Innovations in English Language Education: New Issues and Trends

Edited by Bronwen Hughes and Margaret Rasulo

Università di Napoli L'Orientale

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INDEX

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Reimagining language education today

Language teaching encapsulates the complex interconnections between learners and their diverse social environments. It calls for a dynamic interplay among identities that continually evolve across numerous socio-cultural contexts and temporal frameworks. This multifaceted process requires educators and learners alike to engage with language not as a static set of rules but as a living, evolving system that both shapes and is shaped by the communities in which it exists. Language learning is thus not only about mastering grammatical structures or vocabulary; it encompasses a broader engagement with cultural norms, values, and expectations that vary dramatically across contexts. Such an approach acknowledges that language embodies the lived experiences of speakers, influenced by regional dialects, colloquialisms, and the unique histories embedded within linguistic communities (Kramsch 1993; Canale/Swain 1980).

This intricate process is further shaped by social interactions which serve as conduits for learning by facilitating the exchange of ideas, values, and knowledge that enrich the learner's perspective. Cognitive theories central to language acquisition, such as Bourdieu's theory of habitus (1991), emphasize that language use reflects the social and cultural contexts in which it is embedded. Learners do not merely absorb language; they actively construct meaning through interactions that reinforce or challenge existing worldviews (Vygotsky 1978; Swain 2000). This construction process is mediated by the social capital learners bring into each interaction and elements such as prior linguistic knowledge, socio-economic background, and cultural heritage all influence the way individuals engage with a new language and the identity they develop through this engagement (Bourdieu 1986; Norton 2000).

These interrelations reflect a nuanced understanding of language as not merely a communication tool, but as a medium through which learners interpret and navigate the social world. Language, in this light, becomes a lens through which learners view and understand different facets of identity,

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such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity, and engage with the power structures these categories entail (Gee 1996; Pavlenko 2007). Through language, learners gain insight into how societies function, how cultural values are preserved and transmitted, and how individuals and groups assert and negotiate their identities. Thus, language teaching is situated at the intersection of personal identity, cultural heritage, and collective social structures. It serves as a vital bridge between individual expression and communal belonging, allowing learners not only to communicate but to actively participate in the cultural and social fabric of their communities. In this way, language education becomes a powerful transformative tool, equipping learners with the skills to engage with diverse cultures and ideologies, fostering intercultural understanding, and contributing to the ongoing discourse that shapes the world they inhabit (Byram 1997).

Changes in language education, particularly within the realm of English Language Teaching (ELT), are inherently imbued with profound political significance, as language serves not merely as a communication tool but as a potent instrument for societal transformation and ideological transmission (Pennycook 2001). Language shapes our perceptions of reality and influences our interactions, making it a pivotal medium through which power and cultural norms are both established and contested. In an era characterized by intensified globalization, ELT has undergone significant transformations to equip learners not only with essential linguistic competencies but also with the critical thinking and intercultural skills necessary for effective engagement in a multifaceted global society (Graddol 2006). This evolution reflects an increasing awareness of the intricate power dynamics embedded within language education, as the ability to communicate in English transcends mere functional communication. Proficiency in English is now perceived as a passport, granting learners access to diverse socio-political landscapes, enabling them to unlock economic opportunities, and empowering them to participate meaningfully in cultural dialogues on an international stage (Crystal 2003; Kaplan/Baldauf 1997).

This shift in ELT further emphasizes the role of language as a vehicle for social mobility and empowerment, allowing learners to navigate complex global networks that influence their personal and professional trajectories (Holliday 2009). As they acquire proficiency in English,

learners gain not only a valuable skill set but also the confidence to voice their perspectives and engage with global issues such as climate change, human rights, and social justice. This capability is increasingly significant as the interconnectedness of societies deepens, requiring individuals to engage with diverse viewpoints and negotiate differing cultural norms in their interactions (Matsuda 2012). Thus, ELT serves as a transformative vehicle for cultivating informed global citizens who are not only linguistically adept but also capable of critically engaging with the social, economic, and political dimensions of their interconnected world. This holistic approach to language education and English language teaching and learning acknowledges the importance of fostering agency and responsibility, encouraging learners to become proactive participants in shaping the narratives that define their communities and the global landscape (Pennycook 2007). Indeed, through this lens, ELT emerges as a powerful catalyst for change, inspiring learners to challenge inequities, advocate for inclusivity, and contribute positively to the evolving tapestry of global culture and discourse.

Recognizing these political dimensions, language educators assume roles that extend far beyond mere linguistic instruction, actively engaging in the intricate process of shaping our understandings of social structures and individual identities within broader cultural contexts (Leung 2005). This expanded role necessitates an acute awareness of the socio-political landscapes in which learners exist, as educators integrate discussions of power dynamics, privilege, and cultural representation into their curricula. The evolution of ELT in response to globalization policies further underscores the transformative potential of language as a critical tool for shaping worldviews, fostering intercultural empathy, and preparing learners to navigate and participate meaningfully within diverse communities in a rapidly shifting global landscape (Warriner 2017).

Through a curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking and reflection, educators encourage learners to interrogate the societal norms and values that inform their own identities while simultaneously examining the cultural narratives of others (Freire 1970). This approach not only promotes linguistic proficiency but also cultivates critical consciousness, enabling learners to recognize and challenge inequities in their own communities and beyond. By pairing linguistic instruction with critical

social awareness, educators empower learners to engage with the socio-political influences that shape their interactions, fostering a more holistic approach to language learning that is responsive to the complexities of modern society (Pennycook 2010).

This pedagogical shift is essential when creating inclusive learning environments that respect and celebrate diversity. Educators can leverage language as a means of empowerment, encouraging learners to articulate their own experiences and perspectives while also developing the capacity to listen empathetically to the stories of others (Miller 2016; Canagarajah 2005).

The Covid-19 pandemic has markedly transformed traditional perspectives on language education, catalyzing an accelerated integration of technology into pedagogical practices and redefining the very fabric of educational systems (Zhang *et al.* 2020). This unprecedented global crisis served as a pivotal moment, forcing educators and institutions to rethink established methodologies and embrace innovative approaches to teaching and learning. As schools and universities transitioned to remote instruction virtually overnight, the rapid digital shift not only revolutionized pedagogy by creating unprecedented access to a plethora of digital resources, ranging from interactive learning platforms to vast online libraries, but also shed light upon significant disparities in digital literacy and social connectivity. These disparities, which had long existed but were often overlooked, pose formidable challenges to achieving equitable educational outcomes, particularly for marginalized populations who may lack reliable internet access or the necessary technological skills to fully engage with online learning environments (Selwyn 2020).

As we move into the emerging post-pandemic landscape, the significance of digital transformation remains a central concern for educators worldwide. They continue to navigate the evolving demands of an unpredictable educational environment that calls for adaptability and innovation. In this context, educators are confronted with critical issues such as digital equity, which entails ensuring all learners have equal access to technology and the skills to use it effectively (Hague/Payton 2010). Additionally, fostering learner engagement in virtual spaces presents a unique set of challenges, as educators strive to create interactive and stimulating online experiences that replicate the dynamism of in-person classrooms (Moore 2013). Striking a balance between in-person and online

learning becomes increasingly complex, as educators must weigh the benefits of face-to-face interactions against the convenience and flexibility offered by digital platforms (Zimmerman 2020).

This ongoing technological adaptation underscores the resilience and flexibility of language education systems as they embrace a hybridized model of learning. This model seeks to harness the strengths of both traditional and digital methods, facilitating a more inclusive and diverse learning experience (Fadel/Lemke 2008). The integration of technology into language education offers opportunities for differentiated instruction, allowing educators to tailor their teaching approaches to meet the varied needs of students. Furthermore, the use of digital tools can enhance collaborative learning experiences, enabling learners to connect with peers from different cultural backgrounds and geographical locations (Chun *et al.* 2016). Ultimately, the pandemic has served as a catalyst for a fundamental reimagining of language education, compelling educators to innovate and adapt in ways that will have lasting impacts on the future of teaching and learning.

This pivotal shift serves as the foundational premise for the inaugural issue of the *ALLiED* Journal, which critically examines the sweeping societal transformations reshaping global education systems in the 21st century. Changes in this field encompass a myriad of factors, including technological advancements, shifting cultural dynamics, and evolving pedagogical theories, all of which significantly influence the intricate and dynamic relationship between learners and target languages across a spectrum of diverse and shifting contexts (Blommaert 2013; Balirano/Rasulo 2023). Thus, the present issue delves deeply into recent advancements in ELT, highlighting how these developments have not only redefined the boundaries of traditional educational paradigms but have also catalyzed the emergence of innovative methodologies that effectively bridge local and global perspectives.

Encompassing a wide range of practices, from the integration of digital tools and resources to the incorporation of culturally responsive teaching strategies that acknowledge and celebrate the rich diversity of student backgrounds (Gay 2010; Earl 2012), contributions to this issue illuminate how these innovations transcend conventional teaching paradigms by prioritizing learner agency and fostering a more personalized and adaptable learning experience.

By equipping educators with novel strategies and resources, this issue not only empowers them to address the complexities of teaching in a globalized context but also encourages the development of classrooms that are responsive to the unique cultural and linguistic assets that each learner brings. Moreover, the contributions emphasize the importance of fostering a collaborative learning environment where students are encouraged to engage actively with both local and global issues, thus enhancing their critical thinking skills and intercultural competencies (Deardorff 2006). In this way, the *ALLiED* Journal aims to be at the forefront of the ongoing dialogue about the future of language education, exploring how educators can navigate and leverage these profound changes to create enriched learning experiences that prepare students for meaningful participation in an interconnected world.

The overarching aim of this Issue is therefore to present rigorous scholarly research on language education within varied cultural, technological, and pedagogical contexts, thereby underscoring the intricate roles that language, culture, and technology play in shaping modern education. This interplay facilitates a dynamic platform for learners to navigate a complex, globalized network of information, diverse viewpoints, and evolving ideas, effectively preparing them to become engaged and reflective participants in an ever-evolving world (Rasulo 2017). Featured topics include pedagogical innovation in response to digitalization, the unique implications of EFL teaching within the social media landscape, gamified learning environments, the challenges and successes of online classrooms, alternative assessment methods during the pandemic, novel higher education pedagogies, e-learning initiatives, and discourse analysis through digital storytelling. Through these lenses, the issue foregrounds the transformative capacity of language education to empower learners as informed, adaptive, and interculturally aware individuals who can adeptly engage with the challenges and opportunities presented by a rapidly globalizing world.

Articles

Lucia Abbamonte in *How (Thoroughly) Does the Medium Shape Teaching? Some Considerations on Doctoral Courses in EPP at Vanvitelli University*, examines the profound shift of ELT educators and students from traditional

classrooms to remote teaching and learning environments, leading to the development of a distinct and adaptable skill set. Abbamonte provides valuable insights into how this transition can be effectively managed, drawing on findings from doctoral courses conducted at the Doctoral School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Vanvitelli University.

The article authored by Anna Anselmo and Elena Refraschini, is titled *Combining SLA Theory and Teaching Practice: "Big Bowl of Serial", or, How to Use TV Series to Become Autonomous Learners of English.* This study examines an asynchronous online English course through the lens of Leo van Lier's ecology of language learning framework, emphasizing its four core constructs: relation, action, perception, and quality. The primary aim is to evaluate the course's strengths and identify areas for potential enhancement, offering insights into how well it supports autonomous language learning and where future refinements could improve learner outcomes.

Balirano and De Santo in *Learning English in the Digital Age: eTandem, Autonomy and Intercultural Communication in Online Educational Environments,* explore how this methodology can enhance language learning by fostering autonomy, language skills, and intercultural communication. Conducted within a language university and utilizing Moodle, the research highlights eTandem's role in creating flexible, accessible online exchanges that enrich students' language practice and cultural connections. Findings suggest that eTandem, supported by guidance, reflection, and collaboration, can significantly improve language learning outcomes in higher education.

Francesca D'Adamo's study titled *Gamifying English Learning and Assessment to Reduce Anxiety and Foster Speaking Skills: The Case of Secondary School Students,* delves into the potential of gamification to transform English language learning. D'Adamo addresses a central challenge for Italian students: the considerable stress and anxiety associated with oral and written assessments, which often impedes performance and overall language acquisition. This study explores gamification as a dynamic approach to engage students, fostering greater ease and confidence within the learning process. Grounded in game-based learning theories, gamification is presented as a mechanism to promote learner autonomy, competence, and social connection. By redirecting students' focus on goal-

oriented tasks and leveraging motivation through structured feedback, recognition, and rewards, gamification fosters a more supportive learning environment. Using surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, the research reveals promising outcomes, underscoring the potential of gamified learning to reduce anxiety and improve students' engagement and oral proficiency

Francesca D'Angelo's exploration of *Bilingualism and "Bilingualisms": Different Dimensions and Contexts of Acquisition* offers a nuanced analysis of bilingualism and bilingual education from multiple investigative perspectives. This work delves into the complexity of bilingualism as a phenomenon, examining its categorization ambiguities, its multifaceted impact on educational outcomes, and the crucial influence of acquisition contexts for each language mastered by multilingual individuals. Additionally, the paper addresses the role of metalinguistic awareness in facilitating the learning of additional languages, highlighting the influence of varied acquisition pathways available to learners.

Stefania D'Avanzo's *Storytelling as a Teaching Tool: Some Reflections from Experiences with Undergraduates Students,* examines the growing role of storytelling in enhancing teaching and learning within higher education. In this work, D'Avanzo delves into how various tasks and activities, specifically designed to teach corporate storytelling, can be effectively implemented with undergraduate students. She explores the linguistic and multimodal strategies integral to teaching English within a business university department, highlighting methods and tools that facilitate deeper engagement and skill development in corporate communication.

In *Questioning Across Contexts: A Comparative Analysis of Higher-Order and Lower-Order Questions in CLIL and EMI Education*, classroom questioning strategies are explored by focusing on higher-order and lower-order questions as essential tools for language development and content learning. Hughes and Rasulo examine how lower-order questions aid recall and comprehension, laying a foundation in multilingual settings where students often learn in a non-native language. In contrast, higher-order questions engage students in critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis. Based on classroom recordings from Italian high schools and universities, the study reveals that a balanced use of these question types effectively supports both foundational knowledge and advanced cognitive skills. The

findings highlight the benefits of a structured questioning sequence, where lower-order questions build essential understanding and higher-order questions foster deeper analytical skills. Through a qualitative analysis, this study emphasizes that integrating both question types can create a dynamic, inclusive learning environment, supporting students' progression to critical, independent thinking.

Anthony Yuh presents a compelling analysis of *Digitalization of the Post-pandemic Language Classroom in Cameroon and the Use of Technology in Teaching: Rethinking Local Policy on Classroom Praxis.* In this study, Yuh explores how digitalized language instruction in Cameroon has largely centered on the distance learning platform provided by the Ministry of Secondary Education. However, his primary objective is to call for a paradigm shift toward a more innovative and forward-looking language pedagogy that meets the evolving demands and expectations of 21st-century learners.

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Lucia Abbamonte*

How (Thoroughly) Does the Medium Shape Teaching? Some Considerations on Doctoral Courses in EPP at Vanvitelli University

Abstract

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, ELT teachers and their students at all levels of education were driven from the physical classroom to the remote teaching/learning dimension, and the acquisition of a new set of skills became immediately necessary. Indeed, greater trepidation lay in the increasing focus on the technology rather than the content of teaching activities, with the entailed consequences. After referring to the rich literature on teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moorhouse, Kohnke 2021, 2020; Fitria 2020; Yunus, Ang, Hashim 2021; Mahib ur Rahman 2020), this study will propose some considerations on the media-channels continuum and on how their affordances shape the messages they transmit, with predictable consequences for specific teaching domains. In this light, some insights will be provided into the 2021-2022 English for Publication Purposes doctoral courses held at the Doctoral School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Vanvitelli University.

Keywords: ELT /EPP, remote teaching, media-channels continuum, affordances, Doctoral Courses.

1. Introduction and aims

It is now an accepted notion that in this day and age, pandemics, like wars, lead to an acceleration in the fields of science and technology. In recent times, the field of education has been one of the main *foci* of technology, and the digital divide in school populations has taken centre stage due to both the lack or paucity of resources in many (educational) contexts and the digital skills gap among users. Furthermore, in English language teaching (ELT), the utilization of apps, platforms and social media has been amplified and improved to make synchronous online teaching possible and more effective (Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc.).

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled ELT teachers at all levels of education to develop their distance teaching skills rapidly. As a result, some of them ceased to be the 'all-knowing voice' in their virtual classrooms, and this entailed some transient, though not necessarily negative,

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identity issues. Indeed, while admitting uncertainty or some measure of skill inadequacy would lead to a negative performance appraisal in terms of corporate communication, the dynamics can be different in the educational sphere. A less assertive teacher or a sincere request for cooperation can engage students more actively, hopefully leading to more collaborative attitudes in the teaching/learning process. In the vast and multifaceted ELT domain, attention should also be paid to the difference between the communicative value of a lesson prepared for recording and a synchronous online distance lesson that the students request be recorded.

Overall, given the abundance of (free) online resources for teaching English and the growing expertise of teachers in using them, once language learning platforms and tools were up and running, many educational experiences were considered positive (Moorhouse/Kohnke 2021).

This study will briefly refer to the literature on ELT during the COVID-19 pandemic, offer some thoughts on aspects of current communication modes, and then provide some insights into the 2021-2022 English for Publication Purposes doctoral course held at the Doctoral School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Vanvitelli University.

Lessons at the Vanvitelli University were initially held online and subsequently in a blended dimension for a total of 90 students. The teaching approach was informed by English for Specific Purposes (ESP) methodologies, specifically English for Publication Purposes (EPP). The selection of topics and materials was a crucial issue, given the variety of study domains involved, and the students' production of written materials played a central role in the implementation of the course objectives. The functions of Microsoft Teams served to facilitate the sharing of these and other materials. A sample of the students' production will be analyzed for the purposes of this study. At the end of the course, following an oral examination, a report on each student's acquired abilities in EPP was issued.

2. The experience of remote education: ELT teachers' perspectives

As is now widely known, the COVID-19 pandemic drove 1.38 billion learners from the physical classroom to the remote teaching/learning dimension (UNESCO 2020). Emergency remote teaching (ERT), not entirely a novelty, nevertheless became the mandatory mode of educational delivery, and a new pandemic pedagogy emerged to cope with issues of motivation,

accessibility, and efficacy. Fiorucci (2023) provides a comprehensive analysis of such matters, focusing on students' assessment and the dimension of intercultural communication in online teaching/learning communities.

Interestingly, a longstanding question in our web-wired mediascape – 'digital natives' vs 'digital immigrants' – had already been reshaped by Wang et al. (2013) as a continuum rather than a rigid dichotomy. In their literature review, they identified determining socio-demographic characteristics, organizational and psychological factors, and behavioural intention, which together influence digital fluency (Figure 1).
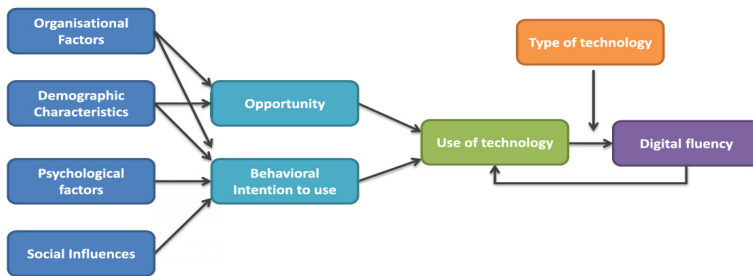
Figure 1. Digital natives vs digital immigrants model (Wang et al. 2013).

Thus, even before the pandemic, a great deal of attention was given to digital skills in education, but in 2020, predictably, a significant amount of trepidation lay in the increasing focus on the 'technology for education'.

The multifaceted scenario of ELT unfolds across countries and continents. From the ELT teachers' perspective, Fitria (2021) evaluated the experience of teaching English through a variety of online learning systems in Indonesia as positive. Along the same lines, Mahib ur Rahman (2020) emphasized the usefulness of focused teacher training to better face challenges in Saudi Arabia, and Chaturvedi et al. (2021) illustrated some effective teaching practices deployed in India. Neither an entirely positive nor an entirely negative picture of the effects of ERT on language learners emerges from the review of studies conducted by Akbana et al. (2021) for foreign and second language teaching in Turkey. The COVID-19 emergency also brought about interesting revisitations or re-functionalizations of existing theories, such as those put forward by Yunus et al. (2021) regarding the situation in Malaysia.
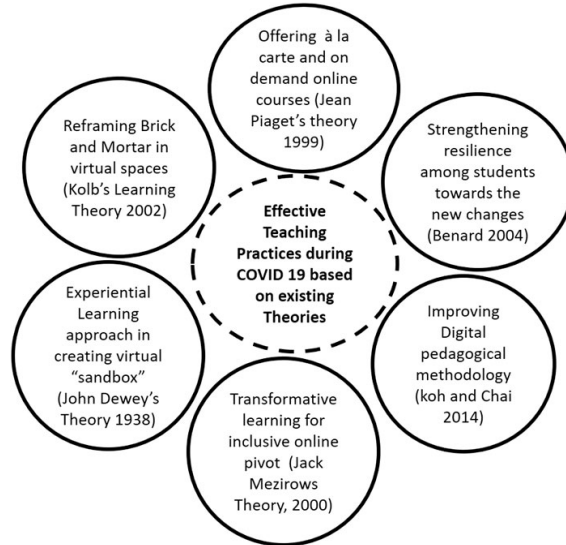
Figure 2. Viewpoints affecting TESL postgraduate students' online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia (Yunus et al. 2021).

The researchers showed in detail how factors of performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (see Figure 3) – under the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology model – consistently affected the learners' intention to use online learning. They conclude that the usefulness of online learning should be highlighted by the authorities.
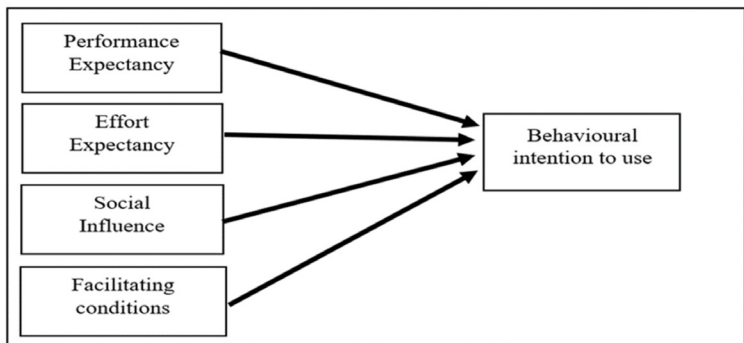
Figure 3. Factors affecting TESL postgraduate students' behavioural intention regarding online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia (Yunus et al. 2021).

On the flip side, Adnan and Anwar (2020), considering the situation of Pakistani higher education during the pandemic, emphasized how the issue of access to online resources, and hence to a learning community, has been challenging for most students in underprivileged countries.

In short, a full-fledged study of the variety of socio-cognitive and pedagogical stances and teaching practices across the globe through the lens of the COVID-19 emergency ought to be conducted. Although a complete review of the global scenario lies outside the focus and limits of this study, it is worth considering a quantitative overview of ELT teachers' responses to the emergency. The thematic review of empirical studies provided by Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021), mainly conducted through Web of Science and SCOPUS, identified the key knowledge generated by the English-language-teaching community during the pandemic.[1]
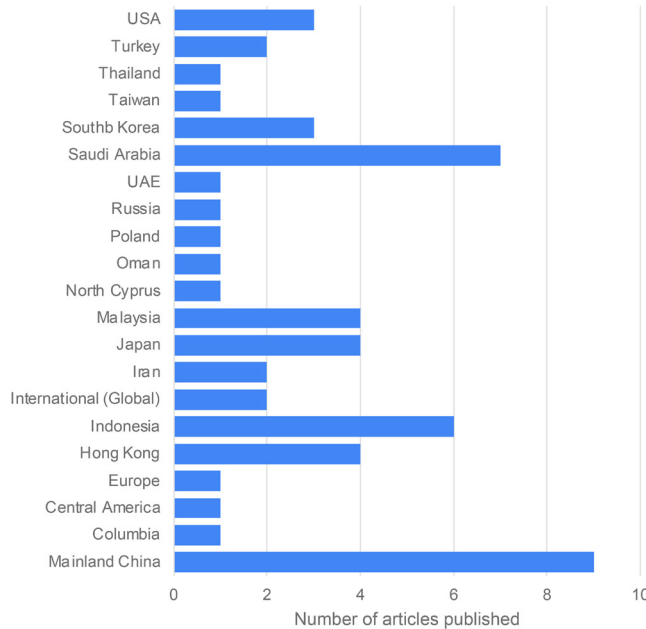
Figure 4. Responses of the ELT community to the pandemic (Moorhouse/Kohnke 2021).

[1] Moorhouse and Kohnke located peer-reviewed empirical studies published since January 2020 that included the keywords 'COVID-19', 'coronavirus', and 'pandemic' with each of the following terms: 'ELT', 'language teaching', 'language teacher', 'language learner', 'teacher education', 'TESOL', 'ELT', 'EFL', and 'ESL'. Out of 267 articles identified in the first round, only 55 papers remained.

The researchers concluded that when the available online language learning platforms and tools were well-functioning and updated/adapted, the educational experiences were considered positive (Moorhouse/Kohnke 2021). Yet, predictably, considering the great variety of such experiences unfolding in different political and geographical scenarios and shaped by various ideological stances and socio-cognitive issues, generalizations are not easily achievable.

2.1. New mode, new phrases

One aspect that may be worthy of explicit attention is that, especially at the beginning of ERT, there was greater trepidation concerning the increasing focus on the 'technology' rather than the 'contents' of teaching activities. In this mandatory computer-mediated communication mode, old and new phrases acquired specific meanings and pragmatic values, such as,

- *I can't see/hear you*
- *My mobile doesn't let me do X*
- *You're on mute/frozen*
- *Please connect your camera when you speak*
- *Try to get out and enter* [the meeting] *again*
- *First, open your PDF, then share your screen*
- *Re-try*

These and similar expressions point to the efforts to overcome technological challenges while engaging students in effective communication. Such efforts were occasionally bidirectional (e.g., both teachers and pupils experienced difficulties with their Microsoft accounts or in using some of the tools) and were often experienced as a joint venture, occasionally resulting in the (positive) effect of reaching a common ground of shared achievement.

Privacy was also an issue, so much so that it was inadvisable to require/ask students to switch on their cameras in order for teachers to respect the privacy of their students' homes. On the other hand, teachers were not at ease with their students' requests to record their lessons. The difference between the communicative value of a synchronous online language lesson

(SOLL) and a pre-recorded lesson can hardly be overstated. Indeed, in real-time classes (with students participating via computer or iPhone), a considerable amount of time was 'wasted' in overcoming connection/tools problems, establishing contact, eliciting students' interventions and discourse, etc. Predictably, these contextual needs – which do not exist in the totally different genre of pre-recorded lessons – spoil the SOLL's effectiveness when it is accessed later.

3. Fast-emerging resources in ELT

Typically, in addition to the more traditional (print) resources, in the domain of ELT, over the past decades, we have been faced with an embarrassment of riches: a great variety of online materials (also freely available) has constantly been produced, such as courses for every need, from general English (all levels) to professional, occupational, research English(es). Additionally, in the world of entertainment, popular TV series (e.g., *Grey's Anatomy, Suits, Friends*) exist in versions for students, not to mention the game-based learning platforms.

Predictably, in the ERT years, to make synchronous online teaching possible and more effective, new affordances were developed by reshaping/re-adapting existing platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc.) and, increasingly, the employability of mobile apps, platforms and social media came to the fore.

But what about content? Can we identify any significant innovation in this area? Or, in other words, are innovations in teaching content as fast and momentous as those in the media, channels, and modes of communication?

3.1. Channels and media: only connect?

In our web-wired mediascape, with the ever-faster-evolving affordances of contemporary digital technologies (see, among others, IN4ACT 2023), which seamlessly link activities, processes, and human participants and trigger new processes, some considerations on the perceived channel-media-information-content continuum are appropriate.

The classical definition of a *medium* as the means of communication and a *channel* as the means of transmission of a message between the sender and the receiver no longer seems fully satisfactory. Let us briefly consider

this issue from the perspective of the contemporary world of advertising, where effective communication is of paramount importance:

> *Medium*: A means of verbal or non-verbal communication. Examples include text ads, video ads and radio ads. *Channel*: A means of transmission or distribution. Examples include display, social media and TV advertising. [...] The terms *medium* and *channel* are often used *interchangeably*. For example, the Internet could be described as both a medium and a channel. (Clearcode 2020: chap. 5, emphasis added)

These definitions are becoming more flexible, and the 'medium-channel' boundary is being surpassed. Accordingly, the Internet and YouTube could be described as both media and channel, and when considering popular websites providing resources for teaching English, such as *BBC Learning English*, also accessible via YouTube, the communicative mode is not dissimilar:

> Learn English with these free learning English videos and materials from BBC Learning English. This site will help you learn English and improve your English [...] with these free learning English videos and materials [...]. As part of the BBC World Service, BBC Learning English has been teaching English to global audiences since 1943, offering free audio, video and text materials to learners around the world. (BBC n.d.)

Similar websites display the characteristics of both a medium, as they produce and provide content in the form of audio-visual and written texts, and a channel, since they broadcast such content. A further level of discussion could be that content is shaped according to given rules (e.g., textual genres, TV formats, etc.).

On the other hand, the characteristics, economic resources, and digital affordances of the (media) channels determine the typology and quality of the messages and contents, or, in other words, their genres and functions. This line of thought brings us back to Marshall McLuhan's definition, "The medium is the message".[2] Provocatory as this might sound, McLuhan has been highly influential in promoting the understanding of the media's functioning and effects on society.

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[2] McLuhan titled the first chapter of his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* 'The Medium is the Message' (McLuhan 1994 [1964]).

Let us briefly consider the formation of 'native ads' in advertising:

Native ads are designed to blend in with the rest of the surrounding content by following the natural form of the user experience and matching the design and behavior of the web page, application, or platform. (Clearcode 2020: chap. 5)

In other words, the digital affordances of the webpage determine the nature of the ads so as not to disrupt the user's experience. Undeniably, a common effect of this new channel-media continuum is the easier and quicker accessibility of such content for an ever-increasing number of people, at least for developed countries, with the predictable consequence of much greater availability of information, knowledge, practices, opinions, attitudes, etc. The entailed outcome should amount to augmenting the user's ability to acquire and process information, knowledge and expertise to become informed decision-makers, etc. Gaps *should* thus be easily bridged, human knowledge exponentially heightened, and rational behaviour expected.

However, when focussing on specific domains, such as ELT, the scenario is not so simple. Only connecting to or relying on web-wired self-study does not seem to be a fully productive path to effective language learning. The real novelty apparently consists in the variety of communication modes. The abundance of resources can be confusing for (some) students; hence, the long-established procedure of preliminary needs analysis and then the selection and gradation of the contents still seems necessary for a productive teaching/learning process, at least for the time being.

3.2. More to come: the metaverse

The 'metaverse', a 30-year-old word, is also defined as a 3D Internet. It can be envisioned as the latest stage of computing and networking, following the mainframes of the 1950s–1970s, the personal computers and the Internet of the 1980s–2000s, and the contemporary mobile and cloud age.

According to Matthew Ball (2022), it cannot be equated with immersive virtual reality headsets, nor augmented reality devices or games, blockchains or cryptocurrencies; instead, it is a parallel virtual plane of existence embracing all digital technologies and uniting both our digital

and physical economies. It will reshape our lives in many ways, hopefully for the better.

Recently, especially during the ERT period, the metaverse has played an increasingly important role in education. Indeed, the affordances of virtual reality technology (e.g., avatars, 3D graphics, Google's 'Project Starline') and instant communication tools (Second Life, Minecraft, Roblox, Zepeto) can dramatically transform language learning. By wearing virtual reality headsets, students are immersed in environments where they can participate in virtual conversations or visit virtual language schools, not to mention gamification in a variety of different scenarios. Furthermore, there are projects to develop virtual campuses, e.g., in the Eastern Caribbean, which would be much cheaper than real campuses and, therefore, particularly convenient for developing countries (Angel-Urdinola et al. 2022).

Nevertheless, the virtual learning experience is constrained by the level of digital literacy of both instructors and learners, and it must be developed for successful English learning, or indeed any remote learning. Furthermore, there is insufficient data on the pedagogical and educational value of virtual learning, and the lack of real interaction raises some concerns (Li/Yu 2023; Wu et al. 2023).

In any case, digital skills and literacies are foregrounded mostly in relation to language learning and are a major focus of intervention in education, as shown, for example, by the implementation of the European Multimodal and Digital Education for Language Learning (EU-MADE4LL) project. It is the product of a European research project that designs, implements and tests a transnational syllabus on these topics, some training workshops for the practical application of skills, and a "Common Framework of Reference for Intercultural Digital Literacy (CFRIDiL) [which] is an adaptation and expansion of both the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) and the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp 2.0)" (EuMade4ll n.d.).

However, remarks on the need and usefulness for human interaction in addition to platforms and virtual interaction abound in the mentioned literature, and a blended pedagogy seems the best option, possibly in a technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) environment.

4. New uses of the language laboratory: a blended PhD course

It cannot be overemphasized that the foreign language laboratory was typically based on a behaviourist approach, assuming that the repetition and memorization of sentence patterns and dialogue sequences were conducive to correct and effective language learning. Though variously criticized, such practices, as well as oral pattern drills, have not totally disappeared from contemporary TELL, where software for encouraging learners' oral and written production, with immediate feedback and self-correction, is often fungible (Heinrich 2023). Increasingly, the functions and use of the language laboratory are being revisited and expanded.

During part of the ERT period (2021–2022), two lecturers led a 50-hour doctoral course on English for Publication Purposes at the Doctoral School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vanvitelli University (Caserta, Italy) for first-year students in a new, well-equipped multimedia language laboratory. The construction of the laboratory had been planned and implemented in the pre-pandemic years, and although the facility could not be used in 2020, students started to come to the laboratory as the sharing of physical spaces became gradually possible.

The lessons were initially held in a blended dimension for a total of 90 students; the two lecturers and some students were in the laboratory, though most were connected via Microsoft Teams. The undeniable value of eye contact, proxemics and body language – i.e. of sharing the same physical space – was thus partly recovered.

The Vanvitelli lab is equipped with videoconferencing software, allowing learners to interact with each other in real time and making it possible for the students and lecturers physically present in the laboratory to see themselves on the screens. In a way, a kind of shared virtual class was created that encompassed the physical classroom, with some occasional *Verfremdungseffekt* due to seeing one's own body variously mirrored and refracted.

Various teaching materials, such as web-accessed audio and videos, including from the online platforms mentioned above and from TV documentaries, were used and shared via Microsoft Teams. Common characteristics of such materials include strong multimodal cohesion and intersemiotic texture, i.e. text-image-sound relationship (Bateman 2014: 159–171), to make the messages clear and fungible for teaching purposes.

The resulting communicative situation is the broadcasting of online multimodal and multimedia content via Microsoft Teams. Such content was accessed only via computers or mobiles by students learning remotely, and via computers and overhead projection on a large screen in the language laboratory for students physically present in the room. Bateman (2014) and Bateman and Hiippala (2021) have offered relevant considerations on such multilayered communication – multimodal, multimedia content, including hypertextual links, transmitted through other media/channels – and suggested that such modes can be defined as hyper-mediatic. Overall, given the correct functioning of the resources of the Vanvitelli laboratory, such computer-mediated communication was an enhancing factor for the learning process.

The teaching approach was informed by ESP methodologies, specifically EPP, with some insights into research methodologies when necessary and feasible. After an initial analysis of the PhD students' learning objectives and needs, the second step was the selection of shareable, engaging, and useful topics for their different PhD programmes:

1. Architecture, Industrial Design and Cultural Heritage
2. History and Transmissions of Cultural Heritage
3. Comparative Law and Integration Processes
4. Psychology and the Sciences of the Mind

Since it is neither feasible nor advisable to teach EPP in abstract, trans-disciplinary topics were chosen together as a collaborative operation from the domains of health, environment and sustainability, gender, and race. One-fifth of the students came from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and the Southern Mediterranean area; thus, cross-cultural communication issues were also chosen and approached with interest.

One more issue was coping with the unevenness of a mixed-ability intercultural class, where it was not easy to give great attention to grammar and basic vocabulary; hence, basic language skills gaps were addressed by providing resources for asynchronous and autonomous learning in the language laboratory or online self-study activities, with some support from the lecturers. Instead, aspects of textual coherence, cohesion, discourse patterns and genre were prioritized during the lessons. Students were also encouraged to build their personal language portfolio by recollecting,

recording and organizing their main language-learning achievements and experiences along their language-learning and language-using itinerary. The group's plurilingualism and different cultural backgrounds made this a fruitful educational experience for all students, with interesting topics for discussion.

In more detail, the typical procedure involved students familiarizing themselves with the selected topics via online multimodal texts, starting from easier journal articles (online version) and videos up to scientific literature, with a focus on the analysis of both verbal and multimodal languages. The cohesion (or lack thereof) in the text-image relations was often highlighted and discussed, and the students were expected to produce both written reports and PowerPoint presentations for oral reporting. Such materials played a pivotal role in the unfolding of the course, and Microsoft Teams made the necessary sharing of these and other materials, including selected texts from the students' portfolios, possible, (relatively) easy, and immediate. It is worth noting that implicit teaching content – originating not exclusively from the lecturers – included the full use of Microsoft Teams, its channels and repositories, and the various platforms and websites utilized.

After preliminary interventions by the lecturers, the revision of the students' written materials, based partly on autonomous reading and research, was conducted collectively as often as possible, and questions of scientific method were occasionally raised and collectively discussed. Issues of effective textuality, taking the conventions of discourse genres into account, were prioritized.

4.1. Examples of PhD students' texts

Below are some examples of the students' written texts, turned in towards the middle of the course. Revisions to the examples are highlighted using the effects delineated in the legend below.

> Legend:
> Teacher's additions, in ***bold italics***
> Parts to be moved and/or rephrased, in *italics*
> Words to be eliminated: ~~crossed out font~~
> Teachers indications and suggestions in square brackets: [ ]

The first example is an abstract by a student of Architecture, Industrial Design, and Cultural Heritage. Although the readability of the text was not satisfactory, the teachers' comments were encouraging and focused more on the interest of the project. Improving the text's conciseness and some re-ordering were recommended, and the corrections did not alter the identity of the text. Language issues were also signalled in the text.

