to feel effective and capable in one's interactions with the environment. Thirdly, the need for relatedness is the need to feel connected to others and to experience a sense of belonging and intimacy in interpersonal relationships. According to Ryan and Deci (2017), intrinsic motivation arises from the satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs, as opposed to extrinsic motivation that is driven by external rewards or pressures rather than by personal satisfaction and fulfilment.

To account for these phenomena, Deci and Ryan (1985, p. 43) developed the cognitive evaluation theory (CET), which asserts that intrinsic motivation increases when the environment supports an individual's needs for autonomy and competence. Conversely, intrinsic motivation declines when autonomy is disregarded or hindered by controlling measures (such as bribes, demands, or pressuring language) or when perceived competence is undermined by negative or unhelpful feedback. For example, early research demonstrated that external motivators such as money could decrease intrinsic motivation by undermining perceived autonomy (Deci 1971). Subsequent studies showed that other external factors that were perceived as being controlling, such as deadlines (Amabile *et al.* 1976) and surveillance (Plant, Ryan 1985), also reduced intrinsic motivation. Similarly, interpersonal environments can impact on intrinsic motivation depending on whether they are viewed as informative or controlling. For example, while positive feedback is generally seen as informative (supporting competence), it can be perceived as controlling (undermining autonomy) if given in a pressuring manner (Ryan 1982). Furthermore, internal factors, such as one's own perceptions, emotions, and thoughts, can also influence motivation. This may occur when feelings of self-value or identity become intertwined with

performance to the extent that engaging in a specific behaviour becomes essential in order to feel worthy or esteemed (Mageau *et al.* 2009; Plant, Ryan 1985).

In educational settings, the application of the SDT framework has emphasised the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to increase students' motivation and academic success (Niemiec, Ryan 2009). It has been observed that, even if extrinsic rewards have a place in these settings, they are not always effective for motivating individuals in tasks that require creativity and problem solving (Pink 2009). SDT has also been used to explore SLA in both formal and informal contexts (Lamb *et al.* 2019; Noels *et al.* 2000), emphasising the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for L2 learning. A psychometric instrument, called the Language Learning Orientation Scale (LLOS) (Noels *et al.* 2000), has been created to assess motivational orientations in L2 learning. Its applications consistently show that greater perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness are positively associated with intrinsic motivation and internalised forms of extrinsic motivation (Agawa, Takeuchi 2016; Noels 2001).

4. The relationship between motivation and agency

In social cognitive psychology, the human mind is seen as being "generative, creative, proactive, and reflective, not just reactive", and "to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (Bandura 2001, p. 4). Agency is particularly important when studying motivation because it highlights an individual's ability to act independently and to make decisions that influence their own life and the world around them. Agency involves a sense of control, self-efficacy, and the ability to make intentional decisions (Bandura 2001).

Agency and motivation are closely related concepts. From a complexity theory perspective, motivation can be viewed as a precursor to the expression of agency as emergent behaviour (cf. "motivation can be regarded as a precursor to engagement" Arndt 2023, p. 4). The concept of agency has attracted significant attention in SLA, often combined with discussions about L2 speakers' identity (Mercer 2012; Zuengler 1989) and learner engagement in formal settings (Mercer 2012; Reeve 2012). This perspective suggests that learners are not passive recipients in the language-learning process; instead, they have the capacity to make conscious choices, to exert influence, to resist (such as by remaining silent or discontinuing courses) or to comply, despite potential limitations imposed by their social circumstances.

5. Motivation and agency in informal contact with English

There has recently been a significant increase in empirical research on informal second language practices (ISLPs). However, limited systematic attention has been paid to the affective factors influencing individuals' access to English outside of the classroom. Studies addressing university students' motivation to access English input informally include those by Trinder (2017), Kusyk (2020) and, concerning Italy, Pavesi and Ghia (2020), and De Riso (2023).

