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Perspectives



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From the Editor

This is a very special issue of Perspectives: we are now on-line!

As the majority of our members agreed on having TESOL Italy Journal on-line we followed on that and here we are.

We expect that there will be inevitable changes, first of all in the way we read it.

I know, holding our book in our hands is a totally different matter, but as someone said from the other side of the pond: “It’s the economy, ‘stupid!’”.

As usual the Spring issue collects articles about different and very engaging themes, all of them extremely relevant for us language educators.

The relevance of social networks is brilliantly and thoroughly explored and discussed by Enrico Grazi in his article *The sociocultural dimension of ELF in the English classroom: the case of fanfiction through social networking*. The article reports a very interesting field research carried out in schools and it addresses the pedagogic implications of using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) by showing how web-mediated activities such as *cooperative writing* and *fanfiction* can bridge the gap between the scholastic dimension of English Language Teaching (ELT) and the reality of authentic communication situated in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Grazi offers us a different and promising perspective on what teaching English in the next decade might be like.

Geraldine Ludbrook in her *Language testing for students with SpLDs: Considerations of validity and fairness* addresses two of the most challenging areas of teaching, specifically of language teaching, that of students’ learning disabilities and that of assessment and evaluation. She presents and discusses ways of assessing and evaluating students with specific learning disabilities (SpLDs),

Pamela Duran and Elena Smith in their *What’s in the Words?* offer us an interesting word-tour by showing all the implications of a ‘lexical journey’. Starting from their initial question they highlight that what was in the words has changed dramatically to what is in the words in 2012, since words used for communication today are not necessarily the words of Standard English, of the academy, or even of our parents. As they underline, technology has generated a myriad of new “Englishes” resulting in language change more dynamic than ever before in history.

Nicola Borrello’s account of a very special type of school, *Swanburst School: A Job Shadowing Experience* introduces the readers to a different yet challenging learning experience in an unusual school in England. Swanhurst School is the largest State girls’ school in Europe, there are over 1,850 students aged 11-19. It is located in

the ward of Billesley, Birmingham, (UK), and it mirrors the ethnic diversity of the area with a large proportion of students belonging to the Asian community – Indo-Pakistani.

The stimulating interview with Mary Slattery carried out by Elisabetta Burchietti takes us back to the primary school and to early language learning. Mary Slattery, a renowned expert in the young learners' field, engages us all with her deep understanding of early language learning and with her practical approach to language learning in the primary classroom.

Lots of food for thought, so, enjoy your reading!

The sociocultural dimension of ELF in the English classroom: the case of fanfiction through social networking

by Enrico Grazzi¹

The aim of this paper is to present a research project on the pedagogic implications of using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) at school, and show how web-mediated activities such as *cooperative writing* and *fanfiction* can bridge the gap between the scholastic dimension of English Language Teaching (ELT) and the reality of authentic communication situated in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

This study, which is essentially informed by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory (SCT), examines the controversial nature of ELF from a social constructionist theoretical perspective on second language learning (Lantolf, 2000), taking into consideration the typical double identity of most L2-users, who are simultaneously students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) attending regular language classes, and ELF speakers who use English as an additional language for real social practice (e.g. travelling abroad, interacting on the Internet, etc.). Interestingly, the results of this research indicate that these two identities are not necessarily conflicting, but rather convergent and complementary through the L2-user's successful performance.

A few Italian high-school classes from Rome, Palermo and Messina were interconnected online through aNobii (a social network dedicated to book readers), and through a wiki that was designed on purpose to let students create a web-mediated community of practice (Cop) (Wenger, 1998) working on English literature and fanfiction. This way, students had the opportunity to a) use ELF as a *mediational means* to participate in an open forum with a large number of fellow readers and share their views on their favourite authors and novels, and b) use ELF as an *affordance* (Gibson, 1979) to express their creative power in writing fanfiction collaboratively, and share their work with other fanfiction networkers. Besides, working as a community of practice favoured the creation of a *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), whereby participants would improve their texts through peer reviewing.

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At the end of the project, a student's and a teacher's survey were conducted to collect relevant information as regards the participants' use of digital tools (at home and at school), and their feedback on the experience of using ELF to connect the class to a wider community of speakers. In conclusion, this research has shown that the use of ELF to carry out real web-mediated activities is not an hindrance to language learning and could well be incorporated into ELT as a valuable resource for a more effective communicative approach to English.

1. Theoretical framework

Research in the field of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has been inherently connected to studies in the broad areas of Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT) ever since the unresolved academic controversy on the nature of English as a global language started, in the early eighties. That was the time when the primacy of Standard English (SE) was questioned by linguists who affirmed the legitimacy of non-standard varieties of English spoken by non-native speakers (NNSs) in the so-called *outer circle* and *expanding circle* countries (Kachru, 1982), and the postulate of the native-speaker's (NS) ownership of English was finally challenged. As Seidlhofer (2003: 7) observes:

One of the liveliest current debates, and also one of particular relevance to language education, revolves around the accelerating global spread of English, and the urgent socio-economic, ideological and ecological issues raised as a consequence of this spread. [emphasis added].

TESOL-Italy has always shown great interest in the pedagogical implications of ELF studies² and has kept an open and receptive attitude towards an

² These are the plenary sessions on ELF that have been hosted at TESOL-Italy's National Conventions so far:

- Jenkins J., 2003, *Respecting diversity, promoting intelligibility: the challenge for English as an international language*.
- Widdowson H., 2005, *On the subject of English*.
- Widdowson H., 2008, *Current Issues in English Language Teaching: a Discussion*.
- Seidlhofer B., 2008, *Border Crossing with English as Lingua franca*.

Besides, TESOL-Italy has published a special issue of *Perspective – A Journal of TESOL-Italy* dedicated to ELF, entitled: *From English to Englishes: teaching and learning issues*. Vol. XXX n. 2 Fall 2003, co-edited by Lucilla Lopriore and Enrico Grazzi.

alternative approach to ELT in key areas such as phonology, lexicogrammar and discourse, which should no longer be exclusively dependent on the traditional “exonormative native speaker model” (Kirkpatrick, 2007: 184-189), but rather incorporate the uncodified forms that distinguish and characterize successful intercultural communication within and across the communities of L2-users around the world. By ‘incorporate the uncodified forms’ I essentially mean that typical ELF features³ should first of all be presented to the English learner as authentic and legitimate, instead of being stigmatized as errors on the basis of the NS’s norms; secondly, that they should be taken as acceptable alternative options whenever students are engaged in authentic intercultural communication in a multilingual environment (e.g. on the Internet), provided their discourse is effective, i.e. intelligible to their interlocutors (both NSs and NNSs of English) and appropriate to the achievement of their pragmatic goals (Widdowson, 2003). Apropos this performative use of ELF, Seidlhofer (2011: 98) observes that:

ELF users too are seen to be languagers. They exploit the potential of the language, they are fully involved in the interactions, whether for work or for play. They are focused on the interactional and transactional purposes of the talk and on their interlocutors as people rather than on the linguistic code itself. We can observe ELF users absorbed in the ad hoc situated negotiation of meaning – an entirely pragmatic undertaking in that the focus is on establishing the indexical link between the code and the context, and a creative process in that the code is treated as malleable and adjustable to the requirements of the moment. These requirements have to do with the message speakers want to convey as well as a host of other factors impinging on the accessibility and acceptability of what is said in terms of clarity, time constraints, and on-line processability, memory, available repertoires, social relationship, and shared knowledge.

3 Research projects and publications on the features of ELF have proliferated in the last fifteen years. However, two fundamental works represent a landmark in this particular field: a) Jenkins’s (2000) study on the phonology of English as an international language (EIL), where the author presents what she has termed a phonological “Lingua Franca Core” (LFC) (Ch. 7 & 8); and b) VOICE (the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English), a corpus of transcribed spoken ELF that comprises 1 million words, which was compiled by a team of researchers at the Department of English at the University of Vienna, under the direction of Prof. B. Seidlhofer, between 2001 and 2009. As stated on the official web site of VOICE: “It is the ultimate aim of the VOICE project to open the way for a *large-scale* and *in-depth linguistic description* of this most common contemporary use of English by providing a corpus of spoken ELF interactions which will be accessible to linguistic researchers all over the world.”

This suggests that the blossoming of ELF should no longer be disregarded by ELT professionals as a defective form of *interlanguage*, or even worse than that, be disparaged as a kind of *broken English*, but it should be considered as the manifestation of a complex evolutionary process that is quite similar to the way all natural languages have been historically shaped and adapted by their speakers, who use them as shared *symbolic mediational artifacts* (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) to respond to their ever changing communicative needs. Borrowing from Vološinov, Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 11) describe this process as follows: “For speakers, what matters with regard to linguistic forms is not their stable and invariable identity across contexts of use, but their adaptability to the speaker’s specific communicative intentions”. Then, later in their book (2006: 79-80) the two authors come to the important conclusion that:

Mediation is the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts and activities to regulate (i.e. gain voluntary control over and transform) the material world or their own and each other’s social and mental activity. With respect to symbolic artifacts, language activity, speaking and writing, is the primary, though not exclusive, mediational means humans deploy for thinking. ... It is essential to keep in mind that languaging activity is not construed as the equivalent of thinking; rather it is a means of regulating the thinking process. ... Finally, on the material side, we wish to underscore that an artifact’s materiality is conventional and takes its functional form from its histories of use in and across cultural practices. In this sense, all artifacts are imbued with characteristics that illustrate the intersection of histories of use with the contingencies of *emergent practice*. [emphasis added]

Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that the progressive differentiation of the lexicogrammar system of ELF from other varieties of NS English is embedded in a sociocultural process of change and adaptation that is *emergent* within the *glocal* dimension of today’s intercultural communicative contexts. Following Hopper (1998: 5), in fact:

The notion of Emergent Grammar is meant to suggest that structure, or regularity, comes out of discourse and is shaped by discourse as much as it shapes discourse in an on-going process. Grammar is hence not to be understood as a pre-requisite for discourse, a prior possession attributable in identical form to both speaker and hearer. Its forms are not fixed templates, but are negotiable in face-to-face interaction in

ways that reflect the individual speakers' past experience of these forms, and their assessment of the present context, including especially their interlocutors, whose experiences and assessments may be quite different. Moreover, the term Emergent Grammar points to a grammar which is not abstractly represented, but always anchored in the specific concrete form of an utterance.

We may conclude that in order to understand the emergent nature of ELF grammar it is necessary to focus on the connection between its non-standard forms and the social relations they mediate in intercultural communicative contexts of use. In other words, the variability of ELF grammar largely depends on the interaction of the interlocutors' different sociolinguistic identities and their active participation in the negotiation of meanings via a second language that they simultaneously *internalize* (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and contribute to *construct* through *usage* (Tomasello, 2003). As Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 175-179) explain:

Internalization does not imply that culturally organized processes disappear inside our heads, but in fact can and often do entail distributed activity in which part of the activity is carried out externally. The implication is that external processes and the artifacts connected with them have psychological status.

We proposed that internalization occurs through imitation, which is not a mindless copying activity, but an intentional, complex, and potentially transformative process. It is a uniquely human activity that is implicated phylogenetically and neuropsychologically in language acquisition. ... [As regards L2 development] imitation does not refer to the parroting behavior stereotypically associated with classical audiolingual pedagogy. Instead it is a potentially transformative process that entails selective attention resulting in reduction, expansion and repetition of social models.

Whereas Tomasello (2003: 13) argues that in usage-based grammar:

Processes of grammaticalization and syntacticization are cultural-historical processes, not biological ones. Thus, it is a historical fact that the specific items and constructions of a given language are not invented all at once, but rather they emerge, evolve and accumulate modifications over historical time as human beings use them with one another and adapt them to changing communicative circumstances.

We can clearly see the Vygotskian roots of these conceptualizations of language development, however it is also important to mention that we find similar formulations in Bakhtin's (1981) *dialogism*, whereby language is conceived as intrinsically dynamic and relational. As van Lier (2004: 85) points out:

Bakhtin (1981) notes an essential tension in language between what he terms *centrifugal* and *centripetal* forces. Centrifugal forces (moving outwards) express creativity, diversification, variety and openness; centripetal forces (moving inwards) express homogeneity, standardization, and centralized control over forms and meanings.

So, on the one hand, speakers want to embroider and invent, sounding new and different, signalling their individual and group identity. On the other hand, speakers (and often official agencies and institutions, such as schools) wish to establish official standards and guidelines for 'correct' language, thus attempting to reduce variations in use. ... '[L]anguage' in its more general sense, is emergent, not fixed, in flux rather than static. Like culture, it is contested, open to processes of inclusion and exclusion, prescribed and proscribed patterns of use, permeated by value judgement, markers of identity, and signs of success.

This entails that the reshaping of English, which is the result of its unprecedented spread within the outer and expanding circle countries, deserves serious consideration, since it may lead us to a deeper understanding of the underlying *processes of sociogenesis* (Tomasello, 1999) that generate ELF. Therefore, putting the development of ELF into a social constructionist perspective foregrounds the participatory and dialogic relationships in the co-construction of meaning carried out by speakers/learners of English who interact in a multicultural setting.

1.1 ELF and the Interlanguage hypothesis

I have given this brief overview of the salient theoretical principles that have oriented my work on ELF to introduce one final observation before I move on to the following paragraph, where a detailed description of my research project is provided. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, studies on ELF are intrinsically related to studies on ELT, due to the double nature of English: a) a rising global language, and b) a foreign language that

has become a primary requirement in the school and University curricula of many countries. Therefore, I would like to consider some of the pedagogical implications of this duality and question one of the pivotal concepts in applied linguistics and communicative language teaching: the so-called *interlanguage* hypothesis (Selinker, 1972; Corder, 1981).

Having considered the development of ELF from a sociocultural point of view has shown that this language, on a par with any other language, is a social construct and that the NNSs' diverse sociolinguistic identities and backgrounds play an essential role in its making. This entails that the NNSs' mother tongues are not alien to this process, but in fact represent a rich resource for successful L2-users. Seidlhofer (2011: 188) observes that:

Learners of an additional language have previous experience of at least one other language, which they will quite naturally and inevitably draw upon. ... This part of the learners' previous experience has to do with their sense of how language in general works. But they also bring with them the experience of their own language in particular. In a foreign language classroom there are always at least two languages present and there will always be the natural tendency to make the foreign language less foreign by relating it to the language that is familiar, in other words by translating. ... The English they produce, I would argue, results from an entirely natural exploitation of their previous linguistic experience. This English is usually, of course, taken as erroneous, and it can be considered as such, *if* we assume that the only possible objective for learning is the acquisition of [English as a Native Language] ENL norms. But if we consider the alternative I have suggested, and think of the objective in quite different terms -as the development of a capability for exploiting linguistic resources, then these so-called 'errors' can be seen as positive signs of effective learning. And this learning is not just that which is directed at ENL as the only legitimate ultimate goal, but learning with a view to functioning in whatever English works for the purpose it is used for. From this perspective, what learners are doing and should be encouraged to do, is engaging in the same strategic process of appropriation and adaptation that typifies the languages of ELF users.

In this particular context, Seidlhofer's use of the word 'translating' describes a communicative strategy that has usually been referred to as *transfer* in applied linguistics (e.g. Corder, 1981: Ch.11) – incidentally, the verbs 'translate' and 'transfer' derive from Latin (*transferre* and *transvertere*) and are synonyms.

Presumably, the reason why the author is avoiding to mention the word *transfer* is that it is normally associated to the *interlanguage hypothesis*, and consequently to the idea that the learner's L1 *interferes* with the acquisition of the L2 (intended as NS's English). Interestingly, though, Seidlhofer reintroduces the word 'translating', which has become a sort of taboo in ELT since new approaches in foreign language teaching (e.g. the direct method, the audio-lingual method, the communicative approach, etc.) superseded the traditional grammar-translation method. Personally, I prefer to use the term 'transfer' to describe the learner's strategic use of their native linguaculture, provided no a priori negative connotation is attached to it and its meaning is reformulated from the ELF perspective⁴. In any case, leaving aside this terminological distinction, Seidlhofer's words imply that ELF is used as a *contact language*, whereby the English linguaculture and the NNSs' different linguacultures meet and inform each other through the NNSs' performance. Thus, transfer had rather be conceived of as a communicative as well as a learning strategy that is part of the constant dialogic mediation and adaptation taking place at all language levels (phonologic, lexicogrammar, discoursal and cultural), whereby successful NNSs *appropriate* English and construct their intercultural identity. So, even though technically speaking ELF cannot be classified as a contact language (like full-fledged creole languages, for instance) but rather as an additional language, there are interesting similarities between the sociolinguistic processes (e.g. loan words, calques, code switching, grammatical replication, etc.) that characterize its development and that of contact languages. Let us take into consideration, for example, what Heine and Kuteva (2005: 34-37) observe apropos grammatical replication in contact languages, which could well be referred to ELF:

There is another perspective of looking at contact-induced language change that appears to be more important. Rather than viewing replication as leading to a "deviation from the norm" or as a disruption of an existing state, we view it as leading to a new state that is simply different from the early state but is not necessarily less coherent, less "systematic", or less complete than the earlier state of the language concerned. And rather than viewing speakers as receivers, imperfect language learners, etc., we find massive evidence for a perspective according to which speakers are

4 See for example how Jenkins (2000: Ch. 5) presents the role of phonological transfer in English as an International Language.

more appropriately analyzed as actors and “language builders” as Hagège (1993) proposes. ... In situations of language contact, speakers create new structures by drawing on universal strategies of conceptualization. ... We are dealing – at least to some extent – with a creative process: speakers ... do not simply imitate grammatical categories, or produce imperfect copies of such categories: rather, they are likely to develop new use patterns and new categories on the model of other languages.