Cultural Heritage Sustainability in Swat, Pakistan: Sustainable Approach through SDG 11: Sustainable Cities & Communities

[INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND] Cultural heritage and sustainability are closely connected**,** although little straightforward consideration has been paid to the sustainability issues of heritage in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The overall aim of the 2015 SDGs, sustainability, is easier to achieve following the criterion of conservation, preservation**,** hence protection, set by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Moreover, the festival of cultural heritage ~~does~~ entail**s** engrained principles of sustainability and provide**s** guidelines as well. Many countries have already pursued the lead of SDGs in their tourism development models. However, in developing countries, the ~~pursue~~ **pursuit** of SDGs in true letter and spirit ~~has been suffering back push~~ **has suffered a major setback** ~~due to the more reliance on essential needs of mankind~~ **because of the increased urgency of basic human needs.** ~~Doing so has disabled the communities and cities to be sustainable and resilient.~~ [The latter notion is speculative]

Similarly, ~~in Pakistan, even though there exist numberless~~ **with its numerous** heritage assets belonging to the Indus Valley and Gandhara civilizations, ~~there remained a deadlock among locals and sustainability of cultural heritage sites. In addition, swift urbanization has also compromised the physical and virtual status of many cultural heritage sites.~~ [Consider summarising the lines below in italics and move them here, after revising their form, to avoid repetition]. ~~Remained as Cradle of the two major civilizations of Indus Valley and Gandhara, the country of~~ Pakistan has remained a ~~point~~ *focus* of attention for many national and international archaeologi**sts and** stakeholders ~~practitioners~~, *unveiling its extensive heritage potential* [not very clear, consider rephrasing].

Archaeological expeditions from Japan, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy *over the course of time* [a bit generic] have been ~~quite~~ engaged in exploration and restoration **activities**. Among these, **the** Italian Archaeological Mission has been leading from the front and **is** still eagerly engaged in sustaining the cultural heritage assets of Swat Valley. ~~Now, because as~~

[AIMS] **Yet,** ~~community activi~~**sts** ~~has been needing of~~ **need time to start,** and locals must be activated; **thus,** this study aims to address this grey area and highlight the grounded issues and problems behind the community's **lack of engagement** [is this what you intended to say?] ~~active approach~~ in sustaining local cultural heritage assets.

[METHOD] Considering the social nature of ~~this~~ **these** issue~~s~~ ~~in hand~~, **a** qualitative research ~~line~~ **approach** will be followed in this study, and semi-structured interviews will be conducted with ~~from~~ target community **members**. In addition, collaborative workshops ~~in align with~~ **on** the ~~targets~~ **objectives** and sub-goals of SDG 11~~,~~ will be organized to ensure *community collection of their viewpoints and perceptions* [not clear] regarding ~~the~~ **such** issues and **their possible** ~~potential~~ solutions ~~of issue under question~~. *Collaborative workshops in the Asian context have proved to be adoptive [??] and effective predominantly in the face of urban regeneration. In the Swat, similar issues of urbanization have been arising, and the public is neglecting the physicality of sites and constructing the premise* [Move these lines above and summarise them; consider revising the form].

[DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS] The ~~possible~~ analysis of **the** data **collected** through interviews ~~to~~ and collaborative workshops with the community will reveal the veiled issues and their expected solutions. These results will enable the researcher to structure inductive themes and **promote** discussion. ~~To this end, it will allow the~~ **Furthermore, the researchers will be able** to set policy recommendations ~~and implications~~ for sustaining **both** ~~the~~ cultural heritage in particular ~~while~~ and ~~for~~ sustainable cities and communities more generally.

*Keyword*s: Sustainability, heritage, Pakistan, Swat, community.

The second example is a brief summary of a PhD student's research project in History and Transmission of Cultural Heritage. Apart from

some language problems, the lecturers felt that this very short text should be enriched with the motivation for the research, the context, and information about the methodological approach.

The fifteenth-century vulgarizations of the *Tractatus de spera* by Giovanni Sacrobosco

The research project ~~expands~~ ***continues and extends*** the studies completed for the master's degree [Whose? Please, specify] ***thesis,*** ~~The title of it is~~ "The fifteenth-century vulgarizations of the *Tractatus de spera* [*Tractato de la spera*? Please check what the most accepted title is] by Giovanni Sacrobosco". These vulgarizations are part of the wide flowering of translations that accompanied the revival of the vernacular in the fifteenth century. The foci of the work are the vulgarization of the *Constitutio Textus*; the editing of the *Stemma Codicum*; a lexical, morphological and syntactic comparison between the various vulgarizations; the formation of dating hypotheses for the vulgarizations; a study of the scientific terms present in the vulgarizations, contextualized with evidence of scientific prose from the period of the Origins; the placement of linguistic *facies* within the evolution of the Florentine dialect during the period of the Origins; and a semantic study of scientific terms.
The timing will be as follows: first year: investigation and review of the manuscripts; second year: transcription and collation of *witnesses*; third year: drafting of the *Stemma Codicum*.

The third example, also by a History and Transmission of Cultural Heritage student, was chosen as a specimen of a less effective abstract, requiring heavier intervention. Apart from some language problems, the lecturers felt that this very short text was ineffective in terms of communication. In particular, as the lack of a title suggests, the abstract does not give exact information on the aims or the methodological approach. It should also be enriched with the motivation for the research.

[Insert TITLE]

This research studies the historical ~~Aa~~nalysis of the sacred *Alam* motif. It is a sacred replica of a flag banner with a mast connected to a historic

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battle fought on a religious background [You must be more specific]. This research seeks to study the entry of the *Alam* motif into the Indian sub-continent and the gradual evolution of its forms, shape, and size, along with *deducing methods* for its future preservation [The notion is not clear; consider rephrasing]. The thesis aims to apply several social concepts such as honour, status, and community to analyze scenarios and occasions in which sacred symbols succeed in becoming**,** or are approximated to, a deity. In popular culture, we know that in Pakistan and India, various symbols serve as reminders of the events that ~~transpired~~ ***took place*** at the Battle of Karbala. Among the most potent symbols that have emerged to represent Karbala is the Alam. These case studies will not only support the main argument [that is?] of the thesis but also contribute to an understanding of the ethical and theological content of the historical records, as well as their literary fabric. [What about the methodology/procedure? And, possibly, expected results?]
[***Keywords*:** Alam, flag, evolution, subcontinent, Karbala, sacred symbol…]

The fourth example is an abstract by a student of Comparative Law and Integration Processes. The lecturers felt that the lexis of this abstract was quite accurate, though the syntax created some readability problems. It could also be lengthened, particularly as far as the motivation for the research is concerned.

Pandemic emergency and pending contracts

The pandemic has resulted in dense, often spasmodic legislation aimed at regulating the sanitary emergency and, consequently, the economic crisis. The legislator acted through vertical norms (regarding the State-private individual relationships) by distributing incentives and/or subsidies and through horizontal norms, which directly affect private individuals' relationships, especially contractual and mandatory pending ones.

Among the many measures, of particular significance is the so-called "Decreto Cura Italia" (Law Decree no. 18 dated March 17, 2020), which in art. 3, paragraph 6 bis provides that "compliance with the containment measures set out in this decree is always assessed in order to exclude, in accordance with articles 1218 and 1223 of the Italian Civil Code, the debtor's responsibility […]".

[Avoid long sentences] The provision, which has been the object of great attention on the part of legal theory and jurisprudence, apparently establishes a legal judgment on the potential suitability of the necessary compliance with the containment measures to produce hypotheses in the event of the impracticability of the service.

However, the issue becomes more complex when it comes to the legislator's failure to act, particularly in relation to contractual relationships for which no appropriate measures have been taken.

It is therefore necessary to verify the consequences of the measures of containment on pending contracts and analyze the directions of both doctrine and jurisprudence, which seem to be divided on two opposing principles: *pacta sunt servanda* and *rebus sic stantibus*. Ultimately, it would be useful to carry out a comparative survey of our system and other legal realities and experiences in order to find a possible solution, especially with reference to:

a) pecuniary obligations

b) rental contracts for commercial properties;

c) tax debt payments and tax settlements.

KEYWORDS: pandemic; pending contracts; containment measures; solutions

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The fifth example is a proposal for a conference presentation by a student of Psychology and the Sciences of the Mind. This shorter text required lighter editing. The lecturers pointed out that more cautious language and some hedging phrases could be utilized.

The Effects of Economic Inequality on Political Participation: Could Economic Inequality Be an Obstacle to Political Participation?

An ***analysis of*** the literature shows us how, over the years, many scholars have tried to highlight, with correlational studies, that belonging to a disadvantaged socio-economic class ['*can affect*' is a more cautious expression] affects citizens' participation in ~~in the event of~~ elections. This ~~giving~~ ***lends*** support to the theory of relative power. What is missing, ***however***, is the presence of experimental studies that can ~~confirm this hypothesis or not.~~ ***either confirm or disconfirm this hypothesis.***

> For this reason, we created two experimental studies where participants could become citizens, in an immediate and immersive way, of a new society called Koor, which could be, according to the study, a society demarcated by economic inequality and/or economic equality.
>
> The participants (920 in the first study and 2,079 in the second) responded positively to our manipulation, showing how belonging to a specific social class can influence opinions not only on the society they belong to but also, and above all, on political participation.
>
> In fact, **our results** show that the rich tend*ed* to show more interest in going to vote as they believe*d* that their vote ~~is~~ *was* ~~more~~ useful for changing society *more* than the poor, thus ~~showing~~ *lending* support ~~for~~ *to* the theory of relative power.

4.2. Discussion

In such a mixed-ability class, including differences in age, various issues were predictable. While the lecturers' feedback was more immediate and effective during the speaking activities and oral (guided) communication, the differences in the students' written outputs were starker.

Some focused interventions made the students more aware of existing conventions in the more frequently utilized research genres (abstracts for papers or conferences, research reports, projects), as well as tasks to be accomplished while reading and consulting guides to academic and scientific writing.

One fundamental aspect to consider is that the students were in the initial phase of their doctoral research and studies. Hence, their subject knowledge and research methods were still developing, and while CLIL is a feasible option at middle or high school level, PhD language courses require greater caution during interventions. It was thus agreed that they would be given the opportunity to deliver a short report to check their progress in effective scientific communication towards the end of their three-year PhD courses.

The students' acquisition of the ability to speak from a PowerPoint presentation was a quicker process, and the use of figures, well-connected verbal captions, and graphic symbols and resources greatly enhanced the efficacy of communication. To keep track of the students' progress, a

certificate of assessment was issued for each candidate at the end of the 50-hour course after an oral examination (Appendix 1). The exam was mainly based on a PowerPoint presentation of their research project to their fellow students, who participated in the assessment of the speaker's clarity and efficacy of presentation.

5. Concluding remarks

ERT was an unforeseen experience that made the employment of new tools mandatory and foregrounded the new oxymoronic concept of 'remote presence'. Teachers and students alike faced huge challenges in the pandemic years, but these also provided a unique opportunity to understand the potential affordances of online teaching. The use of ERT tools has actually outlived those dire times of emergency, and many have found them convenient in a variety of circumstances. Undoubtedly, such tools save valuable time and make useful materials readily available to an interest group. Teachers have learnt and are learning to fully exploit their evolving potential, though the advantages of lessons based on human interaction are not easily overvalued. Furthermore, concerns abound about the effect of the lack of human contact on young learners' physiological development and balance, not to mention the negative effects of frequently reduced class time and decreasing attention spans. Hence, in addition to the return to traditional classroom teaching, blended teaching seems an acceptable option when necessary, especially when the digital resources function well.

As regards the specific experience of this blended PhD course at the Vanvitelli University, thanks to the resources of its well-equipped multimedia laboratory, this dimension allowed students living abroad, even outside Europe, to participate in and share a perceptible spatial dimension which erased the distance to some extent. They were able to see the whole laboratory, including their fellow students present, and the projection of their faces and upper bodies on the big screen on the laboratory wall. Verbal and conversational exchanges were thus fluent, and the sharing of information and different perspectives from diverse research domains was effective and authentic. At a content level, the unfolding of each teaching module evolved from more general information to more specific research methods and data for each selected topic. The role of the EPP lecturer was to orient the topic selection so as to foreground those that were more

engaging and easily fungible by learners of different scientific backgrounds while keeping a constant focus on the various textualities.

An important aspect of the availability of such enhanced communication channels and media is the evolution of the characteristics of the written genre, which the exploration of different research domains during the course brought to the fore. Although scientific methods and criteria move on a different plane, the use of pictures that can be enlarged, hypertextual links, and even alerts (offered by journals) are now common features in scientific articles. Enhanced abstracts (with links to the data and their graphical representations) have circulated for years. Interestingly, though no radical change has been advertised in the basic format of research articles, the possibility of reaching the original text of a cited author with one click erodes the need for long quotations in the text. Although writing a scientific article does not simply equate with writing for the web, ESP teachers in the 2020s need to foreground such digital resources when promoting the advancement of their students' publishing skills.

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Appendix 1. Certificate issued at the end of the course

Heading (to be adapted, and completed with a different logo, according to the course and cycle)

This is to certify that XXX has been awarded Grade X in:
English for Publication Purposes
PhD course in ….. – XXX… cycle
and that s/he is:

Scientific Writing and Reading	Scientific Speaking and Listening
1. *Scientific discourse comprehension:* able to read and comprehend scientific texts, to understand specific terminology, academic vocabulary and the sequence of discourse markers;	1. *Genres in Speaking and Listening:* able to analyze and convey developed, complex ideas in spoken academic genres.
2. *Scientific discourse analysis:* able to recognise the authorial disposition of the information and alignment to theories (e.g. in the Introductions of Research Articles); able to recognise authorial purposes, positioning and stance.	2. *Interactional Speaking and Listening:* able to perform complex spoken interpersonal tasks in order to elaborate and develop ideas in discussion or control flow of discussion.
3. *Scientific discourse writing (SCW). Organization and Flow:* able to write with cohesion at lexical, sentence and discourse level, according to the uses of the major research genres.	3. *Lexico-grammar:* able to choose and use vocabulary and grammar appropriate for academic/scientific communication.
4. *SCW. Lexicogrammar:* able to build meaning cohesively in writing by using varied and appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures.	4. *Pronunciation:* able to present ideas in academic settings with clear English pronunciation.
5. *SCW. Understanding the* Sources: able to support ideas for one's own authorial purpose through well-chosen citations.	
6. *SCW. Ideation and Development:* able to develop and support an original position that clearly expresses its own stance.	

Grade	*Marking criteria*	Grade	*Marking criteria*
A+	Excellence in advanced grammar and academic/scientific vocabulary; Excellence in synthesizing and analyzing ideas and notions; Excellence in listening and oral presentation skills; Excellence in scientific discourse writing.	B	Good use of grammar and academic/scientific vocabulary Evidence of very good comprehension skills and conciseness; Very good listening abilities and presentation skills; Expertise in communicating scientific discourse in written form.

A	Mastery in advanced grammar and academic/scientific vocabulary; Ability to synthesize and analyze ideas and notions; Excellent listening abilities and oral presentation skills; Mastery in communicating scientific discourse in written form.	C	Adequate use of grammar and academic/scientific vocabulary; Evidence of good comprehension skills and conciseness; Good listening abilities and presentation skills; Acceptable expertise in communicating scientific discourse in written form.

Anna Anselmo and Elena Refraschini[*]

Combining SLA Theory and Teaching Practice: "Big Bowl of Serial", or, How to Use TV Series to Become Autonomous Learners of English

Abstract

This article deals with an asynchronous, fully online English course titled "Big Bowl of Serial", which is analysed using Leo van Lier's ecology of language learning framework (2004). The current scholarly interest in multimodal content and its uses and potential benefits in the classroom (Pattemore/Muñoz 2023) is fertile ground for critically presenting "Big Bowl of Serial" as a case study. The article introduces, firstly, the critical description of "Big Bowl of Serial" (its learning objectives, the theory at its core, and its structure), and, secondly, the analysis of its features in the light of Leo van Lier's ecology of language learning and its four main constructs – relation, action, perception, and quality (2004). The article is divided into different sections accordingly: after a short introduction, there follows a descriptive section concerning the structure and aims of "Big Bowl of Serial", after which, the course is analysed using van Lier's framework (2004); the final section of the article sums up the strengths of the course that emerge from the analysis, and identifies areas that might be further developed in the future.

Keywords: Online Language Learning (OLL), TV Series, ELT, Ecology, Ecology of Language Learning

1. Introduction and research questions

This article deals with an asynchronous, fully online English course titled "Big Bowl of Serial" (hereafter BBoS), created by travel writer, EFL teacher and EFL business owner Elena Refraschini.[1] The course is a product of the technological affordances and growing popularity of online language learning (OLL) and it aims to teach Italian learners (or any learners who are proficient in Italian) how to autonomously use TV series to improve their English. OLL has proven instrumental in delivering education during the COVID-19 pandemic; furthermore, OLL has shown the potential for both

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synchronous and asynchronous learning, which have not only deconstructed some of the traditional power dynamics in the classroom (Mann *et al.* 2022: 3), but have also presented challenges regarding appropriate teaching material, content presentation, motivation, and assessment (Suárez/El-Henawy 2023: 2). BBoS takes up these challenges and aims to involve students in "a learning process that provides learner agency, responsibility, flexibility, and choice" (Bozkurt/Sharma 2020: ii). In other words, BBoS engages with learner autonomy as contextual (Cappellini *et al.* 2017: 3). Morever, against the backdrop of English language learning in Italy (Ajello 2018), BBoS is unique. Far from being a traditional English course offering learners input, correction, and assessment in a real or virtual classroom setting; it is, rather, a structured support for self-study, aimed at learners who already have at least pre-intermediate knowledge of English and basic awareness of their CEFR level. The aim of BBoS is thus to provide scaffolding for learners, and tips and tricks to be able to improve their English while using something they enjoy, that is, TV series, but in a way that produces real progress. The aim is to activate learner agency, responsibility, flexibility, choice, and autonomy through a minimum of necessary teacher guidance and through several adaptable activities that present learning techniques, rather than act as mere practice.

Based on these introductory remarks, the article aims to present BBoS as a case study and offer a critical introduction focussing on the following points:

- The critical description of BBoS: its learning objectives, the theory at its core, and its structure
- The analysis of the features of BBoS in the light of Leo van Lier's ecology of language learning and its four main constructs: relation, action, perception, and quality.
- The way(s) BBoS fills a gap in the Italian EFL market and whether it shows any room for future improvement

In order to address these points, the article first presents BBoS – course structure and aims – secondly, it presents the theoretical background that informs the analysis, i.e. Leo van Lier's ecology of language learning; thirdly, the analysis of BBoS is carried out, and, lastly, conclusions are drawn, whereby strengths emerge as well as potential areas to be developed in the future.

2. "Big Bowl of Serial": course rationale, aims, and structure

The exponential growth in production and consumption of serialized products on TV is mirrored by the proliferation of streaming platforms, the revolution in content consumption pioneered by Netflix (Bastos *et al.* 2024: 1), and the escalating social acceptability of binge-watching (Luse *et al.* 2020; Anghelcev *et al.* 2020). The field of audiovisual streaming services has boomed in Italy during the 2010s (Balbi/Magaudda 2014). Data shows that 70% of Netflix viewing happens on TV sets, indicating that TV series consumption still happens in the living room or in the bedroom, via a TV screen (Kafka 2018). With streaming TV series becoming a favourite leisure activity, the need to capitalise on this for the purpose of English language learning has increased. Webb (2014) stated that original version TV series can provide learners with large amounts of spoken input. Moreover, some studies (De Wilde *et al.* 2021; Lindgren/Muñoz, 2013; Muñoz *et al.* 2021) state that watching L2 TV is a very popular method of engaging with a foreign language outside of the classroom. Potential beneficial consequences of watching L2 multimodal material are the object of current scholarly interest (Pattemore/Muñoz 2023); in particular, extensive viewing of TV series has been pointed out as an alternative source of authentic input, with a potential for learning due to lexical richness, repeated encounters with low-frequency words, and visual image support (Pujadas/Muñoz 2019; Rodgers 2018). And while binge-watching may be useful because of massed exposure to L2 input, scholars are also researching the advantages of spaced exposure. In particular "when the learning episodes happen in a massed manner, multiple exposures to target items become redundant, causing decline in attentional processing and, consequently, lower learning gains compared to spaced exposure" (Pattemore/Muñoz 2023: 403; Carpenter 2017) BBoS builds on the growing use of streaming platforms and the burgeoning interest in TV series to offer a methodological framework that learners can use to self-train, a framework which is adaptable enough to be applied to virtually any TV series and flexible enough to accommodate both pre-intermediate and intermediate to upper-intermediate students; a framework which fosters spaced exposure and repetition of the target language in order to support acquisition.

The course is made up of ten sections. All sections contain a teacher-led component, i.e. introductory videos aimed at providing sufficient

scaffolding (Bruner/Sherwood 1976; Wood *et al.* 1976; Gonulal/Loewen 2018) by presenting rationales for each activity, by offering instructions to fruitfully carry out activities, and by establishing both teacher credentials and rapport. The teacher-led component is delivered in L1 (i.e. Italian). The reasons for this choice concern recent research in L1 use in the (virtual) classroom (Shin *et al.* 2019): according to Shin *et al.*, L1 use has been identified as a realistic choice in a learning environment, playing a valuable pedagogical role (Hall/Cook 2012), as well as requiring comprehensive conceptualisations including realistic, relational, and situational aspects (Shin *et al.* 2019: 9).

The sections in the course are here presented in order:

1. Section one is a short general introduction.
2. Section two is titled "Learning English: What Does it Mean?". This section is meant to give learners who have not been previously exposed to the mechanisms underpinning the learning of a second language, the right conceptual categories and terminology to understand the rationale behind the activities that they will carry out in the course. Section two contains several subsections: firstly, the teacher presents the four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing – and addresses the potentially uneven proficiency in each skill as inherent in the learning process (Powers 2010); secondly, the teacher presents the notions of input and output, with particular reference to Krashen's notion of comprehensible input (1982); thirdly, the teacher has recourse to the Learning Zone Model (Senninger 2017) and presents the comfort zone, the learning zone and the panic zone, as well as provide suggestions on how to stay in the learning zone; fourthly, some critical issues in language learning are discussed, i.e. the importance of a functional approach to learning grammar, the importance of recognizing passive and active L2 vocabulary knowledge, and the introduction of some strategies – such as spaced repetition and retrieval practice – useful in improving and monitoring self-learning. The aim of this section is to equip the learner with the necessary knowledge to undertake the improvement of second language learning by him- or herself, using dialogues and monologues from TV shows or movies.

3. Section three is titled "How TV Series Can Help in Language Learning" and explores the ways in which TV series can be employed for self-learning. TV series are fun, engaging and memorable; these qualities facilitate language learning (Webb/Rodgers 2009a; Webb/Rodgers 2009b); moreover, TV series facilitate picking up new vocabulary incidentally (Rodgers/Webb 2019); they also offer insight into both authentic interactions carried out in different communicative settings and the use of different registers and accents (Bilsborough 2009); finally, TV series can play a pivotal role in familiarizing students with a foreign culture (Larrea Espinar/Rodriguez 2019).

4. Section four deals with some of the most common misconceptions and mistakes that hinder language learning using TV series and contains practical advice on the kind of series to focus on depending on one's CEFR level, on the use of an active approach to language learning through TV series, and on the fruitful use of tools such as subtitles. In other words, students should select what to watch based on their competence, and, consequently, pace themselves in learning. For instance, pre-intermediate learners should preferably focus on sitcoms, which provide quotidian, easily recognizable situations and settings (Bilsborough 2009), and consequently facilitate understanding. Moreover, watching should be active, i.e. it should be accompanied by tasks – pre-, while-, and after-watching tasks (Cambridge English n.d.). The use of subtitles changes according to the learner's level: pre-intermediate learners might need to use L1 subtitles and subsequently move to English subtitles; more advanced learners (B2–C1) may only use English subtitles or prefer not to use them at all.

5. Section five contains practical information regarding: where to find clips from TV series for free, which online dictionaries to refer to should there be a need, grammar references should there be a need, and a list of websites containing TV series scripts.

6. Section six constitutes the core of the course. Here, learners are presented with 20 different activities, each named after a famous character from a TV show. The teacher briefly introduces the main rationale for the activities: using a short clip from a TV series each activity aims to facilitate practicing a specific language skill

(i.e. vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking). Activities are numbered, each contains a video introduction and illustrative slides: the teacher presents the activity and simulates the carrying out and completion of the activity for both pre-intermediate and intermediate to upper-intermediate learners. Activities do not have to be carried out in any specific order. Every activity has a download section, where worksheets are provided. Learners are encouraged to work on improving their English for 15 to 20 minutes each day, using one of the activities offered and following the procedure laid out in the introductory video. The activities target different aspects of the language learning journey:

a. Vocabulary and word-building skills: the Sheldon activity, the Walter activity, the Monica activity, the Carrie Activity

b. Writing: the Ted activity, the Nanny activity, the Amy activity, the Rory activity, the Jack activity, the Don activity

c. Speaking and pronunciation: the Pritchett activity, the Moira Activity, The Michael Activity, the Joe activity, the Philip activity, the Dre activity, the Elliot activity

d. Listening comprehension: the Molly activity

e. Grammar: the Lisa Activity

f. Collocations: the Elanor and Chidi Activity

Many of the activities contain integrated skills tasks: the Moira activity, for example, requires students to read the script from a scene, identify terms they believe may be hard to pronounce, and then watch the scene to find out the correct pronunciation.

7. After dealing with the appropriate techniques to harness the comprehensible input offered by TV series, section seven gives learners useful study techniques, aimed at practicing, assimilating, actively using the language learned. Here, various common teaching tools are shared, such as flashcards and memory games (the templates for which are available to download and personalize).

8. The last sections (eight to ten) contain follow up information, a short feedback questionnaire and the opportunity to request a live online session with Elena Refraschini. The contents of the session can be requested and agreed upon with the teacher herself.

3. Theoretical background

The present article takes its cue from Leo van Lier's ecology of language learning (2004). In particular, two of van Lier's foundational concepts are drawn on: firstly, his notion of ecological linguistics, that is, a linguistics which "focuses on language as relations between people and the world, and on language learning as ways of relating more effectively to people and the world" (van Lier 2004: 4); secondly, his definition of ecology in the closing words of his monograph:

> Ecology is presented here as a way of thinking about teaching and learning that should be applicable in all situations, and as a way of working that takes the engaged and active learner as a starting point. […] It is just a way of thinking about teaching and learning in all its complexity, a way of looking at language as a tool of many uses, and as a key component of all human meaning-making activity. It envisions classrooms as busy workshops with lots of activity and learners who have things they want to accomplish, and who, with the help of teachers, fellow learners, and other sources of assistance, find the tools they need to achieve their goals. (van Lier 2004: 224)

Within this framework, ecology is articulated into four main categories: perception, action, relation, and quality (van Lier 2004). In terms of perception, learners are active explorers and all their senses are engaged in the facilitation of meaning (van Lier 2004). Action is required in the learning process: "learners must act to gather the linguistic information they need by doing the activities (e.g., projects and tasks) structured in the curriculum with scaffolding provided by the teacher." (Mei *et al.* 2022: 234). Relation concerns language learning as identity formation, in so far as learners respond to new stimuli and a new culture in the new language; consequently, their ability to relate to the stimuli and the host community (e.g. their teacher and peers) is conducive to learning. From an ecology of language learning perspective, the quality of education should not be assessed through standardized testing; quality manifests through engagement with the learning process and the learning environment (van Lier 2004). Agency is the core element interacting with perception, action, relation and quality. A passive learner will not learn; successful learning depends more on learner initiative than merely on input: "agency is closely connected to identity, and this emphasises the social and dialogical

side of agency: it depends not only on the individual, but also on the environment" (van Lier 2010: 5). Language learning is an area of activity and the classroom is a community of practice (van Lier 2004).

In this ecosystem, learners are autonomous, i.e. they are allowed to define the meaning of their own acts within their social context (van Lier 2004). Within an ecosystem, including any social ecosystem (a family, a classroom, a school – see Bronfenbrenner 1996) a large number of influences are present in a partially chaotic, unpredictable and uncontrolled way. Yet, somehow, among all the movement and interaction, a social system and a complex order emerge. This order, which is dynamic rather than static, provides affordances for active participants in the setting and learning emerges as part of affordances being picked up and exploited for further action. This view of situated learning is quite different from the assumptions of scientific research in which every input has an output and every effect has an identifiable cause preceding it. (van Lier 2004: 8) Such a holistic approach is useful in analysing some of the strengths of BBoS, in particular the course's emphasis on learner agency, engagement, and autonomy.

4. "Big Bowl of Serial" and van Lier's ecology of language learning

Recently, van Lier's perspective has been applied to online learning settings (Liu/Chao 2017; Mei *et al.* 2022). The present section aims to apply van Lier's insight to BBoS, a fully online course, which, while containing asynchronous teacher-led components, is, in fact, aimed at boosting structured self-study and self-learning opportunities and providing methodology for growth in learner autonomy. There is, therefore, no classroom setting, even though learners can request an end-course session with Elena Refraschini. Van Lier's ecology of language learning is used here as it is a versatile and adaptable construct, useful in analysing language learning opportunities that stray from conventional classroom-based, teacher-led learning environments, insofar as learning ecosystems can exist outside the classroom and the situatedness of learning and learner agency can be supported via online and digital tools, while teacher scaffolding can be easily provided in online learning settings.

In BBoS, scaffolding is provided in two main ways: firstly, section two offers a concise – albeit perforce simplistic – guide to some notions in second/foreign

language acquisition. Stephen Krashen's ground-breaking theories, currently lying at the basis of some popular English courses (Wall Street English n.d.), are offered learners as an emancipating tool: the notion of comprehensible input, for instance, can be influential in debunking the idea that uncritical exposure to the second/foreign language equates learning. While exposure is instrumental and facilitates incidental language learning (Schmitt/Schmitt 2020), it must be graded and complemented by achievable tasks. Familiarizing students with Krashen's well-known (i+1) hypothesis – "we acquire by understanding language that contains a structure a bit beyond our current level of competence" (Krashen 1982; Lichtman/VanPatten 2021) – is meant to offer BBoS students realistic expectations: TV series need to be accessible based on the learner's current language competence (i.e. watching *Peaky Blinders*[1] as a B1 student may result in considerable frustration); also, TV series cannot be used as comprehensible input in their entirety, but in order to carry out structured tasks that might facilitate learning and improve knowledge of the second language short excerpts from an episode should be identified. The use of Krashen's notion of comprehensible input is aimed at empowering learners by sharing learning techniques, so that students may eventually become their own teachers.

The second way in which Refraschini provides scaffolding for learners is through the 20 activities in BBoS: not only are the activities thoroughly presented and exemplified, but these are built in such a way as to produce awareness in the learners as to the processes of language learning. The Walter activity (see Appendix 1), for instance, teaches learners how to create their personal word clouds. By watching a short excerpt from *Breaking Bad* (season 1, episode 1), learners select a keyword and then build a set of semantic associations around it, learning new words or new acceptations for each word, in the process. Learners are further asked to write example sentences for each new word they added to their word cloud. This is a structured procedure learners can use to expand their vocabulary and fruitfully employ an online dictionary to do so. In addition, Refraschini suggests using NAmE Dictionaries (e.g., https://www.merriam-webster.com), because she aims to teach the NAmE variety of English, which is her unique selling point in the Italian English-learning market.

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[1] See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2442560/ for more information on *Peaky Blinders*. [Last accessed 10 December 2024].

Besides providing scaffolding, Refraschini's BBoS engages van Lier's four components of an ecological approach to language learning:

1. **Perception**. BBoS is conceived to engage the learners' senses: sight and hearing are involved in watching teacher-led components as well as clips from TV series. Touch is also involved – interaction with the course is dependent on a device and on the use of a keyboard and mouse pad; it also implies the use of pen and paper as activities are provided in the shape of downloadable and printable worksheets.

2. **Action**. Action and agency are pivotal to BBoS as the course is built around the notion of learner autonomy: "Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action (see Little 1991: 4); autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes" (Holec 1981: 3; see Benson 2007; Smith 2008). While in BBoS students may not be actively responsible for correction and assessment, and may not select their methods and techniques, they are actively responsible for setting their learning objectives, choosing contents (the activities in BBoS are applicable to any series of the learner's choosing), setting pace, time, and place for their learning (activities can be carried 24/7 in any location as long as a wireless connection is available), identifying stages for their learning (e.g. more challenging activities may be left for a different time, while more realistically achievable activities may be carried out straight away; BBoS does not arrange activities in order of difficulty).

Relation. In BBoS relation is embodied as language use that builds, maintains, and expands connections at a physical, social, and symbolic levels (van Lier 2010). Learners develop awareness of their learning processes. Moreover, they interact with serialized TV products whose language is the learning objective. Actively watching TV series, learners are incidentally exposed to varieties of the language they are learning, new vocabulary, new lexicogrammar, they are exposed to spoken interaction that strongly resembles authentic language use, to cultural elements and habits which can socialize them into the culture of the second/foreign language. Cultural and sociolinguistic elements in BBoS are particularly relevant in reshaping learners' identities as they interact with North American culture

and language varieties. BBoS thus produces multi-layered interactions with one's own learning – fostering awareness as well as autonomy – and cultural products in the second/foreign language. These elements can be fed back into the course itself if the learners wish to come full circle and interact with their teacher through an online session. Lastly, interaction is repeatedly fostered by the teacher in terms of online social media engagement: Refraschini runs a website (www.ingleseamericano.it) and an Instagram profile (@ingleseamericano.it) and she urges learners to share their learning experience on Instagram or to reach her via direct messages (DMs) to discuss feedback and address any questions or doubts they may have.

Quality. In van Lier's ecology of learning framework, quality can be assessed through appreciation of learner experience and well-being. In 2022, Mei *et al.* had recourse to learner questionnaires in order to identify learner views of the learning experience. In the case of BBoS, a learner questionnaire is provided at the very end, but only contains six general questions: "was section 2 (SLA theory) useful to you?" (learners can select a score from 1 to 5); "was section 2 (SLA theory) clearly explained?" (learners can select a score from 1 to 5); "were activities (sections 6 and 7) clearly explained?" (learners can select a score from 1 to 5); "would you improve anything in the course?" (open question); "leave your feedback here (this will not be published)" (open question); "write a review of the course for my website and let me know if you wish to remain anonymous" (open question). The questionnaire is both a way to enhance relation and a way of better understanding learner experience and quality.

5. Critical conclusion and future developments

The analysis of BBoS in this article sees many strengths and some room for improvement. Van Lier's ecology of language learning framework proves particularly useful, in this respect, as its four main constructs identify defining dynamics in learning ecosystems and, therefore, highlight potential areas that require attention. BBoS addresses B1 to C2 learners who show awareness of their language level and can correctly self-assess; it addresses learners who are passionate about serialized TV products beyond the language learning process; it addresses learners who do not necessarily desire to commit to a synchronous online course or an in-person course, but, due to time/work/lifestyle constraints prefer to be in charge of their own

learning in terms of time, place, pace, staging, and contents. Refraschini provides ample scaffolding for learners in BBoS, by introducing some basic notions of SLA theory into the syllabus, so that learners can manage their own expectations as well as learning, and by offering structured yet versatile activities for students to carry out, as exemplified by her. Student agency is thus supported and stimulated by these guidelines for self-learning and autonomy. Learners' ability to develop a relational identity as they interact with course content is also fostered; in fact, the course offers primarily cultural content, which is further sociolinguistically marked. That way, learners are exposed to both culture and varieties of NAmE, which interacts with their identity-making through the second/foreign language. Agency is worked into BBoS thanks to the technology that facilitates OLL: technology combines with the online learning environment offered by BBoS to create specific affordances for learning – whereby affordances are understood as situated in the relationship between users and environment (Jitpaisarnwattana *et al.* 2022). According to van Lier, affordances are relationships between learners and the environment that support a potential or awareness of actions towards their learning goals (2010, 2004). "In other words, the educational affordance of an online learning environment is available and perceived by learners, allowing them to take further actions and accomplish their goals." (Jitpaisarnwattana *et al.* 2022: 4)

BBoS is a remarkable tool as it stands, but there is room for improvement should one plan for a 2.0 version. Suggested developments that might improve the course's ecosystem are as follows: firstly, using L1 (Italian) as the main language of the course serves the purpose of making the course more inclusive in marketing terms, but in terms of the learning environment, designing two separate courses (pre-intermediate and intermediate to upper-intermediate) and offering graded versions in the L2 to support both groups of learners might improve relation and agency and might facilitate emerging language patterns. Relation might further be supported by creating an online community – through a dedicated IG profile, for instance – and helping learners interact and establish peer-to-peer relationships as well as fostering teacher-learner rapport. Relation can also be facilitated by incorporating asynchronous learning into a synchronous online environment to foster interpersonal communication (Mei *et al.* 2022: 231). Lastly, quality might be best investigated by devising an improved feedback section in the course: in

particular, the learner questionnaire should be more detailed and questions more specific as to perceived learner success, learner well-being and learner experience, with direct reference to both theoretical sections (in particular section two) and the practice section (six).

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Giuseppe Balirano and Maria De Santo[*]

Learning English in the Digital Age: eTandem, Autonomy and Intercultural Communication in Online Educational Environments

Abstract

This study explores how informal language learning activities, such as eTandem, can be enhanced through digital environments designed to foster learner autonomy, improve language acquisition, and promote intercultural communication. eTandem, an evolution of the original face-to-face Tandem language exchange, leverages emerging communication technologies to enable students to engage in authentic language exchanges while benefiting from the flexibility and accessibility of online platforms. Set within a language university context, the research investigates how eTandem has been integrated into online educational environments, specifically the eLearning platform Moodle. By integrating the potential of digitally-enhanced educational spaces with the pedagogical principles of learner autonomy, this study suggests that eTandem may serve as an effective strategy for enhancing language learning outcomes in higher education, particularly in fostering communication and intercultural dialogue among students. From the students' perspective, eTandem is seen as an opportunity not only to improve their language skills but also to connect with peers from different cultures, enriching their overall learning experience. The study also emphasises the importance of providing structured guidance, incorporating reflective practices, and fostering collaborative engagement to fully realise the pedagogical potential of eTandem.