In a study focusing on drivers for ISLPs, Trinder (2017) examined a group of Austrian economics students' access to English-language media and technologies. Using open-ended questions, the researcher investigated users' reasons for accessing various types of media and observed a phenomenon termed "dual-purpose engagement", whereby participants accessed English media not only to enhance their L2 skills but also for leisure and entertainment, making language learning an enjoyable and effortless activity. Similarly, other studies exploring motivations for ISLPs have found a combination of factors, particularly a balance between L2 learning objectives and recreational pursuits.

Kusyk (2020) conducted research on the online informal learning of English (OILE) amongst French and German university students, and revealed that their exposure habits were guided by a combination of explicit language-learning goals and entertainment purposes. While the participants mainly engaged with English media for recreation and language learning, their focus shifted depending on the type of media, such as watching AVs and playing video games for leisure, and reading online texts for learning purposes.

In a comprehensive survey of postgraduate Italian students, Pavesi and Ghia (2020) found that language-learning and hedonic factors were the main reasons for accessing English input informally. The participants often sought authenticity and naturalness by watching films, television series, and other AV programmes in the original language, and expressed admiration for the language itself.

De Riso's (2023) subsequent research on Italian university students corroborated these findings, with the participants engaging in leisure activities in English to experience authenticity, to pursue their interest in the language, and to seize opportunities to enhance their L2 skills.

Current research is providing more information about motivation in informal contact with English (Ghia this volume; Leone, Paone this volume) within the wider framework of the extensive PRIN-funded study of "The informalisation of English language learning through the media" (Pavesi this volume). To date, we are not aware of any research that has employed an SDT perspective to examine motivation in self-directed access to English input in informal settings. Building on the aforementioned considerations, we

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investigated the potential implications of this theoretical framework for investigating the motivated behaviour of Italian university students in contexts of informal access to English as an L2.

6. Rationale for investigating motivation and agency in self-directed informal settings

It is important to clarify that our research concerns the self-directed *access* to English input rather than the self-directed *learning* of the English language; the latter, rooted in learner autonomy, emphasises students' control over their learning journey (Holec 1981; Reinders 2010).

In our approach, we focused on exploring motivation and agency in Italian university students' decisions to access English input without formulating assumptions about the reasons that guided their behaviour. This approach enabled the participants' experiences and motivations to emerge naturally within the data. Based on the view that "the active organism views stimuli not as causes of behaviour, but as affordances or opportunities that the organism can utilise in satisfying their needs" (Deci, Ryan 1985, p. 4), we adopted the SDT framework due to its comprehensive nature and adaptability to various contexts, including informal contact with English settings. With this context in mind, our research questions (RQs) focused on self-reported descriptions of motivated and agentic behaviour, as follows:

- RQ1: What drives our informants to access English input during their free time?
- RQ2: How do they elaborate on the criteria that guide their behaviour?

We aimed to answer these questions through a qualitative analysis of our informants' narratives.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research design

Our study is qualitative in that it investigates data collected through semi-structured interviews with Italian university students from an emic perspective. Qualitative research is well suited for exploring multifaceted phenomena such as motivational thinking and expressions of agency because it provides in-depth insights into the participants' perspectives (Duff 2012). Semi-structured interviews serve as a flexible tool that enables researchers to elicit rich, context-dependent information while maintaining the possibility of

cross-case comparisons (Smith 2018). Emic data were corroborated by information deriving from the Informal English Contact and Learning (IECoL) questionnaire, which was devised as part of the on-going, large-scale national project (PRIN) "The informalisation of English language learning through media: Language input, learning outcomes and sociolinguistic attitudes from an Italian perspective" (Pavesi this volume; Pavesi *et al.* 2023). The questionnaire data concerned the type of university course, the frequency and intensity of exposure, the attitude towards English on a 0-10 scale, and the participants' levels of English proficiency, which was evaluated using CEFR language certificates or, if these were unavailable, via a CEFR-based test (cf. Pavesi *et al.* 2023 for a detailed description of the questionnaire).

7.2 Participants

The participants were 21 undergraduate and postgraduate students, 11 males and 14 females, whose native language was Italian. They were enrolled at the University of Pavia, a medium-sized university in northern Italy, and were taking courses that were distributed equally across three macro areas: Macro area A, Arts and Humanities (including students in the Arts, History, Foreign Languages, and Psychology), Macro area B, Economics/Law/Political and Social Science, and Macro area C, Science and Technology (Pavesi *et al.* 2023).