Everything said so far leads to the conclusion that it would be inherently wrong to categorize ELF as an *interlanguage*, firstly because this definition was originally referred to the individual student’s process of learning EFL, without taking into consideration the intersubjective dimension of learning in schooling (i.e. social relationships within the English classroom); secondly, because the interlanguage paradigm presupposes that the learner’s native tongue interferes with the acquisition of the L2 and may result in the fossilization of deviant forms. According to the interlanguage hypothesis, learning English consists in a progression between two opposite poles: the student’s native tongue (L1) and the target language (TL), that conforms to an abstract NS’s model. The intermediate stages between these two extremes constitute the so-called “interlanguage continuum” (Corder, 1981: 90), which finally coincides with the prototypical NS’s language.

Interlanguage is defined by Corder (1981: 17) as follows:

[A] class of idiosyncratic dialects ... It is regular, systematic, meaningful, i.e. it has a grammar, and is, in principle, describable in terms of a set of rules, some sub-set of which is a sub-set of the rules of the target social dialect. [The learner’s] dialect is unstable (we hope) and is not, as far as we know, a ‘langue’ in that its conventions are not shared by a social group ... and lastly, many of its sentences present problems of interpretation to any native speaker of the target dialect. ... An alternative name might be *transitional dialect*, emphasizing the unstable nature of such dialects.

So, the crux of the matter lies in what seems to be an irreconcilable dichotomy: on the one hand there are ELF varieties, whose creative innovations “are born of international contact among their NNSs”⁵ (Jenkins, 2007: 17) and

5 I had rather add that such creative innovations are also born of international contacts among NNSs and NSs.

follow a natural process; while on the other hand there is EFL, which aims at nativelike competence and allows no deviations from the NS's codified norms. Nevertheless, my overall impression is that on an empirical level it is possible to find a convergence between these two mutually exclusive views, provided we replace the interlanguage hypothesis with sociocultural theory (SCT) in L2 pedagogy. Even though we know that in EFL contexts most official curricula and teaching materials (but above all, most non-native teachers and language learners) still take the NS's competence as their target model (Jenkins, 2007), and even though the certification of language competencies takes NS-English as the benchmark for the definition of graded proficiency standards⁶, we should consider that, on a pragmatic level, schooling and second language acquisition (SLA) are interconnected dynamic processes, characterized and co-determined by the unique combination of key contextual variables that pertain to each individual classroom. In this sense, each English classroom becomes a thriving *ecosystem* (van Lier, 2004), which is not secluded from the world outside, and where EFL is inevitably adjusted by the learning community to suit its communicative needs and specific sociocultural profile. As Kohn (2011: 80) observes:

People acquire English, or any other language, by creatively constructing their own version of it in their minds, hearts and behaviour. This process of constructing one's language is influenced by a number of factors as, for example, target language orientation, exposure to various manifestations of English in pedagogic contexts or in natural ELF communication, mother tongue(s), attitudes and motivations, goals and requirements, language approaches taken, and effort invested. But none of these factors determines the outcome. Acquiring a language is the very opposite of copying or cloning -it is a cognitive and emotional process of sociocultural and communicative construction. ... Regardless of how powerful the communicative and communal pull towards a 'common core' might be, the English that people develop is inevitably different from any target language model they choose or were forced to adopt.

Reading between the lines, Kohn's words suggest that even if NS's English provides an 'orientation' in EFL, it is the learner's socioculturally mediated construction of identity as a successful L2-user that defines their *agency* (Ahearn, 2001), i.e. their capacity to interact within the pedagogical context of

6 E.g. the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Council of Europe.

the English classroom. My contention, therefore, is that from a sociocultural point of view EFL and ELF share the same conception of language as social action, and this proves their tendency to converge and be complementary in the speaker/learner's performance inside and outside the learning environment. Seidlhofer (2011: 187) expresses quite a similar position when she says:

Learners of English as a foreign language assume the role of users of English as a lingua franca. As they move into contexts of use outside the classroom, EFL learners become ELF users. If this is so, then the very *process* of acquiring this resource is itself a valid and viable *objective*.

This, I argue, has immediate pedagogical consequences on ELT, because it essentially turns the dichotomy between EFL and ELF into matter of perspective in approaching the learners' use of English. SCT posits an alternative view to the traditional opposition between English as a school subject and English as an additional language for authentic communication, and the link between these two adjacent dimensions is the idea that language serves its speakers as a mediational tool in a learning environment as well as in the world of global communication. As Kirkpatrick (2007: 194) suggests:

In aiming to teach and learn English in ways that would allow for effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries the focus of the classroom moves from the acquisition of the norms associated with a standard model to a focus on learning linguistic features, cultural information and communicative strategies that will facilitate communication.

The logical entailment of such a position is that a wide-range renewal of educational goals and methodology should be undertaken in order to attune today's ELT practices to the unique status of English as the main lingua franca of today. Bringing ELF to school, therefore, means connecting the English classroom to the world, and this sure is a major challenge for the years to come. For this reason Seidlhofer (2011: 208) concludes that:

The traditional way of prescribing the English of the subject needs to be reconsidered because it is based on assumptions about the objectives and processes of learning that are outdated, and irrelevant, and unrealistic for most learners. The pedagogic relevance of ELF [...] is that it suggests an alternative way of thinking.

In conclusion, the prime objective of my research project, as I will show in the following section, was to design and implement innovative activities for the English classroom and show ELT practitioners how it is possible to bridge the gap between the traditional way of teaching EFL and a more advanced approach to schooling that incorporates ELF.

2. Fieldwork: fanfiction and the use of ELF in the English classroom

I started my research from the assumption that despite the fact that most English syllabuses follow the communicative approach (CA) or task based language teaching (TBLT) (Nunan, 1991), learners hardly have any opportunity to use English for real communication within the institutional learning context of the English classroom. In fact, whenever CA and TBLT lack authentic communicative contexts of reference, the typical students' interaction that takes place in the classroom usually turns into the mimicry of reality, and learners fail to perceive English as a "cultural affordance" (Reed, 1988, in van Lier, 2004: 94)⁷ that can be internalized and externalized through meaning-making pragmatic activities. On the contrary, the Web provides access to a vast virtual space, open to authentic social interaction in a multicultural context that should be explored by teachers and students of English as an extension of their overall experiential environment. As Lantolf and Thorne (2006) observe:

The educational uses of Internet communication tools are affected by the cultures-of-use evolving from the manner in which these tools are used in everyday communicative practice. Internet communication tools, like all human artifacts, involve processes of acculturation. In contrast to Scollon's example of the novel use of artifacts for creative and situational purposes, Thorne's research describes the more bounded heterogeneity of Internet speech communities. Students are shown to have appropriated, and to have become habituated to, divergent forms of Internet-mediated communicative activity. The result is varying types, qualities, and quantities of participation in foreign language interaction within instructed educational settings with consequences for both the processes and products of language learning. ... In the context of second

⁷ van Lier's whole quotation about Reed's definition of cultural affordance reads: "... In recent times the notion of affordance has been expanded to include various sub-categories ... Reed distinguishes between *natural* and *cultural* affordances, the latter having to do with 'historically specific meanings and values.'"

language learning, teachers and students should be encouraged to interrogate mediational artifacts and their culture-of-use as an important (and altogether neglected) dimension of educational uses of Internet-mediated communication.

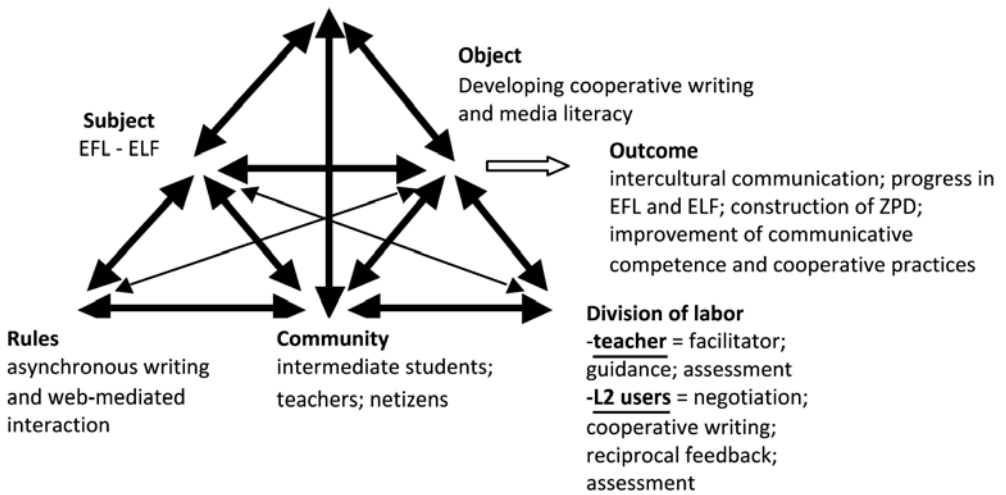
This project, which is informed by Vygotsky's (1978) SCT, has a major pedagogical aim, for it is intended to a) exploit the high affordance of Internet-mediated social networking to provide students with a zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), whereby their performance could gradually improve through their peers' mutual support and feedback; and b) share this experience with teachers of English, in order to give a practical example of how the implementation of ELF-mediated activities online may become an educational experience.

Because Italian high school syllabuses often include the history of English literature, I thought that fanfiction could become the appropriate link between a more traditional study of literature and the new burgeoning approach to reading and writing, brought about by the Internet. Nowadays, the technology called Web 2.0 provides a gamut of applications to facilitate the creation of groups of readers worldwide, whose love for literature has been the driving force and source of inspiration for those who have become authors in their turn. These fans would appropriate their favourite novels either by interpolating new parts into them, or by changing their original stories, or even by writing sequels to them (Harry Potter is a case in point, with countless contributions from the *fandom*⁸). So, thanks to the Internet, the typical relationship of an individual to content has been replaced by the participatory involvement of group members who contribute to the reinterpretation and progressive development of ideas, and this has eventually given birth to a new genre called *fanfiction*, whereby creative writing has evolved into a social event that promotes intercultural communication. Hence, my intent has been to devise pedagogical strategies to incorporate Web-mediated collaborative writing and fanfiction into ELT, for I firmly believe that these are valuable learning tools that give students the possibility to reach out to a real community of practice (Cop) and use ELF to achieve the full potential of their collective intelligence.

8 Open source communities of peers provide free access to fans who can upload and share their creative works. See for example: Fanfiction, at <http://www.fanfiction.net/book/>; Fiction Alley (the biggest English fanfiction web site), at www.fictionalley.org; Harry Potter fandom, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Potter_fandom#Fan_fiction.

Here is the diagram of the process activated through this project⁹ (*Figure 1*). Its graphic representation consists in a large triangle made up of smaller triangles. Each apex can be taken as the starting point of a cycle culminating in the expected outcome, which in turn becomes the link to start a new cycle.

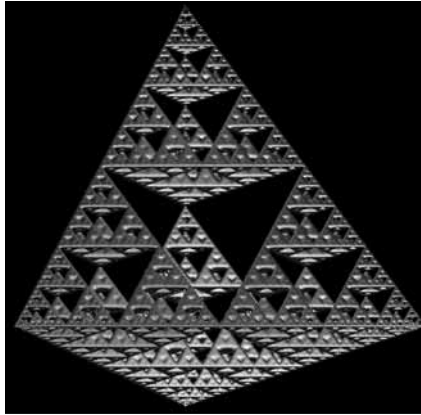
Figure 1



Interestingly, this structure is very similar to those of fractals, the geometric shapes based on self-similarity, whose mathematical equations undergo iteration. For example, consider, this tridimensional fractal in the shape of a triangular pyramid (*Figure 2*), which shows some close affinities to the process described above.

⁹ Based on Y. Engeström's (1987) activity theory model, in Lantolf & Thorne (2006: 259) and van Lier (2004: 210).

Figure 2



Fractals are common in nature (e.g. frost crystals, cauliflowers, sea waves, etc.) and there have been important applications of their structures in several fields as diverse as medicine, music, computer graphics and networks. My point, therefore, is that it seems possible to apply the model of fractals even to language learning processes based on circularity and recursiveness, like the one referred to here.

2.1. Phase 1

I began my fieldwork in May 2009, when two high-school fourth grade classes from two distinct schools in Rome¹⁰ joined my project. They were about to finish their school year and the reason why I decided to contact them right at that time was that I intended to ask them to do some preliminary work during their summer holidays, so that they would be ready to carry out proper activities on web-mediated cooperative writing and fanfiction during the first term of the following school year (2009/2010). Besides, I thought that it would have been appropriate to select students who were going to attend their fifth and final grade, as they were expected to reach the CEFR (Common European

¹⁰ Liceo Scientifico Statale "Primo Levi" and Liceo Scientifico Statale "Teresa Gullace Talotta".

Framework) B1 (Threshold or Intermediate) level of competence in EFL. In this way, I assumed that the production of non-standard lexicogrammar forms in the learners' communicative activities would have been more significant and revealing as regards the emergence of ELF in that particular context.

As a first step, I met the students and their teachers of English to present my project and offer as much information as I could. Later, I asked the students to choose two books out of the following reading list consisting of very popular novels and collections of short stories, which had also been adapted to the screen and had become very successful film productions. This, however, was only a suggested list that was open to any integration by the students and their teachers. Some of the titles are classics that are traditionally part of the syllabus of English literature for the fifth grade, with extracts included in most anthology books for the Italian high school (e.g. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Joyce's *Dubliners*). Some other books, instead, are not usually taught in Italian high schools (e.g. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, and Kesey's *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*), even though they are widely read and appreciated.

Summer reading list

1. The Canterville Ghost (O. Wilde, 1887; several films and TV productions)
2. Lord of the Rings (Tolkien, 1937/49; films 2001/2003)
3. The Hobbit (Tolkien, 1937; animated version 1977; several adaptations)
4. The Witches (R. Dahl, 1983; film 1990)
5. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (R. Dahl, 1964; film 2005)
6. Tess of the D'Urbervilles (T. Hardy, 1891; film 1979)
7. Harry Potter (J.K. Rowling, 1997/2007; films 2001/2011)
8. Alice in Wonderland (L. Carroll, 1865; film 2010)
9. Frankenstein (M. Shelley, 1817; films 1931/1994)
10. Chronicles of Narnia (C.S. Lewis, 1949/1954; films 2005/2010)
11. Gone with the Wind (M. Mitchell, 1936; film 1939)
12. Jurassic Park (M. Crichton, 1990; film 1993)
13. Lord of the Flies (W. Golding, 1954; films 1963/1990)
14. One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (K. Kesey, 1962; film 1975)
15. The Picture of Dorian Gray (O. Wilde, 1890; films 1945/2007)
16. Robin Hood (traditional folk story with several literary versions; several films)
17. The War of the Worlds (H.G. Wells, 1898; films 1953 e 2005)
18. Charles Dickens (any novel; several films)
19. E. Allan Poe (any tale; several films and adaptations)
20. Animal Farm (G. Orwell, 1945; films 1954/1999)
21. Dubliners (J. Joyce, 1914; film: *The Dead*, 1987)

The assignment for the students was to read two books during their summer holidays and meanwhile jot down their notes with personal impressions and ideas (e.g. their emotional reactions to the stories, ideas for new episodes or changes in their plots, etc.). These notes would have been used the following school year to carry out their project-work on cooperative writing and fanfiction.

In October 2009 I met the classes and their teachers again, to establish our working plan. First of all, I introduced the applications that they were going to use to carry out the core activities of the project, namely: sharing their views on the books they had read during the summer, and practicing cooperative writing and fanfiction online. The first application consisted in a social network provided by a website called aNobii¹¹, which is exclusively aimed at readers. Members of aNobii are allowed to create, share and explore booklists, add their personal book reviews, and start discussion groups on different themes, such as an author's work, a literary genre, a novel, a literary topic, etc. The second application was a *wiki*¹², a tool whose most important feature is that it allows participants to share a number of texts and improve them progressively, without losing the previous drafts. Moreover, using a function called 'History', it is possible to compare two or more versions of the same text and visualise all the changes that have been made.