Keywords: eTandem, ELT, digital educational platforms, learner autonomy, intercultural communication

1. Introduction

This study examines how the affordances of digital technologies and novel educational environments may enhance traditional language learning

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The authors jointly contributed to the design and implementation of the research and to data analysis and discussion; specifically, Giuseppe Balirano is responsible for the sections: Introduction, Enhancing intercultural awareness through multimodal creativity and Conclusive remarks and future developments; Maria De Santo is responsible for the sections: Theoretical background, The context of the study, The eTandem corner and The students' perspective on eTandem.

methodologies, such as Tandem language exchanges. Tandem refers to an open learning approach through which two individuals with different native languages work together to improve their language proficiency, while developing at the same time their knowledge of each other's culture (Brammaert 1996). It fosters not only intercultural competence but also collaboration and independence in language learning through "authentic communication with a native speaker" (Brammaerts 1996:13).

Central to Tandem learning are the principles of reciprocity and autonomy. According to the principle of reciprocity, both partners are expected to contribute equally to the learning process and gain equal benefits from the experience, as learning in Tandem is based "on the reciprocal dependence and mutual support of the partners" (Brammaerts 1996: 14). In line with the principle of autonomy (Holec 1981), considered as a capacity for self-direction (Gremmo/Riley 1995; Holec 1996), "all tandem partners are responsible for their own learning" (Brammaerts 1996: 14), by defining objectives, activities, and learning schedules. The distinctiveness of Tandem compared to other conventional methods of language learning, as well as the originality of its contribution, stems from its integration of autonomy, reciprocity and interculturality (Woodin 2018). As a result, Tandem language learners have the opportunity to:

(a) contribute equally to the learning process and share benefits to the same extent;
(b) improve their abilities in the foreign language while facilitating their partner's language learning, acting as both learners and teachers;
(c) take responsibility for their own learning (Holec 1981) and make decisions by setting plans, choosing objectives and methods (Little 1991).

In other words, successful Tandem learning relies on interdependence (Kohonen 1992), collaboration, and mutual support in a context that promotes students' autonomy and enhances their engagement in the learning process.

The original principles of Tandem learning have undergone continuous adaptation and reassessment, largely influenced by "the fast-evolving language learning situations along with the linguistic and sociocultural realities of an increasingly globalised world" (Tardieu and Horgues 2019: 1). Technology

has played a crucial role in the evolution and transformation of Tandem language learning methodologies. To exploit the potential of the Internet for language learning in Tandem, *The International E-mail Tandem Network* was established in 1994 by the Ruhr-Univarsität Bochum, together with its partner universities of Oviedo and Sheffield. The network's aim was to enable students "to work together across national boundaries in order to learn languages from one another and to learn more about one another 's culture by learning in Tandem" (Brammaerts 1996: 22).

Since its original format based on face-to-face meetings, Tandem learning has evolved significantly with the advent of Computer-Mediated Communication (Herring 1996), developing into telecollaborative language learning projects (Little 2016), based on asynchronous e-mail exchanges (Little *et al.* 1999; Ushioda 2000) or synchronous communication through Multiple User Domain, Object-Oriented (MOO) platforms (O'Rourke 2005). The integration of Web 2.0 tools (Pomino/Salom 2016), social media platforms (Alberth *et al.* 2019), and applications that facilitate the autonomous search of tandem language partners has further contributed to the spread of electronic Tandem (eTandem) (Cziko 2013), the digital equivalent of face-to-face Tandem, in both informal and institutional contexts.

eTandem is widely adopted in university contexts as it provides language learners with more opportunities to study and practise a language through authentic interaction with peers. Moreover, it fosters intercultural dialogue, which, according to the Council of Europe (2008: 46), "aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse world views and practices, to increase co-operation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other".

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how the potential of eTandem in enhancing learners' linguistic and intercultural competence (Tian/Wang 2010) can be further amplified through digital educational environments and tools specifically designed to support autonomous language learning.

2. Theoretical background

This study draws on the evolving pedagogy at the intersection of English Language Teaching (ELT) and digital technologies, building on concepts

such as learner autonomy (Benson/Voller 1997; Holec 1981; Little 1991, 2022;) and technology-mediated language learning (Levy 1997; Chapelle and Sauro 2017; Chun *et al.* 2016; Stockwell 2022; White 2003).

Learner autonomy, a well-established and extensively researched concept in the field of ELT, empowers learners to take responsibility for their own learning processes, fostering a sense of agency and accountability that contributes to more effective and individualised language acquisition. Initially defined by Holec as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1981: 3), the principle of autonomy in language learning has been mainly conceptualised as a skill that learners progressively develop. Little (1991: 4), in turn, defines autonomy as a "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" and further highlights the "teaching/learning dynamic in which learners plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their own learning" (Little 2022: 64), emphasising the role of teachers in the progressive development of learner autonomy.

Benson and Voller (1997) outlined five different ways in which the word 'autonomy' has been used in language learning (Benson/Voller 1997: 1–2, emphasis in the original):

1. for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. for the exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning;
5. for the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

A broader definition of autonomy was provided by Oxford (1999) who affirms that autonomy is: "the (a) ability and willingness to perform a language task without assistance, with adaptability related to the situational demands, with transferability to other relevant contexts, and with reflection, accompanied by (b) relevant action (the use, usually conscious and intentional, of appropriate learning strategies) reflecting both ability and willingness" (Oxford 1999: 110–111). Oxford (1990, 2016) also contributed to the understanding of learner autonomy through her work on language learning strategies, by highlighting the importance of

strategic competence in autonomous learning. She identified a complex set of language learning strategies – actions that learners adopt to both process the language and manage their learning process. Cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies are essential as they enhance learners' ability to adapt to different learning contexts and transfer linguistic and meta-cognitive skills across various tasks and educational settings, thus promoting autonomous learning.

Learner autonomy in language education, initially associated with self-instruction in language learning (Dickinson 1987) and individualization (Brookes/Grundy 1998), has gradually been represented as a skill that can be nurtured in social contexts, through interdependence and collaborative efforts among learners. The literature on autonomy consistently highlights its social dimension (Murray 2014), along with a focus on collaborative approaches (Johnson *et al.* 1998) and communities of practice (Wenger 1998).

The relationship between independence and collaboration, which is essential to Tandem learning, was also highlighted by Little (1996), who stated that: "If learning is essentially an interactive process, then the development of learner autonomy is a collaborative matter; and the support that learners can give to one another plays a crucial role in the transition from dependence on the teacher to wholly independent task performance" (Little 1996: 31).

In sum, autonomy is neither a "single, easily described behaviour" nor a "steady state achieved by learners" (Little 1990: 7); rather it is the result of a global and dynamic process that arises from the interaction between individual agency and social engagement. It is characterised as "individual and collaborative, cognitive and affective, organizational and communicative" (Little 2015: 25).
The concept of autonomy in language learning has gradually evolved from an emphasis on individual independence to a more fully developed framework that includes social interaction, strategic competence, and technological integration, thus highlighting its different dimensions.

The process of autonomisation (Holec 1981) is inherently linked to teaching and learning environments. Autonomous language learning, initially explored in school classrooms through learner involvement in curriculum negotiation, classrooms activities, and the use of learning materials (Dam

1995), gradually found its optimal implementation in educational spaces such as self-access centres (Gremmo/Riley 1995; Gardner/Miller 1999, 2011; Sheerin 1991, 1997), where technology provided the foundation for the development of learner autonomy. This interrelation between technology and autonomy has continued to evolve through technological innovations and pedagogical approaches developed over the years.

Specifically, the advent of Web 2.0 offered new opportunities to enhance autonomous learning (Cappellini *et al.* 2017) through Social Networking Systems and online learning platforms, such as the Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle. These technologies have facilitated the creation of digital educational environments (De Santo 2024) conceptualised as social learning spaces (Murray *et al.* 2014), where learners engage in authentic social practices and collaborative learning experiences, develop autonomous learning abilities, and benefit from collective knowledge and support.

Further technological advances emerged in ELT during the period of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges *et al.* 2020) and were consolidated in the post-pandemic period (Balirano/Rasulo 2024). This included Social Media-based EFL teaching and learning (Zulli 2024) and the most recent AI-driven educational technologies (Wei 2023). These new trends in ELT, by leveraging the affordances of digital technologies, not only enhanced students' proficiency in the target language but also aimed to develop different abilities, such as autonomy, collaboration, and intercultural communication, which are also the core principles of Tandem learning.

3. The context of the study

Over the last two decades, Tandem language learning has been one of the primary projects promoted by the Language Centre (CLAOR) at the University of Naples L'Orientale, with the aim to promote learner autonomy and improve students' proficiency in foreign languages, particularly English. Additionally, tandem seeks to support the concept of Internationalisation at Home, defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight 2004: 11). Through Tandem exchanges, Italian students can practice English with English-speaking peers from various countries, while international students learn Italian from their Tandem partners to better integrate into the university

environment and follow lectures conducted in Italian. In this context, Tandem language exchanges are not intended to replace formal language instruction but rather complement institutional language courses and promote autonomous language learning within the Self-Access Centre.

Since the late 1990s, when the University's Language Centre was awarded the European Language Label[1] for the establishment of the Self-Access Lab (1998), it has consistently aimed to enhance language learning and promote autonomy by providing ways to study languages in a technology-based learning environment, namely the Self-Access Centre (Vincent 2002; Cordisco 2003; De Santo 2009; De Santo *et al.* 2014), where learners are offered multimedia resources, supervision by language counsellors, and peer learning initiatives such as group work and Tandem sessions.

To address the growing demand for online language learning opportunities and provide students of English with authentic language learning experiences, the Language Centre has progressively expanded Tandem language exchanges into online settings. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project has been conducted online, which has significantly influenced the tools and methods used to implement the project, as well as the learning outcomes.

3.1. The eTandem project

This study specifically focuses on eTandem language exchanges between Italian university students of English and English-speaking learners of Italian from international universities. The project, started during the COVID-19 pandemic, was originally conducted entirely online and organised following a series of structured steps. Students were paired by the Centre's language counsellors based on responses to an initial questionnaire, which collected information regarding their proficiency level in the target language, degree course, additional languages spoken, and preferred times and days for scheduling meetings. Subsequently, the counsellors introduced the project to participants by providing detailed information on its principles and implementation, including

[1] The European Language Label is "an award encouraging the development of new techniques and initiatives in the field of language learning and teaching, as well as the enhancement of intercultural awareness across Europe" (European Commission n.d.).

guidelines for scheduling meetings and suggested activities to facilitate Tandem exchanges. Throughout the project, counsellors monitored the participants progress via emails and online questionnaires, offering support when needed. Students were asked to notify the counsellors of their first meeting and then submit an email describing and summarising their language exchange experience at the end of the project. They were also encouraged to contact the coordinators to seek assistance or report any issues, such as the difficulties scheduling meetings or other organisational problems.

Informal feedback collected from emails and questionnaires during the first two years of the eTandem project indicated that students needed additional support, particularly during the initial stages of the program. It became evident that their learning experience could be enhanced by creating a space where they could share experiences, familiarise themselves with the counsellors and other participants, and access resources relevant to language exchanges.

To address these needs, and alongside the digitalisation of certain learning activities and resources – such as the virtualisation of the self-access centre to allow students to study autonomously online, free from time and space constraints of the physical self-access centre – a dedicated digital space was developed to support eTandem learning. The project's structure was furtherly adjusted to promote greater interaction among participants, provide tools that facilitate autonomy and self-awareness, and introduce final multimedia tasks to consolidate learning outcomes.

3.2. Methodology and data collection

In order to explore the impact of digital educational contexts on eTandem, a qualitative analysis was conducted on a corpus of data collected from 30 students participating in the project and enrolled to the *eTandem corner* in the academic year 2023–24. Data collection employed a combination of methods, including observation of forum interactions, analysis of online questionnaires and learner logs, and examination of students' multimodal final tasks. These tools were designed to document participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on the eTandem project, including their motivations for participating, perceived challenges, and insights into the linguistic and cultural benefits derived from the exchange.

The observation of forum interactions involved monitoring student exchanges within the digital environment. Specifically, the forum in the *eTandem corner* served as a dedicated space where participants could introduce themselves to other community members, share expectations, and express personal opinions about their eTandem learning experience. Participants' posts analysed in Section 5 were collected from the first thread in the Welcome forum.

Data from online questionnaires were gathered at three key stages: initial, mid-term and final phases of the project. These questionnaires, available in the eTandem corner in the section dedicated to monitoring and self-assessment, provided valuable insights into the evolving perspectives of participants at different points in time. However, for the purpose of this initial study, only data from the mid-term and final questionnaire will be discussed, in conjunction with their initial perspectives as outlined in the Welcome forum. This will provide an overview of their viewpoints throughout different phases of the project.

The dataset was further enriched by the multimodal texts produced by students at the conclusion of the project. These outputs will be examined in Section 6 to observe students' use of various multimodal resources – such as text, images, and videos – to facilitate intercultural communication and express cultural identities.

4. The *eTandem corner*

The *eTandem corner* is an academic space designed specifically for students participating in the eTandem project at the Language Centre of the University of Naples L'Orientale. This online environment, implemented on the University's Moodle-based elearning platform, serves as a supportive learning space that facilitates the development of learner autonomy and intercultural collaboration. Its primary objective is to improve students' learning experiences, foster reflective practices, and enhance critical thinking skills. It provides students with access to various resources, such as project-related information, self-assessment tools, and activities for metacognitive reflection. The *eTandem corner* not only promotes autonomy by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning process but also stimulates interaction among participants through forums, thereby enhancing both linguistic competence and cultural understanding.

In order to push learners' metacognitive development and autonomy, the digital space is structured according to the pedagogical model developed by Cotterall and Murray (2009), which identifies five key affordances: personalisation, engagement, experimentation, reflection, and support. Hence, through eTandem exchanges, students are encouraged to engage in activities that explore authentic topics and issues of personal relevance, and to reflect on their learning process while receiving support from language counsellors.

Like other forms of autonomous language, online Tandem exchanges require guidance and support from experts, such as teachers or language counsellors, who provide scaffolding strategies throughout the learning process. Within the context of this study, the role of the language counsellor has been pivotal in supporting students in engaging with the Moodle-based digital educational environment.

4.1. The phases of the project

The eTandem corner provides a structured framework supporting the different phases of the project, including:

- welcome session;
- self-assessment of the initial level of competence;
- project self-monitoring;
- monitoring sessions;
- final multimodal product.

After the formation of the Tandem pairs, students access the virtual space and begin familiarising themselves with both the environment – through forums, guides and checklists – and the members of the learning community, including language counsellors, their Tandem partner and other peers participating in the project. In this virtual space, students have the chance to self-assess their language proficiency using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) self-assessment grid.[2]

[2] The self-assessment grid illustrates the levels of proficiency described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The self-assessment grid (i.e., Table 2 [CEFR 3.3]) displaying the Common Reference levels is available online at https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-2-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-self-assessment-grid (Last accessed: September 30, 2024).

The self-monitoring phase involves the compilation of a learning diary, which provides both students and counsellors with a detailed record of the participants' language learning experience. Students are encouraged to maintain a log of their eTandem sessions, by documenting activities, language use, and intercultural interactions. This log also serves as a tool for metacognitive reflection, enabling students to evaluate their own learning progress and set future goals.

Additionally, learners complete ongoing questionnaires designed to provide language counsellors with feedback on the overall progress and effectiveness of the project. Pedagogical mentoring, defined as "the guidance by a teacher or facilitator during a virtual exchange to support student engagement, collaboration and learning" (Gutiérrez *et al.* 2022: 152), was integral to the eTandem exchanges, particularly during the initial and final phases. Pre-mentoring and reflective-mentoring (O'Dowd *et al.* 2020) were implemented through a series of activities that accompanied students throughout their eTandem experience. Initial pre-mentoring was facilitated through interviews, forum posts, and the provision of short guides and checklists, while the concluding phases involved self-assessment and metacognitive reflection through online questionnaires.

The eTandem project has also been enriched by offering students the occasion to create a final multimodal learning product, which they post to the virtual space at the end of the project. This digital environment, in sum, has been designed as a place where students can share ideas and activities, collaborate using the communication tools provided by the e-learning platform, receive guidance and support from language counsellors, and publish their final learning products.

5. The students' perspective on eTandem

Central to the *eTandem corner* is the active engagement between students participating in the project. This interaction is facilitated through a Welcome forum, where students are encouraged to build a community of practice (Lave/Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) by introducing themselves and expressing their expectations regarding the Tandem language learning program. Comments posted in the Welcome forum in the online Self-Access Lab provided a way to observe students' perspectives on this learning methodology and their expectations for their learning experience,

thus serving as an instrument to perform an initial needs analysis of the learners.

Table 1 displays students' posts in the Welcome forum and highlights their perceptions of the Tandem project and the goals they have when engaging in this intercultural language exchange. The data presented consists of students' comments categorised into four distinct themes based on their motivations and perceptions regarding participation in eTandem, namely, judgments and perceptions, cultural and social engagement, language skill enhancement, and academic advancement and career preparation.

Students' comments in the Welcome forum	
Category	*Posts*
Judgments and perceptions	1. I saw Tandem as an amazing opportunity 2. Practising with a native speaker is the best way to get familiar with the language; it's also more fun and engaging 3. I am doing the Tandem project because there is no better way to learn a language than with native speakers 4. I want to jump at the chance my university gave me including in this incredible experience.
Cultural and social engagement	5. I decided to participate in this project to meet people interested in Italy and learning Italian 6. I would like to meet new friends 7. I decided to participate in the Tandem project to learn about new cultures 8. I enrolled in the Tandem project to help with Italian 9. I chose to participate in this project because I like to meet new people and learn about new cultures 10. … to meet people with similar interests 11. I decided to join to Tandem project to meet new people who live in another part of the world also teaching them a little bit of Italian 12. My motivation was to meet people interested in improving their Italian and to learn more about Italian culture 13. I hope to be able to connect with others and learn Italian culture

Students' comments in the Welcome forum	
Category	Posts
Language skill enhancement	14. I decided to participate in this project because practicing with a native speaker is definitely the best way to improve a language
	15. I decided to join the Tandem project to improve my speaking and grammatical skills
	16. I decided to participate in the Tandem project with the aim of improving my speaking skills
	17. The motivation that led me to participate in the eTandem project is my desire to practice English with a native speaker, improve my speaking, and increase my fluency
	18. I would like to improve my Italian
	19. I enrolled in the Tandem project to improve my English
	20. What led me to participate in the Tandem project is my goal of further improving my speaking skills
	21. I chose to participate in this project to improve my spoken English
	22. … to improve my speaking abilities
	23. … to improve my Italian speaking skills
Academic advancement and career preparation	24. … to have a better chance of passing the exam
	25. … to increase my chances of passing the exam;
	26. I hope to learn something new and improve my knowledge
	27. I wanted to gain Italian knowledge before I go abroad to Rome next year
	28. … because I hope to study in Rome my sophomore year
	29. I hope to further advance my Italian because I want to learn a third language
	30. I am considering minoring in Italian

Table 1. Students' comments in the Welcome forum.

As can be observed in Table 1, the first category, 'judgments and perceptions', reflects the students' initial expectations on the project (comments 1–4) and highlights their motivation (Deci and Ryan 2020) for participating in Tandem exchanges. Statements such as "I saw Tandem as an amazing

opportunity" (1) and "there is no better way to learn a language than with native speakers" (3) express their appreciation for the initiative and suggest that students perceive Tandem as a valuable learning experience that offers benefits beyond traditional language courses.

The second category, namely 'cultural and social engagement' (comments 5–13), reflects students' willingness to broaden social networks and increase cultural understanding. Statements such as "I chose to participate in this project because I like to meet new people and learn about new cultures" (9) and "I decided to join the Tandem project to meet new people who live in another part of the world also teaching them a little bit of Italian" (11) underscore their view that interaction with others in meaningful social contexts may significantly enhance intercultural awareness.

Comments in the third category, 'language skill enhancement' (comments 14–23), focus on the development of specific language skills, particularly speaking proficiency. For instance, the statements "I decided to participate in the Tandem project with the aim of improving my speaking skills" (16) and "The motivation that led me to participate in the eTandem project is my desire to practice English with a native speaker, improve my speaking, and increase my fluency" (17) emphasise the desire to enhance oral fluency and acquire language-specific competencies. These comments suggest a goal-oriented approach, as students are aware of their linguistic shortcomings and seek specific opportunities to address them, aligning with the literature on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that highlights the challenges of language learner in mastering speaking skills (Thornbury 2005; Hughes/Reed 2017; Munro/Thomson 2022; Goh/Liu 2023). Data collected show students' awareness that speaking is considered one of the most challenging skills. Moreover, the posts in the fourth section, 'academic advancement and career preparation' (comments 24–30), reveal that participation in eTandem is also tied to tangible outcomes, such as improved grades, future study abroad opportunities, or language proficiency required for professional advancement. According to the students, language exchanges offer "a better chance of passing the exam" (24) and help prepare for career advancement, as evidenced by statements such as "I wanted to gain Italian knowledge before I go abroad to Rome next year" (27) and "I hope to study in Rome my sophomore year" (28).

In sum, the distribution of comments across categories reveals that, while a majority of students are motivated by language skill enhancement (indicating a clear awareness of their educational needs), there is also a strong attention to cultural and social engagement. This dual focus highlights the importance of integrating social and cultural elements in language education, as students are not only looking to improve linguistic proficiency but are also seeking meaningful intercultural interactions. Furthermore, the comments in the 'judgments and perceptions' category indicate a highly positive attitude towards the eTandem project (e.g., "Practising with a native speaker is the best way to get familiar with the language; it's also more fun and engaging" and "I want to jump at the chance my university gave me including in this incredible experience"), suggesting that students effectively consider it as an innovative and effective complement to traditional language learning methodologies. The presence of comments linked to 'academic advancement and career preparation' further illustrates that students are approaching the project strategically to meet their long-term academic and professional goals.

As previously mentioned, the students' perspective on eTandem has been collected in different phases of the project with the double aim to monitor the program and offer participants frequent opportunities to reflect on the learning path, activities, and objectives. Following the analysis of the initial comments in the forum, the mid-term questionnaire provides a feedback that is essential to the exploration of students' reflection on project. To this aim, Table 2 reports participants' responses regarding learning objectives and activities carried on during language exchanges:

Participants' description of learning objectives and activities reported in mid-term questionnaire
1. We are mainly focusing on vocabulary, curiosities, and cultural aspects, especially the differences between the two languages, trying to improve speaking skills. Sometimes, I answer her questions or clarify grammatical difficulties, correct her pronunciation, or recommend sources where she can deepen her understanding of certain topics.
2. We are working on translating from Italian to English and conjugating verbs in the present tense in Italian.
3. For grammar, we are focusing on the conjugation of *essere* and *avere* in Italian and idioms in English. Regarding cultural aspects, we have talked about food, national holidays, work, school life, and immigration.

Participants' description of learning objectives and activities reported in mid-term questionnaire
4. We are discussing about phrasal verbs, slang, and also Italian grammar.
5. We are comparing cultural differences.
6. Currently, we are focusing on the most popular idioms and phrasal verbs in the United States and Italy.
7. Usually, we discuss each other's grammar mistakes and speaking in general.
8. During our sessions, we mostly read and converse. Initially, we have free conversations, and then we read and translate texts together.
9. Phrasal verbs (in English), fixed expressions, idioms.
10. For English, we are focusing on pronunciation and grammar questions, differences between more colloquial and formal forms, and nuances of meaning. For Italian, we are concentrating on basic grammar (verb conjugation, gender and number agreement of adjectives and articles) and basic vocabulary.
11. Everyday verbs and vocabulary.
12. Mainly cultural aspects – differences. The vocabulary that emerges from the conversations is very varied since we talk about many topics.
13. For Italian, we are focusing a lot on verb conjugation. From a lexical point of view, she learns new words from different fields and colloquial expressions for conversation every time.
14. For English, we focus a lot on conversation and the social aspects of our respective countries. We also do review exercises on English grammar topics I have difficulty with (like conditional sentences), and she helps me a lot with exercises like fill-in-the-gap for my English exam preparation.
15. Regarding Italian for her, we have focused on conversation and verb exercises, as she doesn't have the opportunity to practice with a native speaker. For English for me, we have concentrated on word formation, which is my weak point, and conversation.
16. We are working on *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto*, when to use *essere* and *avere*, and essential vocabulary for daily life.
17. We focus a lot on the present tense when speaking Italian since that is my current level. We don't really stick to a specific grammar concept; I usually ask her questions about certain verbs or conjugations when I need help.
18. We are focusing on grammar for both languages and working on translating Italian into English, so I can practise reading and translating.
19. Currently, we are focusing on the most famous idiomatic expressions in Italy and the United States. In general, we like talking about music, travel, and linguistics.
20. She helps me with Italian grammar, and I help her with the history of the United States and Mexico.

Table 2. Participants' description of learning objectives
and activities reported in mid-term questionnaire.

As shown in Table 2, the analysis of the students' comments reveals a strong sense of reciprocity between participants, highlighting how eTandem fosters linguistic development, autonomy, and intercultural awareness. Students actively contribute to shaping their learning experiences, as demonstrated by statements such as "We focus on the present tense when speaking Italian since that is my current level" (17). This shows that students are not passively following a fixed learning plan but are instead making informed decisions about which aspects of the language to prioritise based on their individual learning goals. This analysis led to the identification of three essential aspects that can be identified through their comments:

1) *Autonomous learning choices:* learners exercise autonomy not only in selecting the topics to work on, but also in determining the methods and strategies to use. Comments like "I usually ask her questions about certain verbs or conjugations when I need help" (17) reflect an ability to self-assess and seek targeted support, while "We are working on translating from Italian to English" (2) indicates strategic use of translation to enhance both language comprehension and production. Such comments reveal an active role in shaping the learning process, demonstrating autonomy in content, methods, and pace.

2) *Cultural awareness and intercultural exchange:* the tandem experience also broadens the participants' cultural understanding through discussions on topics like food, national holidays, and school life (3), to name a few. Students frequently refer to comparing cultural differences, as seen in the comment "We are comparing cultural differences" (5), which illustrates their engagement in exploring each other's cultural backgrounds.

3) *Reciprocity and mutual support:* there is a clear sense of reciprocity in the exchange, evident in phrases such as "She helps me with Italian grammar, and I help her with the history of the United States and Mexico" (20). This indicates a balanced partnership where both students contribute equally to the learning process, promoting a collaborative environment.

The data thus suggest that the eTandem exchange supports not only linguistic growth but also promotes a shared intercultural awareness, where both students take active roles in facing linguistic and cultural challenges together.

The outlook on students' perceived efficacy of eTandem concludes with Table 3, which displays students' suggestions and comments in the final questionnaire.

Students' final comments and suggestions on eTandem
1. I liked the project, as well as the fact that we were supported throughout its duration. I would definitely do it again.
2. The project was very useful and stimulating. It would have probably been even more satisfying if it had taken place in person. Additionally, the project duration could be extended.
3. I believe it would be helpful to have some guidelines, topics to discuss based on language level, and suggestions for how to conduct the meetings in a way that achieves specific learning goals. Often, the meetings tend to be pleasant conversations which, although productive, do not always meet specific objectives.
4. I find the monitoring and the log to be very valuable support tools.
5. Perhaps a greater number of hours.
6. Maybe provide a list of topics to start talking about.
7. No suggestions, I had an awesome experience and formed a friendship with my partner!
8. Provide more materials to discuss during the meetings.
9. This project would be more helpful if it started earlier in the semester.
10. Perhaps the project could start a bit earlier so that it could last longer.

Table 3. Students' final comments and suggestions on eTandem.

The students' comments reflect an overall positive experience with the eTandem project. Nevertheless, they also suggest areas for potential improvement. Their feedback highlights a general satisfaction with the structure and support provided during the project, indicating that the guidance and monitoring were appreciated and contributed to the project's success. For instance, one student mentioned "I liked the project, as well as the fact that we were supported throughout its duration. I would definitely do it again" (1). This comment emphasises the value students attribute to continuous support and suggests that this aspect of the project should be maintained. However, students proposed starting the project earlier in the semester as in (9) "This project would be more helpful if it started earlier in the semester", or extending its duration as in (10) "Perhaps the project could start a bit earlier so that it could

last longer". These comments reflect the students' desire for a more prolonged interaction period, which would allow them to build stronger relationships with their partners and achieve more substantial learning outcomes.

Another common theme is the need for more materials and specific learning objectives. One student expressed: "I believe it would be helpful to have some guidelines, topics to discuss based on language level, and suggestions for how to conduct the meetings in a way that achieves specific learning goals. Often, the meetings tend to be pleasant conversations which, although productive, do not always meet specific objectives" (3). This example indicates that while students enjoyed the informal nature of the conversations, they sometimes struggled to align the meetings with concrete learning goals. As a result, the inclusion of additional resources, such as suggested discussion topics or thematic guidelines, beyond those already provided, could better support students in achieving both their language and intercultural communication objectives.

6. Enhancing intercultural awareness through multimodal creativity

One of the principal innovations introduced by the eTandem project is the inclusion of a final task that students are required to complete and upload to the *eTandem corner* by the end of their language and cultural exchange. Specifically, eTandem pairs were asked to collaborate in the creation of a joint multimodal product – such as short videos, PowerPoint presentations, or digital files with text and images – that not only summarised their learning journey but also highlighted their progresses from both a linguistic and cultural dimension, while underscoring the intercultural aspects and issues they encountered throughout their language exchanges. The final products feature various creative elements, such as visual comparisons, structured layouts, and the use of both written and visual narratives to present cultural and linguistic information. The dataset, comprising 15 final multimodal products, which have been transcribed and annotated, serves as the basis for analysing students' multimodal creativity and investigating how this creativity may contribute to fostering intercultural communication and enhancing awareness between eTandem partners. By incorporating videos, sounds, images and texts students had the opportunity to engage in a further exploration and expression of cultural identities, compare traditions, and actively develop intercultural awareness.

The multimodal creativity displayed in these projects emerges through the varied ways in which students have exploited visuals, narrative styles, and formatting techniques to effectively convey their experiences. Their use of multimodal resources (Kress 2010) not only enriched the learning experience but also facilitated a more dynamic exchange of cultural perspectives. In relation to the use of multimodality, it is worth clarifying that, although this study does not aim to conduct an exhaustive multimodal analysis (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021) of the semiotic resources deployed in meaning-making processes, the present investigation has nonetheless evidenced that the integration of different modes and semiotic resources contributed to the enhancement of intercultural communication among participants. The interaction between different modes (text, images, and layout) played a crucial role in framing cultural content, guiding viewers through the narrative, and establishing relationships between elements.

To illustrate this further, Table 4 shows five products selected to provide an overview of the features characterising the multimodal artefacts produced by students in the eTandem project, including the type of text, the topics chosen, the strategies employed to address cultural issues, and the multimodal resources utilised to convey meaning.

Type of text	Topics selected	Strategies employed to address cultural issues	Multimodal resources
PPT Presentation	(1) Daily routines and cultural practices	- Addressing cultural stereotypes through comparison of daily routines - Highlighting similarities to bridge cultural gaps	Text: Bilingual format for effective comparison Images: Pictures of daily activities Colours: Use of cultural colours for differentiation Typography: Consistent style for visual appeal
PPT Presentation	(2) Food Culture	- Focus on specific regional dishes and their cultural significance. Addressing cultural - stereotypes related to food and diet.	Text: Alternating languages (English and Italian) Images: Photos of regional foods Layout: Organised with images complementing the text for each food item

Type of text	Topics selected	Strategies employed to address cultural issues	Multimodal resources
PDF	(3) Art and activism	- Discussion on how art reflects cultural values and social issues - Personal insights on activism in art in both Italy and the U.S.	Images: Art pieces and cultural symbols Text: Personal reflections on art Layout: Structured format with subtopics
PDF	(4) Christmas and Holiday Practices	- Detailed comparison of Christmas celebrations in Italy and the U.S. - Discussing the commercialization of holidays.	Text: Narratives on holiday customs Images: Photos of decorations and traditional foods Layout: Sequential presentation of cultural differences Typography: Bold for highlighting key points
PPT presentation	(5) Educational Systems and Holiday Traditions	- Comparison of academic structures and holiday celebrations. - Discussing cultural attitudes towards education and holidays	Text: Side-by-side comparison of academic systems Images: Holiday icons and educational structures Layout: Well-organized to differentiate cultural content visually

Table 4. An overview of the features characterising the multimodal artefacts produced by students in the eTandem project.

As can be observed in Table 4, each product integrates text and images while employing layout and colours to make the content more engaging and accessible. The use of visual elements (e.g., food images, landmarks, holiday symbols, among others) complements textual descriptions creating a cohesive representation of cultural topics. Many of the projects feature bilingual texts, where English and Italian texts are juxtaposed to illustrate cultural and linguistic differences/similarities, enabling direct comparison and enhancing comprehension and awareness. The use

of colours, in particular, creates an immediate visual connection to the represented culture, reinforcing the cultural identity expressed through text and images. Colours function as semiotic modes (Kress/van Leeuven 2002) that convey social meaning. For example, a number of students employed colours symbolically associated with specific cultural elements, such as the green, white, and red of the Italian flag or festive colours for Christmas – to symbolize national or holiday identities. For instance, one of the presentations employs colours to differentiate between Italian and American holiday celebrations. Additionally, the multimodal texts display structured layouts with distinct sections, making it easier to engage with the content, with images supporting the text for enhanced comprehension. The observation of the eTandem final multimodal products demonstrates how the strategic use of different semiotic elements can effectively communicate cultural and linguistic content. Through the combination of text, images, layout, and colours, the final products indeed enhance awareness of cultural differences and similarities, promoting intercultural comprehension and language acquisition. These artefacts serve as a medium not only for practicing language skills but also to express students' cultural identities and engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue.

7. Conclusive remarks and future developments

The integration of digital educational environments with eTandem seems to be a promising strategy that promotes learner autonomy and enhances communication and intercultural dialogue among students. The students' perspective has highlighted that eTandem is viewed as an opportunity not only to enhance language skills but also to connect with peers from different cultures, enriching the overall learning experience. This study emphasised the role of a supportive environment which fosters collaborative engagement and facilitates communication across cultural boundaries. The exploration of students' final products showed that the combination of modes and semiotic resources has not only enriched the representation of cultural identities but has also facilitated a deeper exploration of cultural topics and intercultural awareness. Moreover, the use of LMS-based virtual spaces allows to expand communication between partners and peers beyond synchronous language exchanges, enabling them to interact through the asynchronous communicative tools made available in the *eTandem corner*.

Nevertheless, students' responses also highlighted the need for further implementation of the digital space, such as the creation of further tasks and activities to support students' who need greater guidance during their pathway towards autonomy. The research may further develop by analysing learning outcomes and focusing on self-assessment of linguistic and communicative objectives through learners' logs and structured interviews. Such in-depth analyses would provide insights into students' perceived progress and the overall impact of the project on their language proficiency, intercultural awareness, and autonomous learning skills.

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Gamifying English Learning and Assessment to Reduce Anxiety and Foster Speaking Skills: The Case of Secondary School Students

Abstract

In Italy, the prevailing challenge for students lies in the intense pressure experienced during oral and written tests, emerging as a primary source of anxiety and stress within the educational environment. Moreover, despite significant investment in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), students often face frustration and demotivation due to inadequate language competence. This paper explores the potential of gamification to engage students and enhance their comfort and confidence in the learning process. Drawing on game-informed theories, gamification is viewed as a tool capable of fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learning, redirecting students' efforts towards goal attainment, and leveraging motivation through explicit feedback, recognition, and rewards. However, studies emphasise the critical importance of careful design, acknowledging the complexity of student motivation and the potential variability in the effectiveness of gameful learning strategies. While gamification has gained attention in recent years, its application as an assessment and design tool in Italian EFL programs remains underexplored. The article presents the outcomes of a qualitative case study involving 27 Italian secondary public school students aged 15-18. The research demonstrates positive and promising results in favour of gamification by utilising tools such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. The findings highlight its positive impact on student motivation, language competence, and the implementation of accessible assessment procedures to lower school anxiety.

Keywords: gamification, EFL, assessment, speaking, anxiety, secondary school

1. Introduction

This article presents findings from a doctoral dissertation[1] that explored the use of video games and gamification to reduce the affective filter (inhibition caused by anxiety) in English as a foreign language (EFL) acquisition and student stress related to assessment. The intervention, "Gameful English",

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was developed for standard secondary school classes as a supplemental virtual course designed for standard secondary school classes and based on game-enhanced and game-informed computer-assisted language learning (CALL) theories. This study investigates how a gameful[2] approach can be integrated into the curriculum to potentially lower anxiety associated with traditional grading and promote speaking skills.

Italian students study English for a very long period in their educational career, from 6 to 16 years old, plus the last three years of high school and, in some cases, a few years in kindergarten. Despite the time spent, it does not seem sufficient to guarantee them an acceptable level of competence,[3] which often leads to frustration (and consequent demotivation) the first time they face the real language (Santipolo 2016).

The plausible causes for the marginal learning outcomes from school-based English language instruction can be ascribed to the limited opportunities to speak English in class (Gan *et al.* 2019). Moreover, according to Dörnyei (2001), the problem is that most tasks are imposed on the students in school environments: they are not involved in designing their learning schedules or choosing which activities to engage in. Most of the time, extrinsic motivation (the need to pass exams, get a better mark, etc.) is used by teachers to motivate learners. These "carrot and stick" methods can extinguish intrinsic motivation, diminish performance, crush creativity and foster short-term thinking (Dörnyei 2001).

Another central issue to consider is the impact of school stress and anxiety on the students and their learning outcomes. In Italy, according

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[2] Jane McGonigal used the term "*gameful*" in her book, *Reality is Broken* (2011), inviting the reader to be a truly *gameful* person, which meant "to act like a gamer". The word had already been in circulation in a similar context since at least May 2009, when an Urban Dictionary entry contributed by "Avantgame" gave this definition: "Having a gamer's mindset or attitude. Like playful, but more oriented toward achieving goals, trying out different strategies, and taking on new challenges". "*Gameful*" is not a 21st-century neologism: the word appeared in the early 1200s, according to the *OED*. For many centuries it meant "full of pleasure or enjoyment" and, a little later (and longer), "playful, sportive, light-hearted, jesting, humorous".

[3] In 2019 EF EPI data on Italian schools, only 30% of students in public secondary schools, middle schools and high schools, reached level B2, i.e. the minimum learning level required by the labour market and the initial entry requirement for many foreign universities. Moreover, while 40% of students reach B2 in urban areas, the percentage drops to 25% in provincial schools (EF Italia n.d.).

to recent studies (D'Agostino *et al.* 2022; Melchiori 2018), students feel so much pressure during oral and written tests that it is the predominant cause of anxiety and stress at school.[4] Thus, coping with anxiety becomes essential to enhance individual performance, and teachers have a leading role in reducing pressure because they can build good relationships with all students and improve the school environment (D'Agostino *et al.* 2022).

