

THE INFORMALISATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING A first national research project

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Abstract – The availability of English through traditional and new media has recently increased exponentially, thus multiplying the opportunities for contact with the language worldwide. Concomitantly, extensive L2 experience outside institutional settings is likely to lead to the informalisation of both language learning and use across Europe and elsewhere. However, little is known about the acquisitional and sociolinguistic impact of media-induced contact with English in Italy at present. To address this gap, the Italian national PRIN project that is presented in this article investigates students' private worlds and undetected processes of L2 learning and appropriation at four universities situated in different regions in Italy. The national investigation is informed by a plurality of theoretical premises that are integrated into a multidimensional and interdisciplinary research framework that builds on (i) the spatial dimensions of informal contact with English, (ii) the crucial role of language input in language acquisition, (iii) media register variation giving way to individualised language input, and (iv) the evolving attitudes and stances towards English as an additional language. The stages of the research project will be presented. These involved the creation and administration of a questionnaire about university students' experiences with English and a receptive lexical test, ethnographic investigations into L2 media users' behavioural patterns, motivations and attitudes, and longitudinal studies of untutored high-exposure respondents. Finally, a preliminary statistical overview of the participants' profiles and preferred modalities of informal contact with English is provided as a first illustration of the generalisations that can be obtained via the data collections within the project.

Keywords: Informal language learning; L2 English; Media input; Italian university students; L2 users' exposure profiles.

1. Introduction

Due to contemporary globalisation and media saturation, the availability of English through traditional and new media has increased at an unprecedented rate. Concurrently, extensive contact with the language outside educational settings is leading to the increasing informalisation of L2¹ learning and use

¹ In the present article, 'L2' is used to refer to a second, foreign or an additional language.

(Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018; Reinhardt 2022; Toffoli *et al.* 2023, among others). These dramatic changes in linguistic circumstances in Europe and elsewhere have recently attracted scholarly attention, as they have been shown to deeply affect the language behaviour and L2 proficiency of young L2 users (Azzolini *et al.* 2022; Berns *et al.* 2007; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Sundqvist, Sylvén 2014; Sockett 2014; Toffoli *et al.* 2023, among others). Of note, while multilingualism and multiculturalism have expanded worldwide, English is the additional language that is mainly involved in present-day informalisation processes due to its unrivalled dominance in the media and popular culture and the increasing role of the Internet worldwide (Werner 2022). As a result, the divide between foreign languages other than English and English itself is widening, with English increasingly moving from the status of a foreign language to that of a second language particularly in northern and central European countries, where “contact with English is almost unavoidable” (de Bot 2014, p. 416; see also De Wilde *et al.* 2021; Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018; Modiano 2024). Despite this linguistic scenario, little is known about the acquisitional and sociolinguistic impact of media-induced, informal contact with English in Italy.²

To fill this gap, the national PRIN³ project “The informalisation of English language learning through media: Language input, learning outcomes and sociolinguistic attitudes from an Italian perspective” was conceived to explore what is happening ‘out there’ in the changing linguistic ecology of the country by investigating Italian university students’ private worlds and their undetected processes of L2 learning and appropriation. The project is informed by a multidimensional research framework that is based on a series of descriptive and theoretical premises; it moves from the definition of informal language learning as mainly occurring incidentally and “involving free, self-directed contact with the L2 in non-educational locations for entertainment, social and information-seeking purposes” (Pavesi, Ghia 2020, p. 40). According to Dressman (2023), informal language learning can also be conceived of as a cultural practice, with participants across the world sharing some common features, such as their young age and a specific learning setting – the Internet.

² A few exploratory studies have recently been conducted in Italy (Aiello 2018; De Riso 2023; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). However, their small size and limited geographical scope make it difficult to make generalisations across the country.

³ PRIN stands for ‘Progetto di Interesse Nazionale’ (Project of National Interest). PRIN projects are selected on a competitive basis and financed by the Italian Ministry of University and Research.

The various dimensions and phases of the project will be discussed in the remainder of this article. Section 2 addresses the theoretical premises of the study by focusing on the spatial perspective adopted herein, the role and type of language input that is available in informal learning, and the learner-users' attitudes and motivations. Section 3 outlines the three phases of the investigation, while Section 4 presents the outcomes of a factor analysis that identified the prototypical exposure profiles among the university students who were surveyed. In the concluding section, the main tenets of the project are summarised with a view to providing a backdrop to the individual research strands that are currently being developed in the project.

