

# **‘IN THE PRESENCE OF ENGLISH’: INFORMAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ITALY**

## **An introduction**

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### **1. Setting the scene**

We are living in a ‘new linguistic dispensation’ (Aronin *et al.* 2013) centred around multilingualism and multiculturalism, technology galore and an unprecedented mobility of people and linguistic artefacts. Concomitantly, English language learning is moving out of the language classroom and becoming more and more informal – i.e., unguided, naturalistic, mainly incidental – as L2 users have extensive individual experience with English-language media during their leisure time (Sockett 2014). They also engage in joint activities online by getting involved in communities of practice, contact zones and affinity spaces in English (Vasquez-Calvo 2021). These dramatic changes in linguistic ecology require “a new model of what constitutes a linguistic environment for learning” (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018, p. 7), to account for the complexification of the linguistic landscapes in which second language acquisition (SLA) is dynamically embedded.

Quite recently, Benson (2021) has put forward the strongest argument in favour of the centrality of space in SLA: space comes first as it subsumes and conditions all the other variables involved in L2 learning. By adopting a spatial perspective, in the present volume we thus espouse the view that additional languages are learnt informally in language learning environments, or spaces, that exceed the tangible and intangible boundaries of institutional settings and are populated by a great variety of language-bearing assemblages – most of which include a non-human component. That is, new opportunities have opened up to L2 learner-users while language learning is increasingly becoming a disembodied experience in the wild (Wagner 2015), carried out via the Internet, satellite communication and wireless technologies. The primacy of informal contexts in English SLA does not however exclude that formal and informal practices may intersect, as spaces blend in the L2 speakers’ experience over time (Reinhardt 2022). Indeed, given young users’ extensive schooling in English worldwide, no learning of L2 English can be uniquely informal. From an early age onwards,

formal and informal learning interweave, although each of the two processes may be predominant at different stages in an individual's life.

The informal learning of English has been investigated on a large scale in several European and Asian countries, extending to the other continents as well (Dressman, Sadler 2020; Toffoli *et al.* 2023; Cole, Vanderplank 2016, among many). In Italy, however, empirical data on the current changes in L2 informal learners' behaviour and attitudes are still limited and restricted to a few case studies (Aiello 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). More fieldwork is thus urgently needed, to create a large empirical database and provide reliable pictures of the constantly changing learning landscapes. This broad research agenda also calls for a critical assessment of the methodological approaches and empirical tools required to move beyond local observations and surface-level analyses. It further requires SLA-oriented accounts of the language registers to which L2 learner-users are most frequently exposed during their favoured leisure activities.

The present volume engages with this new English-centred linguistic ecology by presenting research conducted within the project “The informalisation of English language learning through the media: Language input, learning outcomes and sociolinguistic attitudes from an Italian perspective”, funded by the Italian Ministry for University and Research. The overarching aim of the national investigation is to probe students' private worlds and undetected learning processes across Italy, represented by four universities geographically distributed across the country. The project hence qualifies as the first large-scale investigation of Italian university students' modalities of access to English in the wild, their evolving L2 motivation and attitudes, as well as their media-induced L2 development. To comply with its general aim, the project is organized in three stages and implements a mixed research design. It combines cross-sectional and longitudinal data collection, coupled with an array of empirical tools and quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis. The national investigation began with the creation of a fine-grained questionnaire – IECoL<sup>1</sup> – focusing on language behaviour outside formal settings, which was administered to selected and comparable samples of students enrolled at the universities of Pavia, Pisa, Salento and Catania; IECoL was coupled with a vocabulary test assessing participants' receptive lexical knowledge. The first phase of the project was followed by ethnographic investigations via emically-orientated semi-structured interviews. These were meant to illuminate behavioural patterns over time, as well as students' beliefs, attitudes and language learning motivations associated with English-language media. Finally, the project has gained access to the development of media-triggered L2 competence by observing learners over time. In parallel with the three main stages, it also engages with corpus-based descriptions of relevant media genres and registers. These are necessary to inform hypotheses about the impact of different input types upon the learning of L2

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym stands for “Informal English Contact and Learning” (Pavesi *et al.* 2023).

English beyond the classroom. Although linguistic research on media registers is extensive, it mainly addresses systemic, sociolinguistic, textual and pragmatic aspects, rarely explicitly exploring register usability for SLA purposes.