The informants were selected using a combination of criterion and convenience sampling. Criterion sampling was employed to identify potential participants amongst students who accessed English input during their leisure time based on their responses to the IECoL questionnaire. Convenience sampling involved recruiting participants through invitation. Students who specialised in English were excluded from the sample to mitigate potential bias. Students who chose to participate voluntarily in the semi-structured interviews regarding their exposure behaviour were included. While convenience sampling offered practicality and accessibility in the data collection, we acknowledge the potential biases that can be introduced by the self-selection process. This was indicated by the underrepresentation of low-exposure informants in our sample. The majority of the volunteers (18 out of 21) had very high exposure to English input (several hours every day) and a very positive attitude towards English (rated from 8 to 10 out of 10), with varied proficiency levels (B1 = 5; B2 = 3; C1 = 9; C2 = 4). Only three of the 21 informants had low exposure. These participants also had a B1 proficiency level and negative attitudes towards English (rated from 3 to 5 out of 10).

7.3 Instrument

The data analysed in this article were collected through responses to the following two open-ended questions:

1) *Quali sono i motivi per cui ti esponi all'inglese nel tempo libero?* (What are the reasons for exposing yourself to English in your free time?)

2) *Quali sono i criteri che guidano il tuo comportamento?* (What are the criteria that guide your behaviour?)

The researcher explicitly considered the formulation of questions and the social context during the recruitment and data collection phases due to recognising their influence on the specific research circumstances. The questions were designed to be open-ended to gather comprehensive data, and were formulated using terms from the semantic field of decision and choice to capture the concepts of motivation and agency, consistent with SDT principles (Ryan, Deci 2017). The wording was concise to clarify the desired information while minimising priming. To create a comfortable environment and to facilitate effective communication, the researcher adopted a co-adaptive approach, actively engaging with each participant to build a feedback loop during the interview process. The interviews were conducted in Italian, the participants' native language, to enhance the clarity and ease of communication.

7.4 Data collection procedure

The interviews were conducted in a quiet, comfortable environment to encourage open communication. The participants received an informed consent form one week prior to the interviews, which provided detailed information about the project and allowed the students ample time to review the information and to decide whether to participate. Participation was incentivised via a small monetary compensation. The interviewer collected signed informed consent forms before each interview began. The interviews lasted for 15 minutes on average and included questions that explored additional aspects of the informants' experiences, although these are not the focus of the present research. Audio recordings of the interviews were made using a portable device.

7.5 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed using Speechmatics. A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the data, adopting a lexical-semantic principle (Braun, Clarke 2022). This involved searching for expressions that revealed the reasons that motivated our informants to access English input

and expressions of agency, operationalised as the expression of one's ability "to intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (Bandura 2001, p. 4). Specifically, to detect expressions of agency, we examined the types and moods of verbs and modal auxiliaries, adverbs, and adjectives following Duff's (2012) suggestions for research on self-reported agency in qualitative studies. In addition, we examined personal pronouns, which can serve as intensity modulators in Italian (Bazzanella, Gili Fivela 2009).

The thematic analysis was conducted as an inductive, iterative process that involved reading and re-reading the data for initial and axial coding (Saldaña 2021). Codes were assigned to expressions describing motivation by drawing on categories adapted from Deci and Ryan (2008)* and Noels *et al.* (2019), as reported in Table 1.