11 aNobii is a web site that was created in Hong Kong in 2005, and that has become very popular since then. Today, aNobii is available in more than forty different languages, with almost 12 million books classified to date. Its name comes from the scientific term *Anobium Punctatum*, a woodworm, that reminds the expression *bookworm*, used for people who love reading books. As stated on aNobii's front page, this site can be used for three different purposes: 1) to create and share lists of all its members' books; 2) to give its members the possibility to tag their books, exchange their personal views and comments on them, and even add information about where and when a book was read; 3) to create a link among its members and foster their friendship based on their passion for a particular literary genre. aNobii promotes horizontal relationships among its members, but differently from other social networks dedicated to socialization, whose aim is essentially to recreate and maintain contacts among friends, here the creation of nets and subnets is based on the members' interaction driven by a common goal and a shared interest. aNobii fosters peer to peer exchange of knowledge, and in so doing it enhances its members' positive and collaborative relationships, for they are based on their affinities. As a result, aNobii members quickly get to know a large number of books while moving from one virtual shelf to another, led by their interest in certain topics or simply by serendipity.

12 Wikispaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com/>) is a website that allows the creation wikis. It is free for educational institutions.

2.1.1 Book reviews on aNobii

As regards the first core activity of the project (i.e. sharing book reviews), the two classes I had selected for my research were invited to join a reading group on aNobii that I had created on purpose, called *English Learners' Community*¹³. The front-page presentation of this group reads:

This community of readers is open to proficient learners who use English as a Lingua Franca and would like to share their views on the English books they have read. We welcome native speakers of English too.

So, the students had to fill their virtual bookshelf with all the books they had read in English over their high-school years, including those that they had read the previous summer. Then, each student was asked to write a short review in English of the titles he/she had uploaded on aNobii, so that any other member of the social network who shared the same books on his/her personal virtual bookshelf could start an asynchronous discussion online and exchange their views. In the end, the students involved in this research project became members of a vast Cop online, and the fact that they started to receive feedback from other aNobii members who were not their classmates made web-mediated communication authentic and the use of ELF effective. This gave students a strong sense of achievement that immediately reinforced their motivation in carrying out their task. Here is an example of a student's book review of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, uploaded on aNobii, followed by the feedback she received from other social networkers.

1. Benedetta, on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I really believe that we cannot help but read this book, this masterpiece. Many times it happens to all of us to ask questions about why we accept renunciations and many times we let our body can find relief in the pleasure of the senses, in vices, smoking, food, alcohol, drugs, and lose contact with reality often become almost a requirement; but at one point, however, life presents his account, and then you cannot back down. Perhaps the reason why *The Picture of Dorian Grey* is a book that you have to read so deeply, all in one breath, is that although we try to hide the weaknesses of our body, which then are the weaknesses of our soul,

¹³ <http://www.anobii.com/groups/019afaf5fca06cd878/>

sometimes the need to become aware of it cannot be postponed. We cannot always hide behind excuses and masks and then reading those exceptional words that Oscar Wilde put together seems to give relief, because, even if for a few chapters, it feels the fragilities of each share, as if the fact that others also test them is able to justify them. The ending is really, in this context, an explosion. For Dorian, for Oscar Wilde, especially for the reader, at least for me it was so.

If you start to read this book, it is impossible to detach from it without first having reached the last page and this such a involving reading is due to the incredible exaltation of senses and reason it causes. This is the astonishing greatness of this work, because when you read *The Picture of Dorian Grey* limits just become soft edges, the reader becomes Dorian.

2. A reply from Giorgia (a classmate of Benedetta's).

I really enjoyed this novel because it struck my curiosity. Reading through fine, I tried to immerse myself in Dorian. This book is the contrast between appearance and essence, between what is visible to the eye and what is hidden inside each of us. The most beautiful is the painting when it breaks and dies. From this we understand that the true picture of Dorian Gray is a man without scruples, who managed to escape all but the mirror of his conscience.

3. A reply from Miro92 (not a classmate of Benedetta's).

Maybe being forever young and beautiful could be really interesting for many people but everything has the other side of the coin. Dorian is obsessed by his beauty and by the fear to lose it!

4. A reply from Arianna (not a classmate of Benedetta's).

I'm agree with you on the contrast between appearance and essence, this should make us reflect on what is happening in our life. In this society is to prevail the appearance and this book should be an example on this subject!

You are right! Unfortunately our society gives more importance to appearance nowadays, and I don't like this very much.

What makes aNobii so unique and useful is the fact that its members have the possibility to discover new areas of interest and join new groups of readers very easily by browsing through the web site. Thanks to aNobii, the great heritage of collective knowledge that was once scattered through

countless blogs and dedicated web sites is made much easier to access, and this represents a great step forward in the creation of a growing community of informed readers. Therefore, I suggest that integrating this kind of social networking as a common practice in language education is highly advisable not only because it would stimulate the learners' communicative competence, but also because it would contribute to the expansion of their cultural horizons. Among the major advantages that working with aNobii might offer, I would like to mention a few crucial ones:

- The improvement of learners' reading and writing skills.
- The use of ELF for authentic communication within an international community of social networkers who share the same interests.
- A different approach to reading as a social event that promotes the horizontal sharing of ideas and experiences.
- The discovery of new fields of potential interest to the student.
- The support to reflective learning as a process of sociocultural awareness.

2.1.2 Cooperative writing and fanfiction on Wikispaces

The narration of stories is a human need and one of the earliest forms of entertainment. Narratives such as myths, legends and folktales have always played a fundamental social function as they establish models for behaviour and uphold the current social structures and institutions (Eliade, 1998). Traditionally, mythology and storytelling have been a typical source of inspiration for literature. However, in some cases the opposite process was observed, whereby a literary hero has become so popular as to become a new mythological figure, like Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe (Watt, 1996). Today, the creation of new literary myths (a process that Tolkien (1988) defined *mythopoeia* in his homonymous poem, written in 1931 in support of creative myth-making) has received a substantial boost thanks to the Internet, giving rise to a fresh epic form that is going to shape a novel cultural tradition based on collaboration and mutual support (Jenkins, 2006). I have already mentioned the case of fanfiction, a new genre that has reversed the traditional relationship between the author and its public, which has greatly contributed to the younger generations' revival of interest in reading and writing. It is also thanks to fan culture and the dedication of digital communities of readers that we have had the birth of new mythological characters taken from fiction, who have finally entered the popular imaginary.

This is the reason why I thought that the school should take advantage of the great opportunity provided by fanfiction and by the participatory attitude of the so-called *digital natives*, making it worth trying to break through the cultural barrier which still keeps the English classroom secluded from a lively world accessible with a simple click of the mouse.

So, as regards the second core activity of my research project (i.e. cooperative writing and fanfiction), during my organisational meeting with the classes I asked them to discuss about the books they had read during the summertime to share their views and ideas on the possibility of using them as a starting point for their cooperative writing task. Later, when the discussion was over, I told the students to choose the two books that they liked best. In the end, however, even though they had a wide choice of titles, they decided that they had better select two books that were also part of the syllabus for the school-leaving examination, that year. So, they chose Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Joyce's short story *Eveline*, from *Dubliners*. It was like killing two birds with one stone, but of course it was a pragmatic choice that the teachers and I agreed with, considering the fact that the fifth grade curriculum is very demanding for Italian students and that my project was a time-consuming extracurricular commitment for them. Besides, I should also mention the fact that the learners' participation to the project was absolutely optional, in order to make their motivation as spontaneous as possible. However, when the project was over, the teachers decided that they would grant a few additional credits in English to the students who had participated to it.

The following step was to create our wiki on Wikispaces, that I called *Cooperative Creative Writing and ELF*¹⁴. Once the students and their teachers had joined it, our activities could start.

The wiki contained five thematic *pages* that corresponded to five different assignments. The first four were about Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

1. *If the picture could speak...* Here the students had to change the original narrator of the story and write brand new passages from the point of view of Dorian's picture.
2. *A new preface...* Here the students had to create an alternative preface to Wilde's novel.
3. *A new ending...* Here the students had to write a different conclusion to the story.

14 Wikispaces: <http://collaborative-writing-elf.wikispaces.com/>

4. *The pact with the devil...* Here the students had to rewrite the episode of Dorian putting a spell on his own portrait.
The fifth thematic page, instead, was about *Eveline*, Joyce's famous short story from *Dubliners*:
5. *Eveline. A different ending...* Here the students had to create an alternative denouement.

Here is an extract from Page 1.

Time run slowly in that attic. I could see nothing around me: a red veil covered me since the beginning of all this terrible nightmare. It was a lovely sunny day when my master put on me my last stroke of colour. It was a red colour, used for making the beautiful form of my lips. Master Basil looked at me in such a satisfied way. I probably was his best work of art. I took a look to the model that was posing for making me a masterpiece. He was handsome, the most beautiful man I had ever seen during my creation. I heard his name so many times from my master. Basil gave me his name, "Dorian", when he was painting me. I started loving this name, also become mine. I started loving Dorian himself, because he was the source of my own beauty. I found out by my self that I was wrong about him. That sunny day was the starting point of the end. I remember it very well. When Basil ended my composition, Dorian came in front of me. His eyes were painted of a deep red, similar to blood. "I would give my soul for staying beautiful and young, while this portrait will get old instead of me.". After he said these words, his eyes became fire, a fire of evils and corruption, while his heart got iced. I could feel what he was feeling. I felt like my colours were on fire, too. An evil smile grew on my face, like the effective symbol of a horrible spell that linked me and Dorian.

This spell derived from my mate's wish: as time goes he remained full of his beauty and youth and I... well... I never had the courage to see my reflection even when I was "free" and not closed in this attic. I only felt a strange sensation every time Dorian's soul got corrupted. While he became more handsome each moment that passed I became the image of what he and his soul should be. Even the same Dorian got horrified of my new appearance, so that he decided to hide me in this damn attic, covered by a bloody veil. He came back to me only for making me the witness of my poor Basil's murder.

I grew into me a terrible sense of hate and disgust for that man that stole my beauty and forced me to live the life he should have lived.

It was a moment. My mind went back to the present, letting my thoughts fade away.

A noise caught my attention, a noise of closing door.

Only Dorian could open the door of the attic. I could hear his footsteps coming to me. The veil disappeared, taken by the hand of that monster. When I met his eyes, I wish to escape from the painting for hitting him. Disgust. His eyes were full of disgust, a disgust that was painted also in mine. Ours eyes seemed to be a mirror of the same feeling we proved for each other. Disgust and hate.

Dorian was strange. He started to shout at me like a mad, like if the guilt of everything was mine. Sense of guilt, Dorian? Are you finally aware of what you did of your life? In a few second he took the knife, Basil's assassin, and thou it into my painting. A tornado of sensations run between us and I could see his body get static and cold. Ugliness and "oldness" finally came to him, while he was falling to the floor, dead, with the knife, put on his chest. The spell decided to give him what he deserved to have.

In the window next to me I saw me. My beauty was coming back slowly. I came back perfect and pure, but I admit to myself that I decided to give satisfaction to that last "bad smile" remained on my face. Justice and revenge were the feelings inside of me, before that that smile disappeared and servants came to look for that dead body, Dorian's dead body.

Here is an extract from Page 2.

Sometimes there are events that give us a chance to live a new life, to walk in streets that we would have never thought we could find. Only when we are in different situations from those in which we have always lived we can discover who we really are; if we see the world in a different point of view and it is possible to interact with it in a new way, we will find out that there is the necessity to make new choices, to look right into our soul to understand our hidden thoughts, our oppressed desires. And if we see that there are aspects of our character that we've never expressed, we have to discern another time what is right and what is wrong to live according to the new sense of morality we have built.

But I have seen people who lead a life they hate, because they are scared of what they have become and don't want to think about the consequences of their choices. There are people who have never decided the way to follow and live as drunks, with minds clouded by their will to never care about the morality of their actions. But if we lead a life we don't approve we will always try to escape from the side of our personality we are scared of, and what if we could see face to face our sins? If we are believers, we could ask God to forgive us and delete the evil we have just recognized in

us; if we aren't, we would try to silence our inner voice reminding us our sins, so that we keep going on our way, but there will be always a prize to pay for the choices we have made.

Here is an extract from Page 3.

Dorian Gray for a long time decides to take his picture in the attic, so that nobody could see, but at the same time he enjoyed of the pleasures of life, so that the picture suffers all the remorse and wounded of that wicked life.

So he went up to the attic, with the same knife he used to kill Basil and began to tear the picture up, but at the same time that he destroyed the painting, also his life slowly left him.

But Dorian he found himself in his bed and discovered that it was only a dream, the fruit of his imagination, caused by the proposal made to him the day before by Basil Hallward, a painting with his portrait and therefore, thanks to this prophetic dream, he realized the importance of life and that his course was untouched.

So he realized that oldness had to be lived in a happy way, because life is beautiful also thanks to the change in our physical aspect.

So the next day, when Basil Hallward came to him to execute the painting, Dorian explained his reason for not execute the painting, exalting the real value of the life course, which can not be changed as we want.

Here is an extract from page 4.

While Henry and Basil talking about the picture, Dorian whispered «I shall grow old and horrible... How sad it is! Oh if It were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that I would give my soul!»

And when He said this, something strange happened: the bees, the birds, the light summer wind, everything stopped. Suddenly, near Lord Henry Wotton and Basil Howard, appeared a devil. Dorian called, scared, his friends, but then He saw that They too were as still. Then the devil began to talk to Dorian:

«And so, You would like to stay young forever!?!? Well... for this, You have to give your soul to me».

Dorian was amazed, but the He accepted this pact, and contracted with

devil. After this, the devil disappeared and everything began to live again. Dorian didn't believe to what He saw, He thought that devil was only his imagination, or his mind that want this thing that It creates in his head this fantasy. But He was afraid by this and He wouldn't take the picture to him.

Bus Basil saw his face and understood that Dorian was as afraid or disgusted by his picture and said

«Dorian what was wrong? You seem to be disgusted by my picture! Why?»

Dorian didn't answer because he was as absent, was lost in his thought. After few second Dorian said

«No I'm not afraid or disgusted by your picture, it's fantastic. I would like to take this with me.»

Here is an extract from Page 5.

Her time was running out, but she continued to sit by the window, thinking about her past and her future. Everything was very confused and her thoughts got muddled with the odour of cretonne coming from the old window curtains, where the layers of dust marked the age of the old house and beat the passing of the years. Suddenly she heard in the avenue a street organ playing...she knew very well that air: she had heard the same melancholy air of Italy in the night of her mother's death, a tragic death that ended a life of hardship, sufferings and humiliations. She seemed to hear again the voice of her mother saying with foolish insistence: "Follow your dreams! Follow your dreams!".

She stood up in a sudden impulse of terror. Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her love and a respectable life. She wouldn't suffer the same humiliations and pains of her mother. She could be happy, she had a right to happiness, she could be save in Frank's arms. He could save her.

Duty, duty... till that moment her life was only a duty. It was made of privations and sufferings. The perpetual repetition of the identical and the sense of duty had paralyzed her, had made her unable to take the reins of her life.

Escape. I must escape. My mother, her mother. She had forgotten her words, but that air of Italy... right in that moment. She had to change, she had the right to chose her life. Escape. Frank could save me.

He stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall. He was alone. Eveline was not there. The boat blew a long mournful whistle into the mist that made people and objects pure contours without

substance. He was not waiting for her. He knew she wouldn't come. He went up the boat but suddenly he felt seized by a hand... her hand. She had decided, she had left the nest, following her dreams. Her mother was right. Tomorrow she would be on the sea with Frank, steaming towards Buenos Ayres, starting another life with Frank. She had a new home waiting for her. She would be married and people would treat her with respect. She could be happy... she should have no longer fear of her father's violence. She could be safe. A new life for her.

He sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. His head was leaned against the window curtains and in his nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne. He was tired. He was still waiting for her to return. But he didn't know that now she was far. All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart, shaking her existence. She fled from him. She fled away.

Working as a Cop, the students could then write and share stories cooperatively, and improve them through their reciprocal advice and feedback. This had a multiplying effect that turned creative writing into a social event that fostered language improvement as well. In addition, the use of a facility provided by the wiki called *History* favoured the creation of a ZPD, as learners had the possibility to compare at any time the different drafts of each text they had produced and reflect on the dynamics that had been activated within their group, with a vision towards higher accomplishments. This particular kind of language check, which was appropriately guided by their teachers, could help the learners focus on language learning as a process of sociocultural awareness and promoted a beneficial reflective attitude. Last but not least, this kind of social networking reinforced the students' media literacy and their sense of responsibility as Web-users.

2.2 Phase 2: Further developments

This paragraph describes the follow up of my research project, which took place during the school year 2011/2012 and got involved three new high-school fifth grade classes, from three different Italian cities, namely Rome, Palermo and Messina¹⁵. Our work was entirely dedicated to cooperative

¹⁵ Liceo Cassico "Orazio", Rome; Liceo Cassico "Vittorio Emanuele II", Palermo; Liceo Scientifico "Giuseppe Seguenza", Messina.

writing and fanfiction and the students interacted through a new wiki hosted on Wikispaces¹⁶.

My aim was once again to connect the English classroom to the wide Cop that is involved with fanfiction online, and turn learners into social networkers who use ELF as an additional language for authentic Web-mediated communication. As regards the main pedagogic purpose underpinning the choice of working on English literature, it can be summed up nicely by the motto that is printed on the home page of the wiki itself: *Reading and writing for pleasure!* It implies that through social networking it is possible to recover a more natural and playful approach to literature, which is too often sacrificed on the altar of traditional schooling.