## 2. Looking inside the volume

The present collection of papers aims to address some of the issues highlighted above, which were debated at the panel “‘In the presence of English’: Informal English language learning in Italy” during the 31st AIA Conference (Rende, 13-16 September 2023). By borrowing part of the title from Berns *et al.*'s (2007) research monograph, titled “In the Presence of English. Media and European Youth”, we manifested our indebtedness to the scholars who pioneered the investigation of media-driven informal use and learning of L2 English among the youth. Since the time when Berns and colleagues collected their data among German, Belgian, French and Dutch secondary school students, access to entertainment, information and disciplinary content in online media, social media, and pop culture in English appears to have burgeoned in Italy. The time is thus ripe to look at the informal learning of the language in this country.

A few key thematic threads run across the volume. They concur to defining shared features of the novel modalities of engagement with and appropriation of English as an additional language in Italy. At the same time, they detail learner-users' increasingly diverse language experiences and language learning trajectories. The constructs of informal language learning and the related ones of formal and non-formal language learning are variously explored in all the contributions to this volume. Two different perspectives are adopted – the etic one of external observers and the emic one of the L2 users, in both cases focusing on the defining spatial dimensions of the learning process. The spatial perspective entails a temporal dimension as well, in that each individual's learning path changes in response to the contact with different learning environments but is also the result of previous encounters with the language. The impact of the (new) technologies and the digital revolution on the expanding informal learning of English is also highlighted in all contributions, with the access to audiovisual, digital, and interactional media emerging as a new form of language immersion freely available to English learner-users worldwide. By shifting the research focus from reported behavioural patterns to motivation, language attitudes and reasons for accessing English-language media, the inner factors that both reflect and promote change in language habits are explored etically as well as emically. Learners' perceptions, motivations and attitudes are relevant to the investigation of informal language learning. They participate in the construction of settings for SLA (Benson 2021) and affect the awareness of the learning potential of media input. Finally, the linguistic affordances available for informal language learning

are examined in descriptive and corpus-based analysis of English-language media input (e.g., audiovisual dialogue, web-based genres, videogames) with the aim of identifying the features that are likely to impact out-of-class SLA.

The structure of the volume ideally mirrors the sequential organisation of the research phases of the national project – commencing with the large-scale survey, and continuing with the qualitative interviews and the longitudinal case studies.

The three phases together amply cover the main, chronologically-oriented stages of research on informal language learning discussed in Kusyk *et al.* (2023). According to the authors, initial research on informal language learning has focused on the inventory of the informal activities which learner-users are involved in, with the aim of identifying the main patterns in frequency of use, accompanying reasons for access, the role of receptive over productive activities, as well as learner-users' profiles. Across the globe, this initial, quantitative research has alerted “researchers to the arrival of a genuine phenomenon rather than just the favored pastimes of certain enthusiastic outliers” (Kusyk *et al.* 2023, p. 5). Banking on these initial results, research has moved on to analysing social and personal variables and exploring individual perspectives and pathways. This second stage can be posited to include a focus on learners' own voices and L2 development over time. The third stage of research focuses on the “hows” of informal language learning and the complex way in which “users avail themselves of the affordances provided by authentic L2 materials outside the classroom” (Kusyk 2023, p.5).

Since several studies suggest that prolonged naturalistic contact with traditional and digital registers has an impact on target language development and L2 digital multimodal literacy, the volume includes studies on the salient features of relevant media discourses. These represent an additional, important component of research on the informal language learning of English, in that they help to characterize the multimodal input to which L2 speakers are mostly exposed to in the wild.

### 3. The contributions

In her opening article, **Maria Pavesi** presents the main developing lines of the research project. Moving from a definition of informal language learning as “involving free, self-directed contact with the L2 in non-educational locations for entertainment, social and information-seeking purposes” (Pavesi, Ghia 2020, p. 40), the paper offers a critical review of the theoretical and methodological foundations of the project. A spatial perspective on SLA is adopted as the investigation at large “shine[s] the spotlight on the where of language learning” (Benson 2021, p. 1) and the space of human and human/non-human interactions. Within a spatial perspective, the project centres on language input as the most

crucial construct, the *sine qua non* of SLA (VanPatten *et al.* 2020), which is here assessed with reference to the learning potential of media affordances that learner-users encounter in the wild. After outlining the complementary empirical phases of the project, Maria Pavesi carries out a factor analysis on the 2,500 fully completed questionnaires collected at the four participating universities. Through the analysis, Pavesi identified the informal practices that were undertaken together by individual learner-users and were shared across individual learner-users. This profiling operation represents an important first step in the mapping of the informal learning spaces that Italian university students create for themselves through L2 English practices such as watching audiovisual products, playing video games and becoming involved in person-to-person interactions online and offline.