Starting from these assumptions, to make students feel more comfortable and confident to enhance learning and lower stress and anxiety, Flores (2015) thinks rewards (and gamification in general) complete an educational process, generating positive socio-emotional reactions which facilitate learning. The same idea is also confirmed by the crescent number of courses on gamification for teachers, and different theoretical studies (Swacha 2021), exploring practical solutions for the benefit of the students.

2. Method

According to CALL theories (Cornillie *et al.* 2012; Reinhardt/Sykes 2014; Reinders/Chik 2016; Reinders 2012; Reinhardt 2019), gameful principles of goal-oriented game task design can be applied to second language (L2) learning tasks, gamifying a course through game elements (gamification).

Gamification means purposefully applying game design elements to non-game contexts (Deterding *et al.* 2011; Mora *et al.* 2015), suggesting a course may be enhanced by incorporating game elements like leaderboards (motivation), points or scores (progress tracking), trophies, badges, or achievements (recognition), and quests (task structure) (Alexander *et al.* 2019). In this context, gamification refers to the purposeful application of a specific set of elements (points, badges, and leaderboards) in a non-traditional setting (an extracurricular school course). This approach is distinguished as "gameful learning", which emphasises integrating the core mechanics of games (user choice, emotional narratives, immediate feedback, and learning from failure) into the fundamental course design (Fishman/Deterding 2013).

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[4] PISA 2015 report results (OECD, 2017) show that compared to the OECD average of 37%, 56% of Italian pupils become particularly nervous when preparing for an exam and continue to be nervous (70% compared to 56% of the OECD average) even when adequately prepared. Students widely declare that they are 'terrified' of bringing home a bad grade: about 85% of Italian student respondents declared this fear, which is less widespread in the other countries participating in the survey (65% on average).

It's important to clarify that neither gamification nor gameful learning necessitates incorporating entire games into the classroom. Technology and computer games are not essential for a gamified course design, as the core principles draw on the psychology behind gaming rather than the games themselves (Alexander *et al.* 2019).

The use of reward-based strategies in education has a long history, with traditional methods like gold stars serving a similar purpose to digital badges. However, this reliance on extrinsic motivators (external rewards) has led some to criticise gamification for potentially undermining intrinsic motivation (the desire to learn for its own sake) (Mekler *et al.* 2013). Additionally, questions have been raised about the relationship between gamification and student enjoyment of learning (Dale 2014).

Proponents of gamification, on the other hand, emphasise its potential to enhance student motivation and promote a variety of learning outcomes, both cognitive (knowledge-based) and non-cognitive (e.g., critical thinking skills) (Hanus/Fox 2015; Huang/Hew 2015; Lister 2015). They argue that gamification can empower students by introducing choice, fostering creativity, and providing opportunities for critical thinking.

According to Werbach and Hunter (2012), gamification elements can be represented as a pyramid. The game dynamics, which are the foundational principles that make a game engaging, like narrative, relationships, choice, emotions, constraints, and progression are at the top. These dynamics are supported by the game mechanics, which are the specific actions or rules that govern gameplay, like resource acquisition, rewards, challenges, competitions, change, feedback, transactions, turns, and cooperation. The bottom level includes the game components (collections, badges, leaderboards, gifting, social graphs, quests, points, teams, virtual goods, achievements, avatars, content unlocking, combat, and boss fights), which are the tangible elements that players interact with.

Game dynamics are the most high-level conceptual elements in a game or a gamified system (Dichev/Dicheva 2017). Constraints are an essential part of these dynamics, as they limit players' freedom and create opportunities for meaningful decision-making (Nicholson 2015). The notion of 'what' constraints is a fundamental dynamic that any game designer must deem (Lee/Hammer 2011).

Progression, another key dynamic, refers to the sense of advancement players experience, not just through levels but also through responsive difficulty adjustments (Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment - DDA) that personalise the challenge (Werbach/ Hunter 2012). DDA represents a fundamental shift in thinking about the shared educational experience. This allows differentiated learning experiences tailored to individual student needs and interests (Hanus/Fox 2015). Most gamified systems emphasise the concept of progress (Caponetto *et al.* 2014), even without using points or levels, to motivate learners and keep them engaged.

Narrative is the game dynamic which plays a central role in uniting the various elements of a gamified system and fostering a sense of coherence (Armstrong/Landers 2017; Cheong *et al.* 2014; Turan *et al.* 2016). Narratives can be explicit (like storylines in games) or implicit. While gamified learning experiences may not have the same level of visual or aesthetic richness as traditional games, they can still leverage narrative elements to frame activities in a meaningful way (Armstrong/ Landers 2017). A well-crafted narrative can prevent a gamified system from becoming a collection of disjointed elements. However, adapting traditional narratives to educational settings presents a challenge. Unlike predetermined video game scripts, classrooms thrive on student agency and exploration. Learners may choose alternative paths, requiring narratives to be flexible and responsive to these deviations (Armstrong/ Landers 2017). This topic of narrative design in gamified learning environments warrants further exploration, considering how to create engaging narratives that accommodate student choice while maintaining a sense of coherence.

Relationships are game dynamics, too: people interact with each other, friends, teammates, and opponents; social dynamics play a fundamental part in the game experience (Hanus/Fox 2015).

If the dynamics can be thought of as the grammar, the game mechanics are the verbs of the game or gamification, the elements that move the action forward (Werbach/Hunter 2012). Challenges, chance, cooperation, competition, feedback, resource acquisitions, rewards, transactions, and turns are various tools that drive the action forward, get the players in the game, and go from one state to another. Sicart (2008) defines game

mechanics as methods requested by agents and designed for interaction with the game state.

In the educational context, this could be revisited as methods requested by instructors and designed to increase student interaction with the subject matter: assigning points for completing homework exemplifies a game (or gameful) mechanic; consequently, gameful learning revolutionises teaching methods by integrating diverse and unique game mechanics into the instructional design (Alexander *et al.* 2019), using the game components, that can be so defined as the tangible forms of mechanics and dynamics.

Common game components used in gamification include achievements (recognising specific actions), avatars (visual representations of the player's character), boss fights (risky challenges to overcome to pass to the next level), collections (sets of items), combat, content unlocking (awards to have access to other contents), gifting (the opportunity to give a gift to other players), leaderboards (rankings), quests, teams, and virtual goods (digital rewards) (Werbach/Hunter 2012). These components can enhance the learning experience by providing a sense of accomplishment, fostering social interaction, and promoting goal achievement.

A key aspect of gamified learning is student agency, which refers to the ability of students to make choices about their learning path. For example, teachers might offer a variety of assignments with different difficulty levels and point values. Students can then choose which assignments best suit their strengths and schedules, allowing them to balance workload while maximising their learning opportunities.

However, it is important to consider the risks associated with incorporating high-stakes challenges in gamified learning environments. According to Adelson (2007), risks should be low to medium stakes to encourage participation. If students perceive the consequences of failure as too severe, they may avoid taking on challenges altogether. Furthermore, high-stakes assessments can stifle creativity, as students prioritise performing well on those specific tasks over broader learning opportunities (Berliner 2011; Pandina Scot *et al.* 2008; Taylor *et al.* 2008).

A gameful learning design may always consider the risks when promoting student self-efficacy or the belief that the learners can manage their learning process, fostering motivation and improving persistence through tasks (Komarraju/Nadler 2013; Zimmerman 2000). Well-

designed gamified learning allows students to take calculated risks, make mistakes, and use new knowledge to overcome challenges (Kapur/Bielaczyc 2012). Students can grow from failure if given the tools and opportunities to do so (Alexander *et al.* 2019). Learning from mistakes is core to the concept of "saving" in games and aligns with the growing interest in adversity education. This field explores how to teach non-cognitive attributes like grit (persistence), growth mindsets, and curiosity (Catalano *et al.* 2018; Dweck 2008; Hochanadel/Finamore 2015). Research suggests these attributes may be better predictors of student success than traditional measures like grades (Alexander *et al.* 2019). Gamified learning, with its intentional integration of these principles, can provide a solid research base for developing effective teaching strategies.

A recent study by Anisa *et al.* (2020) investigated the effects of gamification on motivation for learning English as a foreign language at the secondary school level. Their results are promising, showing increased intrinsic and extrinsic motivation alongside a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere. However, they caution that effective gamification requires careful design, not a simple application of game elements. To address this, Rivera and Palmer Garner (2021) propose a "Gamification for Student Engagement Framework". This framework aims to help educators design gamified learning experiences by selecting appropriate game attributes based on desired student engagement and outcomes. Further research using this framework can provide more empirical evidence about gamification's effectiveness in achieving these goals.

Allowing students to feel more comfortable while speaking a foreign language and reducing that sense of frustration towards bad marks, which leads to high levels of anxiety before and during a test, could find in gamifying learning an opportunity to explore. Self-determination theory (Ryan/Deci 2009) posits that students are more motivated when they feel a sense of autonomy over their learning. Gamified learning can foster this autonomy by allowing students some control over their learning experience, such as choosing their learning paths within the game's framework. This sense of control can also help reduce anxiety associated with language learning, particularly the fear of receiving bad marks (Ryan/Deci 2009). As a consequence, a gameful learning approach will be most successful when it aligns with both student experiences and interests, as well as the teacher's

needs: gamification and gameful learning are not "right" for every teacher[5] or classroom (Lombardi 2015).

A key distinction between traditional and gamified courses lies in assessment. Traditional courses often start students with full points that can be deducted for mistakes. Gamified learning, on the other hand, utilises an incremental point system where points are slowly accumulated over time (Dicheva *et al.* 2015). This approach emphasises mastery over linear progression and has shown positive effects on students of all levels, particularly those who struggle in traditional settings (Kulik/Bangert Drowns 1990).

It's important to remember that game elements (dynamics, mechanics, and components) are just the building blocks of gamification. They are tools that designers can use, but their success hinges on how they are integrated (Mora *et al.* 2015; Hamari *et al.* 2014; Cheong *et al.* 2014).

The following section will detail how gamification was applied to both the structure and the assessment in an extramural extracurricular EFL course named *Gameful English* at a secondary school level.

2.1 The design

Gameful English was designed as a pedagogical intervention within an exploratory, qualitative case study. This intervention aimed to integrate gamification principles with a commercial video game (*Minecraft*)[6] to enhance EFL learners' speaking, listening, and vocabulary skills while mitigating anxiety and stress during assessments. A gamified system informed both the course design and student assessment. The course structure consisted of an initial session (level 0), nine gamified sessions with pre-play, during-play, and post-play phases (Table 1), and a concluding follow-up session (level 10).

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[5] Although the teacher does not have to be a gamer to integrate the mechanics, expertise with games may affect the instructor's comfort level (Lombardi 2015).

[6] The students chose to play *Minecraft* before the implementation started, among a list of other possible games promoting learning affordances.

PRE-PLAY	DURING-PLAY	POST-PLAY
Introduce wraparound tasks and do preview subtasks (i.e., vocabulary preview)	Get knowledge of the task	Do post-play tasks (assignments based on *Minecraft* recorded gameplay)
Review the past play session and debriefing tasks (post-play phases, usually given as assignments) with a focus on new goals and strategies for the next during-play phase	Play *Minecraft* Multiplayer (creative, survival, mini-games) No time limitation	Debriefing (opportunities for reflection and integration of what students have learned about the game rules, narratives, and language used while playing)
	Record the gameplay (15-20 min)	
Class	Home	Home/Class

Table 1. Structure of a Gameful Session. Author's design.

The pre-play phase, conducted in class, introduces the topic with wraparound tasks (acronyms in web chats, exploring biomes, watching different gameplay styles, commenting on YouTube videos, etc.). It also reviews the vocabulary and the debriefing tasks (assignments). This phase encouraged active student participation through discussions and problem-solving related to the upcoming gameplay. The during-play phase was voluntary and conducted individually at home. Students could choose their gameplay modality and decide whether to complete the assigned task while playing. Recording 15-20 minutes of gameplay served as a resource for the post-play phase, where students could integrate and discuss their learning experiences within and around the game (narrative, rules, vocabulary).

The course consisted of an initial session (level 0) outlining the pre-play, during-play, and post-play phases. Subsequent scaffolded levels (1–9) presented increasingly challenging activities. A concluding follow-up session (level 10) involved a general debriefing with student presentations of their final products (edited gameplay commentary). Student work aligned with specific learning objectives (literacies, language areas, competencies) and was submitted before the next session. Moreover, each task is aligned with assessment measures (points) and displayed on a leaderboard. Points

are assigned not on the student's actual performance in the gameplay, but on the wraparound activities and assignments, according to specific evaluation grids given during the initial session.

Gameful English incorporated gamification elements (leaderboard, points, and badges) as an alternative assessment method. The structure, adapted from Ajlen *et al.* (2020) (Appendix 1), employed various dynamics (narrative, progression, constraints) and mechanics (rewards, feedback, challenges) that students managed. These "rules" were clarified before the course began to ensure transparency and equal opportunity for success. This gamified approach aimed to significantly reduce anxiety and stress associated with traditional written and oral exams, as the overall process (including wraparound activities and alternative assignments) contributed to the final grade, not just individual tests.

2.2 Participants, implementation, and data collection and analysis

Twenty-seven public high school[7] students aged 15–18 participated in the ten-week online intervention (October–December 2021). The weekly hour-long sessions, held in the afternoon, were conducted on Google Meet. The students were divided into three groups based on language proficiency (B1–B2) to facilitate gamified learning.

Students earned points for completing tasks, with the opportunity to achieve the highest score on the leaderboard (100 points), pass a threshold (60 points), and earn badges. Badges were awarded for various achievements, including full attendance, school extracurricular credits, consistent performance, peer review participation, and exceptional gameplay. Google Suite for Education tools facilitated communication, assignment submission, and student score tracking on the leaderboard. The leaderboard was updated weekly on the course's Google Classroom page, and all submitted tasks received feedback and evaluation. Participation was high, with 84% of students attending at least nine out of ten sessions.

The researcher was not affiliated with the participating school to ensure data impartiality, and student grades were not affected by their participation in the course. Students received credits for their involvement.

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[7] The implementation was carried out at the "Liceo Scientifico Enrico Fermi", located in Gaeta (LT), Italy.

Qualitative data was collected through various tools: an anonymous end-of-implementation survey with a Likert scale (Appendix 2), semi-structured interviews with students and their teachers, focus groups, and participant observation to triangulate the findings. Data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel.

3. Results and discussion

Given that this was the participants' first experience with gamification in an educational setting, their feedback was crucial for evaluating the impact of the implemented methods (points, badges, leaderboard – PBL) and gamified assessments on student stress, anxiety, and speaking activities during the intervention. Another key aspect of the study was to investigate students' perceptions of their English language learning progress due to gamification, particularly regarding speaking skills compared to their regular English classes.

Students reported high levels of curiosity and interest in the novel approach. According to them, experimenting with a new method could increase enthusiasm for learning activities. The immediate feedback provided upon task completion functioned as a motivating factor from a psychological perspective: students felt they had a clear understanding of their progress and any potential difficulties, allowing them to implement corrective measures as needed.

The course structure was well-received by the students, who identified the gamification elements employed in the design. These elements included progressive difficulty levels, repetition of specific language structures, opportunities for "practice runs" before challenges (allowing students to understand the task requirements before applying them), a points system, a leaderboard, badges, "boss fights", and the ability to exercise strategic decision-making to progress through the course.

Students reported high satisfaction (96.1%) with the methodology and its practical approach, ("Did you enjoy this new method? What in particular?" – Interviews), particularly appreciating the role of the teacher as a guide in the learning process.

Interviews revealed that students valued the opportunity to speak freely about their interests without the pressure of traditional assessments. The design of *Gameful English* fostered the teacher's role as a coach, with all

students (100%) perceiving a gradual and guided learning process ("Did you feel it was a gradual and guided learning?" – Interviews). No task was introduced without prior explanation of the topic, vocabulary, and solution strategies during class time. This approach positioned the teacher as a source of comfort, encouragement, and motivation. As the teacher was not the leader but someone who promoted independence and self-confidence, the students saw this figure as a reference who could help in case of problems or clarify linguistic doubts they may encounter. These findings support the observations of Barajas *et al.* (2018) regarding the potential of game design to enhance teacher-student interactions: the learning process has greater value than the outcomes because game design promotes risk-taking and use of failure as a positive learning factor, promoting mutual respect, dialogue, and negotiation.

To deepen the assessment of the method, students were also asked to identify any tedious activities encountered during the implementation. The majority of students (65.4%) could not relate to any boring activities ("What was boring?" - Interviews). Having established the overall positive student perception of the *Gameful English* course, another important aspect to consider was its perceived affordability (difficulty level, workload). When asked in interviews about any difficulties encountered (related to course structure, teacher interaction, language, tasks, etc.), student responses (80.8%) demonstrated a high degree of agreement, indicating that they found the course manageable.

While some students identified more challenging aspects, this did not significantly impact participation or completion of sessions and assignments. Eight out of the 27 students did not pass the threshold (60 points out of 100). Interviews with these students revealed that, despite enjoying the course and its structure, various factors contributed to not reaching the threshold: two students cited school workload, two reported a lack of motivation, one student prioritised other commitments, and another student enrolled with the misconception that the course would be less demanding.

Evaluation is a crucial element of the overall course assessment, providing learning feedback for students and teachers. Students were asked if they perceived the use of points and gamification as a fairer and more egalitarian approach compared to traditional school assessment methods, which are often cited as a source of stress and anxiety. Student responses were mixed:

while a majority (66.6%) leaned towards gamification promoting fairness and equality, some students (18.5%) remained undecided, and a smaller group (approximately 15%) did not perceive any significant difference compared to their standard courses (Figure 1).
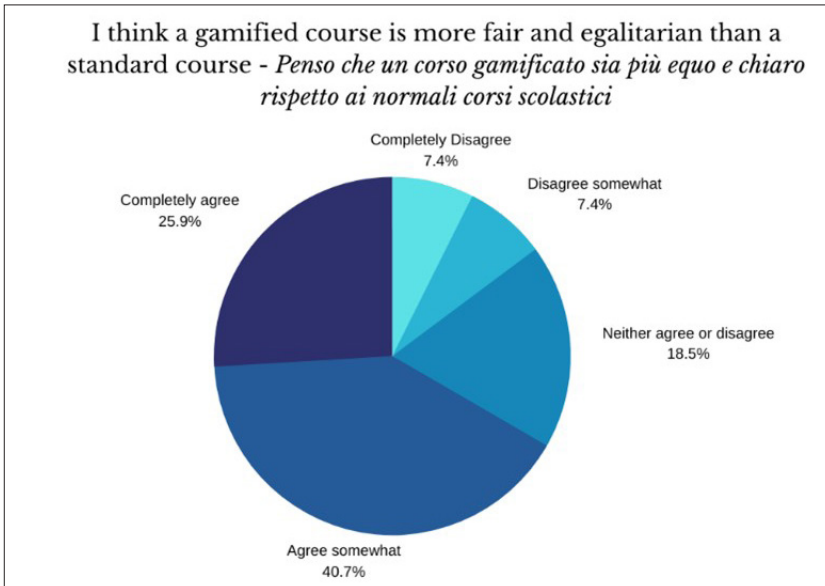

Figure 1. Students' comparisons between *Gameful English* and EFL school course. Fairness. Survey.

Over 50% of the students perceived the gamified assessment as fairer and more egalitarian than traditional methods. They appreciated the perceived equal opportunity to achieve a high position on the leaderboard, regardless of individual starting points. Additionally, students noted the flexibility of the system, allowing them to adjust their strategies to acquire more points throughout the course. Focus group comments indicated that students viewed the gamified approach as a continuous improvement process, where each task or assignment contributed to their overall learning rather than being evaluated in isolation.

This gamified assessment provided an alternative method for evaluating student work and learning outcomes. To assess student perceptions of the broader applicability of gamification, students were asked if, based on their experience with *Gameful English*, they would recommend a gamified

assessment for other courses. The results were overwhelmingly positive, with only one student expressing some disagreement. As shown in Figure 2, 89% of the students indicated a general willingness to see gamification applied in other school courses.
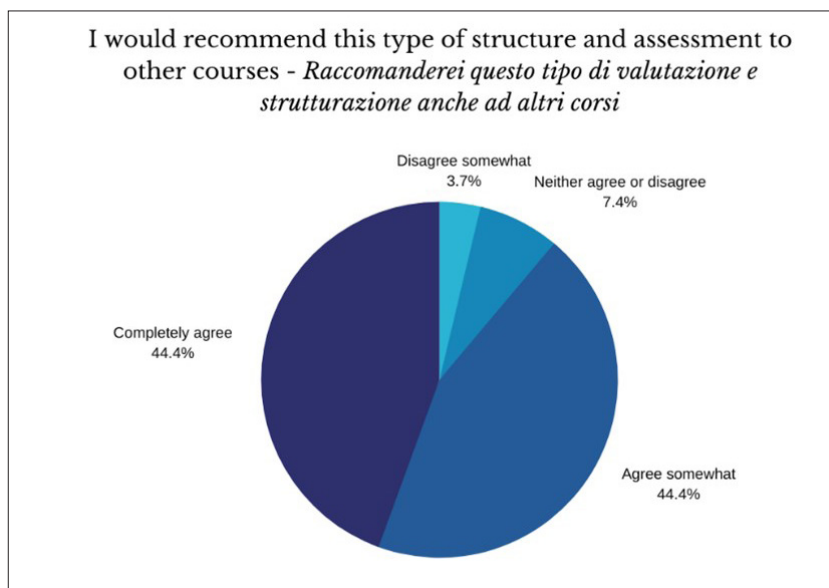

Figure 2. Students' evaluations of gamification as an assessment method. Survey.

The desire for gamified elements in other courses was also confirmed during the interviews, although some raised concerns about feasibility, citing a potential for the educational system to become overly focused on video game culture ("Would you like to have other gamified courses at school?" - Interviews).

Overall, a significant majority of students (92.3%) found the gamified assessment to provide valuable feedback on their work. They appreciated the feedback's clarity, motivational aspects, and emphasis on challenge and fairness ("What do you think about the feedback you received?" – Interviews). Students valued the sense of gradual progress made evident by the leaderboard. This visibility allowed them to monitor their performance and adjust their learning strategies as needed. Focus group discussions revealed that students perceived it easier to recover from a lower score in a

gamified system because each task offered an opportunity to improve. In contrast, traditional grading methods, which often rely on averaging scores, can lead to a loss of motivation to improve after a poor performance. Students felt that gamification fostered a sense of agency in their learning process, with clear guidance and active participation in knowledge acquisition.

By the end of the intervention, a large majority of students (92.3%) viewed gamification as a reliable and tangible indicator of their progress ("How do you judge gamification in terms of your learning?" – Interviews). The method was perceived as efficient and objective in assessing learning outcomes due to the clear and consistent rules established from the outset. This clear feedback structure allowed students to recognise the connection between their actions and learning. They perceived the learning path as accessible and well-defined, providing evidence of progress and a sense of control over their learning experience, thus supporting the observations of Tekinbas/Zimmerman (2003).

Both students and teachers emphasised the value of immediate error correction with brief explanations during interviews ("How did you/your students perceive the error correction?" – Interviews). This approach was appreciated for its contribution to learning, as feedback is essential for self-assessment (Sykes/Reinhardt 2013). Students' perceptions of errors also shifted due to the task evaluation rubrics. Knowing the scoring criteria and potential point distribution beforehand allowed students to make informed choices that contributed to successful learning outcomes (Sykes/Reinhardt 2013). Thanks to gamification, students were actively engaged in their learning, with their scores reflecting their effort. These findings support Armstrong and Landers' (2017) observations that gamification fosters a sense of equality through a positive narrative that presents activities with alternative pathways. Mistakes became learning opportunities rather than sources of discouragement, as students perceived them as opportunities for improvement. The ability to recover from errors through additional tasks aligned with the growth mindset perspective encouraged by Alexander *et al.* (2019).

Gamifying learning hinges on continuous feedback, fostering a sense of control and awareness that can influence future performance and lead to greater acceptance of setbacks. No single assignment carried undue weight, as opportunities to counterbalance failures were always available. The frustration of encountering difficulties became a motivator to tackle challenges again, with the benefit of new knowledge and strategies acquired from previous attempts.

Furthermore, gamification offered alternative paths to achieving goals. In *Gameful English*, some optional tasks were designed to help students to improve their scores. The majority of students (55.6%) found these tasks more enjoyable than those in their regular courses. Interestingly, none of the students reported any preference for traditional school assignments over the tasks used in *Gameful English* (Figure 3).
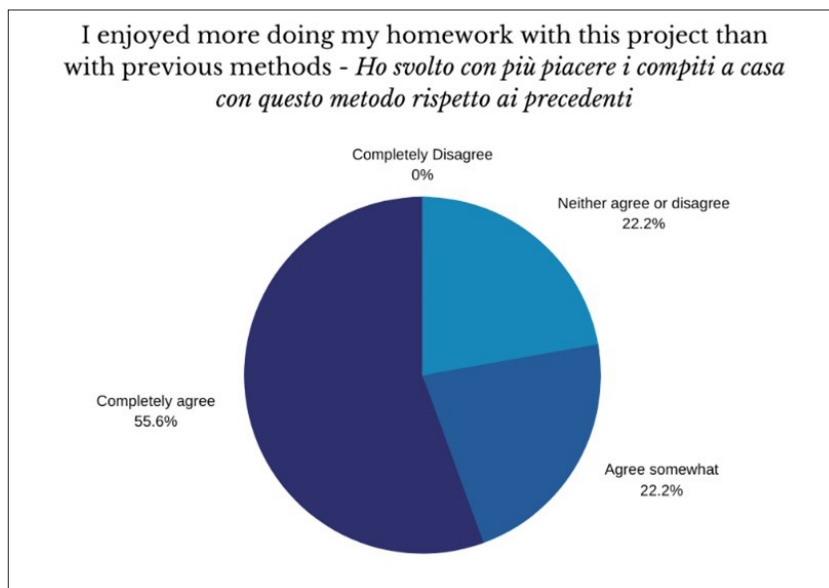
Figure 3. Students' evaluations on Gameful English/ standard school course homework. Survey.

The five homework assignments offered during the course mirrored activities covered in class sessions. Participation in these assignments was not mandatory but could significantly contribute to the student's position on the leaderboard. Considering the extracurricular nature of *Gameful English* and the timing at the end of the first school term, the response to these activities was satisfactory, with an average of 3.2 out of 5 assignments completed per student. Furthermore, students received no external rewards (e.g., school grades) for completing homework. Interview responses revealed that students perceived the tasks as enjoyable rather than obligatory ("What do you think about the proposed tasks?" – Interviews).

Students were also presented with an optional "big theme" assignment at the end of the course, offering an opportunity to earn additional points. This assignment involved selecting one of four options: a gameplay diary (completed by two students), a vocabulary journal, a multiplayer cooperative play activity, or a video game review (completed by three students). Participation in this assignment was low (19.2%). Similarly, only 15.4% of students opted to complete a comprehensive Game journal that tracked their progress throughout the course.

No instances of students complaining about scores or arguing about assessments were reported during the intervention. Focus group discussions revealed that students never felt stressed or demotivated about completing assignments, as the gamified system allowed them to recover from setbacks through alternative efforts and continued participation. In a gamified environment, commitment and dedication hold greater value than traditional courses, as they are visibly rewarded through the PBL system. For example, active participation and positive behaviour contribute to a student's score.

The visual representation of incremental learning was facilitated by the PBL system. Over half of the students (70.4%) expressed enjoyment with this aspect, while a quarter (25.9%) remained neutral, and only one student expressed mild disagreement (Figure 4).
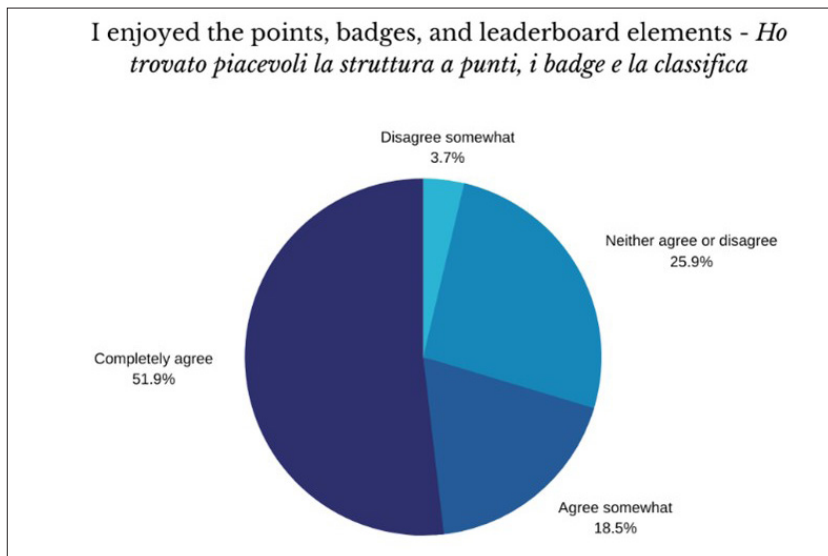

Figure 4. Students' reactions towards PBL. Survey.

Within the PBL design, the leaderboard could be perceived as the most anxiety-provoking element. However, the results showed that only two students (3.7%) reported feeling entirely or partially pressured by the leaderboard. For the majority of students (81.5%), the leaderboard did not cause stress or disappointment during the implementation (Figure 5).
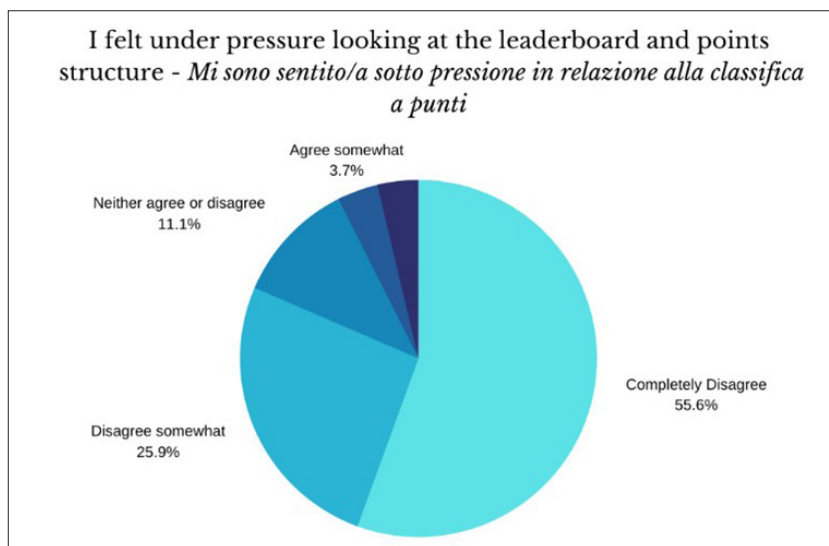
Figure 5. Students' perceptions of the leaderboard. Survey.

Student perceptions of the PBL system were generally positive. They valued the visual representation of progress as a form of immediate learning feedback. The system offered an optional challenge for those who wanted to improve their scores, introduced an element of fun absent from traditional school methods, and fostered intrinsic motivation for learning ("What are the positive or negative elements using PBL?" - Interviews).

No students expressed strong disapproval of the PBL system, and none reported anxiety related to it. The system allowed students to progress at their own pace while also motivating some to achieve higher scores. While the potential for competition was present, focus group discussions revealed that it did not lead to conflict (only 15.4% of students did express concerns about the leaderboard's potential to cause anxiety due to public display of progress).

Points were also well-received, with nearly all students (92.3%) finding them a clear indicator of progress and less stressful than traditional school marks. Students appreciated the opportunity to improve their scores incrementally by completing tasks and focusing on building knowledge rather than simply achieving an average grade ("What do you think about points?" – Interviews). They valued the transparency provided by points awarded for each task. Only a small minority (7.4%) of students perceived no difference between points and marks, indicating a lack of intrinsic motivation regardless of the assessment method.

Badges served as strong motivators for some students (23.1%), who viewed them as tangible rewards for effort and ability. However, others (approximately 77%) found badges to be less relevant as motivational tools ("Did you like the idea of having a badge?" – Interviews).

The study also aimed to investigate whether gamifying English learning could reduce stress and anxiety associated with oral and written tests, potentially improving learning outcomes by lowering the affective filter (with a better and more relaxed environment, avoiding the pressure of bad marks) and allowing students to build personalised learning paths. Results indicated that participants generally perceived improvements in speaking and listening skills (Figure 6). Only a small percentage (7.4%) reported no noticeable change, and a further minority (14.8%) remained undecided.
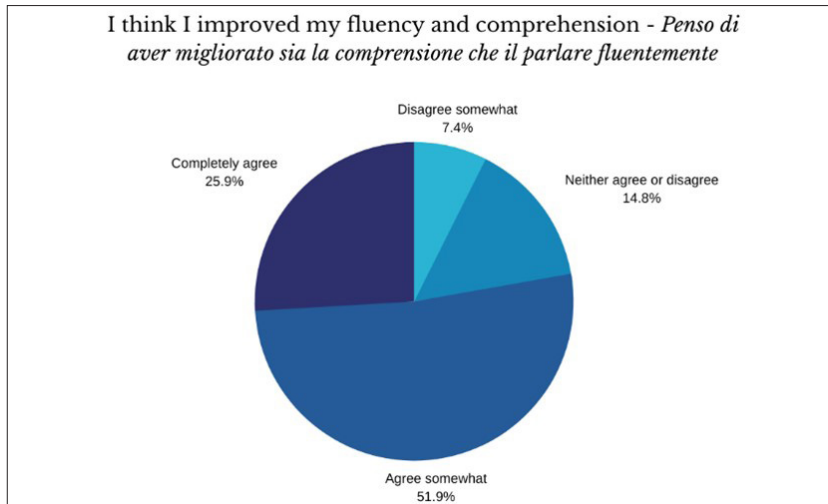

Figure 6. Students' perceptions of fluency and comprehension after the implementation. Survey.

A significant majority (69.2%) of students reported feeling more confident speaking English after the intervention. This newfound confidence stemmed from a reduced fear of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, as the focus shifted towards quick and spontaneous communication during discussions with teachers, classmates, and other "gamers" ("Did you feel more confident at speaking English?" – Interviews). The teachers' corrections followed the intervention, allowing students the freedom to participate without immediate correction. All students perceived an improvement in their fluency to varying degrees, with all reporting some improvement. They attributed this gain in fluency primarily to feeling more independent and comfortable speaking English in class (no longer afraid of public speaking) ("Do you think your fluency has improved after this course?", "Were you afraid of speaking publicly?" – Interviews). This aligns with the findings of Gan *et al.* (2019), who identified a correlation between limited speaking opportunities and lower proficiency in L2 communication.

Students also reported feeling more comfortable using informal English during gameplay and classroom interactions, mirroring observations made by Thorne *et al.* (2009). Additionally, some students noted improvements in pronunciation. Three activities were identified as helpful for speaking fluently: You-Tuber assignment[8], class debates, and describing pictures and *Minecraft* biomes ("What tasks helped your fluency, in your opinion?" – Interviews).

For some students (15.4%), improved fluency stemmed from a perceived increase in vocabulary. They reported learning new words and expressions that facilitated faster and more fluent communication during interactions ("How has your fluency improved?" – Interviews). Overall, the results indicated that *Gameful English* received more positive feedback from students compared to the traditional methods used in language classes. Students felt more relaxed and confident speaking English (as admitted by a large majority – 85.2%) and they had more speaking opportunities in a gameful context (70.4%) compared to traditional methods (Figures 7 and 8).

[8] It was the most difficult activity of the course: the students had to record, edit, and comment on part of their gameplay as real YouTubers.
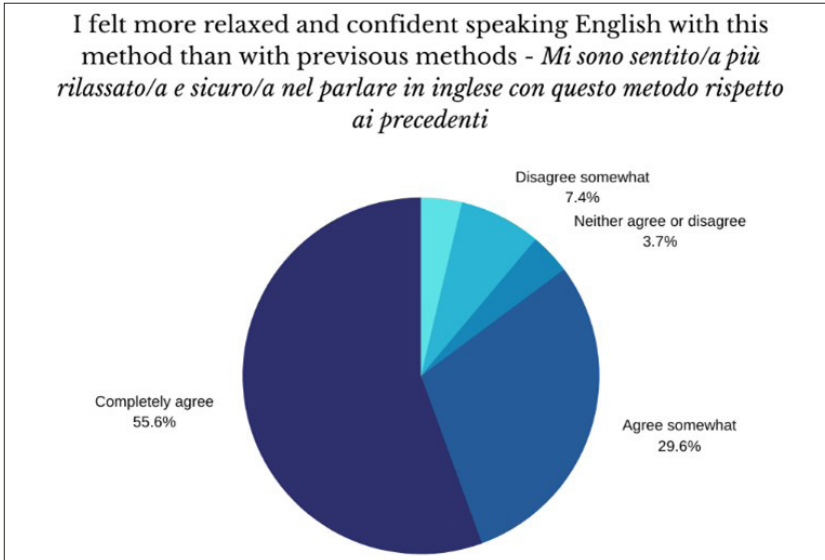
Figure 7. Students' perceptions on speaking activities comparing Gameful English and the school method. Feelings. Survey.
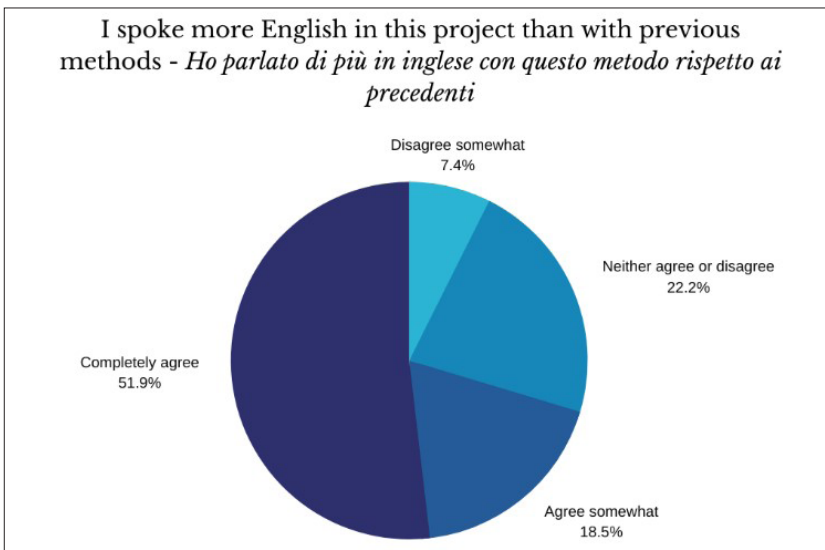
Figure 8. Students' perceptions on speaking activities comparing Gameful English and the school method. Oral interactions. Survey.