The teachers who joined the project and I agreed on working on two contemporary short stories: Roald Dahl's *A Parson's Pleasure*¹⁷ and Ron Butlin's *The German Boy*¹⁸. We thought that in this way it would have been much easier for the students to carry out their tasks, especially because of time constraints. Having started our project at the beginning of the school year (September 2011), there was not enough time for them to read an entire novel in English and be ready for the creative writing phase in October.

2.2.1. Group activities via social networking

Here are the two cooperative writing and fanfiction tasks assigned to the students.

16 Wikispaces: <http://fanfiction-rome-palermo-messina.wikispaces.com/>

17 Published in Kiss Kiss, Penguin, 1960.

18 Published in *British Short Stories of Today*, Penguin Books, 1987.

1. ROALD DAHL - Parson's Pleasure: a new ending

Hello, there! This page contains a file with an extract from Roald Dahl's short story, *Parson's Pleasure*. Read it carefully and carry out the following task with a partner.

Cooperative creative writing

How do you think the story continues? What happens next?

- a Decide what Mr Rummins (the farmer) and Mr Boggis do after they have done their deal.*
- b Think about an unexpected event that takes place at this point. You can create new characters and a new situation.*
- c Think about the consequences of this unexpected situation and what the main problems are.*
- d Find a solution for these problems and finish the story.*

When you finish, upload your file onto this page. Then, through this wiki you will be able to read the contributions from other members in your group and rearrange them (e.g. add new parts, rewrite a few parts, correct mistakes, etc.). Finally, the group will end up with a number of alternative endings to Dahl's short story.

2. RON BUTLIN - The German Boy: a letter to Klaus

Hello, there! This page contains a file with an extract from Ron Butlin's short story, *The German Boy*. Read it carefully and carry out the following task with a partner.

Cooperative creative writing

Imagine that you are the narrator of the story. Klaus hasn't come back to school after what happened with your Maths teacher, so you decide to write him a letter. Include this information.

- 1. Tell Klaus how you feel about what happened.*
- 2. Tell him what you think about your schoolmates' reaction the day of the incident.*
- 3. Tell Klaus what you think about his decision to speak only German.*
- 4. What do you suggest he should do now?*

When you finish, upload your file onto this page. Then, through this wiki you will be able to read the contributions from other members of your group and rearrange them (e.g. add new parts, rewrite a few parts, correct mistakes, etc.). Finally, the group will end up with a number of alternative letters to Klaus.

In each class the students were divided into two subgroups: one was supposed to work on Dahl's short story and the other on Butlin's. Students could work in pairs and once they had finished writing their texts they would upload them onto the appropriate wiki pages. At this point each of the students

who had worked on Dahl's short story could choose one of the texts produced by his/her companions from a different city and rearrange it as he/she pleased. The same could be done by those who had worked on Butlin's short story. Once this phase of the project was over, the two subgroups swapped roles and worked on each other's texts via the wiki. In this way everyone was able to carry out both assignments and cooperate with the whole group.

Here are two examples of creative texts that students produced.

1. *Roald Dahl – Parson's Pleasure: a new ending*

Mr Boggis went back to his car almost running, figuring out himself dressed up with expensive clothes and a lot of people asking him how he has found that rare commode; he was so excited that he fell two times, he kept repeat in his mind: "god bless the ignorance".

Meanwhile the farmers were as much thrilled, they got 20 pounds for that useless piece of wood, those peoples from the city hadn't the value of the money, the only regrets they had was about the fact that the man was a parson, but that was quickly forgotten, they wanted those money, in the end Rummins exclaimed: " god bless the ignorance".

A few minutes later Mr Boggis, after he composed himself, returned to the farmers with his car to load the commode. the farmers were very serviceable and they helped him to find a way to load the piece of furniture; Mr Boggis was quite amused by their behavior: it was very funny to see the three men striving to load that heavy furniture for only 20 pounds.

After more than an hour he was ready to go, he payed the 20 pounds to an exhausted Rummins, that took the money with satisfaction, persuaded that he has had a good deal.

Mr Boggis driving back home was so happy that he didn't stop at a cross and hitting a tree destroyed the commode; the farmers used the money of the commode to buy the wood to build a new barn that went burned after a few months.

2. *Ron Butlin – The German Boy: a letter to Klaus*

Dear Klaus,

I am trying to imagine what you are thinking in this moment and, above all, what you felt yesterday. Everybody looked at you as if you were a mad and you were just doing the most natural thing to you, speaking your own language.

Our classmates enjoyed themselves as if they were watching a TV show, they didn't understand that you were really suffering.

We all behaved in such a stupid and immature way!
 I feel terrible, I should have done something, anything.
 But, you know, it was a strange situation.
 I didn't understand what you were talking about and I was scared.
 This is what you experience everyday, isn't it?
 I am aware that we can't really feel with you, we don't have to make the effort you daily do.
 We speak our language, we joke and we don't realize how much these simple things could be difficult for you.
 Why did you decide to speak only German? I really don't know.
 I can maybe guess that you don't feel comfortable speaking in English, you don't feel yourself.
 I know you miss Germany, your family there and your old life but since now we would really like to help you, to be your family and your friends.
 And I promise, you will always be yourself any language you talk.
 So why don't you come back to school?
 We are looking forward to seeing you again.
 You could teach us a little bit of German. Do you agree?
 Please trust in us and come back.
 We are waiting for you :)

Also in this case, the use of the facility called *History* on Wikispaces favoured the creation of a ZPD, whereby learners had the possibility to compare and edit the different drafts of their texts and improve them. Interestingly, and quite unexpectedly from the teachers' and from my point of view, the students tended to focus more on content rather than form in reviewing their cooperative work. So, they would normally add new ideas or changed parts of their texts to enrich their plots and style rather than correct lexicogrammar deviations from the NS's norms. This indicates that the use of ELF, as can be seen in the few examples that I have provided above, could well serve the pragmatic needs of the students' Cop, i.e. it was used as an appropriate affordance to mediate communication in this particular form of social networking.

3. Ethnographic survey

Because the use of ELF is situated within a complex environment where a number of social ecosystems interact with one another, I constructed and administered two pencil-and-paper questionnaires (for the students and their

teachers, respectively) to collect ethnographic information derived during fieldwork¹⁹. The purpose of these questionnaires was to collect: a) quantitative data concerning the respondents' use of ELF in online communication from home and from school; and b) qualitative data about the respondents' opinions and beliefs on the use of ELF at school, as well as on cooperative writing and fanfiction.

Altogether, thirty-seven students and five Italian teachers of English responded to the survey, and here are the two questionnaires.

Student Survey
Cooperative writing and the use of ELF at school through wikis

Student: _____ **Identification n.** _____ (please, leave blank)
School: _____ **City:** _____
Teacher: _____ **Class:** _____ **Date:** _____

Instructions

The following survey is intended to collect relevant information about your experience as a participant in the research project on collaborative creative writing and the use of ELF at school. You will be assigned an identification number, so that your personal data and answers will remain anonymous.

Please, notice that in some cases you can select only one answer, while in other cases it is possible to select more than one answer. You can skip the questions where no answers are applicable.

Finally, Part 4 contains open questions where you are free to write your personal answers. Thank you for your kind participation!

Part 1 – Social networking at home

1. Do you have a connection to the Internet from home? Yes No
2. How often do you connect to the Internet from home?
daily *every other day* *at weekends* *less than once a week*
3. Who do you usually surf the Net with from home?
alone *with my parents* *with other members of the family* *with friends*

¹⁹ The construction of these questionnaires is largely based on Dörnyei, 2010. They were also reviewed by Prof. Steven Thorne, Portland State University, USA.

4. How often do you use these tools to communicate with other people online? (a)

	never	sometimes	often	always
e-mail				
social networks				
chat rooms				
internet forums				
blogs				
fan groups				

5. What are your typical attitudes and behaviours as a social networker? Choose one of the following profiles (adapted from *Ofcom Social Networking Sites Research, 2 April 2008*).

- **Alpha Socialisers** – people who use sites in intense short bursts to flirt, meet new people, and be entertained.
- **Attention Seekers** – people who crave attention and comments from others, often by posting photos and customising their profiles.
- **Followers** – people who join sites to keep up with what their peers are doing.
- **Faithfuls** – people who typically use social networking sites to rekindle old friendships.
- **Functionals** – people who tend to be single-minded in using sites for a particular purpose.

6. Do you ever use English to communicate with other people online?

never *sometimes* *often* *always*

7. Who do you usually speak English with online?

- Native speakers of English
- Non-native speakers of English
- Both native and non-native speakers of English

8. When do you use English online?

- e-mail
- social networks
- chat rooms
- internet forums
- blogs
- fan groups
- gaming

9. Do you ever use any of these aids when you speak English online?

- Bilingual dictionary
- Monolingual dictionary

- Online dictionaries
 - Language corpora
 - Grammar book
10. How do you disambiguate the cultural references you don't understand when you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds? (e.g. references to people, events, traditions of other countries/cultures).
- Use your intuition
 - Seek information on the Internet (e.g. through Google, Yahoo, Wikipedia, etc.)
 - Ask your interlocutors for more information
 - Ask other people (e.g. your parents, friends, etc.) for more information
11. How do you disambiguate the expressions you don't understand when you communicate in English online? (e.g. idioms, acronyms, slang, etc.)
- Use your intuition
 - Seek information on the Internet (e.g. through Google, Yahoo, Wikipedia, etc.)
 - Ask your interlocutors for more information
 - Ask other people (e.g. your parents, friends, etc.) for more information

Part 2 – Social networking at school

12. How often do you go to the computer room for your English classes?
- always* *once a week* *once every other week*
once a month *less than once a month*
13. How often do you connect to the Internet during your English classes in the computer room?
- never* *sometimes* *often* *always*
14. How do you usually work on the Internet?
- individually* *with a partner* *with more than one partner*
15. How often do you use these tools to communicate with other people online? (a)

	never	sometimes	often	always
e-mail				
social networks				
chat rooms				
internet forums				
blogs				
fan groups				

16. What are your typical activities online during an English class?

- Use the internet as a source of information (e.g. News, Wikipedia, etc.)
- Download useful materials for our work
- Use online dictionaries and corpora
- Take English tests
- Do English exercises
- Watch videos, TV channels, etc.
- E-mailing
- Social networking
- Connect to chat rooms
- Connect to internet forums
- Connect to blogs
- Connect to fan groups (including your project on Book reviews and Fanfiction)

17. Who do you usually speak English with online?

- Native speakers of English
- Non-native speakers of English
- Both native and non-native speakers of English

18. What sort of feedback do you get from your peers in online communication?

- They express agreement or disagreement
- They sometimes correct my English (words and/or grammar)
- They sometimes ask me to rephrase or explain what I have just said

19. What sort of feedback do you give your peers in online communication?

- I express agreement or disagreement
- I sometimes correct their English (words and/or grammar)
- I sometimes ask them to rephrase or explain what they have said

20. What sort of feedback and guidance do you get from your teacher about online communication?

- They tend to correct my English (words, grammar, style)
- They correct my English only when I ask them to
- They never correct my English
- They sort out any language problems, even if I don't ask for their help
- They give me advice to make me find the best solution to a language problem
- They guide me in the choice of topics
- They give me advice to protect my privacy and media identity
- They help me out with technical problems
- They never provide me with any feedback or technical support
- They assess and evaluate my performance
- The teacher and I discuss and asses my performance; then they evaluate it
- They never assess and evaluate my performance

21. Do you ever use any of these aids when you use English online?

- Bilingual dictionary
- Monolingual dictionary
- Online dictionaries
- Language corpora
- Grammar book

22. How do you disambiguate the cultural references you don't understand when you communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds? (e.g. references to people, events, traditions of other countries/cultures you are not familiar with).

- Use your intuition
- Seek information on the Internet (e.g. through Google, Yahoo, Wikipedia, etc.)
- Ask your peers and interlocutors for more information
- Ask your teacher for more information

23. How do you disambiguate the expressions you don't understand when you communicate in English online? (e.g. idioms, acronyms, slang, etc.)

- Use your intuition
- Seek information on the Internet (e.g. through Google, Yahoo, Wikipedia, etc.)
- Ask your peers and interlocutors for more information
- Ask your teacher for more information

Part 3 Social networking and the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) at school.

24. Using ELF at school for social networking is:

- Compelling (e.g. makes you feel highly motivated and interested)
- Embarrassing (e.g. you are afraid of making mistakes; you feel ashamed)
- Boring (e.g. you don't like using the computer; online communication is demotivating)

25. My main goal in using ELF for social networking is to:

- engage in authentic intercultural communication
- practice my English with native and non-native speakers

26. My competence in using ELF is:

- Effective
- Quite appropriate
- Inadequate

27. I think I should primarily improve my:

- English grammar
- English vocabulary

- Knowledge of other ELF speakers' cultures

28. Thanks to my peers' feedback I have primarily:

- learnt new words and expressions
- improved my lexicogrammar competence
- improved my understanding of different cultures

29. I perceive my Italian language and cultural background:

- as a resource for online communication when using ELF
- as an obstacle to online communication when using ELF

30. When I use ELF for social networking:

- I tend to avoid the use of English idiomatic expressions
- I tend to use also some English idiomatic expressions
- I never use Italian idioms translated into English
- I also use Italian idioms translated into English

31. When I use ELF for social networking:

- My identity doesn't change at all. EFL is just another language to express myself
- I tend to assume a different identity and EFL is a part of it

Part 4 – Collaborative creative writing and the use of ELF through wikis.

32. List the works of collaborative creative writing you have produced as part of this project.

- a. Author _____ Novel _____ Your extract _____
- b. Author _____ Novel _____ Your extract _____
- c. Author _____ Novel _____ Your extract _____
- d. Author _____ Novel _____ Your extract _____

33. Have you ever uploaded these works on any social networks? Yes No

34. Have you ever received any peers' feedback? Yes No

35. Have you ever edited your works through a wiki? (e.g. on *wikispaces.com*)?
Yes No

36. Has any of the members in your community ever edited your works through *wikispaces.com*?
Yes No

37. How did you react to your peers' editing your works of collaborative creative writing?

38. How do you consider the experience of using ELF to write on the internet?

39. Do you think it would be a good idea to promote the use of social networking and collaborative creative writing as part of regular English classes? Why?

40. Do you think you will continue to use ELF to write on the internet even after the end of this project? Why?

Thank you, very much for your help!

Teacher Survey
Cooperative writing and the use of ELF at school through wikis

Instructions

This survey is conducted by Enrico Grazzi, a researcher at the Dept. of Linguistics of the University of "Roma Tre", to collect relevant information about your experience as a participant in the research project on collaborative creative writing and the use of ELF at school through wikis.

This questionnaire consists of seven sections. Please, read each instruction and write your answers. This is not a test so there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. You will be assigned an identification number, so that your personal data and answers will remain anonymous. The results of this survey will be used only for research purpose, so please give your answers sincerely.

Please, notice that in some cases you can select only one answer, while in other cases it is possible to select more than one answer. You can skip the questions where no answers are applicable.

Finally, Part 6 contains open questions where you are free to write your personal answers.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Date: _____ **Respondent's identification n.** _____ (please, leave blank)

Part 1 – Personal information

Name: _____ **Surname:** _____ **Gender:** M F

1. Approximate age: 25/35 36/45 46/55 56/65

2. Country of birth: ___(Italy -1)

3. Country of residence: ___(Italy -1)

4. Mother Tongue: __ (Italian -1)
5. Other languages: English-1; French-2; Spanish-3; German-4; Portuguese-5
6. University degree: English Language and Literature.-1; Other Univ. degrees.-2
7. Total number of years teaching English: 1/10 11/20 21/30 31/40
8. Teaching experience/how long (number of years):
 Primary ____ Middle school ____ High school ____ University ____

Part 2 – Social networking at home

In this part I would like you to provide some information about your ordinary use of social networks at home.

9. Do you have a connection to the Internet from home? Yes No
10. How often do you normally connect to the Internet from home?
 daily *every other day* *at weekends* *less than once a week*
11. How often do you use these digital tools to communicate with other people online? (a)

	never	sometimes	often	always
e-mail				
social networks				
chat rooms				
internet forums				
blogs				
fan groups				

12. What are your typical attitudes and behaviours as a social networker? Choose only one of the following profiles (adapted from *Ofcom Social Networking Sites Research, 2 April 2008*).
- **Alpha Socialisers** – people who use sites in intense short bursts to flirt, meet new people, and be entertained.
 - **Attention Seekers** – people who crave attention and comments from others, often by posting photos and customising their profiles.
 - **Followers** – people who join sites to keep up with what their peers are doing.
 - **Faithfuls** – people who typically use social networking sites to rekindle old friendships.

- **Functionals** – people who tend to be single-minded in using sites for a particular purpose.

13. Do you ever use English to communicate with other people online?
never *sometimes* *often* *always*

14. Who do you usually speak English with online?

- Native speakers of English
- Non-native speakers of English
- Both native and non-native speakers of English

15. When do you use English online? You can select more than one answer.

- e-mail
- social networks
- chat rooms
- internet forums
- blogs
- fan groups
- gaming

Part 3 – Social networking at school

In this part I would like you to provide some information about your ordinary use of social networks at school, with your classes (including the activities that have been part of this research project).