Attention then moves to the results of the IECoL questionnaire, which was administered to comparable samples of students in the four universities of the project. **Elisa Ghia** investigates Pavia university students' informal experience with various multimodal genres – films, TV series and other programmes, and YouTube videos – focusing on the reasons behind their habits. The data were collected through IECoL, administered to 1,091 students from three main disciplinary areas as well as language specialists. The findings show an extensive and intensive experience with English-language audiovisuals among the Italian university students surveyed, with users preferring TV-series and YouTube contents over other audiovisual material and accessing them on a regular basis. English subtitles are preferred across all AV genres, even when they are automatically generated, as is often the case on YouTube. The emerging picture complexifies when reasons for informal experience with audiovisuals are explored. Most respondents report several motivations as guiding their involvement with multimodal English input. A positive orientation to the L2 – comprising both the desire to learn the L2 and the liking of English and English-language original voices and products – generally coexists with pure entertainment and other hedonic reasons. Also, a degree of differentiation emerges when looking at genres and students' areas of studies. Similarly, **Serena Ghiselli** illustrates and discusses the results of the IECoL questionnaire with reference to the students of the University of Salento, with a special focus on the Internet and YouTube. The data clearly show that students predominantly engage in receptive rather than productive activities in English, with a preference for audiovisual content. Among the respondents, YouTube proved to be a widely used platform for viewing videos in English, usually for short durations but on a regular basis and frequently with subtitles. On the other hand, the data showed much lower access to other Internet genres in English, with the reading of social media posts dominating among Internet-based activities. Ghiselli also explores the participants' background and observed that the self-assessed level of English and the student attitude towards this language influences the use of media in

English, while factors such as the secondary school attended and language attitudes significantly impact media exposure.

Two contributions follow, both targeting motivation as a broad and multifaceted construct involved in the informal learning of English. **Paola Leone and Emanuela Paone** offer a qualitative case study that explores the dynamic nature of motivation. By adopting Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2008) L2 motivational self-system theory, their work starts from the assumption that behavioral phenomena cannot be explained by a single factor, with complexity arising from patterns rather than simple cause-and-effect relationships. Motivation is discussed by considering its three dimensions: L2 Learning Experience, which looks at the immediate learning environment and its influence on language learning; Ought-to L2 Self, reflecting other people's expectations; Ideal L2 Self, representing the learner's expectations as a successful second language user. Drawing on open-ended interviews, the paper investigates how 26 university students at the University of Salento perceive the factors driving their informal engagement with English across various media platforms. The findings highlight the complex and multifaceted interactions among external and internal factors and learning experiences. The data uncover the pivotal role of teachers in fostering or diminishing motivation to learn a second language during childhood and adolescence, while indicating students' release from parents' and teachers' external pressures over time. As they begin to take ownership of their language learning, some students proactively seek alternative means, such as non-formal instruction, to enhance their language proficiency. Importantly, media emerged as playing a role in evoking positive emotions and sustaining motivation in language learning. The other contribution on motivation is by **Cristina Mariotti** who analysed semi-structured interviews with 21 students of the University of Pavia within the framework of self-determination theory. Her study reveals the roles of intrinsic (e.g., immersion, entertainment, and personal interests) and extrinsic (e.g., improving English proficiency) motivations and helps understand the complex texture subtending university students' self-directed exposure to English input, and to telecinematic products in particular, during their leisure time. In particular, it was noticed that 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, but not necessarily to advanced proficiency. At the same time, L2 exposure practices appeared to be considerably influenced by the desire to enhance one's English proficiency. Finally, this study suggests that greater exposure and more positive attitudes enhance agency and lead to more meaningful engagements with English.

Next, a more detailed view of informal language learning profiles is offered by **Camilla De Riso**, who reports on her longitudinal research exploring the links between exposure to English registers and learning trajectories. De Riso discusses the output of four longitudinal case studies based on monologic storytelling tasks,

investigating possible relationships between L2 development and frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input. The paper also explores the thoughts and feelings of the four L2 learner-users by investigating their L2 awareness in relation to themselves, others, and the informal activities they access habitually. Complexity, accuracy and fluency trajectories presented strong variability across participants and within individual L2 development. However, some specific elements can be hypothesized to have an impact, such as register and immersion: the written register of novels probably supports lexical and grammatical complexity, while the spoken register of comics and manga does not; immersion in turn seems to enhance lexical complexity. Furthermore, accuracy and fluency appeared to be particularly sensitive to each other.