Students perceived *Gameful English* as a more challenging learning experience than a traditional language course. Nearly all students agreed to some degree, with 46.2% strongly agreeing and 42.3% somewhat agreeing. No students completely disagreed (Figure 9).
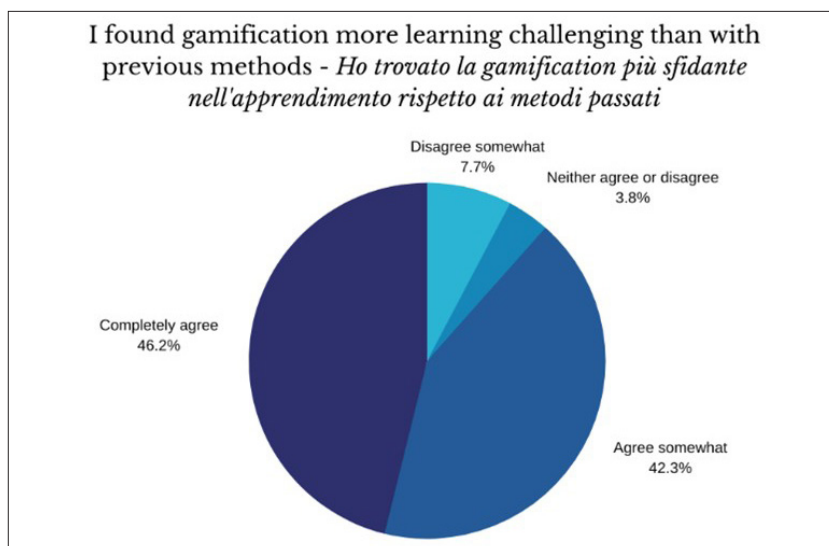
Figure 9. Students' comparison between Gameful English and the EFL school course. Survey.

To gain deeper insights into student perceptions, focus group discussions prompted participants to compare the linguistic and social approaches used in their traditional English classes and *Gameful English.* Students used adjectives to describe the strengths and weaknesses of each method. Figure 10 summarises the adjectives most frequently used by students to characterise the two approaches.

While students valued *Gameful English* for its innovative, communicative approach that prioritised real-world application, they also recognised the importance of a structured method with a grammar focus. The adjectives used to describe the traditional school approach (e.g., traditional, formal, notional, standard, rigid, old-fashioned, hierarchical, etc.) highlighted its limitations in promoting fluency and communication, rather than questioning its overall

validity. During the focus groups, many students expressed a desire for a curriculum that incorporated both methods, acknowledging the importance of accuracy alongside fluency and communication skills.
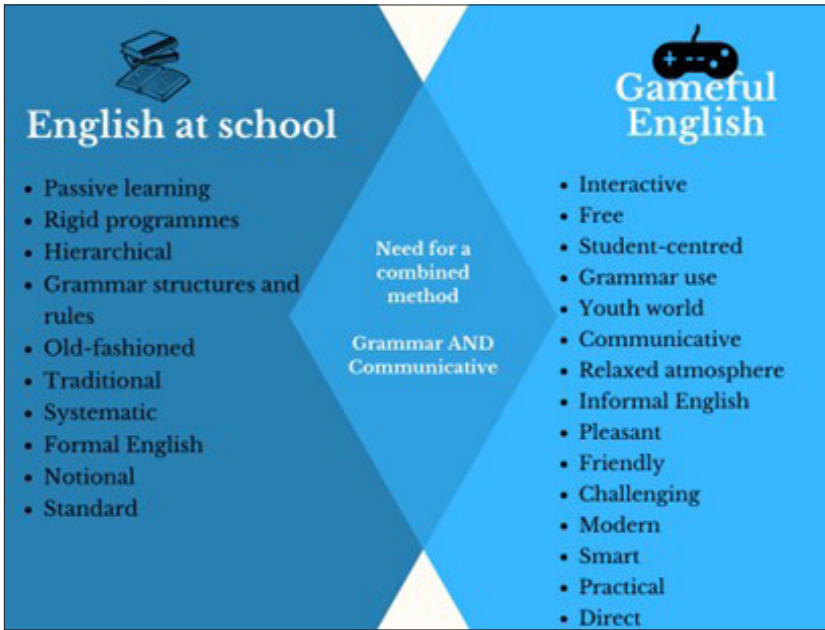
Figure 10. Students' comparison between Gameful English and the EFL school course. Survey.

Students appreciated the communicative approach of *Gameful English* because they perceived it as more practical for real-world language use. They emphasised the value of learning language for everyday situations rather than solely focusing on grammar drills. *Gameful English*'s gamified elements fostered a more enjoyable learning experience, and students perceived it as a more cost-effective approach than traditional methods. Focus group discussions revealed student dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of dialogue, challenge, and freedom in the traditional school environment, with some (30.8%) describing it as "passive learning".

To gauge the effectiveness of *Gameful English*, students were asked if they would recommend it to others. The vast majority (70.4%) expressed

a positive view of its potential as a supplementary learning method, and 25.9% explicitly endorsed its effectiveness. Only one student expressed partial disagreement (Figure 11).
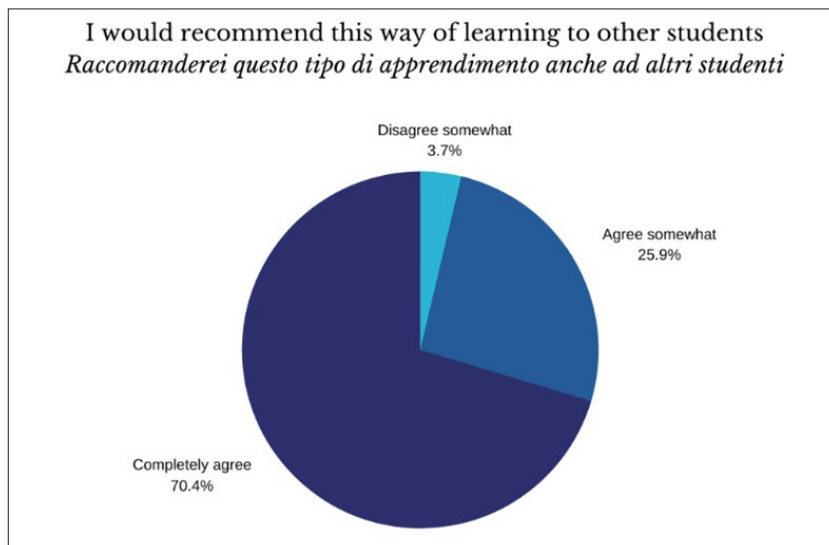
Figure 11. Students' opinions on the validity of Gameful English. Survey.

Student recommendations for who might benefit from an English language gamified course were varied and interesting ("Who would you recommend this course to?" – Interviews). Some students suggested it might be suitable for those unfamiliar with video games (7.7%) or struggling with English (7.7%). Others felt it could appeal to students seeking non-traditional learning methods (19.2%) or teenagers due to their typical learning styles and interests (7.7%). Gamers were also mentioned as a potential target group due to their existing motivation for playing and interacting with others (23.1%). Additionally, students highlighted the course's potential for intrinsically motivated learners (11.5%) and those experiencing insecurity or shyness (11.5%). The latter group might benefit from the confidence-building aspects of continuous feedback and interaction within a supportive group setting. These varied suggestions underscore the multifaceted nature of motivation: gamification may not be a universally

effective solution. While some students respond well to the challenge of increasing their scores, others find intrinsic enjoyment or personal improvement to be stronger motivators, independent of leaderboards.

Student perceptions in the focus group comments also suggested that gamification, as a potentially disruptive educational innovation, might face challenges with teacher adoption, and it highlights the need for appropriate teacher training on gamification principles and their potential benefits in the classroom. Such training could help to alleviate teacher concerns and promote wider acceptance.

The *Gameful English* implementation demonstrates that teachers can successfully integrate gamification principles into their courses, even without extensive digital game expertise. Effective course design involves tailoring content and format to the target audience, not necessarily programming video games. The core lies in utilising game principles that foster participation, interest, and enjoyment to gain a more rewarding learning experience for teachers and students.

4. Conclusions

The case study revealed that students valued the constructive assessment approach within the gamified course. The focus on error correction within a game environment allowed for increased exposure to speaking activities and fostered a less anxiety-provoking assessment experience.

Data from the study confirmed the perceived validity of gamification for measuring learning and fostering student agency. Students particularly appreciated the transparency, fairness, and fun aspect of the points system: they promoted a sense of continuous progress and self-awareness. However, the leaderboard element highlighted potential limitations. While not a source of anxiety during implementation, some students expressed concerns about its impact on students with different personalities and how they handle failure.

Student enthusiasm for the strategic element, which could potentially improve grades, was evident. However, some concerns arose regarding the feasibility of gamification due to a perceived bias towards game-like elements.

The serene classroom environment and the competence-based, well-structured activities fostered a focus on fluency over grammatical perfection, leading to a perceived improvement in fluency across all participants.

It is important to note that *Gameful English* was designed as an extracurricular course, separate from regular assessments. This characteristic may limit its effectiveness in reducing anxiety, as students did not perceive it as part of their formal grades. Future studies could investigate whether gamification integrated into the existing assessment system, with points translated into actual grades, can achieve similar positive results regarding stress and anxiety.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1. Gamified structure of *Gameful English*

Assessment gamified structure for *Gameful English*

ASSIGNMENT TYPE	POINTS PER ATTEMPT	# OF ATTEMPTS	TOTAL POSSIBLE
Assessment English test at the beginning of the course in order to get to know your CEFR level better.	4	1	4
Readings There are readings (or other minimal homework) before some lectures.	1-2	2	4
Survey Lectures Attending and participating in the lectures — where we will be doing a lot of stuff, not just listening passively — is important.	1-3	10	30
Discussions Your discussion sections are where you really learn while interacting with your group.	1-4	5	20
Practice Assignments The practice assignments are the backbone of the course. During weeks 2-10, you may complete five assignments. If you complete five, your lowest below-course-average score will be raised to the course average. Note that this is capped at well below the theoretical maximum	1-5	5	25
"Big Theme" Assignment The Big Theme assignment lets you develop a major project around a theme or a question you are interested in. You may do it collaboratively or you may do it on your own. I encourage you to use the practice assignments in your Big Theme Assignment.	1-7	1	7

Peer Review To encourage you to learn from your peers and to get practice in engaging others, you can earn points for peer reviewing one assignment for a fellow student.	1-3	1	3
Game Journal From the first day of this course, till the last, you will be asked to complete a grid to take notes of the time spent and your activities on Minecraft. Playing every day is not necessary.	1-3	1	3
Final Interview, Survey, and Focus Group You will take part in an interview and a focus group (in Italian) where you will give your personal opinion about the course. A written survey about the course will also complete your interview.	2	2	4

How students' final points in Gameful English are converted to a number grade at the end of the course.

POINTS	*NUMBER GRADE*
95-100	10
90-94	9
80-89	8
70-79	7
60-69	6
50-59	5
40-49	4

Source: Adapted from Ajlen/Plummer/Straub/Zhu (2020)

Appendix 2. Survey

Final survey

This is your end of the course report for Mrs D'Adamo's class. You have been using Minecraft as a learning tool for the last 6 weeks. Please reflect on your learning over this time period and tell me about your experience here.

Questo è il sondaggio di fine corso della prof.ssa D'Adamo. Nel corso delle ultime 6 settimane, hai utilizzato Minecraft come strumento di apprendimento. Ripensa al corso in relazione all'apprendimento e lascia la tua valutazione.

* Indica una domanda obbligatoria

Vernacular videogames impact on learning English - Impatto dei videogiochi commerciali sull'apprendimento dell'inglese *

	Completely disagree Totalmente in disaccordo	Disagree somewhat Parzialmente in disaccordo	Neither agree or disagree - Non riesco ad esprimere una valutazione	Agree somewhat - Parzialmente d'accordo	Completely agree - Totalmente d'accordo
I think this course helped me acquire new English skills - Penso che questo corso mi abbia aiutato ad acquisire nuove competenze in inglese	○	○	○	○	○
I think I learned more English vocabulary with this method than previous methods - Penso di aver appreso più vocaboli inglesi con questo metodo che con i precedenti	○	○	○	○	○

I felt more relaxed and confident speaking English with this method than previsous methods - Mi sono sentito/a più rilassato/a e sicuro/a nel parlare in inglese con questo metodo rispetto ai precedenti	○	○	○	○	○
I spoke more English in this project than previous methods - Ho parlato di più in inglese con questo metodo rispetto ai precedenti	○	○	○	○	○
I think I improved my fluency and comprehension - Penso di aver migliorato sia la comprensione che il parlare fluentemente	○	○	○	○	○
I could learn more English grammar with previous methods - Sono riuscito/a ad apprendere più grammatica con i corsi tradizionali rispetto a questo	○	○	○	○	○
I enjoyed more doing my homework with this project than previous methods - Ho svolto con più piacere i compiti a casa con questo metodo rispetto ai precedenti	○	○	○	○	○

I would recommend this way of learning to other students Raccomanderei questo tipo di apprendimento anche ad altri studenti	○	○	○	○	○

Gamification in educational context - La gamification nel contesto scolastico *

	Completely disagree Totalmente in disaccordo	Disagree somewhat Parzialmente in disaccordo	Neither agree or disagree - Non riesco ad esprimere una valutazione	Agree somewhat - Parzialmente d'accordo	Completely agree - Totalmente d'accordo
I found gamification more learning challenging than previous methods - Ho trovato la gamification più sfidante nell'apprendimento rispetto ai metodi passati	○	○	○	○	○
I enjoyed the points, badges, and leaderboard elements - Ho trovato piacevoli la struttura a punti, i badge e la classifica	○	○	○	○	○
I think a gamified course is more fair and egalitarian than a standard course. - Penso che un corso gamificato sia più equo e chiaro rispetto ai normali corsi scolastici	○	○	○	○	○

I felt under pressure looking at the leaderboard and points structure - Mi sono sentito/a sotto pressione in relazione alla classifica a punti	○	○	○	○	○
I would recommend this type of structure and assessment to other courses Raccomanderei questo tipo di valutazione e strutturazione anche ad altri corsi	○	○	○	○	○

Gameplay perception - Percezione del gameplay *

	Completely disagree Totalmente in disaccordo	Disagree somewhat Parzialmente in disaccordo	Neither agree or disagree - Non riesco ad esprimere una valutazione	Agree somewhat - Parzialmente d'accordo	Completely agree - Totalmente d'accordo
When I played Minecraft I found it less attractive because it was "for school" Quando giocavo a Minecraft lo trovavo meno divertente perchè sapevo che era per scuola	○	○	○	○	○
It was fun to play the game - é stato divertente giocare	○	○	○	○	○
The tasks were too difficult - Le attività erano troppo difficili	○	○	○	○	○

I think I will keep on playing Minecraft Multiplayer after this course - Penso che continuerò a giocare a Minecraft Multiplayer dopo questo corso	○	○	○	○	○
I am more aware of the possibilities video games may have on learning a second language - Ora sono più consapevole delle possibilità di imparare una seconda lingua grazie ai videogames	○	○	○	○	○

Do you want to add something? Vuoi aggiungere qualcosa?

La tua risposta

Appendix 3. Abbreviations

CALL = Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CEFR = Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
DDA = Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment
EF EPI = Education First English Proficiency Index
EF SET = Education First Standard English Test
EFL = English as a Foreign Language
L2 = Second Language
OECD = Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OED = Oxford English Dictionary
PBL = Points, Badges, Leaderboard
SDT = Self-Determination Theory

Francesca D'Angelo[*]

Bilingualism and "Bilingualisms": Different Dimensions and Contexts of Acquisition

Abstract

The present paper provides insight into the concept of bilingualism and bilingual education under different perspectives of investigation. First, it highlights the complexity of the phenomenon, together with its ambiguity in terms of categorisation, depending on the specific factor considered. Second, it analyses various aspects of bilingualism in terms of educational outcomes, cognitive development, and socio-cultural background. Third, the role of a particular factor is examined: the context of acquisition of each language mastered by the multilingual speaker. In particular, the methodology and findings of the most significant studies on the influence of bilingualism on third language acquisition (TLA) will be compared and contrasted to discuss their contribution to the study of instructed and uninstructed bilingualism. Finally, a discussion on the implicit and explicit paradigm is included with a focus on the impact of metalinguistic awareness on additional languages, related to the different routes of acquisition available to learners. The implications of the research are portrayed in pedagogical terms, advancing a teaching approach focused on multilingualism, i.e. on the whole linguistic repertoire of the language learners.

Keywords: bilingualism, instruction, multilingual education, third language acquisition, ESL, multilingualism, metalinguistic awareness

1. Introduction

The study of how individuals can master two or multiple languages has attracted the attention of different scholars from different perspectives: cognitive, linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic etc. The rise of interest, especially in the last two decades, is due to the increased awareness of the sociological reality that, in most parts of the world, over 50% of the population is, in fact, bilingual (Grosjean 2010). Interestingly enough, if one considers the impact of dialects too, the percentage becomes even higher, and bilingualism becomes the norm rather than the exception since almost everyone also speaks (or at least understands) a dialect.

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The present work focuses on several factors affecting bilingual education and bilingualism, particularly the context and the different routes of acquisition available to bilingual language learners. The aim is to provide an insight into the phenomenon by comparing the most important definitions and contributions which examine the effects of instructed and uninstructed bilingualism on additional language learning. Specifically, it delves into the multifaceted realm of bilingualism and bilingual education, approaching the subject through various lenses.

First, the intricate nature of bilingualism is explored, revealing its intricacy and the challenge of categorization depending upon specific factors under investigation (e.g., age of acquisition, number of languages, method of instruction, social prestige of each language etc.). Indeed, the work aims at disentangling the relationship between methods of instruction and bilingualism by reviewing the most relevant definitions proposed by scholars in the last decades, based on the dimensions of bilingualism taken into account. Second, a comprehensive analysis of different facets of bilingualism, encompasses the educational outcomes, cognitive development, and socio-cultural dimensions. The examination then narrows down to the pivotal factor of language acquisition context for multilingual speakers. This involves a comparative assessment of methodologies and findings from influential studies, specifically delving into the impact of bilingualism on third language acquisition (TLA).

Furthermore, the paper scrutinises the educational, cognitive, and socio-cultural dimensions of bilingualism, illuminating its far-reaching impact across diverse domains. Central to this discourse is an in-depth analysis of the contextual factors influencing language acquisition among multilingual speakers. Through a comparative evaluation of the most influential studies on bilingual education and TLA, the work sheds light on the crucial role of acquisition context in shaping linguistic development. The synthesis of these findings contributes to a deeper understanding of the effects of instructed and uninstructed bilingualism. In particular, the implicit and explicit paradigm within the language acquisition domain is examined, with a specific focus on metalinguistic awareness and its implications for bilingual learners. To better understand the intricate interplay between implicit and explicit learning processes, divergent routes of language acquisition are critically reviewed. The implications of this research reverberate within pedagogical spheres,

advocating for a holistic teaching approach centred on multilingualism. Embracing the entire bilingual learners' linguistic repertoire, this approach seeks to foster an inclusive educational environment conducive to the diverse needs of language learners.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Who is bilingual? Different dimensions of bilingualism

The most salient feature that can be observed about bilingualism is the complexity and multifaceted aspect of the phenomenon. Indeed, it is not possible to establish clear cut-off points defining where it starts, where it ends, and who can be considered bilingual. Hence, there is no unique definition pointing out what bilingualism is, considering the multiple factors characterising and affecting the phenomenon itself. It is exactly the ambiguity and lack of precise boundaries that allow so many different definitions and interpretations.

It is worth starting with the disambiguation of some key terms which may often be responsible for misinterpretations and confusion in TLA research. After a close look at the most relevant literature in the field, it can be claimed that the term 'multilingualism' has several meanings. For instance, in Jessner's view (2009) both terms – 'bilingualism' and 'multilingualism' – are still used as synonyms for 'multilingualism' as, in the past, most studies focused on second language learning and bilingualism. For instance, in his pioneering work on multilingualism, Haugen included 'bilingualism' under the meaning of 'multilingualism' and argued that the term 'bilingual' also refers to 'plurilingual' and 'polyglot' (Haugen 1956: 9).

Cenoz (2013) on the other hand, points out that the term 'multilingualism' has recently gained currency at the expense of 'bilingualism'. However, literature shows no consensus on that, which means that there are still different positions and uses for the terms 'bilingualism' and 'multilingualism'. The traditional position, reflecting the importance of research involving two rather than additional languages, considers 'bilingualism' as a generic term. Even so, it is also used in a broader sense to refer to two languages but can also include more languages (Cook/Bassetti 2011).

On the other hand, the mainstream position, nowadays, considers 'multilingualism' to be the generic label used to refer to two or more languages (Aronin/Singleton 2008). On these grounds, 'bilingualism' and

'trilingualism' can be considered as instances of 'multilingualism'. Finally, some scholars use 'bilingualism' and 'multilingualism' as different terms, to distinguish between speakers of two languages and speakers of three (or additional) languages (De Groot 2011). Even though the latter is regarded as the most common approach among researchers working on Third Language Acquisition, the most traditional position considering 'bilingualism' as the broader, generic term will be adopted in the present work.

2.2. Context of acquisition

By taking into account the different types of competencies achieved in a second language, namely grammatical and communicative, it is possible to introduce definitions of bilingualism based on the context of acquisition of the second language. The former is what lay speakers mean by knowing a language or speaking properly. More specifically, grammatical competence refers to speakers' ability to produce and recognise well-formed utterances in a language. In other words, it enables a speaker to make grammaticality judgments. On the other hand, communicative competence refers to the ability to use those utterances in ways that are considered unmarked or appropriate in a particular situation. To determine what is unmarked, one needs to consider the participants, topic, and setting of the conversation. Besides, communicative competence allows us to recognise marked usages and what the speaker intends by such utterances. A marked choice of words and expressions conveys the level of communicative competence. For instance, the ability to choose different registers to address somebody, yet reflects communicative competence.

Several terms have been propounded in the literature to refer to bilinguals who acquired the second language in a naturalistic setting and bilinguals who learned it in a formal setting. The German linguist Braun (*apud* Jessner 2008), for example, in the attempt to find a definition for multilingualism, distinguished between natural multilingualism, in the sense of acquired from birth, and learned multilingualism. In his view, learned multilingualism can also result in active balanced proficiency, but this is an unusual case linked to specific circumstances.

Yet, another common terminology employed is primary and secondary bilingualism to distinguish between a dual competence acquired naturally

through contextual demands, and one where systematic and formal instruction has occurred. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that these cannot be considered watertight compartments. Indeed, for instance, a speaker might develop fluent conversational skills in a language, in a relatively informal way, and only later feel the need to add some formal literacy skills. This would, incidentally, reproduce the way a mother tongue is acquired, and it has been reflected in many second language programmes.

2.3. Age of acquisition

Besides, the age when bilinguals acquire languages is regarded as one of the most important factors affecting the nature of their bilingualism. Indeed, it has been considered as the most striking variable which explains success in second language acquisition. When dealing with this type of distinction, the terminology employed is early bilingualism and late bilingualism. Specifically, an early bilingual can either fall within the category of infant bilingualism or child bilingualism (Haugen 1956: 72), where the conventional cut-off point between the two has been established at the age of three (Mc Laughlin 1984: 73). On the other hand, as far as late bilingualism is concerned, the line established to discern between child and adult bilingualism falls at the age of puberty. Generally speaking, the main differences observed between these types of bilinguals concern different cognitive features including language production and perception, language processing, and storage.

Paradis (2004) has advanced a possible neurobiological cause to explain the age effects. The author suggested that it is caused by the decline of procedural memory for late L2 learners (i.e., a more limited capacity to learn implicitly), forcing them learners to rely more on explicit learning. He claims that the upper age limit changes according to the specific component of the implicit language system acquired through exposure to language interaction. For instance, prosody has been observed to precede phonology, morphology, and syntax. Since the learning of vocabulary resorts to declarative (explicit) memory, it is not susceptible to the age effects.

It has been argued (Myers-Scotton 2005) that native speakers of a language, i.e. those who have learned the language since early childhood, do not need to be taught either grammatical or communicative competence as they acquire them with no particular effort. Indeed, the acquisition process

requires some exposure to the language in use in the speakers' community, and it is based on the innate learning principles that all humans have. This is not the case when the second language is taught in a formal setting since the focus is mainly on teaching the grammatical competence of the language. Because of the belief that grammar constitutes the essence of the language, different programmes only concentrate on explicitly teaching a language, i.e. on teaching grammatical constructions. That is why many L2 speakers show more control of the L2 grammar than of its appropriate use in a specific context. Nonetheless, lately, more and more second language programmes are giving importance to communicative competence.

2.4. Social prestige

There are some important and socially relevant differences worth discussing between those who became bilingual informally and those whose second competence is more self-consciously acquired. For instance, Edwards *et al.* (2013) point out that it would not be appropriate to gather under the same label English-Gaelic bilinguals in Ireland or Scotland who are fluent in both languages due to growing up in a particular location and those who set themselves to become bilingual.

This last nuance has been usually conveyed by referring to élite and folk bilingualism. The former refers to two prestigious languages and has to do with social status marking, the need for knowledge and cultural boundary-crossing. Folk bilingualism, on the other hand, is generally suggestive of a more informal and necessity-driven expansion. Both varieties are driven by necessity even though we are talking about different levels and types of necessity. Moreover, formal education per se does not seem to be enough to elicit the élite label. Real-life mixture examples show how inaccurate simplistic categorisations are.

As Fishman observes (1966), the distinction between folk and élite bilingualism is more related to the prestige and social status of the languages involved rather than to the context of acquisition or necessity type. Folk bilinguals are immigrants and linguistic minorities who exist within the milieu of a dominant language that is not their own and whose own language is not held in high esteem within the society. The élite are those who speak the dominant language and whose societal status is enhanced through the mastery of additional languages. The following observation

by Fishman is very meaningful to understanding the social implications as well as the perception that lay speakers have of language prestige: "Many Americans have long been of the opinion that bilingualism is a good thing if it was acquired via travel (preferably to Paris) or via formal education (preferably at Harvard) but it is a bad thing if it was acquired from one's immigrant parents or grandparents" (Fishman 1966: 122–23).

It is important to notice that not only does this observation deal with the social perception of the languages involved, but it also has important implications from a pedagogical perspective. It affects the actual involvement and use of bilinguals' heritage languages, both at home and school. Indeed, the child who acquires a language is presented to it in a given context, which may be fused or separated. The former situation occurs when both parents speak both languages to the child or when both languages are used in the child's environment, i.e., in a multilingual society. The latter situation occurs when the parents follow the one-parent-one-language rule or when one language is learned in a context/country and the second in the other. All these scenarios characterise the so-called ascribed bilingualism, to use Houston's own words (1972), or the aforementioned natural or primary bilingualism.

On the other hand, the label achieved bilingualism (Adler 1977), that is instructed or secondary bilingualism, describes the situation when a person learns a language through systematic instruction. A further, interesting distinction has been advanced by Skutnabb-Kangas (1984: 95) between natural bilingualism on one hand and school/cultural bilingualism on the other. School bilingualism is involved with formal language teaching in a school environment, and the language is rarely used outside this context. Cultural bilingualism applies more to adults, who learn a language for purposes of travel, leisure, and work, and who recognise the cultural value of knowing more than one language.

Nonetheless, despite the distinctions just introduced, there are still some researchers who do not acknowledge school bilinguals as authentic bilinguals. Indeed, in their view, those who acquired their second language in a formal setting only have a good command of the language, but they are not necessarily bilinguals. Malmberg, for instance, claims that knowledge of a second language laboriously acquired does not result in bilingualism. This establishes an acceptable boundary between bilingualism on one hand and knowledge of foreign languages on the other, which will be further

discussed in terms of cognitive development and language learning skills in the following sections. More specifically, according to his definition:

> A bilingual is an individual who, in addition to his mother tongue, has acquired from childhood onward or early age a second language by natural means (in principle not by formal instruction) so that he has become a fully competent member of the other linguistic community within the sphere, the occupation or social group, to which he naturally belongs. (*apud* Skutnaab-Kangas 1984: 96)

The author points out that there is a connection between the origin of bilingualism and the bilinguals' dependency on it when she establishes that "for naturally bilingual people, bilingualism is a must", while for school and cultural bilinguals "bilingualism is often more or less voluntary [...], not vital for them, but a desirable extra, something they enjoy or find useful" (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984: 96). However, instructed (or secondary/achieved) bilingualism is a more common situation if we consider that second language learning in a classroom setting is a necessary reality in many parts of the world. Indeed, almost every state in the world has a population characterised by different first languages. The minority language groups need to learn the majority language both for practical reasons and because, most of the time, schooling is only available in that language.

In nations where no one language group dominates in number or politically, then, either one regional language or an outside language is selected as a lingua franca. In this case, this language is studied at school and becomes the medium of instruction for at least the upper primary grades. Besides, in many countries, apart from studying the official language of schooling and education, upper-level students must study one or more international languages as part of the programme, such as English. Indeed, it is important to highlight that English is spoken by 400 million people as a first language but at least one billion people study it as a foreign language or as an official second language (Crystal 1987).

3. The role of previously acquired languages on Third Language Acquisition

Many researchers have examined the recurring features of the classroom environment to be relevant to students' development of a second

language. Specifically, they examine the type of cognitive components or mechanisms available to second language learners. Based on the point of view they assume on this matter, especially on the role given to instruction, they have been distinguished into two main groups. The first group includes the Universal Grammar proponents, also called nativists, arguing that second language acquisition has distinct similarities to first language acquisition. In their opinion, learners have some access to the same innate language faculty that makes first language acquisition rather effortless. Therefore, their main aim is to provide evidence that in the performance of L2 learners, it is Universal Grammar and not the instruction that plays the most important role in determining any success.

The other group of Second Language Acquisition researchers attributes a more important role to instruction (e.g., Cenoz/Valencia 1994; Sanz 2000; Thomas 1988). Their starting point used as the main assumption is that the process of second language learning is very different from the acquisition of the mother tongue. They argue that even though the L1 acquisition is based on an innate language faculty, it is no longer active to the same extent for second language learning. Their main focus is to find evidence for the type of learning that is possible for L2 learners. It is precisely the type of learning promoted that determines a further internal division within the group.

On one hand, there are the promoters of explicit learning, convinced of the benefits of instruction in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The SLA supporters also include an additional group of researchers, i.e., Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA) considering the age of acquisition of a second language as a fundamental factor affecting the level of proficiency of the target language on different levels of the language system. A study by Meisel (2018), for instance, highlights similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition, focusing on the role of age of onset (AO) as a possible cause of qualitative differences in the knowledge acquired by learners of these acquisition types. Specifically, it investigates the acquisition of grammatical gender in French by German L1 children. The findings indicate that the turning point is around AO 3;6, highlighting that it is a crucial factor in determining successive language acquisition. On the other hand, there is the claim that learners achieve the best results through teaching methods that favour implicit

learning. Finally, an additional group, with similar theoretical premises to the second main group described, pays particular attention to the context of acquisition in which the learning takes place as well as to the learners' motivations and expectations related to the level of success attained.

In an influential work, after comparing previous research into the field, Rothman (2015) argues that early bilinguals outperform late bilinguals in TLA due to having two activated grammatical systems developed from an early age. On the other hand, Jaensch's view (2012), following the Universal Grammar approach, relies on the assumption that there are more advantages for learners of an L3 if their L2 experience begins at an older age since they can have access to a more enhanced MLA in contrast to the more implicit learning environment of younger learners.

The present work aims to provide an insight into the role and implications of each of the aforementioned perspectives of study on additional language learning, considering the benefits of multilingual education from a different point of view. On the role and effectiveness of instruction in second or additional language learning, there is a large amount of literature. It has been claimed (Jessner 2008) that, to benefit from multilingual education in classroom environments, two main principles need to be followed. First, languages being taught in the classroom need to be linked to profit from transfer and to exploit the resources that students have already developed, through previous language learning. Second, as Jessner suggests, some form of linguistic background documentation should be obligatory in any classroom so that to identify and exploit any positive effects of multilingualism.

Considering these issues on the role of instruction, it is worth recalling Cummin's distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism (1994). In the first, the L1 continues to be developed and the first culture to be valued while the second language is added. In subtractive bilingualism, instead, the second language is added at the expense of the first language and culture, which diminishes as a consequence. To support this claim, in his work, the author specifically refers to research which suggests that students working in an additive bilingual environment succeed to a greater extent than those whose first language and culture are devalued by their schools and by the wider society. Cummin's theories have had considerable implications for multilingual teaching in mixed classrooms. Specifically,

they encourage teachers and educators to explore every possibility to incorporate the different cultural backgrounds of immigrant students into their daily teaching and curricula by stressing the equal importance of their first language and culture.

Nonetheless, as already argued, there is a group of researchers who do not acknowledge any specific effect on instruction since, in their view, L2 learning is an incidental process guided by universal mechanisms (e.g., Krashen 1985; Cho/Krashen 1994). Therefore, the so-called non-interventionist group implied that no positive effect on intervention (i.e., instruction) could be acknowledged and that SLA was best cultivated in ways that resemble first language acquisition. On the other hand, the supporters of an effective role of instruction in SLA claim that instruction is fundamental in SLA, especially for adult and foreign language learners who do not receive enough input outside the classroom and for those wishing to achieve a high level of grammatical accuracy (Ellis 1991, 2005; Long 1988). Indeed, based on the findings of a wide range of studies in the field, it can be argued that secondary bilingualism represents, in fact, an advantage when both type and amount of naturalistic exposure and instruction are held constant (Doughty 2003).

More specifically, the effects of instruction have been investigated along the three basic dimensions of the L2 learning process: the route, rate, and end state of learning. The general findings of the studies have been summarised and reported by De Graaff and Housen (2009) in the following terms. As regards the first dimension, it has been argued that both instructed and uninstructed learners follow the same route. Therefore, instruction will only affect the acquisition of specific linguistic patterns when the learners are developmentally ready to acquire them.

Also, it is worth stressing that, contrary to previous beliefs that developmental orders are primarily driven by universal processing constraints, recent research has shown that they are primarily caused by learners-external features such as the perception of linguistic features in the input (Goldschneider/DeKeyser 2001). In terms of rate, instruction has been demonstrated to improve the speed of acquisition compared to non-instructed learners. Finally, as far as the end-state is concerned, instructed learners have been reported to achieve higher levels of interlanguage development as well as higher levels of proficiency than uninstructed learners.

4. The implicit-explicit paradigm

Once acknowledged the general benefits of instructed bilingualism, it is worth providing a brief insight into the types of instruction available to the learners together with an analysis of their specific outcomes. A first distinction can be made between Meaning-Focused Instruction (MFI) and Form-Focused Instruction (FFI). This latter is defined by Ellis as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (2001: 2). The MFI, on the other hand, is characterised by focal attention exclusively on the communication of relevant meanings and authentic messages (Norris/Ortega 2001). Examples of this type of learning can be found in the Natural Approach to L2 teaching, in the Communicative Language Teaching methods as well as in the immersion programmes. On the other hand, FFI aims at drawing the learners' attention to language form through an instructional activity where grammatical structures, lexical items, phonological features etc. are taken into account.

From a closer look at the latest research on the effects of FFI, a lack of clarity and consistency in definitions of terms such as Focus on Form, and Form-Focused Instruction can be noticed. Nonetheless, the common feature that all these expressions seem to share is the concept of language seen as an object. Yet, different scholars have different views on how this focus on form can be achieved. Long (1996), for instance, claims that focus on the form may occur in different ways including problem-solving tasks, provision of negative feedback, and common error-focus tasks. Brown (2007) proposes a continuum of explicit-implicit approaches to form. On one hand of the continuum are the explicit, discrete-point metalinguistic explanations, and discussions of rules and exceptions. On the other, there are the implicit, incidental references to form, noticing, i.e. the learner's paying attention to specific linguistic features in input and, finally, the incorporation of forms into communicative tasks or, to say it in Ellis' words (1997), "the grammar consciousness-raising".

Sharwood-Smith (1991) propounds an interesting re-analysis of the notion of consciousness-raising in language learning. The input enhancement, i.e. the process by which language input becomes salient to the learner, can be a result of deliberate manipulation or it can be considered as the natural outcome of some internal learning strategy. Moreover,

according to the author, it can vary both quantitatively and qualitatively. Interestingly enough, it does not necessarily involve the conscious analysis of rules. Yet, on the implicit-explicit dichotomy, according to Ellis (1994), there are three main ways used by learners of a second language to acquire a new form: i.e. explicitly, via given rules following instructions; explicitly, through selective learning, searching for information, comparing and contrasting hypothesis; implicitly, by abstracting unconsciously the structural nature of the material derived from the experience of specific instances. Additionally, he argues that adult L2 learners are likely to make use of all the aforementioned procedures. Based on these learning procedures, the two types of form-focused instruction may be applied in a second language classroom, that is to say, implicit and explicit.

Some researchers have looked, more generally, at the effects of monolingual and bilingual school environments on the overall language and cognitive development of language learners. Paul and Jarvis (1992), for example, compared English language learners in bilingual and monolingual pre-kindergarten classrooms and found positive outcomes for children in the bilingual classroom. Another study in which classroom activities were carried out exclusively in Spanish (Campos 1995) shows similar positive effects of first language use on second language acquisition.

These works point to the importance of understanding the linguistic environments of institutional settings that serve as the primary base for second language acquisition. Thus, it can be argued that understanding even the preschool environment is critically important in predicting the outcomes of learning for several reasons. First, it has been demonstrated that the development of the native and second languages are interdependent in the sense that they affect each other thanks to the implicit transfer of knowledge of the languages. Learners develop cross-linguistic awareness, the learners' tacit and explicit awareness of the links between their language systems.

As suggested, studies on the nature of what can be transferred from first to second-language reading ought to consider not only the level of first-language reading but also the level and content of the second-language reading material (Hakuta 1998). Second, the quantitative methodology should be completed by qualitative data since it is not only a matter of how much but also in which way the input has been internalised. What is more, it can be argued that future successful readers typically arrive at school with

a set of prior experiences and well-established skills conducive to literacy, including an understanding of literacy, and abstract knowledge of the sound and structure of the language. Third, early instruction is impacted by a lack of explicit instruction in the local orthography and the absence of background knowledge and skills acquired in highly literate environments.