Motivation type and code	Description
Intrinsic motivation (INT)	Individuals are internally driven to access input in English in informal settings due to the inherent enjoyment and satisfaction they derive from the process.
Extrinsic motivation (EXT) Subtypes: 1) Integrated 2) Identified 3) Introjected 4) External	Individuals are driven to access input in English in informal settings to satisfy needs that are not connected to the inherent enjoyment and satisfaction they derive from the process. Extrinsic motivation encompasses the following subtypes, ranging from most to least internalised: 1. *Integrated*: Informants recognise accessing input in English as an integral part of their identity and self-expression; they find personal meaning in doing it and see it as consistent with other aspects of their identity. 2. *Identified*: Informants recognise the personal significance of accessing input in English in achieving meaningful goals, such as study or career advancement. 3. *Introjected*: Informants feel internally obligated to access input in English due to self-imposed or normative pressures. They may focus on avoiding negative emotions or boosting their ego rather than freely choosing the activity for its personal meaning. 4. *External*: Informants feel compelled to access input in English due to external demands or circumstances.

Table 1
Description of codes for motivation.

Codes were assigned to expressions describing agency using the Agency Elaborateness Scale (AES), a scale that was created specifically for this study following Duff's (2012) suggestion to develop ad hoc instruments for detecting and measuring agency in qualitative research based on the adopted theoretical framework. Although other agency scales exist, they are designed to measure different phenomena (such as perception) and do not allow for qualitative analyses (cf. the Sense of Agency Scale in Tapal *et al.* 2017).

The AES indicators included endorsement of one's behaviour, proactivity, and expressions of confidence. As shown in Table 2, these indicators were inspired by SDT principles (Ryan, Deci 2017) and were adapted to suit the context of the present study.

Indicator	Code	Description
Endorsement	END	Endorsement of one's behaviour refers to an individual's identification with, support for, and acceptance of their own actions while accessing input in English. This concept is linked to the internalisation process, in which individuals view their behaviours as aligned with their own values, beliefs, and/or goals.
Proactivity	PRO	Proactivity refers to the ability to identify and pursue opportunities to access input in English, rather than waiting for instructions or external cues; it indicates self-direction.
Confidence	CONF	Expressions of confidence relate to individuals' beliefs in their ability to effectively pursue and achieve their goals as they access input in English.

Table 2
Description of indicators in the AES.

The elaborateness score ranged from 0 (indicating the absence of any indicators) to 3 (indicating the presence of all three indicators). The codes were inserted manually and retrieved automatically using data analysis software to ensure accuracy. The data were then reviewed by two peers who were not part of this study, but who were knowledgeable about the topic. The inter-rater reliability was 80%; the raters then discussed the inconsistencies and reached agreement about the remaining 20%. We present our results in Section 8 by highlighting recurring patterns and providing descriptions of some of the informants' behaviours.

7.6 Ethical aspects

To ensure data anonymity during the interviews, voice recordings were encrypted, and the files were stored on a device that was not connected to the Internet.

8. Results

To address RQ1 (What drives our informants to access English input during their free time?), we classified their responses by applying the SDT categories of motivation.

Our informants accessed English input for the following reasons, listed in decreasing order of frequency: seeking entertainment, enjoying immersive experiences, improving their English language skills, accessing a wide range of content and information that aligned with their personal interests, and because they perceived English-language information - particularly news - as being more reliable than its Italian counterpart.

By applying the SDT paradigm, our data revealed that the intrinsically motivated behaviour encompassed seeking entertainment, enjoying immersive experiences, and pursuing personal interests. The informants who reported intrinsic motivation had a very high exposure index (at least three

hours every day) and extremely positive attitudes towards English (from 9 to 10), but not necessarily high proficiency. An example of how these informants described this type of motivation is provided in Excerpt 1:

> (1) *Ormai mi sono abituata a vederli direttamente in inglese e se uso i sottotitoli li metto direttamente in inglese, ma tendenzialmente lo faccio perché lo trovo, trovo più interessante approcciarmi al contenuto nella sua forma originale, quindi senza passare attraverso il doppiaggio, perché lo trovo più interessante al fine diciamo, di usufruire del contenuto audiovisivo nella sua forma integrale, più pura diciamo, per un'esperienza più piena.*
>
> "Now I'm used to watching them directly in English, and if I use subtitles, I use them in English as well. But I tend to do it because I find it more interesting to approach the content in its original form, so without going through dubbing, because I find it more interesting to enjoy the audiovisual content in its complete, purer form, for a fuller experience."