As learners of English may experience non-formal and formal learning at university as well, the two papers that follow De Riso's study shift the focus from informal learning *strictu sensu*, to the exploration of social media and how they provide affordances and opportunities for language instruction outside traditional educational settings. **Gloria Cappelli and Nicoletta Simi** delve into the dynamic and interactive spaces created by social media platforms. Moving from Wagner's (2021) definition of Instagram as a "multimodal microblogging genre", they critically survey the main assets of Instagram as a privileged site for informal and non-formal English language learning before focusing on Instagram accounts specifically devoted to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). An innovative pedagogically-motivated analytical framework is put forward to critically assess a sample of six institutional and twenty-one non-institutional English language teaching accounts, hence comparing non-formal Instagram teaching to traditional, formal EFL education. The pedagogical categories that make up the framework include contents and topics, teachers and learners, and methodology and modes of presentation. As a main outcome of the critical analysis, the authors show how learning English via Instagram differs from learning the language in traditional settings as the former provides opportunity for individuals to creatively explore content based on personal interests beyond temporal and spatial restrictions and free from rigidly structured syllabi. This study opens up innovative avenues of research on the budding context of non-formal language learning via social media. **Elena Manca** investigates the role of social media in English language learning from the perspective of a special group of users, namely students attending foreign language curricula at the University of Salento. Manca administered a questionnaire that combines some items from the IECOL with new items on social media usage, to ascertain students' preferences and attitudes, but also perceptions regarding the advantages of using social media in English within their L2 learning process. The students taking part in this survey showed a steadfast belief in the language-enhancing capabilities of social media, which suggests exploring ways for integrating social media into formal and non-formal language learning settings as they could contribute to

enhance the students' sensitivity to linguistic nuances and general language proficiency, as well as to promoting cultural exchange and understanding.

The volume continues with three contributions on the nature of the input to which learner-users are typically exposed outside institutional settings, and on specific language features of media registers that are believed to affect L2 acquisitional trajectories. **Francesca Bianchi** investigates the lines of non-player characters in video games and identifies their lexical coverage, i.e. the vocabulary size readers need to understand dialogue between characters without external support. This study confirms previous hypotheses that the lexical profile of in-game dialogue is somehow similar to that of British and American films and that lexical coverage differences largely depend on individual games rather than genre, although genre might play a minor role. Furthermore, the data suggest that setting probably contributes to determining the words used in the dialogues. The results are discussed in relation to language learning. Overall, this paper offers new insights into a type of pop product that is still under-investigated from a linguistic perspective despite its extensive use by young generations. Two contributions follow on audiovisual dialogue, a type of input that has been extensively shown to impact language learning both inside and outside the classroom. In line with the recent attention paid to complexity in language registers and SLA, they tackle complementary aspects of grammatical complexity in films and TV series. **Maicol Formentelli and Raffaele Zago** adopt Biber's (1988) register-functional approach to assess the frequency and functions of clausal and phrasal complexity features in the Sydney Corpus of Television Dialogue, with a focus on finite and non-finite subordinate clauses as well as noun phrase premodification. The distribution of complexity features in TV series is also evaluated with reference to spontaneous spoken language to gauge the degree of proximity between the two registers and ultimately account for the frequency and type of grammatical complexity features in TV dialogue. These are key language elements that are expected to play a significant role in L2 development. This study shows that TV dialogue mimics spontaneous conversation to a considerable extent, but characterises itself for register-specific features that are related to the audience-oriented, narrative functions and scripted nature of television dialogue. The authors conclude the paper by discussing the acquisitional implications of the uncovered complexity patterns. Finally, **Liviana Galliano**'s contribution zooms in on phrasal complexity in film dialogue by adopting the same register-functional approach to complexity (Biber *et al.* 2022) as in Formentelli and Zago's paper. Galliano analyses the latest version of the Pavia Corpus of Film Dialogue to unveil the defining features of nominal pre- and post-modification in the register, while assessing how close in frequency and use these complexity patterns come to analogous features in natural conversation. The results suggest that film dialogue most often relies on adjectival pre-modification, which is followed by nominal pre-modification and post-modification via prepositional phrases. The higher degree of phrasal complexity



in film dialogue is discussed with reference to the functional specificities of the register, which, however, do not detract from its general similarity to natural conversation.

Overall, this volume contributes to depicting the varied landscape of English language learning in the wild and provides new etic and emic insights into the relation that links youths to the language in online (social) media and registers, and pop cultural artefacts. New opportunities have opened up to L2 learner-users while informal language learning is increasingly becoming a largely disembodied experience mainly carried out via new and traditional media, the Internet, satellite communication and wireless technologies. This new scenario cannot be disregarded and should be capitalised on. We hope the insights offered by the results of these studies may also inform new approaches to the teaching of English at tertiary level.

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