16. How often do you use the computer room for your English classes?

- always* *once a week* *once every other week*
once a month *less than once a month*

17. How often do you let your students connect to the Internet from the computer room, during your English classes?

- never* *sometimes* *often* *always*

18. How do your students usually work on the Internet? You can select more than one answer.

- individually* *with a partner* *with more than one partner*

19. How often do you ask your students to use these digital media to communicate with other people online? (a)

	never	sometimes	often	always
e-mail				
social networks				
chat rooms				
internet forums				
blogs				
fan groups				

20. What are your students' typical activities online during an English class? You can select more than one answer.

- Use the internet as a source of information (e.g. News, Wikipedia, etc.)
- Download useful materials for their work
- Use online dictionaries and corpora
- Take English tests
- Do English exercises
- Watch videos or TV channels, read newspapers, etc.
- E-mailing
- Social networking
- Connect to chat rooms
- Connect to internet forums
- Connect to blogs
- Connect to fan groups (including our project on Book reviews and Fanfiction)

21. Who do your students usually speak English with online?

- Native speakers of English
- Non-native speakers of English
- Both native and non-native speakers of English

22. What sort of feedback do your students get from their peers in online communication? You can select more than one answer.

- They express agreement or disagreement
- They sometimes correct their English (words and/or grammar)
- They sometimes ask them to rephrase or explain what they have said

23. What sort of feedback and guidance do you give your students to carry out online communication? Select only one answer in each group.

A. **Language**

- I tend to check and correct their English
- I check and correct their English only if they ask me to
- I ask them to rephrase or revise what they have said or written, when necessary
- I provide tools and give them tips to solve their language problems

B. Topics

- I assume a gatekeeping role for the admission of the topics they choose
- We choose the topics jointly
- I guide them in the choice of topics only if they ask me to
- I leave them free to choose their topics

C. Views

- I assume a gatekeeping role for the admission of the opinions they express online
- I tend to express agreement/disagreement with what they say or write online
- I prefer not to interfere with what they say or write online

D. Privacy

- I usually give them advice on how to protect their privacy and media identity
- I rarely give them advice on how to protect their privacy and media identity

E. Assessment

- I usually assess their online performance
- The students and I assess their online performance jointly
- I never assess their online performance

F. Evaluation

- I usually mark each student’s online performance, just like a normal communication task
- I give students credits for their participation to online activities, at the end of each term
- I don’t evaluate their online performance, to avoid spoiling its authenticity

24. Which of the following tools do your students normally use when they work online? You can select more than one answer.

- Bilingual dictionary
- Monolingual dictionary
- Online dictionaries
- Language corpora
- Grammar book

Part 4 – ELF (English as a Lingua Franca)

25. In this part, you can say how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by simply circling (0) a number from 1 to 6. Please do not leave out any of the items.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

1.	ELF refers to the use of standard English as a global language, for international communication.	1 2 3 4 5 6
2.	ELF refers to the pronunciation and intonation of English spoken by L2 users.	1 2 3 4 5 6
3.	ELF is a sort of “broken” English used by L2 users for international communication.	1 2 3 4 5 6
4.	ELF refers to different world Englishes emerging locally and used globally for international communication.	1 2 3 4 5 6
5.	Standard English belongs to native-speakers, while ELF belongs to non-native speakers.	1 2 3 4 5 6
6.	Both native and non-native speakers of English contribute to the evolution of ELF ‘glocally’.	1 2 3 4 5 6
7.	Non-native teachers of English should take ENL (English as a Native Language) as their target model.	1 2 3 4 5 6
8.	Non-native teachers of English should take the SUE (Successful User of English) as their target model.	1 2 3 4 5 6
9.	Standard English and native-speaker competence are the appropriate targets of ELT (English Language Teaching).	1 2 3 4 5 6
10.	The main target of ELT is to make learners become SUEs, who are able to use multiple skills in different discourses and communicative contexts, while maintaining their socio-cultural identity.	1 2 3 4 5 6
11.	L2 users gain prestige and have better opportunities if they speak ENL.	1 2 3 4 5 6
12.	Taking ENL as a model of proficiency in ELT reinforces linguistic imperialism and entails the loss of one’s socio-cultural identity.	1 2 3 4 5 6
13.	The use of ELF should not be allowed at school as it easily turns into a students’ pidgin.	1 2 3 4 5 6
14.	ELF is informed by EFL and is emergent at school when learners carry out authentic communicative activities in their ‘glocal’ socio-cultural environment.	1 2 3 4 5 6
15.	The students’ L1 and socio-cultural identity interfere with the learning of English and cause errors.	1 2 3 4 5 6
16.	The students’ L1 and socio-cultural identity are resources that can enrich English and adapt it to their interactive needs.	1 2 3 4 5 6
17.	ELT materials should only present learners with examples of how native-speakers use their different varieties of ENL.	1 2 3 4 5 6
18.	ELT materials should present learners with examples of how ENL and ELF are used by SUEs (including both native speakers of English and L2 users).	1 2 3 4 5 6

Part 5 – Use of ELF for social networking at school

In this part I would like you to provide some information about your students’ use of ELF to practice social networking at school (including the activities that are part of this research project). Please select only one answer per item.

26. Using ELF at school for social networking is:

- Compelling (e.g. it makes your students feel highly motivated and interested)
- Embarrassing (e.g. you disapprove your students’ faulty use of English)
- Problematic (e.g. technical problems, time-consuming, hard to evaluate, etc.)

27. Your main goal in making students use ELF for social networking is to:

- Foster their interest and motivation in learning English
- Make them practice their English with native and non-native speakers
- Get them engaged in authentic intercultural communication

28. Your average students' competence in using ELF for social networking is:

- Effective
- Quite appropriate
- Inadequate

29. As regards ELF, you think your students should primarily improve their:

- English grammar (e.g. morphosyntactic norms, colligations, etc.)
- English vocabulary (e.g. use of idioms, collocations, formulaic sentences, etc.)
- Communicative competence (e.g. fluency, communicative strategies, use of different registers, etc.)
- Intercultural competence (e.g. awareness of one's cultural identity, understanding other people's behaviours and ways of thinking, etc.)

30. Peers' feedback can primarily help students to:

- improve their lexicogrammar competence
- learn new words and expressions
- improve their intercultural competence

Part 6 – Integrating ELF, wikis, and fanfiction through collaborative creative writing.

In this part I would like you to reflect on the experience of having taken part to this research project, particularly as regards the students' use of ELF and wikis to produce fanfiction. Please feel free to write your personal opinions.

31. Do you think it was a good idea to integrate the use of ELF, wikis and fanfiction to produce collaborative creative writing during your regular English classes? Why?

32. Do you think in the future you will make your students use ELF to produce collaborative creative writing online? Why?

33. Do you have any suggestions to improve this kind of communicative activity?

Thank you, very much for your help!

Processing the students' and the teachers' answers has provided interesting information as regards their habits in using the Internet at home and at school, but above all, these questionnaires were useful to know more about the learners' and teachers' attitudes towards the possibility of using ELF as an integral part of their syllabuses.

A detailed account of the analysis of the data that were gathered would obviously not fit this paper due to space constraints, therefore I will just sum up some of the essential results that are relevant to the topic that I have been discussing so far.

3.1 Student Survey: social networking at home

Here is a synopsis of what the survey has revealed about the students' use of the Internet at home.

1. about 90% of the respondents connect to the Internet from home daily, and mostly alone (92%).
2. 86% of respondents often connect to social networks (e.g. Facebook), while the e-mail is less popular (69% use it sometimes). Other uses of the Internet are far less common.
3. Here are the results about the students' auto-profiling as Internet users:

QUESTION 1_5		
<i>Auto-profiling</i>	N	%
Alpha Socialisers	2	6%
Attention Seekers	13	36%
Followers	2	6%
Faithfuls	5	14%
Functionals	10	28%
No respondents	4	11%

4. Although most of students connect to the Internet daily, only 20% *often* or *always* use English online, while 75% *sometimes* do so, and 2% *never* do so.

5. Interestingly, 11% of those who often use English online do so with NS interlocutors. While those who sometimes use English online do so with NNS interlocutors.
6. Comparatively, respondents prefer to use English online through social networks, e-mail and chat rooms. It is also interesting to notice that 17% of respondents use English online for gaming.

QUESITON 1_8	
<i>Use of English</i>	%
e-mail	39%
social networks	75%
Chat rooms	39%
forums	8%
blogs	6%
groups	22%
gaming	17%

7. In order to understand exophoric references to the interlocutor’s cultural background, 2 out of 3 respondents seek information on the Internet. However 36% ask directly their interlocutors for clarification. The Internet is used also to disambiguate some English lexicogrammar constructions, but most respondents usually tend to infer their meaning.

3.2 Student survey: social networking at school

1. Most of respondents say that they have classes in computer room once a month, and that students work either individually or in pairs.
2. They sometimes connect to the Internet from the computer room, although they mainly use the Web as a source of information to download useful materials for their work. Other uses of the Internet, such as social networking, e-mailing, gaming etc. are quite rare.
3. Peer review and language feedback are very rare too. Basically, students get only agreement/disagreement from their interlocutors online.
4. Teachers usually refrain from correcting the students when they are working online, although they are ready to assist them when asked.

5. Online dictionaries (monolingual and bilingual) are the typical aids used by students when they work on the Internet.
6. Opaque exophoric references to alien cultural backgrounds, as well as unclear idioms, use of slang expressions etc. are generally disambiguated through inferencing, or by seeking information online, or else by asking teachers for help.
7. As regards the use of ELF to communicate online, a great majority of respondents found it compelling and highly motivating. Only a minority felt quite embarrassed, as they were afraid of making mistakes. Besides, they thought their ELF competence was quite appropriate. Interestingly, almost all respondents felt that they needed to improve and enrich their English vocabulary, and a minority also felt the need to improve their intercultural competence. Finally, just few respondents thought they should improve their English grammar.
8. Peers' feedback (which includes the participants' reviews of the creative texts they had written for this research project on the use of ELF in fanfiction) was primarily useful to expand the learners' vocabulary. In some cases, it improved the participants' grammar competence too. As for the use of idiomatic expressions, almost all respondents said they normally do not avoid the English ones, while the very rarely translate the Italian ones into English. What is very interesting, though, is that the most part of respondents think that their Italian language and cultural background is a resource for online communication when using ELF and not an obstacle. Finally, almost all respondents said that ELF is felt as an additional language, which does not affect their identity by all means.

3.3 Student survey: social networking, ELF and fanfiction

The last part of the questionnaire contained essentially a few open questions, where the students could freely express their own ideas about the work they had done during this project. Most respondents showed great appreciation for the experience they had had, which was basically perceived as a good opportunity to a) improve their English; b) practice English for real communication; c) get to know other people; and d) make the English classes more lively and interesting. Let me just close this section with a quote from one of the students' questionnaires, that is very emblematic:

I am afraid for the use of English, for my grammatical errors but is not important this. The relationship with other people is very important. ... This is the real English for me. ... It is a very beautiful experience.

3.4 Teacher survey: social networking at home

1. The five teachers who cooperated to this project normally use to communicate on the Internet via e-mail, but only two of them also connect to a social network regularly (e.g. Facebook). Instead, chat rooms, forums, blogs and fan groups do not seem to be very popular among them. Their auto-profiles vary as well. One is a *faithful*, two are *functionals*, one is a *follower* and one has not answered this question (she might not have joined any social network). They all use English online.

3.5 Teacher survey: social networking at school

Three out of the five teachers use to bring their classes to the computer room once a month, one does so once a week, and one does so every time they have a lesson. Students usually work individually or in pairs, but they seldom connect to a social network or to any other site designed for web-mediated social interaction. The Internet is used essentially as a source of information (texts, videos, etc.), to download useful materials, to access online dictionaries, and to take language tests. In any case, especially when students use the e-mail, they interact with both NS and NNS of English.

As regards the teachers' feedback and guidance for their students, four out of five prefer to provide tools or give them tips to solve their language problems, while one of them asks her students to rephrase their messages if necessary.

Generally speaking, teachers tend not to interfere with the students' choice of topics they are going to discuss online, though they tend to negotiate and check what they are going to write. In some cases, teachers provide guidance and advice only if students ask for them. In any case, none of the teachers mark the students' performance when they communicate through the Internet, but rather prefer to discuss and assess it together with the learners. Some of the teachers assign extra credits for the activities students carry out in the computer room. Finally, students are allowed to use online dictionaries (monolingual and bilingual).

3.6 Teacher survey: ELF

The results of this survey show that three out of the five English teachers involved in this project consider NS's English as the target model in ELT and a key to success for their students. To them, the successful L2-user is a NNS of English who conforms to the norms of SE and affirms his/her cultural identity as well. In other words, even if language standards of accuracy and fluency correspond to the NS's model, this is hardly perceived as a threat or limitation of the learner's right to appropriate the foreign language and express his/her sociocultural identity. It is as if learning English essentially consisted in a neutral system of lexicogrammar rules to be acquired as such in order to be able to express oneself correctly in an additional language. Consequently, ELF is perceived rather vaguely and the respondents sometimes give contradictory answers: on the one hand they seem to agree (albeit half-heartedly) with the idea that NNSs and language learners contribute to the emergence of English globally and that the L1 linguaculture can enrich English, but on the other hand they think that the students' native tongue interferes with the acquisition of *proper* English. What is more, even though respondents agree that ELT materials should present learners with examples of how ENL and ELF are used by NSs and successful L2-users, they seem to assume that EFL conforms to NS's English norms, and that its diversity basically consists in the fact that it is spoken by NNSs in international contexts.

As for the other two teachers, one answered only the final question in the grid, therefore this part of her questionnaire was considered irrelevant; the other, instead, provided answers which are absolutely in line with the theories and conceptualizations of ELF that I have presented in the first paragraph of this paper.

3.7 Teacher survey: use of ELF and social networking at school

Rather unexpectedly, all the five teachers gave a positive feedback as regards the use of ELF at school for social networking, although at times they had to solve some technical problems in working with wikis.

Respondents found that the students' use of ELF online fostered their motivation and that web-mediated intercultural communication was beneficial to their classes. Besides, the average students' communicative competence was considered quite appropriate.

3.8 Teacher survey: social networking, ELF and fanfiction

Initially I thought I should sum up what the five teachers wrote in the final part of the survey, where open questions were asked about the pedagogical experience of having integrated the use of ELF and cooperative writing to make students practice fanfiction online. On second thought, I considered that it would be much better to report their observations here, without any further comment, as they are self-explanatory and conducive to drawing conclusions in the final paragraph.

1. Do you think it was a good idea to integrate the use of ELF, wikis and fanfiction to produce collaborative creative writing during your regular English classes? Why?

Teacher n. 1 The idea was certainly a good one. It allowed students to use their English to communicate freely, fearless of teacher's control.

Teacher n. 2 Yes, because it allowed students to write for pleasure, out of the traditional school context. Also, it improved their language competence.

Teacher 3 Yes, first of all because my students and I used a new tool and new sites, in addition they had the opportunity to communicate in English in a real context.

Teacher 4. I think that every experience in which the students are involved may play an important role in the regular English classes. Moreover students don't have real opportunities to write in English so wikis and fanfiction was a good one.

Teacher 5 Yes. It stirs the student's interest and motivation.

2. Do you think in the future you will make your students use ELF to produce collaborative creative writing online? Why?

Teacher n. 1 I think I will, because I believe peer interaction to be an effective learning tool. The Internet allows learners to acquaint themselves with a large number of ELF examples. This may help them build up confidence and prompt them to try their hand at writing in a protected, anxiety-free environment. When such an activity is carried out at an international level it may also be an effective means to widen students' cultural horizons.

Teacher n. 2 Yes, because it develops students' creativity and stimulates their interest in reading/writing. It also gives them the opportunity of interacting with other people using English and sharing ideas and opinions.

Teacher n. 3 Certainly 'yes'. I like the idea of wikis and I think I will use this site again even if in a more didactic way. It can be a good way to help students to edit their texts and reinforce self-correction.

Teacher n. 4 To foster their motivation and make them practice their English. It's good if they understand that online collaborative writing can be a good way to improve their competence.

Teacher n. 5 No answer.

3. Do you have any suggestions to improve this kind of communicative activity?

Teacher n. 1 Perhaps students should be given shorter deadlines to carry out their tasks: This might help them concentrate on the activity and therefore increase the frequency of their contributions.

Linking the wiki to facebook appears to be impossible at present, but the importance of social networks to the lives of teenagers seems to be so great as to require further thought. Maybe a facebook group could be created with all the people who take part in the activity. If one informed the group he/she has posted a comment on the wiki, each member would receive the notification on his/her own account.

Besides, I would try a wiki based on the students' personal creative writing production, their own short stories or even their own poems. One could suggest topics, or let them choose their favourite ones, or – better – discuss the choice with them.

Teacher n. 2 To make this activity more interesting, students of several schools could be involved in a creative writing competition and they themselves could vote the most creative text expressing their own opinion and comment.