As can be seen, this informant's access to English input was mainly motivated by the intrinsic enjoyment and satisfaction experienced during the process. An example of seeking entertainment is provided in Excerpt 2:

> (2) *Utilizzo quasi esclusivamente materiale in inglese per, perché ritengo che i media e lingua inglese siano migliori, le serie TV sono proprio di qualità migliore.*
>
> "I almost exclusively use material in English because I believe that English-language media is superior, especially when it comes to TV series which are of higher quality."

With regard to extrinsic motivation, our informants mainly reported the identified extrinsic subtype, as they recognised the personal significance of accessing input in English to achieve meaningful goals such as improving their proficiency levels, as shown in Excerpt 3:

> (3) *Guardo principalmente magari vlog di persone che riprendono la propria vita e che magari utilizzano i termini che non ho mai sentito perché sono slang o comunque termini che vengono utilizzati magari in una zona o nell'altra, quindi principalmente per utilità ecco, l'inglese comunque come lingua mi è sempre piaciuto, quindi vabbè, quello l'ho dato forse per scontato, però lo ritengo anche molto utile comunque per tutto, e quindi, cioè io ritengo di avere comunque un buon livello, però posso sempre migliorarlo e questo modo per migliorarlo senza studiare attivamente.*
>
> "I mainly watch vlogs of people documenting their lives, and maybe they use terms I've never heard before because they're slang or terms used in one area or another. So mainly for utility, you know? Anyway, I've always liked English as a language, so that's a given, but I also find it very useful for everything. So, I mean, I think I have a good level of

proficiency already, but I can always improve, and this is a way to improve without actively studying."

This informant, an engineering student, described the behaviour he adopted in detail when accessing English input to achieve a purpose he deemed useful, likely for his future professional life, and stressed the fact that it was important for him to expose himself to online content that he found interesting as a means to "improve without actively studying".

Our informants also frequently mentioned the most internalised subtype, integrated extrinsic motivation, which corresponded to accessing input in English as an integral part of an individual's identity and self-expression (see Table 1 for a detailed description), as illustrated in Excerpt 4:

> (4) *Quando leggo una notizia lo faccio prima in lingua inglese diciamo da quotidiani inglesi o comunque americani statunitensi invece poi la leggo in quelli italiani mi rendo conto anche di come entrambi hanno diciamo una narrativa diversa, e questa per me è una cosa importante, se noi leggiamo una notizia in inglese abbiamo una pluralità di punti di vista perché abbiamo quello americano quello europeo quello che ne so dell'emisfero australe per dire perché l'inglese comunque è una lingua che si parla in tutti questi in queste aree del mondo quindi effettivamente ci esponiamo contemporaneamente a tanti punti di vista diversi.*
> "When I read a news article, I read it first in English from British or American newspapers, and then in Italian ones, I realise how both have different narratives. And that's an important thing to me. If we read news in English, we have a plurality of perspectives because we have the American one, the European one, and even perspectives from the southern hemisphere, because English is spoken in all these areas of the world. So, effectively, we are exposed simultaneously to many different viewpoints."

This informant, who was a political science student, emphasised the importance of accessing unbiased news from multiple sources in an attempt to uphold her commitment to understanding the contemporary world accurately.

Only less proficient informants described their behaviour using words that could be analysed as expressions of introjected regulation (see Table 1 for a detailed description), a more controlled subtype of extrinsic motivation. These informants apparently felt obligated to access input in English due to self-imposed pressures. An example is provided in Excerpt 5:

> (5) *Guardo video di YouTube in inglese perché voglio cercare di andare un po' più avanti, però successivamente insomma, perché poi quando uno inizia a sentirsi in imbarazzo di fronte alla lingua, non è nemmeno più portato ad apprenderla, quindi prima di tutto ci si abitua a un livello base poi magari si sale insomma sì sì quindi crearsi una zona*

> *comunque di comfort e poi da lì eventualmente decidere come muoversi.*
> "I watch YouTube videos in English because I want to try to improve a bit more, but then, you know because when someone starts feeling embarrassed about the language, they're not even inclined to learn it anymore. So first of all, you get used to a basic level, then maybe you move up, you know. So, yes, yes, creating a comfort zone and then from there, eventually deciding how to proceed."