2. Premises and theoretical background

2.1. *Informal language learning: A spatial perspective*

In the project, we adopt a spatial perspective on second language acquisition (SLA), as the study “shine[s] the spotlight on the *where* of language learning” (Benson 2021, p. 1) and the space of human and human/non-human interactions. The *where* and the *how* of SLA are strongly intertwined, since learning choices and learning processes are constrained by the spatial factors “governing the availability and accessibility of resources” (Benson 2021, p. 97). In line with this spatial perspective, a series of space-related constructs are foregrounded, including *landscape*, *space*, *place*, *setting*, *environment*, *trajectory*, *layer* and *context*. In general, the space of contemporary informal language contact and learning is extremely fluid. Not only may learner-users access a wide variety of L2 affordances⁴ ‘in the wild’ (Wagner 2015), but they can also easily shift from one language learning resource to another as their trajectories move across several modalities over time.

Overall, applied linguists agree that informal language learning takes place outside of and beyond the boundaries of traditional language instruction (Dressman, Sadler 2020; Reinders *et al.* 2022; Toffoli *et al.* 2023), where boundaries are not to be interpreted as demarcating physical locations but rather as delimiting concrete or abstract learning spaces (Leone 2023). As mediated artefacts and mediated interactions are progressively populating the space of contemporary informal language experiences, the globalisation of information, popular culture and media technology has created a new, unconstrained and disembodied “environmental layer” for language learning (Benson 2022, p. 30; see also Werner 2022). This out-of-class layer combines

⁴ In L2 learning, affordances are the resources that are available in the environment and what learners do with them (Benson 2021, p. 95).

with both formal and informal settings dedicated to embodied encounters on the ground, such as traditional language instruction, English medium instruction (EMI) and living abroad experiences. As a result, L2 users will not only share language learning environments, but will also “trace unique spatial trajectories across increasingly varied maps of settings and resources” (Benson 2022, p. 31). Similarly, Sockett (2014, 2023, p. 117) observed that L2 input is socially determined and is the result of the unique combination of online and face-to-face encounters that constitute “personal learning environments” – that is, complex ecosystems in which language users experience the various affordances as a whole.

Within this spatial framework, there is a need to account for the unprecedented linguistic milieu inhabited by contemporary Italian learner-users and to explore the way(s) in which they create their own language environments while acquiring new L2 competencies and developing novel stances towards the target language through contact with English-language media.

2.2. Language input and informal language learning

The PRIN project centres on language input as the most important construct, the *sine qua non* of SLA (VanPatten *et al.* 2020). Whereas the term ‘input’ was initially used to refer to all the linguistic manifestations to which learners were exposed in the target language, recent theories have defined it more restrictively “[...] as language the learner attempts to comprehend during communication events”, hence excluding language that the learner does not access for meaning (VanPatten *et al.* 2020, p. 10). This definition highlights the relevance of the L2 input that learner-users encounter and interact with spontaneously through online and offline media affordances.

Accordingly, the aim of the project is to investigate which types of language and texts are accessed in informal media settings in line with SLA models and approaches that place language input at the core of language development. Extensive comprehensible input has long been claimed to initiate and sustain SLA. Krashen’s (1985, 2008) comprehension hypothesis posits that L2 input is not only necessary but is also sufficient for SLA provided it is comprehensible for learners (via contextual information) and is just above their current level of language knowledge. Although Krashen’s model has been criticised repeatedly, the validity of its basic tenets has been widely supported in terms of the paramount role of exposure to L2 input and the primacy of input comprehension over production (VanPatten *et al.* 2020). In a recent reassessment of Krashen’s comprehension hypothesis, comprehensible input has been relabelled as “communicatively embedded input” to underline that learners are not passive receptors but are active

interpreters of meaning when they process the target language for comprehension (Lichtman, VanPatten 2021, p. 297).