Teacher n. 3 I am not sure but Wikis could be a good way to help students also in their “normal” school tasks because the teacher can have the role of facilitator and advisor. Fanfiction is also interesting because it can help students to be more creative. The only obstacle I found during the research project was that some of the students seemed not to like the idea of using the internet in a didactic way but I am still thinking about the reasons and I would like to prepare a questionnaire to find out their opinion.

Teacher n. 4 I've recently experienced the fact that when we involve students in using some sort of activities through the net they tend to refuse them, it seems that they don't want to associate what they generally use as a free time activity (social networks, blogs...) with a “School activity” (using social networks to collaborate for a project and so on). I'm trying to find some possible solutions but it's not easy.

Teacher n. 5 No answer.

5. Conclusions

The great potential of computer-mediated communication undoubtedly makes the Internet a valuable resource for English learners who use ELF as an affordance to carry out web-mediated communication in a multicultural and multilingual context. However, the incorporation of ELF into ELT is not automatic and cannot be left to the individual improvisation and spontaneity, as it requires accurate planning, a definition of objectives, as well as clearly set forth guidelines for teachers and learners, as this research project has tried to demonstrate.

As for the role of the teacher, fieldwork has shown that he/she should act as a facilitator who:

1. filters the students' contributions,

2. orientates their choices,
3. gives advice,
4. provides relevant language input,
5. assesses results together with the students.

In conclusion, this study indicates that a steady increase in the form of social participation and authentic communication through the Internet should become a common practice in ELT, and that teachers of English and educators should assume a more open position as regards the use of ELF at school, as it is a sociocultural affordance whereby L2-users share and mediate meanings and contents to achieve their communicative goals. As we have seen, Web-mediated cooperative writing and fanfiction are paving the way towards mutual understanding and intercultural communication, which incidentally are also two main objectives of ELT. Therefore, classroom activities which require the use of digital affordances (e.g. wikis) to practice cooperative writing and fanfiction online should not be overlooked by language teachers, but rather be integrated within the EFL syllabus to enhance learners' competencies and support collaborative relationships.

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Language testing for students with SpLDs: Considerations of validity and fairness

by Geraldine Ludbrook¹

Introduction

Recent legislation in Italy has established national guidelines to learning and assessment for students who are medically certified with specific learning disabilities (SpLDs) to guarantee their access to education. The guidelines set out recommended compensatory measures and alternative assessment, as well as exemptions from examinations. As a result of the greater awareness of the needs of students with SpLDs, increasing numbers of dyslexic students are continuing their studies at secondary school and university level.

Italian universities now require mandatory certification of general English skills at the CEFR level B1 on enrollment, and many postgraduate courses require certification of a B2 level of English proficiency. The growing numbers of dyslexic students applying for university entrance raise the issue of providing fair and valid tests of English language, while applying the guidelines imposed by law.

This article sets out to examine some of the issues of validity that arise when considering the assessment of the English language of university students who are certified with dyslexia and related SpLDs. I begin with a review of the legislative background in Italy to identify the provisions made for students with SpLDs. I then give a brief definition of these SpLDs and the implications they have for the learning of English. I conclude with an outline of concepts of validity in language testing, and a discussion of how a judicious application of the Italian guidelines is needed to reduce the threat to test validity and fairness.

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Disabilities in the Italian education system

Italy was one of the first OECD countries to apply a policy of integration of disabled students within mainstream education. In the early 1970s disabled pupils were granted legal access first to primary and junior high school, then in the late 1980s to secondary high school². Currently about 99% of disabled students are enrolled in mainstream education while the remaining 1% – mainly students with severe visual, hearing or cognitive difficulties – are educated in separate structures. From the 15,000 students with disabilities enrolled in the Italian school system in 1974/1975, it is estimated that currently (2010/2011) there are 208,489 students enrolled, equal to 2.3% of the school population (Associazione Trelle et al., 2011).

Italian legislation also provides disabled school students with a variety of forms of assistance to learning. They range from the presence of support teachers in the classroom to adaptive technologies, such as speech-to-text conversion or voice recognition, magnification devices, Braille, and visual and graphic organisers, to enable learners with disabilities to be educated in mainstream classrooms to the greatest extent possible.

Assessment of students with disabilities is also directed by specific legislation. In the school system, each student has an individual educational plan (*Piano Educativo Individualizzato*, or PEI) that takes into account their potential and their starting level. Assessment is then calibrated to each student's individual PEI. Students are assisted at school state exams by additional time, the use of adaptive technologies and the presence of support teachers. However, students may also sit "equivalent" exams, designed by a commission of teachers within each individual school, or they may be exonerated from part of the exams (Associazione Trelle et al., 2011).

Access to university education was granted in 1992³, and further legislation regarding services for disabled students intending to continue their studies at the tertiary level was introduced in 1999⁴. The services include assistance from personal tutors and the provision of adaptive technologies to facilitate learning and assessment.

The legislation cited above has been integrated in recent years by regional

² See laws n. 118/1971, and 517/1977; also Sentence of the Corte Costituzionale 3/06/1987, n. 215.

³ See law n. 104/1992.

⁴ See law n. 17/1999.

laws, regulations, and administrative decisions. Nevertheless, it remains a rather generic background of guidelines especially regarding university examinations which, despite the assistance of disability offices, are often dealt with on the basis of individual cases with little co-ordination between teachers of different disciplines.

Dyslexia and related SpLDs

The national guidelines to learning and assessment for students who are medically certified with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) refer explicitly to the definition and recognition of dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthographia, and dyscalculia⁵. It is beyond the scope of this article to propose a detailed definition of dyslexia and related learning difficulties. However, the literature points to three main features of dyslexia that it will be useful to review here to better understand the difficulties dyslexics face in processing language.

Firstly, dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent wording, reading and spelling; characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. People with dyslexia therefore often find it hard to retain spoken information within their short-term memory systems, to access spoken information from long-term memory, and to reflect on the units of sound within words.

Secondly, dyslexia is neurobiological in origin and occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. In other words, although dyslexia is often diagnosed when a person has more difficulty with reading, writing, and spelling skills than their thinking and reasoning abilities would suggest, it is not related to measured IQ. In typical readers, cognition and reading/spelling develop together while in dyslexic readers they appear to develop differently (Gabrieli, 2009).

Thirdly, dyslexia is usually conceived of as a continuum ranging from mild to severe difficulties. It is not therefore a distinct category, with clear cut-off points, but often a series of related difficulties in multiple cognitive and academic areas (Payne & Turner, 1999). Some of the difficulties that are commonly associated with dyslexia are:

⁵ See law n. 170/2010.

- dysgraphia (difficulties with writing);
- dysorthographia (difficulties with spelling and grammar);
- dyscalculia (difficulties in acquiring arithmetical skills);
- dyspraxia (difficulties in motor coordination);
- dysnomia (difficulties recalling words or names);
- personal organisation;
- attention deficit disorder (ADD).

In addition, no two individuals have the same combination of SpLDs, and it is extremely difficult to extrapolate a description from one person to another. See Ferrer, Shaywitz, Holahan, Marchione & Shaywitz (2010) and Lyon, Shaywitz & Shaywitz (2003) for further information on defining dyslexia and related SpLDs.

Although it appears that dyslexia shares the same core features regardless of language and culture, its frequency does vary between languages. In fact, dyslexia is common in languages with deep orthography: languages with writing systems with relatively irregular correspondence between sounds and letters. Dyslexia is less common in languages with more transparent orthographies: languages with writing systems with more consistent mappings between sounds and letters (Lindgren, 2012, p. 19).

English has a highly inconsistent match between the 26 graphemes and the 44 phonemes of its sound and writing systems. Indeed the British Dyslexia Association estimates that 10% of the British population are dyslexic, 4% severely so⁶. This compares with the much lower numbers in countries with more transparent orthographies such as 2-8% for Swedish, which has an intermediate orthography, and 4-5% for Italy, which has a shallow orthography and a close matching between letters and sounds (Lindgren, 2012; Associazione Trelle et al, 2011). English therefore poses additional problems for Italian learners of English as a second language.

In general, the process of second language acquisition brings with it an additional load for learners with dyslexia and related SpLDs, and such learners have considerable difficulty in reading and using a second language. Research on second language acquisition by dyslexics has suggested that difficulties in the native language affect foreign language learning (see Sparks and Ganschow, 1991, and Sparks, Ganschow & Patton, 2008). In addition, overall language

⁶ <http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/about-us.html>

aptitude makes a substantial contribution to foreign language proficiency and classroom achievement. Hence, students with SpDLs have additional disadvantages when learning a second language. Moreover, weak language skills are likely to increase anxiety and lower motivation for learning a foreign language; dyslexic students generally show anxiety levels that are well above what is shown by students without learning difficulties (Carroll & Iles, 2006).

In addition to this generalized difficulty in acquiring a second language, the learning of English for Italian dyslexic students is additionally problematic if we take into consideration the contrast in orthographies between the two languages described above.

I shall now turn to the issues of validity and fairness in language testing, and examine how the guidelines for the treatment of dyslexic students set out in Italian law represent a possible threat to the validity and, more generally, the fairness of high-stakes English language tests.

Issues of validity and fairness in language testing

The issue of validity in language testing concerns principally the use and interpretation of test results. Messick (1989) defines test validity as “an integrated evaluative judgement of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based on test scores” (p. 13). The validity of a test therefore lies in the degree to which inferences about the test taker’s language performance can be justified.

Messick identifies two major threats to validity in language tests. The first is construct-irrelevant variance. This occurs when a test measures variables that are unrelated to the construct, i.e. what the test claims to measure. This may result in construct-irrelevant easiness, when the test tasks may provide clues that allow some test takers to respond correctly in ways that are irrelevant to the test construct, and result in higher scores. This may also result in construct-irrelevant difficulty, when the test is more difficult for some test takers, for irrelevant reasons, and result in lower scores (p. 34-35).

Construct-irrelevant variance is often perceived as a threat to the validity of score interpretations with students with SpLDs. This is because such students often have difficulties which can impact their performance on educational tests. For example, a student may be unable to write test answers with decipherable handwriting, making it difficult for the rater to read the written product. The

effects of disability are construct-irrelevant if the skills (handwriting, in this case) are irrelevant to the construct being assessed.

The second threat to validity in performance tests is construct under-representation. This occurs when the tasks measured in the assessment fail to include important dimensions or facets of the construct. As a result, the test scores do not reveal the test taker's true abilities within the construct as defined for the purpose of the test (p. 35). If, for example, students with SpLDs are exonerated from a part of a test, the test scores no longer fully interpret the student's abilities.

A second important aspect of test validity is fairness, and "anything that weakens fairness compromises the validity of a test" (Xi, 2010, p. 147). There are three generally accepted descriptions of test fairness: lack of bias, equitable treatment of all test takers in the testing process, and equity in access to learning the materials covered in a test. See Kunan (2000) for a more detailed discussion of fairness in language testing.

Fairness with regard to test takers with disabilities is generally understood as providing appropriate accommodations to ensure access to the test. However, it also includes ensuring that irrelevant factors do not give rise to differences in test performance across subgroups and disabilities, i.e. that construct-irrelevant personal characteristics of test takers have no appreciable effect on test results or their interpretation (Xi, 2010).

Testing *accommodations* are generally understood as pre-approved alterations to the standard administration conditions designed to ensure accessibility to a test for test takers with disabilities. They do not alter the construct of the test being measured or substitute for knowledge or abilities that the student has not attained. Nor do they provide an unfair advantage for students with disabilities over students taking tests under standard conditions. Frequent forms of testing accommodations are flexibility in scheduling/timing; flexibility in the setting used for the administration of assessments; changes in the method of presentation; and changes in the method of response.

Testing *modifications* are changes made to the testing process or to the content of the assessment itself, or provision of certain adaptive technologies or services, which affect the construct being tested. Examples of testing modifications that affect the construct of the test are simplification or explanation of test questions; reading of items designed to test the student's reading skills; use of spell- and/or grammar-checking devices on a test of the student's writing skills; and use of a calculator on a test of the student's computational skills.

Italian legislation and language testing

Italian law 170/2010 established national guidelines to learning and assessment for students who are medically certified with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) to guarantee their access to education within the Italian system. Further legislation provided additional guidelines for the teaching and testing of foreign languages⁷. The measures stipulate two kinds of provisions: compensatory measures and exemptions.

The compensatory measures specified in the guidelines include: the use of tables (alphabetic, Pythagorean, geometric formulae, etc), calculators, voice recorders, computers with writing programmes and spell checks, voice synthesizers, on-line dictionaries. Exemptions depend on the seriousness of the SpLD. The guidelines refer to the possibility of dispensation from reading aloud, dictation, use of dictionaries, memory learning of tables. With specific reference to foreign language learning, the guidelines also recommend additional time for tests, and marking of written and spoken tests to focus on content and not form⁸.

Regarding assessment, it is permitted that all the various compensatory measures and exemptions listed above can be used also in testing settings at the discretion of the examining commission. Exemption from all forms of written assessment of a foreign language was initially permitted, but this measure was modified in later legislation and recommended that dyslexic students be given additional time for written exams for foreign languages rather than exemption in state exams for legal reasons. All adaptive technologies (voice synthesizers, spell-checkers, on-line dictionaries) can be used in examination settings if they have been used throughout the school year⁹.

Discussion and final considerations

In this final section, I would first like to return to the discussion of the concepts of validity and fairness mentioned above. A close analysis of the compensatory measures set out in the Italian legislation suggests that their

7 DM 12/07/2011 (Legge Gelmini).

8 C.M. n. 4099/A/4 del 5/10/2004.

9 Note MIUR n. 5744 del 28/05/2009.

injudicious use might create a serious threat to the validity of tests, i.e. the validity of the score interpretations, if used in the testing context. Indeed, most of the measures appear to be modifications – changing what is tested – rather than accommodations providing increased access to the test.

The assumption that students can be allowed to use the same adaptive technologies on tests that they are accustomed to using in the classroom, such as a voice synthesizer for a reading comprehension test, can seriously alter the nature of the ability being tested. This would seem to be a case of one of Messick's two serious threats to validity in language tests – construct underrepresentation – in which important features of the construct are omitted from the test. If the test claims to measure the test taker's ability to read a written text in the foreign language, a voice synthesizer that converts text to speech will measure instead the test taker's ability to understand spoken text, and reading skills are excluded.

Test accommodations are designed to promote fairness in testing and to lead to more accurate interpretations of students' test scores. However, if the accommodation leads to an unfair advantage for the students who get them, i.e. if *everyone* would benefit from the accommodation, then the scores from accommodated exams may be invalidly inflated, which would be unfair to students who do not receive accommodations. For example, the consultation of tables and mind maps, or electronic dictionaries, while useful in the learning context, would provide test takers with disabilities an unfair advantage over students taking tests under standard conditions.

The second point I would like to discuss is the generic nature of the guidelines set out in Italian legislation and the consequent difficulties that teachers and testers have in making principled decisions regarding their use. This is particularly true in the case of learning and testing foreign languages, especially English, where there exist difficulties in distinguishing between errors due to dyslexia or related disabilities from those related to lower levels of proficiency or to the normal language learning process.

The Italian legislation leaves the choice of which measures to adopt for students with SpLDs to the discretion of teachers and examiners in charge of the test being administered. In the school context, where teachers have had extended contact with students and are aware of their abilities and special needs, this would seem to be a useful procedure that allows a personalized assessment of the needs of each individual student. This is particularly important when test takers have multiple disabilities that require a variety

of accommodations that go beyond the standard requests for extended time and additional breaks.

In the university context, this is in fact not such an easy process to carry out when there has been no previous contact with the individual students. Test administrators are required to make decisions based on very little background information. Students must hold documentation of their SpLD in order for compensatory measures to be applied. Often this documentation is a brief medical certificate noting the disability or disabilities (dyslexia, discalculia etc.), and the degree of severity (mild, severe). Even when more detailed information is provided, it is beyond the professional competences of the teachers and test administrators to be able to interpret such information in terms of appropriate compensatory measures. However, a case-by-case examination of the student's needs, including collecting information from the students themselves, can provide test administrators with additional information regarding the learning strategies the student has developed and the accommodations normally used. See Brinckerhoff & Banerjee (2007) for further discussion of decisions regarding accommodations in high-stakes tests.

Tests are used to make decisions on the basis of a process in which information about test takers is gathered from an observed performance under test conditions. For example, how a test taker performs on a high-stakes test of English for university entrance in English-medium programmes (such as the IELTS or TOEFL tests) is a prediction of how they will then be able to perform in an English-medium educational context. Cambridge ESOL is one of the biggest examining boards of English as a second or other language. It has a range of accommodations with special requirements, such as hearing, speaking or visual difficulties. It also provides accommodations for test takers with SpLDs. These include extra time (usually 25% of the normal time) and supervised breaks to compensate for fatigue. It also permits test takers to use a computer, word-processor, or typewriter to write their answers, if they normally write this way. However, it is specified that test takers must not use the spell check, grammar check or thesaurus functions. Test takers are not allowed to use voice recognition software or programmes that convert speech to text. Test takers are also not allowed to have a reader read out the papers, and use of screen-reading software, such as voice synthesizers, is also not permitted. For test takers with handwriting difficulties, the testing centre may make a transcript of the test taker's work, including any mistakes in grammar, spelling or punctuation. Other accommodations are: writing answers on a separate sheet of paper for test takers who have difficulty in following the numbers or

order of questions on a page, and the use of transparent coloured overlays, if they are normally used¹⁰.