In this excerpt, the informant mentioned mainly accessing English input to avoid negative emotions related to limited proficiency, rather than choosing the activity due to its personal significance. This inclination may be attributed to the informant's personal characteristics or past internalised negative experiences with English, which may have caused feelings of embarrassment when using the language.

It was interesting that our data confirmed a trend that was observed in prior research in which telecinematic input served two primary functions: It was associated with intrinsic motivation due to the appreciation of the original language and with a quest for naturalness and authenticity (Pavesi, Ghia 2020, p. 95), and was also the most frequently used type of input for enhancing English proficiency, particularly for expanding L2 vocabulary (cf. dual-purpose engagement in Trinder 2017). An example is presented in Excerpt 6:

> (6) *Allora, come motivi principali, se un materiale è disponibile anche in inglese preferisco vederlo magari in lingua originale, appunto, anche perché lo vedo comunque come un modo per unire svago a un qualcosa di utile.*
> "So, as main reasons, if a material is available in English, I prefer to watch it in the original language, precisely because I see it as a way to combine leisure with something useful."

Consistent with the notion of self-directed exposure, none of our participants reported feeling compelled to access English input due to external demands or uncontrollable circumstances. As a result, no instances of external extrinsic motivation stemming from an obligation to engage with the L2 were identified.

Our data did not reveal identifiable patterns concerning gender or affiliation with a specific macro area.

We addressed RQ2 (How do they elaborate on the criteria that guide their behaviour?) by analysing expressions of agentic behaviour. The highest elaborateness score (AES = 3) was consistently associated with descriptions that reflected intrinsically motivated behaviour (for instance, when seeking entertainment). High scores (AES = 2 and 3) were also associated with

internalised, self-regulated extrinsic motivation of an identified subtype, such as when accessing English input to improve proficiency in the language or to seek reliable news. Informants who scored high for agency elaborateness typically demonstrated very high exposure and highly positive attitudes towards English (9 or 10).

Distinctive patterns of behaviour emerged when the informants reported accessing English input to learn the language. An example is presented in Excerpt 7:

> (7) *Dipende da cosa guardo, perché se è una serie, magari un film che in cui parlano molto velocemente o che non capisco bene decido in base al tempo che ho, magari metto i sottotitoli in italiano così intanto capisco la trama e in base quindi al livello di apprendimento poi cerco di mettere i sottotitoli in inglese, magari prima metto una serie, magari un film in inglese, poi se mi rendo conto che non riesco a capire determinate cose, allora passo ad altro così non sto a perdere tempo con qualcosa che per me è troppo difficile, ma magari no, se parlano più piano cerco magari di mettere di mettere subito i sottotitoli in inglese, magari piano piano.*
> "It depends on what I'm watching, because if it's a series, maybe a movie where they speak very quickly or that I don't understand well, I decide based on the time I have. Maybe I'll put on Italian subtitles so that I can understand the plot, and then, based on my learning level, I try to switch to English subtitles. Perhaps I'll start with an English series or movie, and if I realise I can't understand certain things, then I switch to something else so I don't waste time on something too difficult for me. But if they speak more slowly, maybe I'll try to put on English subtitles right away, perhaps gradually."

It could be suggested that this informant, a mathematics students, employed a form of self-assigned, self-directed viewing behaviour that reflected his needs, expressing endorsement of his behaviour ("maybe a movie where they speak very quickly or that I don't understand well, I decide based on the time I have"), proactivity ("if they speak more slowly, maybe I'll try to put on English subtitles right away, perhaps gradually"), and confidence in his self-efficacy ("based on my learning level, I try to switch to English subtitles"). This informant appeared to have developed a detailed procedure supported by reasoning and rationale tailored to his specific needs and preferences, indicating a thoughtful approach to his viewing habits.

Those who provided the least detailed descriptions of their agentic behaviour (AES = 1 or 0) tended to have lower proficiency and negative attitudes towards English (scoring from 3 to 5 out of 10).