Concerning the role of transfer, Khaled and Hossein (2013) reviewed several studies indicating that L2 writers make considerable use of their L1 when writing in the L2. Particularly, the use of the L1 as a composing strategy may also compensate for the possible deficiencies in their L2 proficiency, facilitating their writing process. Besides, they report the use of L1 for generating ideas, searching for topics, developing concepts, organizing information, and planning purposes. Interestingly, they report that learners also transfer some other L1-based strategies including metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies to L2 writing, transferred across languages positively.

The additive effect of instructed bilingualism is also supported by the findings of another study (D'Angelo/Sorace 2022) which contributes to shed light on the role of implicit and explicit instruction as well as the level of metalinguistic awareness achieved in additional language learning. Specifically, the research question of the study examines whether bilinguals' level of both implicit and explicit MLA in the L2 is related to their attainment in third or additional language acquisition over and above their proficiency in L2, amount of formal instruction received, context of acquisition, and age of acquisition of L2. To demonstrate this hypothesis empirically, on one hand, the correlation between implicit and explicit MLA was investigated, on the other, it was the ability to learn an additional language at the initial stage was examined.

The participants, 42 adult bilinguals aged between 20 and 70, with German as an L2, with different levels of instruction received, and different ages of acquisition of the L2, were assessed in their ability to learn an additional language at the initial stage through an artificial language task (Llama-F/ Meara 2005). The study was conducted with participants living in Scotland and England. The majority of them had English as a first Language. The level of implicit MLA was assessed with a Self-Paced Reading (SPR) task focused on sensitivity to case and agreement ambiguity in German L2 (Gerth *et al.* 2017). The level of explicit MLA was assessed with a task of Grammatical

Knowledge (Roehr 2008). The influence of the other background variables, i.e. number of languages mastered, proficiency, age of acquisition of each language etc., was recorded with a Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (Leap-Q) (Blumenfeld/ Kaushanskaya 2007).

The main findings suggest that explicit MLA also developed in an L2 is the most important factor which assists and enhances the process of learning additional languages over and above implicit MLA, level of bilingualism (i.e., proficiency in an L2), and age of acquisition of L2. Moreover, the study also demonstrates that bilinguals performed better in the artificial language task of grammatical inference the more languages they knew (specifically, more than three) and the more explicit their level of grammatical MLA was. The influence of the other aforementioned mediating factors such as participants' age and age of acquisition of German L2 was also controlled through partial correlation analyses.

More recently, numerous studies (e.g., Cenoz/Gorter 2022; D'Angelo 2023) have focused the attention on strategies and pedagogical practices, including translanguaging, aiming at enhancing bilingual linguistic, cultural, and semiotic resources in TLA. More specifically, these words support the holistic, multilingual approach along three dimensions: the multilingual speaker, the multilingual repertoire, and the socio-educational setting. Pedagogical translanguaging is presented as an approach which allows learners to activate and fully exploit their prior knowledge when dealing with additional languages. Indeed, by going beyond the existence of conventionally defined linguistic boundaries, translanguaging allows a higher degree of freedom of expression and self-confidence, for both students and teachers, as well the use of more diverse linguistic resources. Hence, developing multilingual awareness and valuing their whole multilingual and multicultural background significantly boost TLA in terms of quality of process and linguistic proficiency.

5. Discussion

In terms of pedagogical implications, considerable discussion has taken place on the effectiveness of the different contexts of acquisition of previously acquired languages presented in the current work. Specifically, it seems necessary to develop didactic methodologies which draw the learners' attention on form too, to develop explicit MLA. Nonetheless, as

Sorace (1985) points out, if one believes that formal knowledge of a foreign language does have a positive function on MLA, the question is open to how to exploit this potential in a lively, communicative-oriented learning situation. This requires a better comprehension of the psycholinguistic processes underlying the complex relationship between knowledge and use in language learning. Besides, once acknowledged that languages are interdependent in the mind of the learner and that previous and subsequent learning of languages affects each language they know, it seems advisable for educators to develop language materials drawn upon learners' knowledge of other languages to explain and exemplify the target language.

In particular, it has been argued that studies on SLA have mainly focused on the differences between languages. In the language learning classroom, the willingness to activate prior language knowledge has been generally ignored, although it is part of the actual process of language learning. As Jessner (1999) maintains, among teachers, it has been the exception rather than the rule to underline common features between L1, L2, and L3. Indeed, it can be claimed that increased transfer strategies, built on a language system already established, seem to be facilitative. In other words, the role of previous languages must be exploited in terms of both similarities and differences. The traditional contrastive method should be complemented by a psycholinguistic approach to the interlinguistic strategies used in language learning.

In the specific case of TLA, particularly if the languages involved are typologically related, it is important to create the conditions to exploit students' prior experience as language learners, focusing not only on the commonalities among languages. Indeed, what is fundamental in this context is to recall the learning strategies and processes used with previous languages and apply them to TLA. That is to say, students must be stimulated and assisted in the process of conscious reflection and manipulation of the metalinguistic awareness developed for this latter to play a significant role in subsequent language learning. Accordingly, an alternative methodological approach, considering the whole linguistic repertoire of students as well as the interactions and similarities among languages and, most importantly, their socio-cultural background is sought. Hence, a shift of focus from the target language to the multilingual learners together with their whole linguistic background is needed.

The emphasis should extend beyond merely identifying commonalities among languages and delve into the conscious reflection and manipulation of metalinguistic awareness developed through previous language acquisition. By recognising the significance of learning strategies and processes used with prior languages, language teachers can guide students to effectively apply these skills to the TLA context. Moreover, an alternative methodological approach that considers the entirety of students' linguistic repertoires, explores interactions and similarities among languages, and incorporates socio-cultural backgrounds proves to be advisable. Therefore, a shift in focus from the target language to the multilingual learners, embracing their comprehensive linguistic background, becomes imperative for fostering a more holistic and effective language learning environment.

6. Conclusion

Starting from a detailed terminological disambiguation of the terms 'bilingualism' and 'multilingualism' and the different nuances of bilingualism, the paper provides an insight into the concept with a specific focus on the type of bilingualism characterised by the context of acquisition of each additional language (i.e., L2, L3, Ln). As it has been argued, if one hand the advantages that bilingual individuals possess in comparison to monolinguals when acquiring an additional language have been widely acknowledged in the literature, on the other, the specific factor that may be responsible for a better performance of bilinguals is still a matter of intense debate among scholars. Bilinguals exhibit heightened proficiency as language learners, potentially having developed learning strategies to a greater extent than their monolingual counterparts. Furthermore, they possess a more extensive linguistic and intercultural repertoire.

The extensive reviews of methodology and findings of the studies investigating the impact of bilingualism on third language acquisition suggest that formal instruction may be indicative of a higher level of metalinguistic awareness. The latter, in turn, supports and facilitates bilingual learners in the process of additional language learning. Hence, introducing a novel perspective – the 'focus on the multilingual learner' –, the paper advocates for a more appropriate approach to analyse the influence of bilingualism on TLA and contributes to the broader field of multilingualism research. The holistic perspective propounded concentrates on multilingual speakers and

their linguistic repertoires, emphasizing the intricate interaction between their languages.

This perspective allows us to overcome the monolingual bias in TLA, giving voice to language users involved in a process of meaning making, using all the linguistic and semiotic resources available in their multilingual repertoire. Finally, the focus on multilingual learner approach allows the enactment of plurilingualism, as defined and described in the CEFRCV (Council of Europe 2020). That is, plurilingualism aims to capture the holistic nature of individual language users/learners linguistic and cultural repertoires. In this view, language learners/users are seen as social agents who draw upon all sorts of resources in their linguistic and cultural repertoires and further develop these resources in their trajectories. Moreover, the Council of Europe stresses the dynamic use of multiple languages and cultural knowledge, awareness and experience in social situations. It is therefore worth transforming language education to meet the needs of a highly diverse, multicultural and multilingual society.

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Stefania D'Avanzo[*]

Storytelling as a Teaching Tool: Some Reflections from Experiences with Undergraduates Students

Abstract

In recent years, storytelling has been increasingly used to support teaching and learning in higher education. Indeed, storytelling has been considered as an integral component of learning as it has been shown to be able to support students in their sense-making processes (Mokhtar et al. 2011; Alkaaf 2017; Abrahamson 1998). This study is aimed at exploring corporate storytelling-based tasks and activities involving undergraduate students, while uncovering linguistic and multimodal methods and tools involved in teaching English as a foreign language in a Business Department. While integrating the perspectives of scholars from different fields (Cheng et al. 2021; Smeda et al. 2014) the present contribution highlights the need to adapt the storytelling methods to specific goals and learning needs. Therefore, different ways to work with stories are discussed, along with structured approaches to adopt when students are new to storytelling.

Keywords: corporate storytelling, new insights in the teaching / learning process, multimodal storytelling, corporate narration

1. Introduction

Storytelling can improve intercultural understanding and communication as stories can give the students the opportunity to explore their own cultural roots and come into contact with diverse cultures. Thanks to storytelling, they can empathise with unfamiliar people/places/situations while getting insights into different cultural traditions and values. From a teaching perspective, some benefits have been explored including, among others, the promotion of a feeling of well-being and relaxation, encouragement in the active participation by the students, in the use of their imagination and creativity, cooperation with other students, etc. (Mokhtar *et al.* 2011; Alkaaf 2017; Abrahamson 1998).

In management studies, storytelling has two main spheres of application, as it is considered both a knowledge tool and a communication one. Stories, in fact, can be the object of research in the organisational field or be used as a managerial tool. In particular, in the context of narrative inquiry,

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analysis through the collection, processing and interpretation of stories can be useful in understanding and explaining numerous phenomena that occur in the social reality of organisations (Alkaaf 2017)

Specifically, the narrative mode of knowledge consists in organising the experience with the help of a scheme that starts from the assumption of the intentionality of human action. Stories can be considered also as a means of communication as they are among the tools that management can adopt to guide and modify the behaviour of actors inside and outside the organisation. For instance, the narrative is configured as one of the most valuable tools to stimulate the identification of the members of the organisation with the company goals (Napolitano *et al.* 2018; Riviezzo *et al.* 2015). In this case, the purposes and ways in which stories are used as a communication tool can themselves become the subject of analysis and research (Czarniawska 2018). Starting from these premises, this study tries to explore the benefits of storytelling-based activities in the teaching-learning process. In particular, it illustrates some activities introduced to the students attending Economics and Management degree courses in order to highlight the learning achievements deriving from storytelling practice and possibly provide some reflections concerning the teaching-learning process when narratives are offered in the higher education process.

2. Theoretical Background

Some theories have illustrated the benefits of learning through storytelling. For instance, through narratives students are encouraged to experience diverse cultures while exploring their cultural traditions along with differences and commonalties of cultures around the world (Gachago 2015; Norman 2011; Smeda *et al.* 2014). Previous studies (Mokhtar *et al.* 2011) focused on the extent to which storytelling helps in enhancing students' communication skills. The findings showed that storytelling had beneficial effects on reading skills as students reinforced their skill to associate meanings and emotions with words. Students also had the opportunity to develop their vocabulary and learn when and where to use words and phrases in an appropriate way. Another study (Alkaaf 2017) illustrated the teachers' and learners' opinions concerning the impact of the storytelling strategy on developing the story writing skills, thus testing self-awareness related to usefulness of storytelling in writing skills improvement.

The outcomes revealed both teachers and learners could benefit from storytelling practice in terms of skills improvements and personal

involvement in the activities. In higher education storytelling has been investigated from different perspectives, including, among others, the one including pedagogical implications. Specifically, lively narrative formats have been explored in higher education as these appear to be helping students think critically. Furthermore, its use encourages the students to focus on technical aspects of texts by providing concise, concrete examples of the written material studied. Storytelling can clearly be viewed as the foundation of the teaching profession (Abrahamson 1998). Advantages offered by storytelling in higher education have also been explored in terms of encouragement of a deeper understanding of a topic and development of critical thinking skills. Specifically, it was emphasised how storytelling can accommodate diverse cultural, emotional and experiential incidents, and may be used in many different contexts including some formal/informal ones or one-on-one/group setting (McDrury/Alterio 2003).

In this section, further theoretical concepts have been explored. The latter were introduced during the activities carried out by the students. In particular, the students were invited to focus on the contrast between Denotation and Connotation, which was related to two fundamental concepts applied to the investigation of pictures included in social semiotics approach. Through a ppt presentation, they were told that Denotation is related to showing something. For instance, some images show particular events, people, places or events, so, they denote (Machin 2020). Denotation characterises photographies, which represent people or things. It does not mean that they are 'neutral' recordings of reality as it is likely to provide subjective perspectives while shooting a photo.

According to Barthes (1977), there is no image free of connotation. Notwithstanding, there are degrees of this in terms of image use. Anyway, lack of abstraction is a peculiar feature of denotation. Connotation, instead, represents the second layer of images meaning, that is, the ideas and values associated with them. It is conveyed by connotators, such as poses, objects and settings, and photogenia. A further concept introduced during this stage was 'modality' from a multimodal viewpoint. Abstract or realistic representations are some other elements the students were invited to explore. In particular, modality is the main concept related to potential realism or lack of realism in pictures as it refers to the way we communicate as how true or as how real a representation should be taken

(Kress/van Leeuwen 2006; Machin 2020). Modality is interpersonal, as it is not about expressing absolute truths but about aligning listeners with some truths and distancing them from others (Kress/van Leeuwen 2006).

3. Methodology

The classes started in 2023 (II term) and lasted three months (since February to May). The students attending the classes were about 50. They had already passed their exam of English Language during their three-year course – Business Administration or Economics and Commerce –, which implied the achievement of a B1- level of knowledge and skills according to the Common European Framework

A student-driven approach was followed, which involved three main steps. During the first step, some 'prepared' stories about companies, consumers or brands were used (e.g., on corporate websites, in mass media advertising, videos), in order to develop the skills of identifying and interpreting key story aspects. At this stage the students were invited to focus on the narratives delivered by the companies themselves but also on the image-text complex characterising the sections where corporate stories were told through a combination of images. Thus, they could explore storytelling in corporate discourse through verbal messages and through images. During the last part of this stage, attention was devoted to theories and methodologies about narratives (Labov/Waletzky 1967; Linde 1993; Lieblich *et al.* 1998), narratives in corporate discourse (Catenaccio *et al.* 2021; Riviezzo *et al.* 2015; Napolitano *et al.* 2018) and multimodal analysis (Machin 2020; Kress/van Leeuwen 2006). The latter was mainly employed to invite the students to focus on the corporate stories told through images by the companies. Some multimodal concepts including, among others, Denotation vs. Connotation, and the representation of social actors through images were introduced in order to encourage the students to explore promotional strategies enacted by the companies to promote their identities and products.

During the second step, the students were asked to plan the 'story' of the company they were supposed to work for. In particular, they were invited to create their own project work including a PPT presentation or a digital product where creative corporate storytelling would be produced.

The two steps lasted 28 hours divided into 14 lessons – three per week.

Finally, the third step included the assessment of the skills acquired during the learning / teaching process. Specifically, narrative skills were

assessed, which included some key competences, such as writing stories according to Labov's categories, through images and through the image-text complex. It is necessary to point out that the Professor supervised the whole process while facilitating the comprehension of some key-theoretical concepts mentioned above.

3.1. Methodological procedure

Step I

During the first step of the learning process, the students were shown some examples of storytelling from websites. In particular, they were invited to explore EG Group's Foodservice (EG Group 2024). The Group presents a range of attractive Foodservice services with recognised global brands including Subway, Starbucks, and KFC as well as some other proprietary brands including Cooplands, Go Fresh, and Cumberland Farms. In recent years, the Foodservice market has expanded across the countries in which they operate, underpinned by long-term trends such as customers seeking convenience and an increase in travellers from tourism in certain countries. The rationale behind this choice was to provide students with examples from a group of companies sharing similar goals due to their belonging to the same group. Specifically, the students could explore more than one story while focussing on similarities among them, thus providing observations concerning the original intention and mission of the EG association.

According to some studies on storytelling from the marketing and linguistic fields, communication studies have particularly benefited from the growing interest in storytelling, where a "[…] considerable body of research has emerged spanning across multiple areas of corporate discourse" (Catenaccio *et al.* 2021). In particular, in corporate discourse, storytelling has been considered as 'responsible' for corporate collective identity. The latter "[…] 'resides' in the collective identity stories that, for example, people tell each other in their conversations, write into corporate histories, and encode on websites" (Brown 2006: 734). From a narrative perspective, organisations' identities are identified as discursive linguistic constructs constituted by the multiple identity-relevant narratives that their participants author about them, and which feature, for example, in documents, conversations and electronic media. Thus, while exploring these narratives, the students were encouraged to reflect upon the promotional features and identity values

conveyed through the EG group website. In the following figure, some sample materials used during the classes are provided:
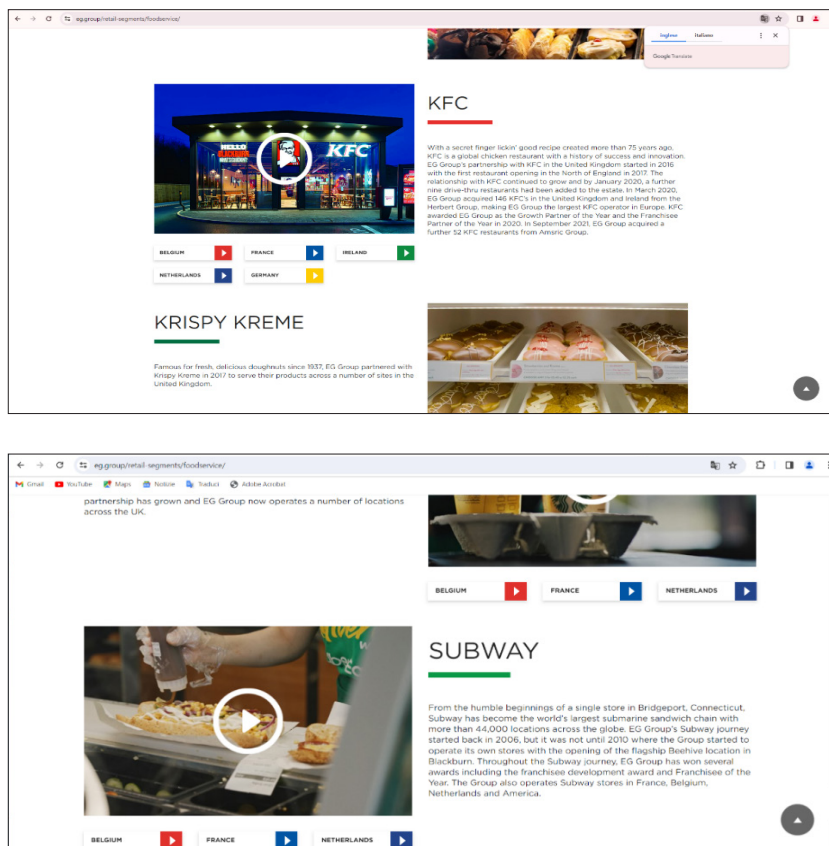
Figure 1. Sample materials from EG group website (EG Group 2024).

As can be observed from the figures above, storytelling is combined with images, thus creating a coherent whole. Thus, during this stage, the students were invited to focus on both the structure of the verbal messages included in the descriptions and the use of the images corresponding to the message. As far as the structure of the texts is concerned, they were encouraged to divide the texts into paragraphs in order to identify the sequential order of the events occurred to the companies. Then, a debate in group was suggested, which was aimed to explore the main tenses and verbal voices found in each paragraph.

During this stage a quick revision of these grammar topics was offered while inviting the students to practice through the British Council website (British Council 2024). After discussing the analysis with the Professor, some theoretical points were introduced concerning studies on narratives. At this stage, the frontal teaching was aimed only at categorising and labelling the paragraphs according to a precise methodological perspective. In particular, the componential approach, which is considered as highly influential in narrative analysis was introduced to the students. According to the popular theory about the structure of narratives (Labov/Waletzky 1967), in narration it is possible to identify five main steps including Orientation (reference to people, place, time, situation), Complication (a serious of events leading to a result), Resolution (results), Evaluation (the attitude the narrator holds towards the narratives). Thus, the students were invited to explore the paragraphs already analysed according to the theoretical notions introduced before. Specifically, they were told to focus on a possible subdivision of the same paragraphs investigated before into Orientation, Complication, Resolution and Evaluation. Then, they were offered further practice through some other examples from the website, as observed in the following figure:
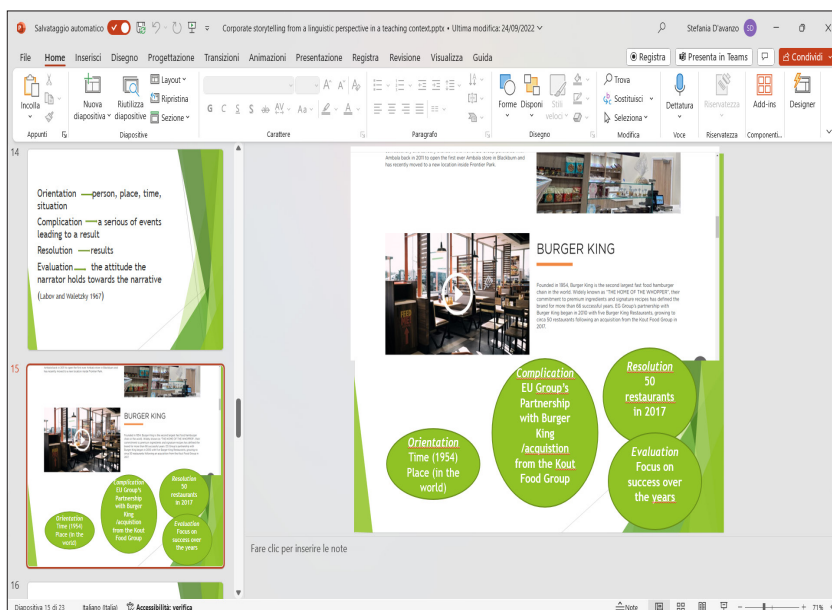
Figure 2. Example provided by the students during their own activity.

Stefania D'Avanzo

The following lessons were devoted to the exploration of multimodal concepts through the analysis of further examples from the same website according to the student-driven approach already followed in the previous activities. In particular, some video shots from the EG Group were shown to the students in order to invite them to focus on the stories told through the images. In the following figure, the video shots explored during the lessons are illustrated:
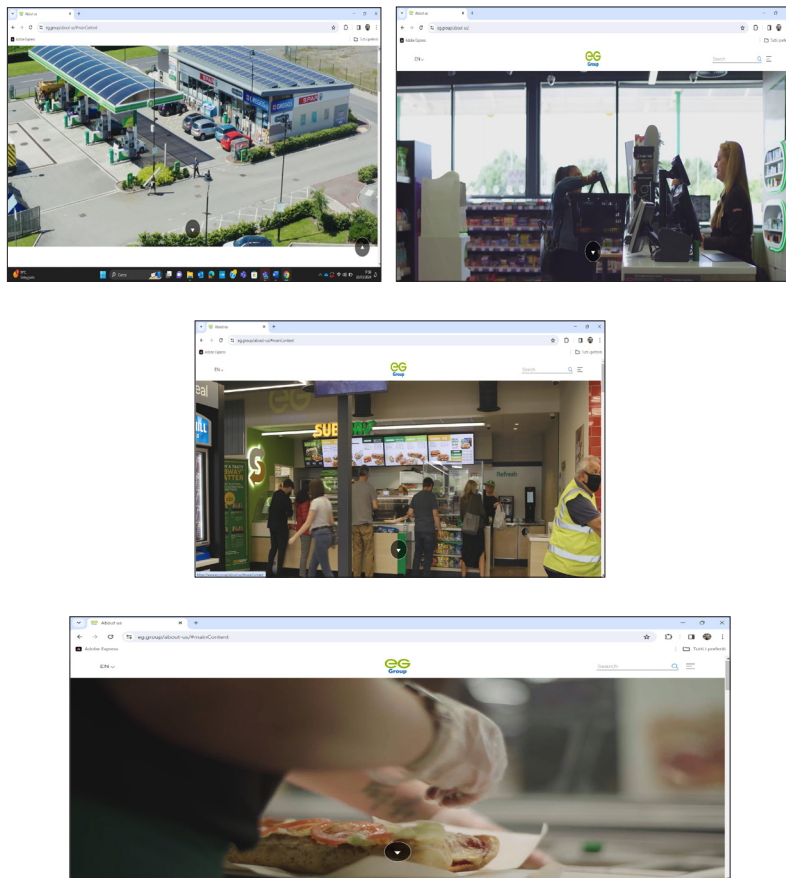
Figure 3. Video shots explored during this step (EG Group 2024).

After watching the video, the students were invited to provide their first hypotheses concerning the sequence of the actions represented. Specifically, during this step, questions concerning some background information, the

position of the people represented (e.g., foreground or background, posing or not posing), photos from daily life or lack of naturalism, colour differentiations, camera angles were asked. The answers were debated in small groups.

Then, theoretical concepts related to multimodality were introduced along with some other examples where the image-text complex was found. It is necessary to point out that some theoretical notions concerning multimodal concepts were provided only at this stage due to the inductive nature of the teaching procedure chosen for all the activities.
After introducing these theoretical concepts, the students were asked to work in group in order to explore the examples provided (see Figure 3 and further material from the EG group website).

Specifically, they were invited to investigate the features of the images debated during the previous activities according to a multimodal perspective. They were asked to write their answers individually.

Step II
As mentioned in the Introduction section, at this stage, the students started focussing on their final project while working in small groups. They were asked to start writing narratives delivered by some fictious companies according to the theoretical concepts learned and practiced during the previous lessons. During the hours spent in the laboratory, the students were also asked to do research concerning possible images to be used and combined to tell corporate stories through pictures.

Step III
The final stage consisted in assessing the skills acquired. As mentioned above, narrative skills included some key competences, such as writing stories according to the narrative structures introduced by Labov (1967), through images and through the image-text complex.

Although the actual assessment stage coincided with the exam sessions, some preliminary tests were delivered before them. They consisted in some exercises including the investigation of image-text complex and schematisation of corporate storytelling according to Labov's narrative model. As far as the examination sessions are concerned, the achievement of the initial objectives including creating corporate storytelling according to narratives and multimodal concepts was assessed.

In particular, the structure of Labov's narratives was expected to be found in their works along with the use of images chosen according to their multimodal values.

4. Data analysis and Discussion

The study was aimed at exploring teaching activities and tasks related to corporate storytelling addressed to students attending the two-year course of Economics and Management. Specifically, the final intention was to reflect upon possible the benefits of the exploration of corporate narratives from a linguistic perspective during the teaching / learning process. In particular, in the storytelling-based projects created by the students, narrative skills including Labov's categories were assessed according to some specific parameters illustrated in the following grid:

Category	Criteria	Rating (1-5)	Comments
Abstract	- Summarises the story effectively		
	- Engages the audience's interest from the beginning		
Orientation	- Provides necessary background information		
	- Sets the scene and context clearly		
	- Introduces key characters or elements effectively		
Complicating Action	- Describes the sequence of events logically and engagingly		
	- Builds tension and interest through the narrative		
Evaluation	- Highlights the significance of the events		
	- Provides insight into the narrator's perspective or the company's values		
Resolution	- Clearly presents the outcome of the events		
	- Satisfactorily concludes the narrative		
Overall Coherence	- Ensures the narrative flows smoothly from one section to the next		
	- Maintains a consistent tone and style throughout		

Creativity and Style	- Uses creative elements to enhance the storytelling		
	- Employs a compelling and appropriate narrative voice		
Audience Engagement	- Captures and maintains the audience's attention throughout		
	- Effectively addresses the audience's needs and interests		

Table 1. Assessment grid illustrating Labov's categories along with others (Overall Coherence, Creativity and Style and Audience engagement) and the corresponding rating and comments.

The grid above was aimed at assessing both the correct adaptation of Labov's narrative categories to the corporate stories created by the students and their general cohesion along with the level of linguistic creativity and audience engagement. A further grid was used, instead, to assess the students' skills related to their ability to generate stories through images while evaluating the acquisition of multimodal concepts by Kress/van Leuween (2006):

Category	*Criteria*	*Rating (1-5)*	*Comments*
Salience in Images	- Evaluates the prominence of social actors in images (e.g., size, focus, color)		
	- Analyses the effect of salience on the audience's attention and interpretation		
Interaction with Text	- Assesses how effectively images and text complement each other in representing social actors		
	- Considers the coherence and overall impact of the combined image-text narrative		
Ideological Implications	- Analyses the underlying ideologies represented through the depiction of social actors		
	- Evaluates the potential influence of these ideologies on the audience		

Table 2. Assessment grid evaluating some relevant multimodal concepts.

As can be observed above, several multimodal concepts were assessed, which were consistent with the initial objective of the whole teaching-learning process, that is, assessing narrative skills while writing corporate stories. In short, the two tables above summarise the expected results in terms of acquisition of narrative skills according to both narrative categories and multimodal concepts. The results took into account the percentage of students who passed or failed their own exam, which tested the acquisition of the skills concerning the correct use of Labov's categories and the appropriate use of images. Firstly, 80% of the students passed their exams. They mainly created narratives of fictious family-businesses, where they tried to combine narrative categorisations with images taken from websites. Most of them delivered some power point presentations. Only three groups created videos where they combined images with verbal messages, texts and music, thus providing interesting examples of digital corporate storytelling. As far as the outcomes referred to the grid in Table 1 are concerned, it is possible to assert that the highest points corresponded to the first five Labov's categories (4/5 points) whereas, some lower points related to the other categories (Overall Coherence, Creativity and Style and Audience engagement) were obtained, where the average of 3 was reached by the students. This outcome is consistent with the lack of linguistic proficiency by the students attending the Department. In particular, the repetition of some linguistic structures was often observed along with the lack of cohesive linkers when the students needed to move from one category to another (e.g., from Abstract to Orientation). The grid in Table 2, instead, revealed some very high points corresponding to the first two categories – Salience in images and Interaction with Text. In contrast, some lower points corresponding to Ideological Implications were obtained by the learners.

This was probably due to a lack of deep awareness among the students concerning the theoretical multimodal concepts involved in the activities.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is possible to assert that the main benefits deriving from the activities consisted in the acquisition of new skills such as categorisation of narratives according to a linguistic model, critical interpretation, selection and combination of images according to

multimodal parameters. This outcome was particularly relevant, especially if the weak prerequisites belonging to the students with poor linguistic skills are taken into account. It is important to point out that one of the difficulties sometimes encountered by the students themselves was some limited awareness of the theoretical concepts referring to both narrative categorisation and the multimodal assumptions implicit in the activities. Specifically, while showing advanced skills in creating corporate stories through the combination of different narrative categorisations, they could not sometimes give their right definition when some more detailed questions were asked to them. Furthermore, uncertainties mainly related to textual coherence and cohesion emerged. In the future, some classes could be devoted to the reinforcement of linguistic and syntactic skills, thus encouraging the students to improve their proficiency before inviting them to focus on writing corporate stories.

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Bronwen Hughes and Margaret Rasulo

Questioning Across Contexts: A Comparative Analysis of Higher-Order and Lower-Order Questions in CLIL and EMI

Abstract

This study investigates questioning techniques in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and English Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms, focusing on higher-order and lower-order questions as key pedagogical tools for language acquisition and content comprehension. Drawing on Bloom's Taxonomy, the research categorizes lower-order questions as those fostering recall and comprehension, while higher-order questions promote critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis. Conducted in Italian high schools and universities, the study utilized classroom recordings of CLIL and EMI lessons in science and economics to examine the use of questioning techniques by teachers and the elicited responses from students. The findings reveal that lower-order questions provide essential scaffolding for language and foundational content, which is crucial in multilingual classrooms where students are often learning through a non-native language. The study underscores the effectiveness of combining both question types to balance comprehension with deeper cognitive engagement. In CLIL and EMI contexts, the sequential use of lower-order questions for foundational understanding and higher-order questions for analytical depth promotes a holistic approach to learning. By implementing a qualitative approach to the analysis of dialogical questioning, this study provides evidence that an integrated questioning strategy fosters a dynamic, inclusive learning environment, enabling students to progress from basic knowledge acquisition to critical, independent thinking skills.

Keywords: Bloom's taxonomy, HO questions, LO questions, CLIL, EMI, ELT

1. Introduction[1]

Over the years the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has become increasingly complex, impacted by evolving educational practices, technological advancements, and shifting linguistic landscapes. Key

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challenges today include fostering multilingualism and inclusion, integrating artificial intelligence (AI), addressing the role of English as a lingua franca and implementing both Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and English Medium Instruction (EMI). Each of these areas has implications upon how English is taught and learnt, calling for new strategies and perspectives.

Today, English is not taught in isolation but rather within a multilingual context. In many classrooms, students come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, which presents unique challenges and opportunities. Educators need to adopt inclusive teaching practices that leverage multilingualism as an asset rather than a barrier. According to Escobar and Dooly (2023), multilingual classrooms promote better cognitive development and enable students to transfer knowledge between languages, fostering a deeper understanding of content. Teaching in these environments, however, also requires additional skills and resources, as language instructors must find ways to balance the different linguistic needs of students while maintaining English proficiency as a learning outcome.

The rapid, unceasing rise of AI presents both promise and challenges for the teaching and learning of English. AI tools can support language learning by offering personalized feedback, enabling practice, and allowing self-regulation (British Council 2023). Tools such as Grammarly and other language-specific AI applications have been shown to enhance learners' grammatical accuracy and vocabulary (Lo 2023). AI-driven tools can also help students develop speaking skills by providing real-time feedback on pronunciation, pitch, and intonation (Shivakumar *et al.* 2019). It must be said, however, that while AI can enhance learning, it cannot replace the nuanced, context-driven guidance provided by human teachers (Wei 2023).

The role of English as a global lingua franca is both a driving force and a challenge in ELT. The language serves as a bridge for communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds, making English proficiency essential in many international contexts. However, the dominance of English also raises questions about linguistic imperialism, with other languages and cultures being marginalized in favour of English (British Council 2023). In response, some educational systems now tend to emphasize a more pluralistic approach to English, promoting an understanding of different 'World Englishes'. This approach allows learners to recognize that English varies globally and helps them develop skills for cross-cultural

communication. It also encourages students to maintain pride in their native languages and cultures while simply engaging with English as a tool for global interaction (Tech.ed.gov 2023).

CLIL and EMI have grown in popularity in recent decades, especially in non-English-speaking countries where English is used as the language of instruction in scholastic, academic and professional contexts. While EMI aims to prepare students for successful placement in global job markets, it can also present challenges for both students and instructors. Conversely, in CLIL contexts, students often struggle with the subject matter due to language barriers and low linguistic competence; this can affect their comprehension and academic performance (York University 2023). In both the CLIL and EMI settings, educators need in-depth training to teach their complex subjects in English effectively. EMI students, however, are subjected to a 'double burden', as they are expected to grasp not only academic content but also to improve their English proficiency without any dedicated language input. To address these challenges, some institutions are currently developing bilingual programs, using scaffolding techniques, and providing additional language support.

In the main, the challenges in ELT today reflect broad societal changes, technological advancements and the ever-encroaching importance of global communication. As ELT continues to evolve, it will be ever more essential to develop adaptable teaching strategies that support diverse learners in a rapidly changing world.

1.1. Context of the study

Research into classroom discourse has highlighted questioning techniques as a key pedagogical tool that can significantly shape student engagement and cognitive development. This study seeks to investigate the comparative use of higher-order and lower-order questions within the two distinct instructional contexts of CLIL and EMI. Based on and in line with Bloom's Taxonomy of learning outcomes, each type of question, in a similar manner, plays a distinct yet complementary role in the learning process. The Taxonomy provides a hierarchical classification of cognitive skills that are involved in learning. It is commonly represented as a pyramid with six levels, arranged from basic to complex cognitive functions: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, creating.

Lower-order questions generally target the first two levels (Remembering and Understanding), while higher-order questions are associated with the upper levels (Applying, Analysing, Evaluating, and Creating). By examining both types of questions posed by teachers, and the responses elicited from students, we aim to provide evidence of the crucial role played by language input (as opposed to mere subject-matter input) while acknowledging the potential differences in cognitive demands and interactional patterns across these educational frameworks.

Analysing questioning strategies in CLIL and EMI settings is essential, since it is only by understanding the nuances of questioning in these contexts that valuable insights into effective teaching strategies and enhanced learning outcomes can be obtained. Particularly beneficial in studying interactive processes, language use, and pedagogical practices is the qualitative analysis of authentic classroom recordings which provide a rich, contextualized understanding of teaching and learning dynamics. Such analysis is advantageous in educational research as it allows investigators to capture the complexity of classroom interaction. Here follows a detailed account of the benefits of qualitative analysis in this context, drawing on the relevant literature.

2. Theoretical background

Classroom environments are multifaceted, involving dynamic interaction among teachers, students, and the instructional content. Qualitative analysis allows researchers to capture these complexities more deeply than quantitative methods, which may oversimplify classroom processes (Lyle 2003). Through approaches like conversation analysis (CA) and interaction analysis, researchers can focus on subtleties, such as turn-taking, body language, and non-verbal cues (Mercer 1995), which reveal how teachers manage discussions and scaffold student understanding. Lyle (2003), for instance, argues that qualitative analysis is indispensable for observing how teachers adapt their questions based on students' responses in real-time. This adaptability in questioning is a critical component of effective teaching, particularly in interactive pedagogies like inquiry-based learning.

Qualitative methods thus allow researchers to unpack the micro-level processes involved in teaching, providing insights into the complexities of classroom interaction that are often missed by quantitative approaches.

Qualitative analysis further provides insight into pedagogical strategies, helping researchers understand how teachers create an inclusive learning environment, manage student engagement, and employ various teaching techniques. Researchers like Walsh (2011) highlight that qualitative methods allow for a detailed analysis of how teachers structure lessons and respond to students' needs, which can reveal the efficacy of different instructional approaches. Through inductive coding, for example, researchers can categorize and interpret teaching strategies observed in recordings, enabling them to identify patterns and themes. This approach helps to elucidate the link between specific teaching practices and student outcomes, contributing to the development of pedagogical theories. For example, Alexander (2008) uses qualitative analysis in studying dialogic teaching, showing how the use of open-ended questions promotes critical thinking and student engagement.

Classroom recordings, such as those analysed in the present study, provide authentic data on how language is used for communication and learning. By analysing these recordings qualitatively, researchers can explore how teachers and students use questioning, negotiate meaning, and clarify misunderstandings. Seedhouse (2004) emphasizes the importance of CA in analysing classroom discourse, as it enables researchers to focus on language as a vehicle for learning. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how language facilitates cognitive development and supports various learning processes. Mercer's (1995) work on classroom discourse demonstrates that qualitative analysis is effective in identifying how teachers use language to build cumulative and exploratory talk, which helps students articulate their thoughts. This type of analysis can reveal instances where teachers scaffold learning by guiding students through complex reasoning or problem-solving processes, offering insights into effective communication strategies in teaching.