It is clear from this description of the accommodations allowed by Cambridge ESOL that they are all specifically aimed at facilitating access to the English language tests without in any way modifying the construct of the test itself. The Cambridge website also explicitly points out that even though permission may be given to use special arrangements, the tests taken with these accommodations will be marked in the same way as the tests of all other candidates.

In the ever more international world of education, certificates of English proficiency awarded by Italian universities and language centres have increasingly high-stakes importance as they are used to gain access to higher degrees or European exchange programmes for which English language at the B1 or B2 level of the CEFR is required. It is therefore important that careful attention is paid to the issues of validity and fairness with regard to the procedures followed to provide access to English language teaching and testing for students with SpLDs.

There is no comprehensive answer to the issues raised in this discussion. However, it is essential that some degree of balance is achieved between the needs of the test taker with SpLDs and the responsibility of teachers and test administrators to guarantee equal access to learning and assessment. Considerations of the principles of fairness and validity, and the awareness that legislation is intended to guarantee equal opportunities to all, not equal outcomes for all, are important factors in the decisions as to what measures can be applied in the testing context. Flexibility and sensitivity in applying guidelines on a case-by-case basis and the principled application of legislation are necessary to meet the needs of all the stakeholders involved in the testing process: test takers, test administrators and educational institutions.

¹⁰ See <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/special-circumstances/index.html>

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Reports and Reflections

What's in the Words?

by Pamela Duran and Elena Smith

“What’s in the Words?” is a very good question these days. What **was** in the words has changed dramatically to what **is** in the words in 2012. Words used for communication today are not necessarily the words of Standard English, of the academy, or even of our parents. The onslaught of technology has generated a myriad of new “Englishes” resulting in language change more dynamic than ever before in history.

Do you remember “Beowulf”, the first work written in Old English (the 11th century A.D.)? The progress in English from prehistoric times to this 11th century variant was dramatic; however, today, English speakers have no ability to understand Old English, and only language historians can decipher its content: “*Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum, þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.*” leaves speakers of English arguing that this could not possibly be their native language.

Nevertheless, the significance of “Beowulf” was tremendous, and after its appearance, English started to develop in leaps and bounds. Middle English, the language of Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales”, is not such a huge mystery for modern readers: “*Whan that Aprille, with hise shoures soote, The droghte of March hath perced to the root,*” and the sixteenth and seventeenth century Early Modern English of William Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays present almost no difficulty in comprehension: “*From fairest creatures we desire increase, That thereby beauty’s rose might never die, But as the ripper should by time decease, His tender heir might bear his memory.*”

Languages are vibrant and alive. They breathe and develop like any other living entity in the world. The curve in the imaginary chart of English language change has continued gradually and steadily for centuries, responding to the roles and functions required for and by human interaction. Surprisingly, however, the results of research during the current Modern English Era illustrate that world changes during just the past twenty to thirty years have been catalysts for a dramatic, unstoppable, and unprecedented rise in the curve of **language change**: language change has gone global.

As R. Kipling wisely stated, “Words are the most powerful drug used by mankind.” Just as drugs influence behavior, emotions and thoughts, so do words. The word “drug” may mean “treatment” or “cure”, but it can also convey “addiction” or “entertainment”. It seems the English speaking population is past the stage of utilizing words as merely a means of co-operation or communication for “cure” and is moving fast towards the means of recreation and entertainment. One convincing example of this idea is the powerful influence of electronic games on Modern English. For instance, the grammatically incorrect phrase in one of the e-games designed in Japan, “All your base are belong to us,” has conquered the United States media and advertisement, and is probably not even regarded as incorrect in any way. It communicates more than if written in the correct grammar of Standard English; it communicates the power of entertainment, thus being effective in the exchange of messages or ideas among masses of people. Such “Englishes” like this one that infiltrate Standard Modern English (SME) through electronic entertainment and social media (Facebook, Twitter, My Space and many others) arrive unannounced at any time from Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America and other big and small places and nooks and crannies of the Planet Earth.

Another phenomenon that penetrates SME with equal speed and forcefulness is the African-American Vernacular English (Ebonics), which has been undergoing intriguing metamorphoses during the past twenty-thirty years. From a language that was characterized as the one that “has the power to bind, imprison and destroy” (Ellison, 1995) and is “used most commonly by members of the working and lower class” (Rickford, 1996) Ebonics, together with hip-hop culture, is now beginning to be the language of “coolness” and interaction among the teens of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The sentence, “You gots to git those Benjamins so you cin git dat bling-bling fo yo ride,” may not be easy to understand by middle-aged Americans, but the young generation of 2012 has no problem in knowing that it means, “You need to get money so that you can get expensive accessories for your car.”

Hip-hop culture and language have now started to penetrate EFL/ESL classrooms and show profoundly in students’ writing, and in their speaking and body language during oral presentations. These changes in SME are so fast and enormous in the range they affect (spelling, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, intonation and semantics) that their development cannot be stopped but can only continue to be overpowering by the development of the electronic media and entertainment industry.

But that is not all. Another even more noticeable transformation of SME is the influence of Google Translate. Today, learning a foreign language may not be necessary at all. If you want to communicate with a business partner in China, just write your message in English in Google Translate, and with one mouse click, your partner will begin business negotiations with you by following similar “mouse click” manipulations. EFL/ESL students quickly mastered the use of this “simple” tool in “reading” English academic articles and “summarizing” them. All they need to do is to insert the English text into the Google Translate window, click on their native language, and read and summarize it. Then they paste their summary into the same window, click on “English,” and voila! Homework is done. The problem is that the final product often makes no sense to the teacher, and the failing grades adequately match the level of the “creative” students’ knowledge of English.

Google Translate may be a handy accessory for casual and informal communication with friends from other countries, but as a business or academic English language tool, it remains inadequate. The following are examples from ESL/EFL students’ writing as a result of the utilization of Google Translate: “*I want to go New York to see the woman of freedom with torture*”; “*Some men are love eating as same as anything*”; “*Americans very busy and never have intercourse.*” Are these sentences understandable? Maybe they are, but it is quite possible that the meaning expressed in them is different from the actual meaning that was meant to be communicated. Does the writer in the third example talk about Americans being busy and never having time for sex, or for a conversation? That is the question.

Undoubtedly, these interventions in Standard English are non-stoppable, and with the rapid development of technology are unpredictable. Whether they become permanent or they will be temporary elements for entertainment that will come and go does not matter for ESL/EFL instructors since in either case, they present teaching challenges. We tell our students that in our classrooms, we teach them English for TOEFL, IELTS or Academic purposes, but “real” English in the “Real World” is different. But to what extent will it continue to be different, and will English teachers have to modify their learning outcomes to match “Real World English,” the inevitable next generation of Standard Modern English? In the classrooms we already hear instructors casually saying, “I seen that”; “It’s between you and I”; “I’ve boughten a new car”; “You can bring five books or less”; and “I borrowed you ten dollars yesterday.” Is this “Real World English” the New Standard English?

So what’s in the words? Their power to change.

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Notepad

Swanshurst school: a job shadowing experience¹

by Nicola Borrelli

Introduction

Swanshurst is the biggest State girls' school in Europe, with its 1,850 students aged 11-19. It is located in the ward of Billesley, Birmingham, (UK), and mirrors the ethnic diversity of the area with a large proportion of students belonging to the Asian community – Indo-Pakistani, in particular.

I got in touch with Swanshurst in the summer 2010, before submitting my application for a job shadowing grant to the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) Italian Agency, within the framework of the European Commission's Comenius Actions. As a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in an Italian State school, I regarded the opportunity for mobility for school staff available under the Comenius scheme as an invaluable chance to observe and learn from other teaching experiences. During my stay at Birmingham University in 2007, I had heard of Swanshurst as a very active institution in the field of partnerships with overseas schools, so I decided to write to them to ask if they were eligible as a host school for my job shadowing. Their willingness to have me and the attainment of the Comenius grant resulted in my stay at Swanshurst from the 27 April until 6 June 2011.

The observation of a number of lessons in most of the disciplines taught at Swanshurst was aimed primarily at detecting differences in the pedagogical approaches adopted in the British and Italian education systems, also in relation to the facilities made available for the teaching staff in the two countries. As an EFL primary school teacher, I focused in particular on the language lessons with the year 7 students (11-12 years old) whose age overlapped with that of the students in the last year of Italian primary school. The growing interest in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approaches across Europe spurred me on to look at the local language teaching experiences as a possible

¹ A project funded by the 'Lifelong Learning Programming Agency' within the framework of the European Commission's Comenius Actions.

source of significant ideas and suggestions. The large presence of students from different ethnicities offered me an opportunity to observe lessons in English as an Additional Language (EAL) and to interview some of the girls involved in them. Finally, the chance to give a one-off lesson in Italian during one of the classes was important in terms of receiving feedback from a different cultural perspective, as well as to appreciate differences in teaching styles.

For the purpose of a separate, parallel project to be carried out with the 'L'Orientale' University of Naples on the linguistic and para-linguistic aspects of teacher-student class interaction, I was allowed to record some of the lessons I was able to observe.

Throughout my stay at Swanshurst, I received thorough induction and unfailing support from all the staff I had a chance to come in contact with. In particular, I wish to thank Ms Elaine Kenney, Ms. Elaine Salmon and the whole Modern Foreign Language department whose help made my experience possible and my stay useful and pleasant.

The Classroom Facilities

Swanshurst is a very modern school equipped with state-of-the-art educational technology. Each classroom is fitted with an interactive whiteboard (IWB), and each teacher has got their own laptop to connect to it. A lesson is typically presented as a power point file containing images, videos and sound files, and the students are commonly invited to interact with the lesson using the whiteboard. Undoubtedly, this adds a lot to the interactivity of the lesson, and it also has spin-off effects on the teaching profession in terms of teaching material resourcing and time management. In fact, the lesson is made ready-for-use during the preparation work, thus optimising the effective teaching time during the contact hours, and it can be expanded in real time, thanks to the Internet connectivity as the activities develop.

The use of the IWB comes in particularly handy for language teaching. For a language lesson which is expected to prioritise communication, it is indisputably useful to be able to have a piece of equipment that enhances the teacher's ability to involve the students – no matter what their predominant learning style is – and to increase the exposure of the class to the target language exercising the four skills in a fun way.

Italy is still lagging behind in terms of widespread use of educational technologies in State schools. In 2006, the then minister of education

Giuseppe Fioroni announced his intention to introduce IWB technology into State schools. His plan was re-launched in 2008 by his successor Maria Stella Gelmini, who declared that State schools would be equipped with over 10,000 IWBs. As of today, most Italian schools still remain in the 'chalk age' as very few of the announced plans to modernise educational resources have been accomplished. The current government's efforts to rationalise State expenditure following the economic crisis that hit hard between 2008 and 2009 resulted in axing a considerable proportion of the funds reserved for State education, and a change in their education policy at the moment appears quite unlikely. In addition to this, another problem potentially standing in the way of the technological modernisation of Italian State schools is the limited IT literacy of parts of the teaching staff.

The Didactics: a General Overview

A clear, recurrent pattern that emerged from the observation of all the lessons at Swanshurst is the focus on the development of students' skills more than knowledge. Students are presented with the topic being covered at the beginning of the lesson, and then they are left to explore it for themselves. They are invited to find the answer to a question or the solution to a problem by reflecting on them and by resorting to their common sense, their background experience and their emotional resources. In other words, students are left to cope with a problematic situation and come up with a solution, with little or no initial induction from the teacher whose main aim does not seem to be the transference of contents or knowledge, but rather the autonomous acquisition of coping strategies by the student. Such an approach is undoubtedly favoured both by the use of setting, which permits the teaching staff to group together students with homogeneous abilities, and by the open learning pathway, whereby students can add a number of subjects of their choice to a core curriculum, thus focusing their efforts on the subjects they are more motivated to learn.

I believe that this heavily skill-focused method has a few advantages and some potential drawbacks. On the one hand, it results in a more active, student-centred learning and a more problem-solving oriented attitude of education. This is suitable for the British educational system, which is marked by a fixed number of formally scheduled, mostly written tests at the end of each term, aimed at assessing the degree of achievement of the targets set out in each

subject area at each Key Stage. On the other hand, learning might be reduced to a mere acquisition of skills to pass the tests, and that the limited attention paid to the theoretical aspects of teaching and learning might stunt the progressive stratification of knowledge that forms, in the long run, the individual's personal erudition, and dissuade the students from the intellectual investigation of those aspects of knowledge that do not have immediate practical outcomes.

My opinion is obviously influenced by experience, first as a student and then as a teacher, of the Italian educational system, which has traditionally preferred a 'talk and chalk' approach to teaching, with more or less erudite teachers transferring their knowledge to the learners. This approach has been closely linked with the recruiting system², the subject curriculum³ and the assessing methods⁴.

In the last two decades, schooling in Italy has changed quite a lot, with a lot more stress being put on the "school of competence" as opposed to the "school of knowledge" and on the centrality of the pupil to the teaching/learning process. This has resulted in a more dialogic approach to the lesson, whereby the students learn by listening, investigating the topic themselves, and interacting with the teacher who, nonetheless, provides them with guidance and support to reach the correct answer to a question

2 For decades, teachers were recruited via national exams –set up by the Ministry of Education – that qualified them to teach only the subject they had specialized in at university. The last nationally set exams date back to 1999. After that, they were retained for the recruitment of primary school teachers (but they were no longer set), but they were replaced by Specialisation Schools for Secondary Teaching (SSIS) for the recruitment of high school teachers. SSISs were active until 2008, when the current Minister of Education decided to close them down. At present, becoming a teacher in Italy entails a 5-year university pathway, including both discipline- and job- specific exams, and 1-year training on the job. Each teacher can still only teach the subject s/he specialized in at university. This rule applies to all teachers of 'Scuola Secondaria di Primo Grado' (11-14 year old) and 'Scuola Secondaria di Secondo Grado' (14 -19 year old), as well as to EFL teachers in 'Scuola Primaria' (6-11).

3 The subject curriculum in Scuola Primaria and Scuola Secondaria di Primo Grado is the same in all the schools in the country, and includes Italian, History, Geography, Maths, Science, English, Art, Music, Religious Education, P.E., French and Technology (French and Technology are only taught in Scuola Secondaria di Primo Grado). The subject curriculum in Scuola Secondaria di Secondo Grado changes based on the type of school (classical, scientific or vocational), but is fixed for all the students who choose that type of school. In addition to the subjects mentioned above, it includes – with the exception of vocational schools – subjects such as Philosophy, Latin and Ancient Greek.

4 Italian assessing method is based on both written and oral testing in all levels of school, with two sets of national exams set at the end of the first – 14 years old – and second – 19 years old – stage of secondary school.

or the solution to a problem. The theoretical core of the lesson (the so called ‘explanation’ by the teacher) is kept in place not only as a stimulus to speculative thinking during the passive stage of listening, but also as a model for the student to emulate during the periodic oral tests that take place in class. Oral testing remains a central form of assessment in Italian schools, and pupils are confronted with it as early as their third year in primary school (8 years old). This implies that knowing something or how to do something is not sufficient: students have to gradually master the skill of conveying their knowledge or competence in an oral form that is stylistically acceptable, in front of the teacher and the rest of their class. In my opinion, this practice – which probably dates back to the rhetorical tradition of the Classical world – offers the advantage of starting to refine the skill of public speech from a very early age with an eye to university and future career opportunities, as well as mastering oral interaction that is, undeniably, the privileged communication channel in everyday life.

The Subjects

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)

In the British education system, the study of a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) begins in year 7. At Swanshurst, French is part of the core curriculum for all the students in years 7 to 9, and an additional MFL – to be chosen from Spanish, German or Urdu – can be introduced starting from year 8 by those students who are in sets 1 and 2 for French. A GCSE in French, Spanish or German is only open to students who have studied it in years 8 and 9 and it is compulsory for students who want to choose a language at AS or A-Levels. In total, the number of MFL hours per week is three (2+1 for students who study two languages, alternated so as to guarantee the same number of hours to each of the two languages).

This system appears to differ significantly from the Italian system of MFL teaching, both in terms of the education stage at which an MFL study is introduced and in terms of the time devoted to the study of an MFL. In fact, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is taught in Italian schools starting from the first of the five years of Scuola Primaria (6-11 years old), for one hour a week in year 1, two hours a week in year 2, and three hours a week in years 3-5. The study of English is kept up during the three years of Scuola Secondaria di Primo Grado (11-14 years old) for three hours a week, and is accompanied by

the study of a second foreign language, to be chosen from French, Spanish or German, for two hours a week. During the five years of Scuola Secondaria di Secondo Grado (14-19 years old), English is taught as a first foreign language in all types of school for three hours a week, French, Spanish or German is taught as a second language in most vocational schools for three hours a week, and a third language, to be chosen from the previous ones as well as from Arabic, Chinese or Japanese, is taught in language and tourism schools for three hours a week.