$\mathcal{L}$ ingue e
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9. Discussion

We examined how motivation and agency could impact on informal L2 English exposure and highlighted the nuanced nature of these affective factors. Firstly, our data confirmed that our informants accessed English input to fulfil various functions in their daily lives, leveraging the wide range of opportunities provided by the multimodality of the affordances (Hasebrink *et al.* 2007). This finding aligns with previous studies in the field (De Riso 2023; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Trinder 2017).

Secondly, we noted that intrinsic motivation, defined as the decision to access input in English based on the inherent enjoyment and satisfaction derived from the process, was associated with very high levels of exposure frequency and intensity, as well as highly positive attitudes towards the language. It is interesting that it was not necessarily linked to advanced proficiency, as it was also reported by informants with B1 and B2 proficiency levels. Given the nature of the data and the design of this study, it was not possible to determine whether increased exposure stemmed from a positive attitude towards the language or, conversely, if immersing oneself in English input provided a deeply ingrained and enjoyable activity that iteratively amplified the need for exposure (Pavesi, Ghia 2020). Internalised forms of extrinsic motivation also played an important role in guiding our informants' exposure behaviour. Specifically, the desire to enhance their English proficiency, driven by identified extrinsic motivation, significantly influenced L2 exposure practices.

Telecinematic input was associated with two types of motivation: It was linked to intrinsic motivation, as the informants accessed it due to appreciation of the original language and a desire for naturalness and authenticity (see Pavesi, Ghia 2020, p. 95). In addition, it was associated with identified extrinsic motivation, as it was the most frequently used type of input for self-assigned, self-directed viewing practices aimed at improving English skills (see dual engagement in Trinder 2017).

Finally, with regard to agency, the informants with low exposure, low proficiency, and negative attitudes towards English provided minimal details when describing their behaviour in informal contact with English. Those with very high exposure and highly positive attitudes towards English used elaborate expressions, particularly when discussing accessing English input to immerse themselves in the language, to improve their English proficiency, and to seek news online due to the perceived greater availability and reliability compared to news that was delivered in Italian. In these instances, our informants provided detailed accounts demonstrating endorsement (END) of their behaviour, proactivity in seeking input (PRO), and confidence (CONF) in their self-efficacy. Thus, it can be suggested that more exposure

and positive attitudes enhanced the informants' agency, leading to more meaningful engagements with English.

9.1 Limitations of the present study

While qualitative research can provide valuable insights, its findings may lack generalisability to broader populations. Moreover, convenience sampling can introduce a self-selection bias (Dörnyei, Dewaele 2023). It is also important to recognise that the data generated from interviews are social constructions, and that the content and depth of the responses may be influenced by various factors such as the setting, the interviewer, or the interviewee (e.g. personality traits, mood on the day of the interview, or the reason for participating in the interview). Of note, the observer interacts with the observed, and participants' presentations of themselves may be shaped by perceptions of the researcher's expectations (Duff 2012; Talmy 2010).

Furthermore, we acknowledge that motivation, like language development, is dynamic and subject to fluctuations (Larsen-Freeman 2012, p. 78), and is unique to each individual within different systems. Therefore, this study only provided a situated snapshot and aimed to lay the methodological groundwork for potential future expansion.

10. Conclusions and implications for future research

In this article, we explored motivation and agency in the self-directed exposure to English input in informal contexts amongst Italian university students. Despite its limitations, the findings of this study might contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how motivation and agency influence behaviour in informal contact with English. Moreover, they may have potential implications for various stakeholders. In particular, students could explore the reasons that guide them to access English input during their leisure time by identifying the reasons that are intrinsic and those that are extrinsic, yet which are internalised and aligned with their sense of self, making them easier to act upon. By leveraging their motivation, they can capitalise on the abundant input that is available, which is not only rich and varied but can also be made comprehensible and tailored to their needs through technological resources. This can lead to greater autonomy for L2 English learners and to a satisfying experience that can extend to other learning contexts. We believe that it would be valuable for future research to continue to investigate motivation in informal settings to understand how students utilise the resources at their disposal.

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