In the field of teacher training and professional development, there is abundant literature on the qualitative analysis of authentic classroom recordings which offer valuable insights into the implementation of effective and less effective teaching practices. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that qualitative findings from classroom recordings provide a realistic picture of teaching, enabling trainee teachers to reflect on and improve their practices. In teacher education programs, recordings and their

analyses can be used as reflective tools to demonstrate successful classroom management strategies, effective questioning techniques, and scaffolding methods. Qualitative analysis provides a detailed account of these practices, which can help new teachers develop practical skills for managing diverse classrooms and engaging students in meaningful learning activities.

Finally, in terms of methodological rigour, qualitative analysis of classroom recordings such as the ones employed throughout our study, supports theory development by allowing researchers to observe and interpret teaching and learning phenomena in a natural setting. This approach aids in the construction of theoretical frameworks that explain the complexities of classroom interactions. For instance, grounded theory methods allow researchers to build theories rooted in empirical data (Charmaz 2006), which is essential for developing nuanced understandings of classroom discourse and instructional methods. Moreover, qualitative analysis contributes to methodological rigor by allowing for triangulation and cross-validation of findings through multiple perspectives (Denzin/Lincoln 2011).

3. Origins and background of CLIL and EMI in Italy

3.1. The adoption of CLIL in Italy

CLIL emerged in Europe during the early 1990s as a method for integrating language learning with subject-matter teaching (Marsh, as cited in Escobar/ Dooly 2023). Its goal was to enhance students' multilingual competence and subject-specific skills in non-linguistic subjects through a foreign language, typically English. This approach stemmed from the European Union's (EU) emphasis on promoting multilingualism and cultural understanding as a cornerstone of European identity and student mobility (see, for example, the Maastricht Treaty 1992). The EU's multilingual education strategy, with CLIL at its core, encouraged member states to integrate it into their curricula.

Italy's interest in CLIL began in the late 1990s with experimental and pilot programs in secondary schools. These initiatives were often supported by the European Commission, which encouraged Italy to enhance students' linguistic capabilities through CLIL teaching.

The EU's 2006 Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning emphasized multilingualism, providing further impetus for CLIL adoption in Italy. Italian educators saw this as an opportunity to

modernize the country's language education system, shifting the focus from traditional grammar and literature to practical language skills. EU-funded projects, such as Socrates and Erasmus, played a crucial role in promoting CLIL by supporting teacher training and curriculum development.

CLIL was progressively introduced into the Italian school system by means of a number of legislative acts: the so-called *Riforma Gelmini* (Law 133/2008) made it mandatory for upper secondary schools to offer at least one non-linguistic subject taught in a foreign language during the final year of tuition. In 2010, a further ministerial decree (249/2010) outlined teacher qualifications for CLIL, requiring C1 language proficiency and specific training. The National Plan for Digital Education (PNSD) in 2015 then introduced digital tools and online resources, which have proven beneficial for CLIL instruction.

3.2 The adoption of EMI in Italy

English Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the practice of teaching academic subjects in English rather than the native language of the students. It has become increasingly popular in higher education institutions worldwide, including Italy where it is primarily implemented at the tertiary level, particularly in graduate programmes. In recent years, Italian universities have increasingly offered courses in English especially in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics for the purposes of attracting international students, enhancing global competitiveness, and preparing students for international careers.

In much the same way as CLIL, EMI in Italy was introduced by key legislative acts. The Ministerial Decree 270/2004 allowed Italian universities more flexibility in offering programs in foreign languages, thus contributing to the growth of EMI. In 2013, the Council of State Ruling on EMI emphasized a balanced approach, allowing universities to offer English-language courses alongside Italian. The *Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale* in 2015 further encouraged the use of English-language resources in secondary and higher education, facilitating the integration of EMI through digital platforms.

It can therefore be said that in recent years, CLIL and EMI have gained significant traction in Italy, driven by various factors, including EU policies, national educational reforms, and the global demand for English language skills. While both approaches offer unique opportunities for language

learning and content acquisition, their successful implementation requires careful planning, adequate teacher training, and appropriate resources. These methodologies are, however, not devoid of challenges. One major hurdle is the limited number of teachers with the required C1 language proficiency together with the specifically required teaching qualifications. To address this, the government has invested in professional development programs and explored alternative models, such as co-teaching with language specialists. Despite these efforts, the full potential of CLIL and EMI in Italian education is yet to be realized. All told, as Italy continues to navigate the complexities of global education, CLIL and EMI will likely remain important components of its language education landscape.

4. Questioning techniques in CLIL and EMI classrooms

Effective questioning is essential in CLIL and EMI classrooms to support comprehension, language practice, critical thinking, and engagement with content. However, to make questioning effective, a number of pedagogical requisites must be observed. To begin with, allowing adequate wait time after asking a question encourages the students to engage in deeper thinking and provide more thoughtful responses (Rowe 1974). Scaffolding questions which provide hints or clues, and gradually increase in complexity can guide students towards a heightened awareness of the appropriate response (Alexander 2008). Such hints or clues can also facilitate the formulation of students' correct responses, especially when language barriers may hinder understanding. Repeating or rephrasing student responses can model correct language use and clarify content, while encouraging collaborative thinking and allowing students to articulate and refine their ideas. Reusing key vocabulary in different contexts further reinforces language learning and content understanding. Finally, crucial is the use of open-ended questions to promote critical thinking and extended language production, while closed questions can be used for checking comprehension.

4.1 Higher-Order (HO) and Lower-Order (LO) Questions

As previously mentioned, questions stand as a fundamental pedagogical tool that probe into students' previously acquired knowledge while laying the groundwork for the acquisition and assimilation of newly presented content. Question types serve different teaching and learning purposes

and can be categorized on the basis of their cognitive demands. Two major categories of questions are lower-order and higher-order types based on Bloom's taxonomy, which organizes cognitive skills from basic recall to complex analysis and creation.

Lower-order questions primarily focus on recall, comprehension, and basic application of knowledge. They require students to recall facts, define terms, or explain concepts in simple terms. Some examples of LO questions are:

- What is the formula for gas?
- Can you define climate change?

Such questions are also useful for checking understanding and building confidence, particularly for students with limited language proficiency. However, relying solely on lower-order questions can limit opportunities for deeper cognitive engagement.

Conversely, HO questions engage students in complex cognitive processes like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as well as encourage them to draw connections, make inferences, hypothesize, and justify their thinking.

Some examples of HO questions are:

- How can precipitation impact different ecosystems?
- Why do you think chemical reactions accelerate as the temperatures rise?

While higher-order questions can be challenging for students with limited language skills, they are essential for promoting deeper understanding and fostering a more interactive and engaging classroom environment.

5. Dataset and methodology

5.1. Dataset description

This research is based on two recordings of high school CLIL science lessons conducted in English, and two recordings of university level EMI economics lessons. The former were carried out in two different upper secondary level schools in the province of Avellino, the latter in two universities also located in the south of Italy. Both the CLIL and EMI lessons lasted two hours each. In the CLIL classes there were respectively 25 and 28 students, whereas in the EMI classes there were 45 in the one

case, and 56 in the other. Both the high school groups and the university groups were specifically selected by the authors of this study on the basis of the teachers' English language competence which was, in all four cases, B2 or above in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The teachers' high level of language competence was deemed necessary due to the fact that the focus of this study is on the effective delivery and reception of the two interrogative typologies: lower order and higher order questions. In other words, this was to ensure that the teacher/student interaction was in no way impeded by language barriers (lexical, syntactic, morphological, prosodic). The student groups, conversely, as in most Italian school and university settings, were extremely heterogeneous, spanning from a B1 minus to a full B2. The teachers in both settings were instructed to ask a minimum of 5 questions belonging to each interrogative typology and to select different students each time as respondents.

5.2. Methodology

The aim of this research project is to observe and subsequently analyse high school and university classroom interaction in CLIL and EMI settings. By implementing an ethnomethodological approach (Creese/ Blackledge 2019) involving the audio recording of the four lessons under investigation, the study focuses on the emerging nature of lower order and higher order question-and-answer pairs, and their potential contribution in terms of tools to favour the acquisition of content and language in non-language subjects.

The investigative procedure adopted comprised a number of steps. We initially contacted the educators and students to ensure their participation and carry out ethics clearance. We then set up encounters and agreed on the data-collection procedure including anonymization of sensitive information. We subsequently provided educators with appropriate procedural guidelines (e.g., preparing students for observation and recording, illustrating the project and its aims and final benefit). The recording sessions and transcription of data followed with question types and responses being coded on the basis of the LO/HO question types. Linguistic analysis and interpretation of the data was then carried out.

6. Findings and discussion

6.1 Findings

In CLIL and EMI settings, such as the ones under investigation, using both lower-order and higher-order questions is crucial to effectively balance the transmission of language and content knowledge. In these settings, teachers and instructors aim not only to convey subject-specific content but also to facilitate language development, which is essential for students to engage meaningfully in discussions and demonstrate understanding. Employing both types of questions promotes a scaffolding approach, where lower-order questions support foundational knowledge while higher-order questions push students to synthesize, evaluate, and apply their understanding in complex ways.

Based on our findings, it emerged that lower-order questions, often referred to as factual or recall questions, are vital for building the essential vocabulary and knowledge needed for understanding subject-specific concepts. They require students to recall information, definitions, and basic explanations, which aids in reinforcing foundational concepts and language structures. This scaffolding is particularly important in CLIL and EMI settings, where students are not only grappling with new content but often doing so in a non-native language. For example, in our high school CLIL context, the question

What is the symbol of iron?

prompted students to recall the symbol 'Fe', reinforcing both the chemistry content and the relevant vocabulary. Similarly, asking

What is Avogadro's number?

supports both content acquisition (the fundamental constant) and language practice, as students articulated a specific numerical value in a scientific context.

Lower-order questions are also essential for developing procedural knowledge, whereby students learn how to approach problems in a structured way. For instance, the question

How do you calculate the molar mass of calcium carbonate (CaCO3)?

enables students to perform a calculation by summing atomic masses. This question reinforces fundamental skills and teaches them to apply specific

language patterns, such as articulating mathematical processes in words, which is an important skill when conducting scientific discussions.

Higher-order questions, such as those that ask students to analyse, evaluate, or create new ideas based on what they have learned, are instrumental in fostering deeper engagement with both content and language. In CLIL and EMI contexts, higher-order questions prompt students to use complex language structures and advanced vocabulary as they construct arguments or hypotheses. For example, in the university EMI setting we observed that the question

Why did Coca-Cola start replicating its factories in other countries?

encouraged students to consider economic strategies and express their opinions and ideas. This question required them to use language to explain causal relationships and discuss business concepts in English, thereby enhancing both cognitive and linguistic skills.

Higher-order questions also push students to make connections between ideas and to apply theoretical knowledge in hypothetical or real-world situations. For example, the question

Imagine you have a block of iron; how would you estimate the number of atoms in it using Avogadro's number?

encouraged students to integrate the concept of atomic structure with practical applications of the Avogadro constant. By responding to such questions, students practiced using technical language in an applied context, which strengthened their grasp of both scientific concepts and the language needed to discuss them.

An effective educational strategy in CLIL and EMI incorporates both types of questions in a complementary manner. Lower-order questions build confidence and familiarity with foundational terms and concepts, which are prerequisites for tackling higher-order questions. For instance, understanding the meaning of *specific heat* (a lower-order question) provides a stepping stone to higher-order questions about energy transfer, such as

What does it mean if a system is isolated in terms of internal energy?

Lower-order questions prepare students to respond to these more challenging prompts by providing the necessary linguistic and conceptual building blocks.

This integration also mirrors real-world learning, where foundational knowledge is used as a springboard for critical thinking and problem-solving. In a science class, students might begin with factual questions like

What are the three types of thermodynamic systems?

before progressing to questions that require them to analyse these systems in different contexts, such as

Can you imagine a situation with negative work?
How does it relate to energy transfer?

This approach helps students to see the relevance of foundational knowledge and understand its application in complex scenarios.

6.2 Discussion

Educators can maximize the benefits of integrating both types of questions by using a sequential questioning strategy, where lower-order questions build a base of knowledge that is then expanded upon with higher-order questions. This strategy helps to maintain a balance between comprehension and application, as students are given the time to solidify their understanding before moving into more analytical or evaluative responses. For instance, when discussing globalization in an EMI university course, beginning with a lower-order question such as

What is globalization?

allows students to anchor their understanding in a concrete definition before moving to a higher-order question like

How is it possible that a company makes a Foreign Direct Investment?

This methodical progression ensures that students are linguistically and conceptually prepared for the complexity of higher-order inquiries.

Another effective approach is to encourage collaborative discussion around higher-order questions. By first answering simpler, lower-order questions individually or in small groups, students build up the language skills and confidence needed for higher-order thinking. In group discussions around questions like

> *If heat is a kind of energy, and work is another kind of energy,*
> *what can we conclude about the nature of energy?*

students practice articulating their thoughts, negotiating meaning, and using subject-specific language in a meaningful way, which reinforces both content understanding and language skills. By effectively employing questioning techniques, teachers can create engaging and intellectually stimulating learning environments that foster both language proficiency and content mastery in CLIL and EMI classrooms.

7. Conclusion

Questioning techniques are a powerful tool in shaping student engagement and cognitive development. In content-based language learning (CBLL) contexts such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and English Medium Instruction (EMI), effective questioning can enhance both language acquisition and content understanding.

In CLIL and EMI contexts, the combined use of lower-order and higher-order questions is not merely a matter of structuring lessons but a pedagogical necessity for achieving both language acquisition and content mastery. Lower-order questions serve as stepping stones, helping students to become comfortable with foundational concepts and vocabulary, while higher-order questions promote deeper cognitive engagement and the practical use of language. By thoughtfully integrating these questions across both educational settings, teachers can create a dynamic learning environment that equips students with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in both their subject area and their use of English as a medium of instruction.

As previously illustrated, this integrated approach, utilizing both higher-order and lower-order questions, aligns with the cognitive hierarchy outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy. Lower-order questions lay the groundwork for understanding, retention, and comprehension, while higher-order

questions promote analysis, evaluation, and creativity. Together, they encourage comprehensive, deep learning that equips students with both foundational knowledge and critical thinking skills. By combining these question types, educators can create an inclusive, challenging, and dynamic learning environment that fosters cognitive development and prepares students for real-world challenges. This integration ultimately enriches the learning experience and cultivates students who are both knowledgeable and capable of thinking critically about complex issues.

This study aimed to provide evidence that an effective educational experience requires a balance of lower-order and higher-order questions. Each type fulfils unique cognitive roles, and using them in isolation can limit students' learning and cognitive development.

The most salient outcomes of this study point to the fact that before students can analyse or evaluate, they must first understand the basics. Lower-order questions establish this foundation, while higher-order questions help students develop advanced skills based on this foundational knowledge. Furthermore, lower-order questions provide the scaffolding needed to tackle complex problems. Without comprehension of basic concepts, students may struggle with complex tasks like analysis or synthesis, which higher-order questions require. It must also be said that students often have varied cognitive abilities and learning styles. Lower-order questions can be useful for students who need reinforcement of basic knowledge, while higher-order questions cater to those students who are ready for deeper exploration. Together, these question types support differentiated instruction. With a specific focus on content acquisition, lower-order questions enable students to master a wide range of content, while higher-order questions encourage them to explore particular topics in depth. This balance ensures students gain both breadth and depth in their understanding.

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Digitalization of the Post-pandemic Language Classroom in Cameroon and the Use of Technology in Teaching: Rethinking Local Policy on Classroom Praxis

Abstract

The digitalization of the language classroom in Cameroon has predominantly been confined to the utilization of the distance learning platform facilitated by the Ministry of Secondary Education. However, this research paper endeavours to transcend the limitations of this narrow perspective by presenting a comprehensive and expansive view of digitalization in the context of language teaching. By exploring the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and other technological innovations, this study critically examines the prevailing local policy in the West Region of Cameroon, which imposes restrictions on the use of technology in traditional language classrooms. In doing so, it advocates for a paradigm shift towards a more innovative and forward-thinking approach to language pedagogy that aligns with the expectations and demands of the 21st century. By broadening the understanding of digitalization in the language classroom, this research paper seeks to inspire educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to uphold transformative practices that harness the potential of technology to revolutionize language teaching and learning across all regions in Cameroon.

Keywords: Digitalization, language classroom, Cameroon, ICT tools, technological innovations, language pedagogy

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of education has become imperative in our rapidly changing global landscape, and the language classroom is no exception. In Cameroon, as in many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in education through the development of distance learning platforms by the Ministry of Secondary Education (MINESEC). However, conceptualizations of digitalization in Cameroonian language pedagogy have often been narrowly constrained, primarily focusing on the implementation of these online platforms (Yuh 2023). This narrowed conceptualization is obviously not aligned with what the Cameroon minister of secondary education might have in mind as

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she advocates for the digitalization of the language classroom. The limited perspective on digitalization fails to acknowledge the fuller potential of integrating information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other technological innovations into language teaching methodology.

Scholarly discussions have increasingly recognized the need for a more comprehensive understanding of digitalization in language education. Scholars emphasize that digital transformation extends beyond mere virtual delivery of lessons to encompass utilizing digital technologies and ICTs within classroom instruction. Likewise, Yuh (2023) argues technological advancements have necessarily transformed language teaching practices, requiring innovative approaches aligned with 21st century skills. Similarly, Morley *et al.* (2018) advocate integrating ICT tools into language pedagogy to enhance learning outcomes. Within Cameroon's linguistically diverse secondary education system, comprising both anglophone and francophone streams, the language classroom faces multiple challenges. These include overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and criticism of curricula lacking emphasis on higher-order thinking and problem-solving (Gavach 2016). Furthermore, local policies in regions like the West Region restrict using ICTs such as laptops, phones and tablets in language instruction (Yuh 2023). While research from other contexts highlights benefits of technological integration (Kassie *et al.* 2002) Cameroon's policy at local level in some regions perpetuates a kind of methodological atavism inhibiting digital transformation.

This paper aims to examine current local directives concerning praxis in Cameroonian secondary language classrooms, particularly in the West Region. Drawing on constructivist and situated learning theories, I argue that the careful integration of technology and digital tools into traditional pedagogy should be non-optional in the 21st century. This aims to diversify learning experiences and promote communicative competency aligned with Cameroon's Competency Based language teaching model. The research seeks fuller conceptualizations of digitalization to strategically leverage technological affordances for both online and physical classroom contexts where possible in Cameroon.

2. The concept of digitalization in language teaching

2.1. Definition and scope of digitalization

Digitalization in the context of language pedagogy refers to the holistic integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs)

and evolving technological innovations into the language learning process. It encompasses more than mere utilization of online distance learning platforms or tools for virtual lesson delivery. Broadly conceived, digitalization involves strategically leveraging a diverse array of digital tools – including laptops, tablets, mobile phones, multimedia applications and interactive software – to cultivate an immersive, collaborative and engaging learning environment (Chun *et al.* 2016).

The scope of digitalization also extends beyond the physical bounds of the traditional classroom to encompass blended learning approaches that skilfully combine in-person instruction with online components to diversify learning modalities (Morley *et al.* 2018). Digitalization, thus, is not confined to virtual spaces but aims to optimize technology's potential to facilitate dynamic teacher-student interactions, provide enriched access to authentic target language resources, and foster situated communicative competence through collaborative digital projects. So, by systematically integrating advanced technologies, digitalization seeks to reimagine conventional language classrooms as vibrantly learner-centred environments attentive to 21st century skills development. It transforms pedagogical praxis from the solely theoretical transmission of knowledge toward interactive, project-based modes of experiential learning that actively prepare students for an increasingly digitalized global society (Reinders / Hubbard 2013). Comprehensively conceptualized, digitalization promotes innovative methodologies attentive to diverse learning styles while cultivating digital literacy and its social, cognitive benefits for language acquisition.

2.2. Integration of ICT tools in the language classroom

The strategic integration of information and communication technology (ICT) tools represents a core facet of meaningful digitalization efforts in language education. ICTs encompass a wide array of hardware, software and networked platforms – including computers, tablets, smartphones, digital projectors, interactive whiteboards, bespoke language learning applications, and online collaborative platforms. These diverse technologies provide rich opportunities to transform language teaching practices. ICT tools empower educators to design dynamic multimedia lessons facilitating interactive engagement and immediate formative feedback (Morley *et al.*

2018). They allow immersive language use through virtual exchanges, simulations and digital stories. Moreover, ICTs facilitate access to an abundant pool of authentic target language resources, such as online texts, audiovisual media and virtual language communities.

ICT integration also personalizes the learning experience. Tools like adaptive software, e-books and mobile applications support differentiated instruction aligned with diverse learning preferences and styles. They provide multimedia scaffolding and allow self-paced study. Furthermore, ICTs foster collaborative learning through online discussion forums, collaborative writing tools, and group projects employing multimedia. Such platforms promote higher-order communication and cooperation skills crucial for success in an interconnected world. In sum, purposefully leveraging ICTs as an integral component of reimagined language pedagogy can transform conventional classrooms into vibrant hubs of personalized, interactive and situated language development attentive to 21st century competencies.

2.3. The role of digital technologies in language pedagogy

While infrastructure barriers hampering widespread technology access persist across Cameroon's varied landscape, the potential of digital tools in reimaging pedagogy should not be discounted. Despite connectivity constraints, committed language educators continue striving to leverage low-cost solutions maximizing available affordances to enrich instruction. As the literature underscores, innovative technologies play a pivotal role in cultivating engaging, student-centred learning environments supportive of communicative competency development when judiciously applied (Morley *et al.* 2018).

Even within Cameroon's prevailing infrastructural constraints, the strategic integration of fundamental technological tools and platforms enables the promotion of immersive, experiential learning opportunities. Offline, mobile-based applications and resources facilitate the design of dynamic, multimedia-enriched, project-based activities that foster authentic language use and cultivate global cultural awareness and exchange in diverse formats. Additionally, through collaborative authoring interfaces and dialogical virtual forums, educators can leverage such technologies to nourish ongoing professional development, sharing strategically curated Open Educational Resources and instructional materials optimized for alignment with the

national language curriculum. Though institutional challenges persist, harnessing available technological affordances holds transformative potential for reimagining pedagogy and elevating language learning outcomes.

Digital tools moreover catalyse dynamic paradigm shifts supporting self-directed language acquisition beyond physical classrooms. Mobile applications and formative assessments can provide personalized feedback and differentiated scaffolding for independent skill development catering to diverse contexts nationwide. With sustained governmental commitment to infrastructure expansion and specialized training, Cameroonian classrooms can increasingly leverage technological innovations to reimagine traditionally taught competencies for global participation, using the Competency Based model being applied in language classrooms across the country. Though challenges persist, the potential of strategically applied technologies in nurturing engaged, student-centred pedagogy warrants continued experimentation and support, especially as this move aligns with the vision of the Minister of Secondary Education in Cameroon.

3. The current state of language teaching in Cameroon

3.1. Overview of Cameroon's education system and language instruction

Cameroon maintains a bilingual approach to education with English and French serving as the country's dual official languages prescribed by the Constitution (Gavach 2016), and contextually used as mediums of instruction across Cameroon. The national education system comprises two parallel sub-systems reflective of Cameroon's linguistic duality – the anglophone stream primarily utilized in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and the predominant francophone stream across the remaining provinces (Gavach 2016). Within each subsystem, a primary objective of language education centres on developing balanced proficiency in both English and French amongst students. In the anglophone system, English functions as the primary medium of instruction (MOI), while French is taught formally as a second language (FSL) through dedicated classes/subjects from Form one to Upper Sixths. Conversely, in francophone schools or Francophone sections of Bilingual secondary schools French assumes the role of MOI with English instruction allocated as the secondary EFL, conventionally labelled 'Anglais' as a subject or sub discipline within the secondary school system.

Cameroon's ambitious bilingual language education initiative has come under significant scrutiny in recent years. Critiques from education experts and stakeholders have highlighted a range of persistent issues that undermine the effective implementation of the country's bilingual policy. Chief amongst these concerns are the widespread inadequacies in teacher qualifications, with many instructors lacking the specialized training and language proficiency required to deliver high-quality bilingual instruction. Additionally, the lack of appropriate, research-based teaching methodologies tailored to the unique needs of bilingual learners has been cited as a major impediment. The shortage of well-designed, contextually relevant bilingual instructional materials further compounds the challenges faced by both teachers and students in the classroom context. Furthermore, the problem of overcrowded classrooms, where students struggle to receive the individualized attention necessary for developing balanced proficiency in both the English and French languages, has been a significant obstacle to the policy's aim of promoting true biliteracy. Perhaps most concerningly, assessments have revealed highly variable mastery of the target languages amongst graduates, with many exhibiting uneven levels of proficiency that fail to meet the standards envisioned by the bilingual education programme. Collectively, these challenges serve to undermine the overarching goal of the bilingual policy – to cultivate a foundation of English-French biliteracy that can support national cohesion and meaningful participation in regional integration efforts across Cameroon.

3.2. Challenges faced by the language classroom in Cameroon

The language classroom setting across Cameroon confronts an array of persistent obstacles that significantly impede the efficacy of teaching and learning processes. Firstly, the endemic issue of overcrowded classrooms (Fontem/Oyetade 2008) poses a major challenge, making it exceedingly difficult for educators to provide the necessary individualized attention and interactive language practice opportunities required for cultivating student competencies (Gavach 2016). These large class sizes inherently limit meaningful student-teacher interactions and markedly hinder the development of learners' communicative language skills and real-world application of target linguistic abilities.

Secondly, the dearth of adequate infrastructure and constrained access to essential educational resources pose challenges impeding effective language teaching and learning across the Cameroonian context (Gavach 2016). Numerous schools, particularly in underserved areas, lack access to fundamental facilities such as well-equipped language laboratories, libraries, and up-to-date language learning materials. This scarcity of vital resources substantially limits students' opportunities to engage in authentic, immersive language use and precludes their ability to readily access high-quality linguistic resources necessary for fostering communicative competencies aligned with pedagogical objectives.

Additionally, the prevailing curriculum framework implemented across Cameroon's education system has faced substantial criticism for its disproportionate emphasis on rote memorization and grammar-centric instruction, which ultimately neglects the crucial development of communicative competence and higher-order critical thinking skills amongst learners (Gavach 2016). However, the introduction of the Competency-Based language teaching model aims to address these shortcomings by promoting more interactive, student-centred pedagogies. The challenge lies in ensuring teachers consistently apply this innovative curricular approach, as the traditional teaching methodologies typical of language classrooms often prioritize decontextualised grammar drills and translation exercises, which may prove insufficient in cultivating students' capacity for meaningful communication and authentic language use within real-world scenarios.

3.3. Policy restrictions on the use of technology in traditional classrooms

Within certain regions of Cameroon such as the West Region, bureaucratic directives place constraints curtailing purposeful incorporation of educational technologies and ICT tools into conventional classroom contexts (Yuh 2023). Specifically, established guidelines proscribe utilizing laptops, tablets and mobile phones to supplement language instruction. Such restrictions ostensibly originate from concerns pertaining to potential distractions from academic objectives and prudent device usage, as well as deficiencies in pedagogical understanding of technologies' affordances. While the Ministry of Secondary Education has laudably introduced digital distance learning platforms amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, governing policy restrictive of

technology implementation within traditional classrooms remains largely unchanged (Yuh 2023).

These longstanding constraints imposed by restrictive policy directives inhibit the full realization of the well-documented academic, social-emotional, and 21st century skill benefits that the strategic integration of technological tools and platforms can confer upon language acquisition processes when methodologically implemented. In light of such entrenched challenges perpetuating the inhibition of systemic digital transformation and the evolving societal demands for technologically adept graduates, the urgent need to re-envision these dated policy directives has become increasingly apparent. Thoughtfully harnessing the transformative potential of diverse technologies, including mobile phones, tablets, and laptops, can align curricula with international best practices promoting engaged, interactive learning and better prepare learners for navigating an increasingly technology-mediated world.

4. The potential of ICTs in the language classroom

4.1. Review of scholarly literature on the use of ICTs in education

The strategic use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as pedagogical tools in educational contexts, including second/foreign language teaching and learning, has garnered substantial attention within academic research. A wealth of empirical studies and review articles have explored the affordances, implementation challenges, and learning outcomes associated with purposefully integrating technologies across diverse instructional settings.

In their seminal review, Kozma and Anderson (2002) synthesized a sizeable body of evidence highlighting ICTs' positive influence on cultivating student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and achievement through interactive, collaborative learning experiences. Similarly, analyzing contextual factors shaping technology adoption, Warschauer (2004) underscored how deploying ICTs judiciously could help bridge prevailing digital access divides and facilitate equitable provision of rich educational resources, particularly within underserved communities. But beyond these foundational contributions, extensive research has also investigated various technology tools and platforms. For example, multiple meta-analyses corroborate that one-to-one computing initiatives boost academic

performance across disciplines when leveraged to enhance authentic, project-based learning (Zheng *et al.* 2016; Varier *et al.* 2017). Blended and online learning environments were found to promote cognitive presence and higher-order critical thinking when designed according to connected pedagogical principles (Akyol/Garrison 2011; Borup *et al.* 2014). At the same time, numerous qualitative explorations have uncovered attitudinal, sociocultural and implementation factors shaping technology use (Ifenthaler/Schweinbenz 2013). Institutional support structures, professional development quality, and pedagogical expertise dimensions have emerged as key determinants of successful, sustained integration efforts.

4.2. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and its impact on language skills

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), defined as the strategic leveraging of portable digital devices like smartphones and tablets to supplement and enrich language instruction, has emerged as a particularly compelling subset of ICT integration given the widespread proliferation and adoption of mobile technologies across diverse contexts (Burston 2014; Kukulska-Hulme/Shield 2008). Numerous empirical studies have documented MALL's promising affordances for enabling ubiquitous, contextualized language practice aligned with social-constructivist pedagogical models, offering significant potential to enhance language acquisition outcomes (Keskin/Metcalf 2011).

Empirical investigations across diverse contexts have furnished compelling evidence of MALL's ability to positively impact the development of varied language proficiencies. For instance, Thornton and Houser's (2005) study incorporating mobile vocabulary applications with undergraduate Spanish learners observed sizeable gains in lexical retention and recall compared to traditional approaches. Similarly, experiments integrating multimedia-enriched resources accessed via mobile phones to enhance English listening skills found significantly improved comprehension outcomes amongst test groups relative to control cohorts (Stockwell 2007; Wu *et al.* 2012). Such findings highlight MALL's transformative potential for language teaching and learning. Additional research highlights MALL's capacity to advance oral communication abilities. Several studies reported benefits such as increased willingness to communicate verbally through recorded speaking exercises accessible on phones (Lu 2008). Mobile language exchange

applications connecting learners internationally also showed efficacy for fostering speaking fluency via authentic informal conversations (Jauregi *et al.* 2011; Thornton / Houser 2005). Surveys further indicate learners perceive MALL as lending a stronger sense of autonomy and control over personalized learning experiences

In summary, the thoughtful integration of well-designed mobile technologies affords compelling opportunities to make language study more situative, engaging, and effective at developing overall proficiency amongst learners when leveraged strategically for supplemental practice and reinforcement (Huang *et al.* 2010; Kukulska-Hulme/Shield, 2008; Zurita/Nussbaum 2004).

4.3. Benefits of technology integration for teachers and learners

The strategic integration of instructional technologies in language education provides multifaceted advantages for both instructors and students when leveraged judiciously. To begin, digital tools empower educators to design immersive, participatory lessons through interactive multimedia platforms. For instance, technologies like interactive whiteboards and educational software enable incorporation of enriched audiovisual elements, collaborative activities, and formative assessments to heighten engagement (Levy 2009; Morley *et al.* 2018).

Furthermore, advanced technologies facilitate the implementation of differentiated pedagogical approaches, tailored to accommodate the diverse learning profiles prevalent in modern classrooms. Through the strategic utilization of digital platforms, educators can personalize content delivery and provide scaffolding via customized assignments, thereby offering targeted support while simultaneously presenting appropriately challenging tasks (Pegrum 2014). This nuanced diversification of instructional methods not only caters to individual learning needs but also fosters learner autonomy through student-paced, self-directed practice. Such an approach aligns seamlessly with constructivist theories of education, emphasizing active engagement and knowledge construction (Bax 2003).

Also, technologies afford equitable access to authentic language resources through online repositories and collaborative platforms (Hubbard 2013). Language learners can gain exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts via interactive multimedia exercises, gamified activities and communicative

exchanges with international peers (Chapelle/Jamieson 2008). These contextualized experiences optimize skill development (Kessler/Hubbard 2017). Digital tools have been found to promote collaboration through student-centred, cooperative learning modalities. Project-based assignments conducted via virtual classrooms, discussion forums and collaborative authoring tools develop higher-order communication competencies essential for global competency.

In Cameroonian classrooms navigating infrastructure constraints, project-based learning cultivated via basic technologies remains impactful for developing higher-order communication. With sustained commitment to specialized training and expanding connectivity, classrooms can increasingly leverage strategic technology integration shown to promote engaging, personalized pedagogies supporting proficiency-based outcomes. Though challenges remain, committed educators continue striving to maximize available affordances enriching adaptive, student-centred instruction.

5. Rethinking local policy on classroom praxis

5.1. Critique of the methodological atavism in some Cameroon's language classrooms

A discerning analysis of the prevailing pedagogical climate characterizing Cameroon's language classrooms reveals deeply entrenched patterns of methodological atavism that contradict evidence-based advances, and even goes against the aspirations of the present minister of Secondary Education. The stubborn clinging to obsolete practices rooted in bygone eras presents an impediment to progress, innovation and positive reform. Specifically, the perpetuation of teacher-centred, rote instructional styles privileging grammatical rules and mechanical exercises over meaningful communicative experiences fails to optimize student-centred constructs that should emphasize experiential learning through social interaction (Gavach 2016). Such rigid, archaic methodologies stifle creative and critical thinking through an overdependence on mindless recitation and drills disconnected from authentic language usage contexts. Though this pedagogical praxis may operate in contradistinction to the intentions of the hierarchy, insistence on traditional methods of lesson delivery can be misconstrued as a call to shun the integration of technology into language pedagogy.

Moreover, limited attention allocated to developing higher-order competencies like cooperation, negotiation of meaning, and literacy

proficiencies through collaborative project-based learning impedes learners' aptitudes for navigating today's globally connected societies (Katz 2020; Yuh 2023). Without targeted reforms, this entrenched methodological atavism will continue obstructing the holistic development of communicative and intercultural competencies sought through Cameroon's bilingual vision statement. To forbid the use of technological tools, thus, is to forbid access to a wide array of resources, some of which could be instantly sought to address situations that might arise in the language classroom.

In summary, urgent redress is needed to modernize the pedagogical landscape in Cameroon through systematic professional development on constructivist, sociocultural approaches, particularly in the west region. This will go a long way to harness strategic integration of technological affordances for engaging, interactive language learning conducive to 21st century demands (Blattner/Fiori 2009; Gavach 2016).

5.2. The need for innovative approaches to language pedagogy

Considering the pressing need to modernize practices underscored in the preceding critique, an imperative emerges to embrace transformative change redirecting the course of language education. To optimize student outcomes amidst globalization, pedagogical landscapes must transition beyond convention, instead pioneering innovative methods situated at the vanguard of evidence-based practice. The exigency lies in cultivating pedagogies that ignite passion for perpetual learning through engagement in authentic, experiential activities. Strategically harnessing novel constructs like experiential education, social constructivism and multidimensional assessments can re-envision pedagogy and optimize the development of higher-order capacities for communication, collaboration, problem-solving and intercultural competence.

Moreover, the judicious incorporation of emerging technologies at the forefront of educational innovation – such as blended learning models, mobile-integrated ePortfolios, and virtual collaborative communities – can serve as a catalyst for this paradigmatic shift in pedagogical practice. When thoughtfully integrated within sociocultural frameworks, these innovative technological tools have the potential to nurture highly interactive, student-centred learning environments. Such environments are particularly conducive to cultivating essential 21st-century skills, including intellectual curiosity,

creative problem-solving, and critical reflexivity. This synergistic fusion of cutting-edge technology and established educational theories not only enhances engagement but also promotes deeper, more meaningful learning experiences that prepare students for the rapidly evolving global landscape.

In a nutshell, embracing pioneering pedagogical reform through theory-driven technology integration presents a timely opportunity to transform obsolete models and forge new instructional paths that maximize learners' potential to thrive in a globally connected future through proficient linguistic media. Thus, if language pedagogy in Cameroon (particularly in the West Region) is to instil 21st century skills into the learners, it goes without saying that the integration of technology into language teaching becomes nonoptional.

5.3. Supporting arguments based on learning theories and models

The call to rethink local policy on classroom praxis within the Cameroonian context, particularly in the West Region, finds resolute support within esteemed sociocultural learning theories. Constructivism, as espoused by Vygotsky and Piaget, underscores the vital role of engaged social learning and authentic experiences in knowledge construction (Kalina/Powell 2009; Ültanir 2012). By embracing collaborative, technology-supported pedagogies, educators can cultivate vibrant communities where meaningful interactions flourish and critical thinking blossoms (Falloon 2020).

Moreover, cognitive load theory posits that effective instruction optimizes cognitive resources by presenting multi-modal, personalized materials calibrated to learner capacities (Sweller 2011). By leveraging technology to deliver scaffolded, experiential learning tailored for diverse styles, educators can facilitate optimal language acquisition (Clark/Mayer 2016; Moreno/Mayer 2007). In tandem, the Community of Inquiry framework outlines social, cognitive and teaching presences essential for productive online exchanges (Akyol/Garrison 2011). Purposefully integrating virtual exchanges cultivates engaged communities supporting quality interaction, knowledge-building and shared understanding, but to arrive there, familiarity with basic use of technology in the language classroom must be encouraged in Cameroon.

Additionally, transformative learning theory advocates for perspective-shifting experiences promoting self-reflection and autonomy (Mezirow 1997). In the Cameroonian context, where differences exist across diverse

linguistic, ethnic, and regional communities, transformative learning theory provides an impactful framework. Collaborative projects conducted through technology-mediated instruction that connects learners across these divides can nurture willingness to negotiate varied viewpoints and gain sociocultural competence. Such experiences exploring perspectives outside one's immediate community are particularly beneficial in Cameroon, helping to foster cultural awareness, empathy, and national unity. By facilitating transformative learning among language students through virtual exchange projects, educators can help prepare learners for an increasingly interconnected yet diverse world.