This means that Italian students study a foreign language from an earlier age and for a much longer time (both in terms of hours per week and total schooltime) than their British counterparts; nonetheless, the results still leave a lot to be desired. According to Eurobarometer's 2006 survey on "Europeans and Languages", only 36% of Italians declared they are able to participate in a conversation in a foreign language⁵. The 2011 survey on "User language preferences online" showed that only 39% of Italians use a foreign language when reading on the Internet and an even smaller 25% of them uses a foreign language to write on the Internet⁶. These data are the symptom of a malfunction in the Italian language teaching system: for too many years the focus has been on the contents rather than on the communicative aspects of a foreign language⁷, and there is still a lack of continuity between the different levels of education, which implies that students start studying a foreign language from scratch every time they move to the next level of education⁸.

Most of my observations at Swanshurst were conducted in the course of French lessons from year 7 to year 11.

Language students are divided into sets starting from the beginning of the second term in year 7. This permits the teachers to work with homogenous groups in terms of skills from the very beginning, and to follow slightly differentiated paths based on the different degree of ability of each set. In my

5 This was the same result as Spain and Portugal. The UK was penultimate in front of Hungary, with only 30% of respondents asserting they could speak a foreign language.

6 The UK was last, with 15% of readers and 9% of writers in a language other than English.

7 This has been slightly improving over the last few years, partly because of the growing popularity of preparation courses for Trinity College Graded Examinations in Spoken English. These courses, usually included in the extra-curricular offer of many State schools in Italy, are mapped on the CEFR, and emphasise the acquisition of the functions of the language by the student.

8 In the last few years, efforts have been made to intensify the contacts and the exchanges between teachers from different level of education.

opinion, this has undeniable advantages for teachers in terms of optimization of time and resources, and for students who can work at their own pace. The other side of the coin is the risk of inducing a feeling of segregation in the lower sets, with a consequent undermining of their self-confidence and a greater difficulty for the teachers in managing the class. This has been the long-debated argument against setting in Italy which, as of today, has prevented its introduction into the Italian teaching system.

A typical lesson lasted one hour and was based on a power point file prepared by the teacher and made interactive via the use of an IWB. The objective of the lesson was presented at the beginning, so students were always aware of what they were expected to have learnt by the end of that lesson (or set of lessons). The teacher presented the lesson, usually starting with an ice-breaker and asking students to volunteer to answer by putting their hands up. After that, students were normally required to take notes of the new lexicon being taught, by copying it into their notebooks. Then, they were presented with exercises to do from the IWB or their books. Sometimes, the exercises in the books were presented on the IWB in a slightly simplified form (e.g. the instructions were given in English rather than in the target language, or the questions, in the target language in the book, were translated into English on the IWB to facilitate the students' comprehension).

A lot of thinking was elicited from the students about the rationale behind the choice of specific exercises, the best way to guess the meanings of unknown words and to learn new ones, or about the grammatical aspects of a given structure. In my opinion, this is a really valuable approach to get students to acquire a method and greater autonomy for their self-study, and it falls within the skill-focused approach illustrated in the didactics section above. On the other hand, it also gives you an idea of the extent to which lessons are aimed at performing well in tests and exams. I think this is expected in an education system based on a tight exam schedule where the results are the measure of the greater or lesser achievement of the required targets. Nevertheless, in a comparison with the far from perfect Italian approach to language teaching in State school, I believe that the genuinely communicative component of foreign language learning is neglected.

The necessity to get a message across within specific time constraints makes the use of the first language much more convenient than that of the second language, but it drastically reduces the already limited time exposure of the students to the foreign language.

Positive reinforcement is vital to building the self-confidence of the students

with an eye to exams, but excessive leniency on the inaccurate pronunciation or intonation of the foreign language might affect comprehension in contexts where speaking the foreign language is needed for communication purposes. In spite of the initial embarrassment they might cause in the students, I believe that pronunciation drills are important to master the orthoepy of a word⁹. Similarly, excessive emphasis on lexicon to the detriment of language functions certainly rewards the students with a feeling of immediate achievement, but exposes them to the risk of having long lists of words and lacking the structures within which to use them. This is also the age-old problem of English teaching in Italian primary schools, where still too many teachers believe that teaching word lists equals teaching pupils how to speak English.

Finally, a lesson based on tightly scheduled interaction between teacher and learners is undoubtedly time-effective, but is bound not to give enough attention to communication-oriented activities. Dialogues and role-plays are time consuming, but they represent the only opportunity for the students to use the foreign language in real-life contexts, thus boosting their internal motivation to learn it¹⁰.

An MFL questionnaire was administered to all the year-11 students who had included an additional MFL into their curriculum, but the result have not been processed as yet, so they are not presented in this report.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Swanshurst provides English as an Additional Language (EAL) lessons for students with special needs. They are mostly students of ethnicity other than White British, who have been in the country for a relatively short time and

9 In my experience, I have found they work particularly well with younger learners, both because they are less inhibited than adults in speaking in the foreign language and because they haven't usually acquired a wrong pronunciation of the foreign language based on reading it according to the phonetics of their first language.

10 I believe boosting students' internal motivation to study a foreign language in the UK is particularly difficult for two reasons: 1) the status of 'lingua franca' awarded to English worldwide, which makes learning a foreign language virtually unnecessary for English native speakers, and 2) the decontextualised teaching of the foreign language, which is presented in isolation rather than as one element of the broader culture of the country where it is spoken. This latter aspect – which is probably also rooted in the British examination-focused approach to foreign language teaching – is in sharp contrast with what happens in Italian schools, where British civilization is taught along with English language from primary school to high school, and where all non-vocational high schools also teach the history and literature of the countries of origin of the foreign languages they offer.

who do not use English as their first language in the family or in other social situations outside school.

EAL classes are usually much smaller than ordinary ones (12-14 students vs. 25-30), and the main teacher is always assisted by a teaching assistant. Students sit at a table in groups of 5-6, and do their activities under the constant support and guidance of either the teacher or the teaching assistant.

In the lessons I had a chance to observe, the approach to teaching was very similar to a Reading Comprehension activity in an EFL lesson. Students were asked to read an estate agent's advertisement about a flat for rent, and to answer some multiple-choice questions based on it. Questions were also asked about the items of vocabulary likely to be difficult for or unknown to the students. All the students took turns in answering and all were involved in the lesson receiving feedback and positive reinforcement from the teacher.

The advantages of setting were particularly evident during the EAL lessons. Working in small groups, without the pressure of competition by more endowed students and under the reassuring eyes of the teacher spurred on even the most shy students to take the floor and have their say. In Italy, in the absence of setting, students with learning difficulties are left in mixed-ability classes, and the main class teacher is assisted by a special needs teacher who may cover the totality or only part of the contact hours depending of the seriousness of the student's impairment¹¹. Furthermore, the allocation of a special needs teacher to a student with learning difficulty is a far from straightforward procedure in Italy. In fact, it is based on a diagnosis made by a National Health System doctor on recommendation of a teacher, but the teacher has to obtain the parents' authorisation to recommend the student. This often turns out to be an insurmountable problem because having a special needs teacher still has a social stigma attached to it in Italy, and parents usually refuse their consent, thus going against their own child's best interest.

The EAL Questionnaires: the Results

During my stay at Swanshurst, I obtained the permission to interview some EAL students in order to administer a questionnaire to them about their

¹¹ Special needs teachers in Italy usually divide their contact hours between a couple of students who are not necessarily in the same class. Only students with a serious impairment are given a teacher to cover the totality of the contact hours; the others spend part of the contact hours in class, and it is left to the class teacher to provide them – time allowing – with simplified activities to do.

experience as EAL students (see Appendix 1). Below is a description of the results.

All the girls interviewed were aged between 12 and 15 years old and originally from other Asian, African or European countries. Their age of arrival in the UK ranged from 8 to 12.

All the respondents had studied EFL in their countries of origin, but none of them was particularly excited about it (their answers about how they found studying EFL ranged from 'OK' to 'Boring'). They all admitted having mixed feelings of worry and excitement on starting school in the UK, with worry being more frequent in the older respondents.

All the respondents appeared to have a high degree of confidence in their current English skills which were considered important mainly for professional reasons (e.g. 'to perform well in school tests' or 'to go to university and find a good job').

All the respondents deemed the amount of EAL lessons they have received so far sufficient, but the majority of them did not seem to think that the EAL lessons have helped them much to improve their English. On the other hand, they all acknowledged the importance of EAL lessons to improve their performance in the other subjects included in their curriculum. This lack of consistency points to the fact that the respondents may have failed to realise that the two questions were interlinked.

All the respondents declared they preferred reading activities during the English class (the older the more so), with listening and speaking in particular being dismissed as 'too much hard work'. This appeared to be in line with their mostly visual learning style (the majority of them preferred looking at the teacher and writing down what s/he says during the lesson).

Finally, the majority of the respondents declared they felt comfortable about being tested, and all of them said they found the UK's education system better than the education system in their original country.

The other subjects

The observation of lessons in some of the other subjects taught at Swanshurst (English, History, Geography, Maths, Development and Enrichment Programme, Learning for Life) confirmed the idea of a skill-focused teaching approach aimed at promoting autonomy in the students.

A controversial statement, or a thought-provoking question or picture was often used as a prompt to spur on the students to set off on their quest for truth

in the History and Geography lessons or to develop empathy strategies in the Learning for Life class.

I was particularly impressed with the degree of interactivity in the History lessons. Contrary to my expectation of a traditional, bookish approach to the topic being covered, the lesson was a whirlwind of stimuli of various natures, with students being challenged to find their way through them by interpreting quotations, watching video clips and reading historical sources, with flashes of theory being scattered by the teacher throughout the lessons.

Similarly interesting was the English lesson, in which the students, given a brief, were required to write their own poems using the figures of speech they were familiar with. A useful way, I think, of learning to use rhetorical devices in the context of a lesson of creative writing.

A recurrent pattern observed in all the lessons above was the use of peer- and group-learning. The students were divided into groups of 6 sitting around a hexagonal table and working together. Such an approach was not observed – expectedly – in the Maths lesson or – more surprisingly – in the MFL lessons. Nonetheless, I think that what I stated above about the exam-oriented nature of the MFL lessons explains the more individualistic approach to learning adopted in these classes.

CLIL: Ideas and Suggestions

CLIL is an educational method where subjects are taught through a foreign language with a dual- focussed aim, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language. Of course, the implicit risk of experimenting with such a system is that the student might struggle with the language specific to the discipline and that this might impede the comprehension of the content.

In a system where teaching is tightly scheduled to achieve the targets required by law as the British one is, CLIL cannot easily find a fertile ground. The limited number of hours of MFL taught in British schools does not easily permit teachers to get involved in experimental projects such as a CLIL one.

Furthermore, the CLIL method has its foundations in interdisciplinary/ cross curricular teaching, which requires MFL teachers and teachers of other disciplines to plan together and to create a communication net to constantly monitor the results obtained. This is obviously far from easy, even more so in a context where time is a very limited commodity. In Italy, extra-curricular

projects offer in theory more time for CLIL experimentation. However, in practice, problems such as the school's reluctance to invest part of its limited budget into a project whose results are not immediate, as well as the teachers' willingness to embark on such a challenge get in the way.

Nonetheless, the potential for the realisation of a CLIL project exists at Swanshurst both in terms of organizational and didactic resources. The punctual briefings that are held every Thursday morning with all the staff are aimed at circulating news and sharing experiences between the departments, and most members of the staff are not new to inter-departmental activities. Didactically, the organisation in lexico-thematic areas of most of the books used in MFL teaching could potentially facilitate the interlinking with the other disciplines, even for isolated impromptu experiments. What remains to be seen is whether this would be of any use for the purposes of the exam-performance based British teaching/learning system.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the obvious limits that my observations have in terms of statistical relevance, I think that they point to significant differences that exist between the British and Italian education systems.

The main difference concerns the holistic approach to the teaching/learning process, skill-based and aimed at promoting autonomous learning in Britain and more knowledge-based in Italy, where the transition from the 'school of knowledge' to the 'school of competence' has nonetheless preserved most of the sage aura surrounding the teacher.

The classroom facilities in British State schools outclass those in Italy, with IWBs, OHPs and the like present in every single classroom. This places British schools at a great advantage as far as language teaching is concerned, enhancing the communicative potentiality of the lesson enormously. Nonetheless, such an advantage does not seem to be fully exploited due to a heavily scheduled testing-and examination-based system where performance is assessed according to the achievement of specific targets that are not always related to factual communication skills.

The Interview Corner

The Interview Corner

An Interview with Sarah Phillips

by Elisabetta Burchietti

I. *From what I read in your books and from what I understand of you as a trainer I would say that one of your fundamental beliefs is that if you empower the teacher you will have better learners. Is that correct?*

S. Phillips – Like many things in life teaching and learning are complementary and feed into each other. A teacher who believes in what she is doing, and in her ability to do it, will in turn inspire her learners with the same beliefs. As a trainer I think my role is to work alongside teachers as they discover their teaching persona, their personal beliefs about teaching and how to realise these in the classroom. A teacher once said to me at the end of a course: “You’ve taught us lots of things we knew already.” I hasten to add she had much enjoyed the course and hadn’t been bored stiff! I think her words sum up very nicely what I am trying to say, – it’s all there, it just needs uncovering.

I. *In your talk at the 35th Tesol-Italy National Convention held in Rome in November 2010 you presented your ideas and reflections on the importance of motivation to ensure effective learning. What is the role of the teacher?*

S. Phillips – A teacher’s role as a motivator can be the difference between success and failure on the part of the child. We can’t underestimate the role we play in our pupils learning journeys, for better or for worse. And of course, once you have found the key to motivating your learners and you have got them pulling in the same direction as you, then the sky’s the limit.

I. *And the role of the learner?*

S. Phillips – In the end, learners are the stars of their own show, they are responsible for their learning. But that doesn’t happen by magic, it takes time

and practice. Sometimes it feels as if our systems make learners are anonymous and uniform, and this undermines their autonomy and self belief. Children are left feeling powerless and unable to direct their learning or motivate themselves. At the Tesol-Italy National Convention I discussed how the lack of choice and meaningful objectives are detrimental to motivation. Part of our job as parents and teachers is to nurture children's individuality and to recognise their needs and choices, and to enable them to become autonomous, step by step.

I. *Why is it important to apply the ideas and techniques of brain-based learning when teaching English?*

S. Phillips – In the last couple of decades we have learned a lot about how the brain works. For example at a neurological level it has been shown dopamine is released when we are successful, and dopamine is also involved in consolidating the neural pathways that have led to that success. So it makes sense to teach in a way that is in sympathy with the way the brain works best. That way everyone is a winner, learners learn and teachers feel fulfilled. And we set up a self-perpetuating upward spiral as the brain thrives on success and positive feedback.

I. *Can you give us some examples of activities that develop thinking skills?*

S. Phillips – I'll give you three of my favourites.

- 1) Graphic organisers such as mind maps, all kinds of graphs or time lines are invaluable in the language classroom as they appeal to both visual and mathematical learners. You can use them to support comprehension, if they are embedded into the text, or to demonstrate comprehension as part of a task. You can encourage learners to organise their ideas with them before writing or speaking.
- 2) Finding the odd one out is another task that is very simple to set up, but is very thought-provoking. Learners have to observe, identify common characteristics, defend their choice, listen and question other points of view, among others. And if there is more than one right answer, then we are encouraging learners along the path of creativity, where going beyond the immediately obvious is a key skill.
- 3) And stories can be a powerful generator of thinking skills. Once you have established what the narrative of the story, you can start to go deeper, looking for more meaning. You can ask the pupils to get inside the heads

of the different characters, encouraging them to see issues from different points of view. You can encourage their creativity by asking them to imagine alternative endings, or what happened before, or would have happened if... The list is endless.

If you are interested in finding out more about incorporating thinking skills into your teaching, then sign up for Mike Fleetham's newsletter¹ which is always full of useful and thought provoking ideas, many of which can be adapted for the language classroom.

I. And what about the emotional sphere? How can we take care of that?

S. Phillips – Big question. In the end it all overlaps, if we give children self belief, encourage them to become autonomous and give them the tools they need to think then in many ways we are helping put them on the road to emotional maturity.

I. But a teacher doesn't and can't work alone. What elements should a school system provide in order to allow teachers to fulfill their task in the most effective way? (e.g.number of students per class, teacher training, technology, spaces...)

S. Phillips – Limiting the number of students per class, giving great pre-service and in-service training, providing the necessary equipment and having spacious and well appointed classrooms are all undoubtedly contribute to a better learning environment. But they are not the end of the story. Most of these factors relate to the bottom two layers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. There are three more layers – belonging, esteem, and self actualization – and we can't ignore them if we want our schools to work effectively.

I. Unfortunately it is happening in a lot of countries all over the world: governments are cutting down costs for education. What do you think about this?

S. Phillips – That's the easiest question of all. I think it is a huge mistake – education is a country's key investment in the future – cutting the budget for education is a false economy.

¹ <http://www.thinkingclassroom.co.uk/>

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