In summation, modern theories collectively confirm innovative, sociocultural pedagogies as optimally supportive of language learning aims. By drawing on such proven frameworks to inform strategic policy modernization, Cameroon can transform obsolete models into vibrant, inclusive learning communities responsive to 21st century demands. Educational policymakers in the West Region could align with the minister's aspirations by promoting classroom praxes that purposefully integrate digital technologies into language pedagogy.

6. Recommendations for digitalization in the language classroom

6.1. Strategies for incorporating ICT tools and technological innovations

To realize the vast potential of digital transformation in language education, strategic and thoughtful integration of emerging technologies is paramount. Educators must first conduct comprehensive needs analyses to discern clear instructional objectives and intended learning outcomes. Only then can appropriate tools and platforms be selected in alignment with pedagogical goals. A diverse toolkit may include interactive virtual learning environments, open educational linguistic resources from around the globe, collaborative digital authoring spaces conducive to project-based learning, and adaptive artificial intelligence assistants tailored for personalized competency development.

Rather than relying solely on traditional in-person modalities, innovative blended, hybrid, and situated learning models combining strategic classroom face-to-face interactions with extended online and mobile components can enhance authentic language acquisition. Learning management systems allow efficient distribution of interactive multimedia

lessons that transcend temporal and spatial barriers. Videoconferencing nurtures synchronous global exchanges for intercultural understanding. Asynchronous discussion forums cultivate continued reflection and higher-order thinking beyond bell schedules.

To ignite intrinsic motivation amongst diverse learners, educators should infuse language pedagogy with motivational affordances like adaptive gamification elements, interactive quizzes and situated collaborative problem-solving scenarios. Immersive virtual worlds provide autonomy to experience authentic language and cultural scenarios. Digital rewards systems promote a growth mindset. Situated tasks necessitate negotiation of meaning and cooperation across linguistic and cultural divides.

Formative assessment of effectiveness and iterative refinements guided by emergent needs are indispensable for sustained impact. Technology-mediated tools like evidence-based digital portfolios and competency e-maps empower self-monitoring and benchmarked progression. Continued professional development according to periodic evaluation ensures strategic synchronization between technological affordances and evolving pedagogical objectives. Through research-driven selection and purposeful integration of fit-for-purpose technologies, transformative hybrid instructional models can realize the ambitious vision of optimizing 21ˢᵗ century language proficiency for all learners.

6.2. Overcoming challenges and barriers to implementation

Effectively addressing predicted challenges surrounding the digital transformation of language pedagogy demands prudent mitigation strategies formulated through a lens of research-informed change management. As the literature consistently denotes, equitable access to suitable technological infrastructure presents the foremost hurdle inhibiting widespread adoption. Proactive advocacy is therefore required from educational stakeholders to rally necessary funding support towards expansive network development initiatives and provision of internet-enabled learning devices targeted within underserved rural regions where connectivity gaps persist. Long-term partnerships forged between policymakers, community organizations, and equipped with strategic planning outlooks considering contextual nuances can help oversee sustainable infrastructure projects to gradually bridge digital access divides.

In tandem, specialized professional learning models must be devised to purposefully build educator capacities aligned with evolving digital pedagogical praxis. Curated in-service programmes, mentorship pairings with early adopters, and online collaboratives can collectively nurture ongoing development of technology-mediated instructional design competencies alongside growth mindsets receptive to paradigm recalibrations. Targeted capabilities encompass not only fundamental computer literacy but also competence operating available educational tools and confidence facilitating emergent blended and mobile learning modalities. Supportive communities of sharing best practices further foster reflexivity and collaborative iterations informed by systematic evaluation feedback.

Perhaps most critically, transformational shifts towards student-centred, active construction of knowledge demand judicious change management through instructive coaching, leadership modelling, and customized demonstration of transformed praxis. Optimal synchronized progression requires navigating pedagogical transitions skilfully via ongoing mentorship while also cultivating broader institutional buy-in through prudent strategic planning attuned to contextual realities. Perpetual progress monitoring then serves to ensure sustainability and refinement according to emergent needs. With infrastructure demands prioritized and systematic capacity building coalesced under a phased change management vision, the aforementioned roadblocks threatening digital transformation in language education can be navigated purposefully through collaborative mitigation over time.

6.3. Implications for teacher training and professional development

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of purposeful digital transformation initiatives within Cameroon's language education landscape necessitates strategic prioritization of customized educator capacity building ventures. Despite recent curriculum updates embracing technology integration, persistent challenges like inadequate infrastructure and limited practitioner competencies still impede widespread adoption.

From the outset, pre-service teacher training programmes at higher teacher training colleges across Cameroon should emphasize the development of foundational digital literacies and technological competencies that are particularly suited to the country's unique contextual

constraints, as hinted on by Muñoz-Cristóbal *et al.* (2015) in the context of Spain, and Kessler *et al.* (2012) in the context of the United States. Given the prevailing infrastructure challenges, a crucial emphasis is needed on equipping prospective educators with proficiency in leveraging low-cost, offline-operable mobile technologies that are ubiquitous nationwide. This targeted approach aims to imbue new teachers with heightened awareness of affordable technological affordances and confidence in experimenting with place-based, context-sensitive pedagogical methodologies.

However, competence must also be regarded as an ongoing process rather than singular event. Cameroonian educators accordingly require proactive support engaging in lifelong professional growth navigating technological advances. Opportunities including regional seminars, participation in local professional networks, and online courses tailored to the national curriculum strengthen pedagogical expertise within means. Communities of practice formed through collaborative reflection additionally nourish contextual understanding of implementation realities throughout diverse linguistically and economically varied settings nationwide (Borup/ Evmenova 2019). With long-term governmental commitment to capacity building standardized yet customized for local needs, language educators can drive inclusive, sustainable transformation from grassroots. Most critically, learners across Cameroon will graduate equipped with demand-driven competencies.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, several key findings and arguments have emerged regarding digitalization in the language classroom. Strategies for incorporating ICT tools and technological innovations have been highlighted, including the thoughtful selection of tools, the implementation of blended learning models, and the use of gamification and interactive approaches. Overcoming challenges and barriers to implementation has been identified as crucial, such as ensuring access and infrastructure, enhancing technological competence amongst educators, and embracing pedagogical shifts. Additionally, the implications for teacher training and professional development have been underscored, emphasizing the need for digital literacy, ongoing professional development, and mentorship and support systems. Thus, the importance of embracing digitalization in the

language classroom cannot be overstated. Digital tools and technological innovations offer numerous advantages for language learning, including increased engagement, personalized learning experiences, access to authentic resources, and opportunities for collaboration and communication. By integrating ICT tools strategically, educators can create dynamic and immersive learning environments that foster language acquisition, fluency, and cultural competence. Embracing digitalization also aligns with the demands of the digital age, equipping learners with the necessary skills to thrive in an interconnected world. As digitalization continues to evolve, there are several promising directions for future research and practice in the language classroom.

First, further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of specific ICT tools and technological innovations in different language learning contexts. Comparative studies can shed light on the most effective strategies for incorporating digital resources and their impact on language proficiency outcomes. Also, research, especially in the Cameroonian context, can examine the optimal blend of online and in-person instruction in blended learning models, as well as the role of gamification and interactive approaches in enhancing motivation and engagement amongst learners. Also, research could address the evolving needs of language educators in terms of digital literacy and pedagogical training. It is essential to continue investigating effective approaches for providing ongoing professional development that equips educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully integrate digital tools into their teaching practices. Additionally, exploring the impact of mentorship and support systems on educators' adoption of digitalization can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for facilitating technology integration.

In a nutshell, embracing digitalization in the language classroom offers exciting possibilities for transforming language learning experiences. Through strategic integration of ICT tools, addressing implementation challenges, and prioritizing teacher training and professional development, educators can create dynamic and engaging learning environments that empower students to thrive in the digital age. Continued research and exploration of best practices will further enhance the effective use of digital resources and contribute to the evolution of language education.

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Diangha Anthony Yuh[*]

Digitalization of the Post-pandemic Language Classroom in Cameroon and the Use of Technology in Teaching: Rethinking Local Policy on Classroom Praxis

Abstract

The digitalization of the language classroom in Cameroon has predominantly been confined to the utilization of the distance learning platform facilitated by the Ministry of Secondary Education. However, this research paper endeavours to transcend the limitations of this narrow perspective by presenting a comprehensive and expansive view of digitalization in the context of language teaching. By exploring the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and other technological innovations, this study critically examines the prevailing local policy in the West Region of Cameroon, which imposes restrictions on the use of technology in traditional language classrooms. In doing so, it advocates for a paradigm shift towards a more innovative and forward-thinking approach to language pedagogy that aligns with the expectations and demands of the 21st century. By broadening the understanding of digitalization in the language classroom, this research paper seeks to inspire educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to uphold transformative practices that harness the potential of technology to revolutionize language teaching and learning across all regions in Cameroon.

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of education has become imperative in our rapidly changing global landscape, and the language classroom is no exception. In Cameroon, as in many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in education through the development of distance learning platforms by the Ministry of Secondary Education (MINESEC). However, conceptualizations of digitalization in Cameroonian language pedagogy have often been narrowly constrained, primarily focusing on the implementation of these online platforms (Yuh 2023). This narrowed conceptualization is obviously not aligned with what the Cameroon minister of secondary education might have in mind as

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she advocates for the digitalization of the language classroom. The limited perspective on digitalization fails to acknowledge the fuller potential of integrating information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other technological innovations into language teaching methodology.

Scholarly discussions have increasingly recognized the need for a more comprehensive understanding of digitalization in language education. Scholars emphasize that digital transformation extends beyond mere virtual delivery of lessons to encompass utilizing digital technologies and ICTs within classroom instruction. Likewise, Yuh (2023) argues technological advancements have necessarily transformed language teaching practices, requiring innovative approaches aligned with 21st century skills. Similarly, Morley *et al.* (2018) advocate integrating ICT tools into language pedagogy to enhance learning outcomes. Within Cameroon's linguistically diverse secondary education system, comprising both anglophone and francophone streams, the language classroom faces multiple challenges. These include overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and criticism of curricula lacking emphasis on higher-order thinking and problem-solving (Gavach 2016). Furthermore, local policies in regions like the West Region restrict using ICTs such as laptops, phones and tablets in language instruction (Yuh 2023). While research from other contexts highlights benefits of technological integration (Kassie *et al.* 2002) Cameroon's policy at local level in some regions perpetuates a kind of methodological atavism inhibiting digital transformation.

This paper aims to examine current local directives concerning praxis in Cameroonian secondary language classrooms, particularly in the West Region. Drawing on constructivist and situated learning theories, I argue that the careful integration of technology and digital tools into traditional pedagogy should be non-optional in the 21st century. This aims to diversify learning experiences and promote communicative competency aligned with Cameroon's Competency Based language teaching model. The research seeks fuller conceptualizations of digitalization to strategically leverage technological affordances for both online and physical classroom contexts where possible in Cameroon.

2. The concept of digitalization in language teaching

2.1. Definition and scope of digitalization

Digitalization in the context of language pedagogy refers to the holistic integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs)

and evolving technological innovations into the language learning process. It encompasses more than mere utilization of online distance learning platforms or tools for virtual lesson delivery. Broadly conceived, digitalization involves strategically leveraging a diverse array of digital tools – including laptops, tablets, mobile phones, multimedia applications and interactive software – to cultivate an immersive, collaborative and engaging learning environment (Chun *et al.* 2016).

The scope of digitalization also extends beyond the physical bounds of the traditional classroom to encompass blended learning approaches that skilfully combine in-person instruction with online components to diversify learning modalities (Morley *et al.* 2018). Digitalization, thus, is not confined to virtual spaces but aims to optimize technology's potential to facilitate dynamic teacher-student interactions, provide enriched access to authentic target language resources, and foster situated communicative competence through collaborative digital projects. So, by systematically integrating advanced technologies, digitalization seeks to reimagine conventional language classrooms as vibrantly learner-centred environments attentive to 21st century skills development. It transforms pedagogical praxis from the solely theoretical transmission of knowledge toward interactive, project-based modes of experiential learning that actively prepare students for an increasingly digitalized global society (Reinders / Hubbard 2013). Comprehensively conceptualized, digitalization promotes innovative methodologies attentive to diverse learning styles while cultivating digital literacy and its social, cognitive benefits for language acquisition.

2.2. Integration of ICT tools in the language classroom

The strategic integration of information and communication technology (ICT) tools represents a core facet of meaningful digitalization efforts in language education. ICTs encompass a wide array of hardware, software and networked platforms – including computers, tablets, smartphones, digital projectors, interactive whiteboards, bespoke language learning applications, and online collaborative platforms. These diverse technologies provide rich opportunities to transform language teaching practices. ICT tools empower educators to design dynamic multimedia lessons facilitating interactive engagement and immediate formative feedback (Morley *et al.*

2018). They allow immersive language use through virtual exchanges, simulations and digital stories. Moreover, ICTs facilitate access to an abundant pool of authentic target language resources, such as online texts, audiovisual media and virtual language communities.

ICT integration also personalizes the learning experience. Tools like adaptive software, e-books and mobile applications support differentiated instruction aligned with diverse learning preferences and styles. They provide multimedia scaffolding and allow self-paced study. Furthermore, ICTs foster collaborative learning through online discussion forums, collaborative writing tools, and group projects employing multimedia. Such platforms promote higher-order communication and cooperation skills crucial for success in an interconnected world. In sum, purposefully leveraging ICTs as an integral component of reimagined language pedagogy can transform conventional classrooms into vibrant hubs of personalized, interactive and situated language development attentive to 21st century competencies.

2.3. The role of digital technologies in language pedagogy

While infrastructure barriers hampering widespread technology access persist across Cameroon's varied landscape, the potential of digital tools in reimaging pedagogy should not be discounted. Despite connectivity constraints, committed language educators continue striving to leverage low-cost solutions maximizing available affordances to enrich instruction. As the literature underscores, innovative technologies play a pivotal role in cultivating engaging, student-centred learning environments supportive of communicative competency development when judiciously applied (Morley *et al.* 2018).

Even within Cameroon's prevailing infrastructural constraints, the strategic integration of fundamental technological tools and platforms enables the promotion of immersive, experiential learning opportunities. Offline, mobile-based applications and resources facilitate the design of dynamic, multimedia-enriched, project-based activities that foster authentic language use and cultivate global cultural awareness and exchange in diverse formats. Additionally, through collaborative authoring interfaces and dialogical virtual forums, educators can leverage such technologies to nourish ongoing professional development, sharing strategically curated Open Educational Resources and instructional materials optimized for alignment with the

national language curriculum. Though institutional challenges persist, harnessing available technological affordances holds transformative potential for reimagining pedagogy and elevating language learning outcomes.

Digital tools moreover catalyse dynamic paradigm shifts supporting self-directed language acquisition beyond physical classrooms. Mobile applications and formative assessments can provide personalized feedback and differentiated scaffolding for independent skill development catering to diverse contexts nationwide. With sustained governmental commitment to infrastructure expansion and specialized training, Cameroonian classrooms can increasingly leverage technological innovations to reimagine traditionally taught competencies for global participation, using the Competency Based model being applied in language classrooms across the country. Though challenges persist, the potential of strategically applied technologies in nurturing engaged, student-centred pedagogy warrants continued experimentation and support, especially as this move aligns with the vision of the Minister of Secondary Education in Cameroon.

3. The current state of language teaching in Cameroon

3.1. Overview of Cameroon's education system and language instruction

Cameroon maintains a bilingual approach to education with English and French serving as the country's dual official languages prescribed by the Constitution (Gavach 2016), and contextually used as mediums of instruction across Cameroon. The national education system comprises two parallel sub-systems reflective of Cameroon's linguistic duality – the anglophone stream primarily utilized in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and the predominant francophone stream across the remaining provinces (Gavach 2016). Within each subsystem, a primary objective of language education centres on developing balanced proficiency in both English and French amongst students. In the anglophone system, English functions as the primary medium of instruction (MOI), while French is taught formally as a second language (FSL) through dedicated classes/subjects from Form one to Upper Sixths. Conversely, in francophone schools or Francophone sections of Bilingual secondary schools French assumes the role of MOI with English instruction allocated as the secondary EFL, conventionally labelled 'Anglais' as a subject or sub discipline within the secondary school system.

Cameroon's ambitious bilingual language education initiative has come under significant scrutiny in recent years. Critiques from education experts and stakeholders have highlighted a range of persistent issues that undermine the effective implementation of the country's bilingual policy. Chief amongst these concerns are the widespread inadequacies in teacher qualifications, with many instructors lacking the specialized training and language proficiency required to deliver high-quality bilingual instruction. Additionally, the lack of appropriate, research-based teaching methodologies tailored to the unique needs of bilingual learners has been cited as a major impediment. The shortage of well-designed, contextually relevant bilingual instructional materials further compounds the challenges faced by both teachers and students in the classroom context. Furthermore, the problem of overcrowded classrooms, where students struggle to receive the individualized attention necessary for developing balanced proficiency in both the English and French languages, has been a significant obstacle to the policy's aim of promoting true biliteracy. Perhaps most concerningly, assessments have revealed highly variable mastery of the target languages amongst graduates, with many exhibiting uneven levels of proficiency that fail to meet the standards envisioned by the bilingual education programme. Collectively, these challenges serve to undermine the overarching goal of the bilingual policy – to cultivate a foundation of English-French biliteracy that can support national cohesion and meaningful participation in regional integration efforts across Cameroon.

3.2. Challenges faced by the language classroom in Cameroon

The language classroom setting across Cameroon confronts an array of persistent obstacles that significantly impede the efficacy of teaching and learning processes. Firstly, the endemic issue of overcrowded classrooms (Fontem/Oyetade 2008) poses a major challenge, making it exceedingly difficult for educators to provide the necessary individualized attention and interactive language practice opportunities required for cultivating student competencies (Gavach 2016). These large class sizes inherently limit meaningful student-teacher interactions and markedly hinder the development of learners' communicative language skills and real-world application of target linguistic abilities.

Secondly, the dearth of adequate infrastructure and constrained access to essential educational resources pose challenges impeding effective language teaching and learning across the Cameroonian context (Gavach 2016). Numerous schools, particularly in underserved areas, lack access to fundamental facilities such as well-equipped language laboratories, libraries, and up-to-date language learning materials. This scarcity of vital resources substantially limits students' opportunities to engage in authentic, immersive language use and precludes their ability to readily access high-quality linguistic resources necessary for fostering communicative competencies aligned with pedagogical objectives.

Additionally, the prevailing curriculum framework implemented across Cameroon's education system has faced substantial criticism for its disproportionate emphasis on rote memorization and grammar-centric instruction, which ultimately neglects the crucial development of communicative competence and higher-order critical thinking skills amongst learners (Gavach 2016). However, the introduction of the Competency-Based language teaching model aims to address these shortcomings by promoting more interactive, student-centred pedagogies. The challenge lies in ensuring teachers consistently apply this innovative curricular approach, as the traditional teaching methodologies typical of language classrooms often prioritize decontextualised grammar drills and translation exercises, which may prove insufficient in cultivating students' capacity for meaningful communication and authentic language use within real-world scenarios.

3.3. Policy restrictions on the use of technology in traditional classrooms

Within certain regions of Cameroon such as the West Region, bureaucratic directives place constraints curtailing purposeful incorporation of educational technologies and ICT tools into conventional classroom contexts (Yuh 2023). Specifically, established guidelines proscribe utilizing laptops, tablets and mobile phones to supplement language instruction. Such restrictions ostensibly originate from concerns pertaining to potential distractions from academic objectives and prudent device usage, as well as deficiencies in pedagogical understanding of technologies' affordances. While the Ministry of Secondary Education has laudably introduced digital distance learning platforms amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, governing policy restrictive of

technology implementation within traditional classrooms remains largely unchanged (Yuh 2023).

These longstanding constraints imposed by restrictive policy directives inhibit the full realization of the well-documented academic, social-emotional, and 21st century skill benefits that the strategic integration of technological tools and platforms can confer upon language acquisition processes when methodologically implemented. In light of such entrenched challenges perpetuating the inhibition of systemic digital transformation and the evolving societal demands for technologically adept graduates, the urgent need to re-envision these dated policy directives has become increasingly apparent. Thoughtfully harnessing the transformative potential of diverse technologies, including mobile phones, tablets, and laptops, can align curricula with international best practices promoting engaged, interactive learning and better prepare learners for navigating an increasingly technology-mediated world.

4. The potential of ICTs in the language classroom

4.1. Review of scholarly literature on the use of ICTs in education

The strategic use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as pedagogical tools in educational contexts, including second/ foreign language teaching and learning, has garnered substantial attention within academic research. A wealth of empirical studies and review articles have explored the affordances, implementation challenges, and learning outcomes associated with purposefully integrating technologies across diverse instructional settings.

In their seminal review, Kozma and Anderson (2002) synthesized a sizeable body of evidence highlighting ICTs' positive influence on cultivating student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and achievement through interactive, collaborative learning experiences. Similarly, analyzing contextual factors shaping technology adoption, Warschauer (2004) underscored how deploying ICTs judiciously could help bridge prevailing digital access divides and facilitate equitable provision of rich educational resources, particularly within underserved communities. But beyond these foundational contributions, extensive research has also investigated various technology tools and platforms. For example, multiple meta-analyses corroborate that one-to-one computing initiatives boost academic

performance across disciplines when leveraged to enhance authentic, project-based learning (Zheng *et al.* 2016; Varier *et al.* 2017). Blended and online learning environments were found to promote cognitive presence and higher-order critical thinking when designed according to connected pedagogical principles (Akyol/Garrison 2011; Borup *et al.* 2014). At the same time, numerous qualitative explorations have uncovered attitudinal, sociocultural and implementation factors shaping technology use (Ifenthaler/Schweinbenz 2013). Institutional support structures, professional development quality, and pedagogical expertise dimensions have emerged as key determinants of successful, sustained integration efforts.

4.2. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and its impact on language skills

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), defined as the strategic leveraging of portable digital devices like smartphones and tablets to supplement and enrich language instruction, has emerged as a particularly compelling subset of ICT integration given the widespread proliferation and adoption of mobile technologies across diverse contexts (Burston 2014; Kukulska-Hulme/Shield 2008). Numerous empirical studies have documented MALL's promising affordances for enabling ubiquitous, contextualized language practice aligned with social-constructivist pedagogical models, offering significant potential to enhance language acquisition outcomes (Keskin/Metcalf 2011).

Empirical investigations across diverse contexts have furnished compelling evidence of MALL's ability to positively impact the development of varied language proficiencies. For instance, Thornton and Houser's (2005) study incorporating mobile vocabulary applications with undergraduate Spanish learners observed sizeable gains in lexical retention and recall compared to traditional approaches. Similarly, experiments integrating multimedia-enriched resources accessed via mobile phones to enhance English listening skills found significantly improved comprehension outcomes amongst test groups relative to control cohorts (Stockwell 2007; Wu *et al.* 2012). Such findings highlight MALL's transformative potential for language teaching and learning. Additional research highlights MALL's capacity to advance oral communication abilities. Several studies reported benefits such as increased willingness to communicate verbally through recorded speaking exercises accessible on phones (Lu 2008). Mobile language exchange

applications connecting learners internationally also showed efficacy for fostering speaking fluency via authentic informal conversations (Jauregi *et al.* 2011; Thornton / Houser 2005). Surveys further indicate learners perceive MALL as lending a stronger sense of autonomy and control over personalized learning experiences

In summary, the thoughtful integration of well-designed mobile technologies affords compelling opportunities to make language study more situative, engaging, and effective at developing overall proficiency amongst learners when leveraged strategically for supplemental practice and reinforcement (Huang *et al.* 2010; Kukulska-Hulme/Shield, 2008; Zurita/Nussbaum 2004).

4.3. Benefits of technology integration for teachers and learners

The strategic integration of instructional technologies in language education provides multifaceted advantages for both instructors and students when leveraged judiciously. To begin, digital tools empower educators to design immersive, participatory lessons through interactive multimedia platforms. For instance, technologies like interactive whiteboards and educational software enable incorporation of enriched audiovisual elements, collaborative activities, and formative assessments to heighten engagement (Levy 2009; Morley *et al.* 2018).

Furthermore, advanced technologies facilitate the implementation of differentiated pedagogical approaches, tailored to accommodate the diverse learning profiles prevalent in modern classrooms. Through the strategic utilization of digital platforms, educators can personalize content delivery and provide scaffolding via customized assignments, thereby offering targeted support while simultaneously presenting appropriately challenging tasks (Pegrum 2014). This nuanced diversification of instructional methods not only caters to individual learning needs but also fosters learner autonomy through student-paced, self-directed practice. Such an approach aligns seamlessly with constructivist theories of education, emphasizing active engagement and knowledge construction (Bax 2003).

Also, technologies afford equitable access to authentic language resources through online repositories and collaborative platforms (Hubbard 2013). Language learners can gain exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts via interactive multimedia exercises, gamified activities and communicative

exchanges with international peers (Chapelle/Jamieson 2008). These contextualized experiences optimize skill development (Kessler/Hubbard 2017). Digital tools have been found to promote collaboration through student-centred, cooperative learning modalities. Project-based assignments conducted via virtual classrooms, discussion forums and collaborative authoring tools develop higher-order communication competencies essential for global competency.

In Cameroonian classrooms navigating infrastructure constraints, project-based learning cultivated via basic technologies remains impactful for developing higher-order communication. With sustained commitment to specialized training and expanding connectivity, classrooms can increasingly leverage strategic technology integration shown to promote engaging, personalized pedagogies supporting proficiency-based outcomes. Though challenges remain, committed educators continue striving to maximize available affordances enriching adaptive, student-centred instruction.

5. Rethinking local policy on classroom praxis

5.1. Critique of the methodological atavism in some Cameroon's language classrooms

A discerning analysis of the prevailing pedagogical climate characterizing Cameroon's language classrooms reveals deeply entrenched patterns of methodological atavism that contradict evidence-based advances, and even goes against the aspirations of the present minister of Secondary Education. The stubborn clinging to obsolete practices rooted in bygone eras presents an impediment to progress, innovation and positive reform. Specifically, the perpetuation of teacher-centred, rote instructional styles privileging grammatical rules and mechanical exercises over meaningful communicative experiences fails to optimize student-centred constructs that should emphasize experiential learning through social interaction (Gavach 2016). Such rigid, archaic methodologies stifle creative and critical thinking through an overdependence on mindless recitation and drills disconnected from authentic language usage contexts. Though this pedagogical praxis may operate in contradistinction to the intentions of the hierarchy, insistence on traditional methods of lesson delivery can be misconstrued as a call to shun the integration of technology into language pedagogy.

Moreover, limited attention allocated to developing higher-order competencies like cooperation, negotiation of meaning, and literacy

proficiencies through collaborative project-based learning impedes learners' aptitudes for navigating today's globally connected societies (Katz 2020; Yuh 2023). Without targeted reforms, this entrenched methodological atavism will continue obstructing the holistic development of communicative and intercultural competencies sought through Cameroon's bilingual vision statement. To forbid the use of technological tools, thus, is to forbid access to a wide array of resources, some of which could be instantly sought to address situations that might arise in the language classroom.

In summary, urgent redress is needed to modernize the pedagogical landscape in Cameroon through systematic professional development on constructivist, sociocultural approaches, particularly in the west region. This will go a long way to harness strategic integration of technological affordances for engaging, interactive language learning conducive to 21st century demands (Blattner/Fiori 2009; Gavach 2016).

5.2. The need for innovative approaches to language pedagogy

Considering the pressing need to modernize practices underscored in the preceding critique, an imperative emerges to embrace transformative change redirecting the course of language education. To optimize student outcomes amidst globalization, pedagogical landscapes must transition beyond convention, instead pioneering innovative methods situated at the vanguard of evidence-based practice. The exigency lies in cultivating pedagogies that ignite passion for perpetual learning through engagement in authentic, experiential activities. Strategically harnessing novel constructs like experiential education, social constructivism and multidimensional assessments can re-envision pedagogy and optimize the development of higher-order capacities for communication, collaboration, problem-solving and intercultural competence.

Moreover, the judicious incorporation of emerging technologies at the forefront of educational innovation – such as blended learning models, mobile-integrated ePortfolios, and virtual collaborative communities – can serve as a catalyst for this paradigmatic shift in pedagogical practice. When thoughtfully integrated within sociocultural frameworks, these innovative technological tools have the potential to nurture highly interactive, student-centred learning environments. Such environments are particularly conducive to cultivating essential 21st-century skills, including intellectual curiosity,

creative problem-solving, and critical reflexivity. This synergistic fusion of cutting-edge technology and established educational theories not only enhances engagement but also promotes deeper, more meaningful learning experiences that prepare students for the rapidly evolving global landscape.

In a nutshell, embracing pioneering pedagogical reform through theory-driven technology integration presents a timely opportunity to transform obsolete models and forge new instructional paths that maximize learners' potential to thrive in a globally connected future through proficient linguistic media. Thus, if language pedagogy in Cameroon (particularly in the West Region) is to instil 21st century skills into the learners, it goes without saying that the integration of technology into language teaching becomes nonoptional.

5.3. Supporting arguments based on learning theories and models

The call to rethink local policy on classroom praxis within the Cameroonian context, particularly in the West Region, finds resolute support within esteemed sociocultural learning theories. Constructivism, as espoused by Vygotsky and Piaget, underscores the vital role of engaged social learning and authentic experiences in knowledge construction (Kalina/Powell 2009; Ültanir 2012). By embracing collaborative, technology-supported pedagogies, educators can cultivate vibrant communities where meaningful interactions flourish and critical thinking blossoms (Falloon 2020).

Moreover, cognitive load theory posits that effective instruction optimizes cognitive resources by presenting multi-modal, personalized materials calibrated to learner capacities (Sweller 2011). By leveraging technology to deliver scaffolded, experiential learning tailored for diverse styles, educators can facilitate optimal language acquisition (Clark/Mayer 2016; Moreno/Mayer 2007). In tandem, the Community of Inquiry framework outlines social, cognitive and teaching presences essential for productive online exchanges (Akyol/Garrison 2011). Purposefully integrating virtual exchanges cultivates engaged communities supporting quality interaction, knowledge-building and shared understanding, but to arrive there, familiarity with basic use of technology in the language classroom must be encouraged in Cameroon.

Additionally, transformative learning theory advocates for perspective-shifting experiences promoting self-reflection and autonomy (Mezirow 1997). In the Cameroonian context, where differences exist across diverse

linguistic, ethnic, and regional communities, transformative learning theory provides an impactful framework. Collaborative projects conducted through technology-mediated instruction that connects learners across these divides can nurture willingness to negotiate varied viewpoints and gain sociocultural competence. Such experiences exploring perspectives outside one's immediate community are particularly beneficial in Cameroon, helping to foster cultural awareness, empathy, and national unity. By facilitating transformative learning among language students through virtual exchange projects, educators can help prepare learners for an increasingly interconnected yet diverse world.

In summation, modern theories collectively confirm innovative, sociocultural pedagogies as optimally supportive of language learning aims. By drawing on such proven frameworks to inform strategic policy modernization, Cameroon can transform obsolete models into vibrant, inclusive learning communities responsive to 21st century demands. Educational policymakers in the West Region could align with the minister's aspirations by promoting classroom praxes that purposefully integrate digital technologies into language pedagogy.

6. Recommendations for digitalization in the language classroom

6.1. Strategies for incorporating ICT tools and technological innovations

To realize the vast potential of digital transformation in language education, strategic and thoughtful integration of emerging technologies is paramount. Educators must first conduct comprehensive needs analyses to discern clear instructional objectives and intended learning outcomes. Only then can appropriate tools and platforms be selected in alignment with pedagogical goals. A diverse toolkit may include interactive virtual learning environments, open educational linguistic resources from around the globe, collaborative digital authoring spaces conducive to project-based learning, and adaptive artificial intelligence assistants tailored for personalized competency development.

Rather than relying solely on traditional in-person modalities, innovative blended, hybrid, and situated learning models combining strategic classroom face-to-face interactions with extended online and mobile components can enhance authentic language acquisition. Learning management systems allow efficient distribution of interactive multimedia

lessons that transcend temporal and spatial barriers. Videoconferencing nurtures synchronous global exchanges for intercultural understanding. Asynchronous discussion forums cultivate continued reflection and higher-order thinking beyond bell schedules.

To ignite intrinsic motivation amongst diverse learners, educators should infuse language pedagogy with motivational affordances like adaptive gamification elements, interactive quizzes and situated collaborative problem-solving scenarios. Immersive virtual worlds provide autonomy to experience authentic language and cultural scenarios. Digital rewards systems promote a growth mindset. Situated tasks necessitate negotiation of meaning and cooperation across linguistic and cultural divides.

Formative assessment of effectiveness and iterative refinements guided by emergent needs are indispensable for sustained impact. Technology-mediated tools like evidence-based digital portfolios and competency e-maps empower self-monitoring and benchmarked progression. Continued professional development according to periodic evaluation ensures strategic synchronization between technological affordances and evolving pedagogical objectives. Through research-driven selection and purposeful integration of fit-for-purpose technologies, transformative hybrid instructional models can realize the ambitious vision of optimizing 21st century language proficiency for all learners.

6.2. Overcoming challenges and barriers to implementation

Effectively addressing predicted challenges surrounding the digital transformation of language pedagogy demands prudent mitigation strategies formulated through a lens of research-informed change management. As the literature consistently denotes, equitable access to suitable technological infrastructure presents the foremost hurdle inhibiting widespread adoption. Proactive advocacy is therefore required from educational stakeholders to rally necessary funding support towards expansive network development initiatives and provision of internet-enabled learning devices targeted within underserved rural regions where connectivity gaps persist. Long-term partnerships forged between policymakers, community organizations, and equipped with strategic planning outlooks considering contextual nuances can help oversee sustainable infrastructure projects to gradually bridge digital access divides.

In tandem, specialized professional learning models must be devised to purposefully build educator capacities aligned with evolving digital pedagogical praxis. Curated in-service programmes, mentorship pairings with early adopters, and online collaboratives can collectively nurture ongoing development of technology-mediated instructional design competencies alongside growth mindsets receptive to paradigm recalibrations. Targeted capabilities encompass not only fundamental computer literacy but also competence operating available educational tools and confidence facilitating emergent blended and mobile learning modalities. Supportive communities of sharing best practices further foster reflexivity and collaborative iterations informed by systematic evaluation feedback.

Perhaps most critically, transformational shifts towards student-centred, active construction of knowledge demand judicious change management through instructive coaching, leadership modelling, and customized demonstration of transformed praxis. Optimal synchronized progression requires navigating pedagogical transitions skilfully via ongoing mentorship while also cultivating broader institutional buy-in through prudent strategic planning attuned to contextual realities. Perpetual progress monitoring then serves to ensure sustainability and refinement according to emergent needs. With infrastructure demands prioritized and systematic capacity building coalesced under a phased change management vision, the aforementioned roadblocks threatening digital transformation in language education can be navigated purposefully through collaborative mitigation over time.

6.3. Implications for teacher training and professional development

Ensuring the long-term sustainability of purposeful digital transformation initiatives within Cameroon's language education landscape necessitates strategic prioritization of customized educator capacity building ventures. Despite recent curriculum updates embracing technology integration, persistent challenges like inadequate infrastructure and limited practitioner competencies still impede widespread adoption.

From the outset, pre-service teacher training programmes at higher teacher training colleges across Cameroon should emphasize the development of foundational digital literacies and technological competencies that are particularly suited to the country's unique contextual

constraints, as hinted on by Muñoz-Cristóbal *et al.* (2015) in the context of Spain, and Kessler *et al.* (2012) in the context of the United States. Given the prevailing infrastructure challenges, a crucial emphasis is needed on equipping prospective educators with proficiency in leveraging low-cost, offline-operable mobile technologies that are ubiquitous nationwide. This targeted approach aims to imbue new teachers with heightened awareness of affordable technological affordances and confidence in experimenting with place-based, context-sensitive pedagogical methodologies.

However, competence must also be regarded as an ongoing process rather than singular event. Cameroonian educators accordingly require proactive support engaging in lifelong professional growth navigating technological advances. Opportunities including regional seminars, participation in local professional networks, and online courses tailored to the national curriculum strengthen pedagogical expertise within means. Communities of practice formed through collaborative reflection additionally nourish contextual understanding of implementation realities throughout diverse linguistically and economically varied settings nationwide (Borup/ Evmenova 2019). With long-term governmental commitment to capacity building standardized yet customized for local needs, language educators can drive inclusive, sustainable transformation from grassroots. Most critically, learners across Cameroon will graduate equipped with demand-driven competencies.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, several key findings and arguments have emerged regarding digitalization in the language classroom. Strategies for incorporating ICT tools and technological innovations have been highlighted, including the thoughtful selection of tools, the implementation of blended learning models, and the use of gamification and interactive approaches. Overcoming challenges and barriers to implementation has been identified as crucial, such as ensuring access and infrastructure, enhancing technological competence amongst educators, and embracing pedagogical shifts. Additionally, the implications for teacher training and professional development have been underscored, emphasizing the need for digital literacy, ongoing professional development, and mentorship and support systems. Thus, the importance of embracing digitalization in the

language classroom cannot be overstated. Digital tools and technological innovations offer numerous advantages for language learning, including increased engagement, personalized learning experiences, access to authentic resources, and opportunities for collaboration and communication. By integrating ICT tools strategically, educators can create dynamic and immersive learning environments that foster language acquisition, fluency, and cultural competence. Embracing digitalization also aligns with the demands of the digital age, equipping learners with the necessary skills to thrive in an interconnected world. As digitalization continues to evolve, there are several promising directions for future research and practice in the language classroom.

First, further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of specific ICT tools and technological innovations in different language learning contexts. Comparative studies can shed light on the most effective strategies for incorporating digital resources and their impact on language proficiency outcomes. Also, research, especially in the Cameroonian context, can examine the optimal blend of online and in-person instruction in blended learning models, as well as the role of gamification and interactive approaches in enhancing motivation and engagement amongst learners. Also, research could address the evolving needs of language educators in terms of digital literacy and pedagogical training. It is essential to continue investigating effective approaches for providing ongoing professional development that equips educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully integrate digital tools into their teaching practices. Additionally, exploring the impact of mentorship and support systems on educators' adoption of digitalization can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for facilitating technology integration.

In a nutshell, embracing digitalization in the language classroom offers exciting possibilities for transforming language learning experiences. Through strategic integration of ICT tools, addressing implementation challenges, and prioritizing teacher training and professional development, educators can create dynamic and engaging learning environments that empower students to thrive in the digital age. Continued research and exploration of best practices will further enhance the effective use of digital resources and contribute to the evolution of language education.

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