In accordance with the centrality of input, input frequency has been the focus in usage-based approaches to SLA. In this regard, learning is construed as being input driven, with frequency of usage being viewed as the key to acquisition, both in terms of token frequency – how often a given item occurs in the input – and type frequency – the incidence of the wider category to which a given pattern belongs (Ellis 2003, 2015; Ellis, Collins 2009; Muñoz, Cadierno 2021; Sockett, Kusyk 2015). A direct link between experience and learning is posited, with learners subconsciously deriving statistical abstractions of form-function mappings from the language to which they are exposed. Consequently, “the more often constructions are experienced and understood together, the more entrenched they become” (Pérez-Paredes *et al.* 2020, p. 4). Learners will proceed by matching recurring forms in English to the appropriate functions that they extract from context across several utterances, while abstract patterns will be created by drawing on processes of schematisation and analogy (Tomasello 2005). Furthermore, although the “experience of language is unique, learners are statistical and attentive to forms and functions across the input” (Pérez-Paredes *et al.* 2020, p. 7). This leads to the prediction that different access via various media will still result in a high degree of commonality in SLA because learners cognitively experience the same core language constructions, irrespective of the uniqueness of their personal learning environments.

The learning potential of media affordances has been further supported by cognitive models and theories of multimodal input learning, such as Paivio’s (1986) dual coding hypothesis and Mayer’s (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning. These models emphasise the processing component in the acquisition of data by focusing on the redundancy of multimodal input, as expressed via multiple channels, and its positive impact on processing capability and memorisation. For example, inter- and intralingual subtitles increase the comprehensibility and redundancy of L2 input (Ghia 2012), while multimodality generally triggers media immersion and “vicarious participation” in onscreen conversations, which are believed to sustain SLA (Lantolf *et al.* 2020, p. 238).

Focusing on the essential role of interaction in SLA, the interaction hypothesis highlights additional dimensions of L2 input that are expected to lead to situated language learning through media. According to the interaction hypothesis (Gass 2013; Long 1996), interactionally modified input is crucial for both the comprehension of the target language and for L2 development. When communicating with expert users, learners not only access positive input – information about what is grammatical and acceptable in the L2, but also receive negative input – information about what is not

allowed in the target language. Moreover, sequences of negotiation of meaning are activated in interactions, during which more understandable input can be provided by the expert speaker while the L2 learner is pushed to produce comprehensible output (Long 1996; Swain 1995). The interaction hypothesis also has a cognitive dimension, as the learner's selected attention to linguistic features is a relevant step between input reception and intake. Input characteristics, such as word frequency, morphological salience, meaning-form transparency and imageability or concreteness, can assist learners to comprehend the input and to focus on specific features of the target language (Gass, Mackey 2020). These same properties are likely to apply to multimodal media text as novel language features become highlighted through onscreen interactions, contextual signs and subtitling (Ghia 2012). Gaming and social media may also provide interactive negotiation sequences, together with a focus on informal opportunities for spontaneous, untutored SLA. However, the actual effects of interactive media on informal learning have only recently begun to be explored and supported empirically (De Wilde *et al.* 2020).

In summary, a complex conceptual framework that integrates cognitive, affective and social parameters, functioning together dynamically, is required to address informal language learning (Sockett 2014; Sockett, Kusyk 2015).

2.3. The media as language input

Freedom of contact with English offers a previously unparalleled abundance of L2 input. As the media are characterised by remarkable linguistic variability and fluidity (Crystal 2006), they provide rich L2 input that varies in part depending on the affordances the individual learner-user accesses regularly.

A brief look at some of the major media can highlight the richness and variability of the language input that is presently available.⁵ Beginning with the traditional media, the fictional dialogues in audiovisual, telecinematic⁶ products have been found to approximate face-to-face interactions. By adopting Biber's (1988) multi-dimensional (MD) analysis⁷ and its dimensions

⁵ Given their high and constantly increasing number, a thorough review of media registers is beyond the scope of the present article. For purposes of exemplification, we will only mention a few media products that have been found to be popular among contemporary informal learner-users of English (Dressman, Sadler 2020; Krüger 2023; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020).

⁶ The adjective is commonly used to refer to the language of both film and television series (e.g. Piazza *et al.* 2011; Werner 2021).

⁷ MD analysis is a corpus linguistics approach developed by Douglas Biber (1988) to account for variation in written and spoken registers in English (e.g. Berber Sardinha, Veirano Pinto 2019).

of register variation, Forchini (2012) compared the language in a corpus of American films, the *American Movie Corpus*, to the *Longman Spoken American Corpus*. She found that Biber's (1988) first and main dimension of *involved* versus *informational production* (i.e. Dimension 1) accounted for the striking similarity between film language and the language of conversation. Personal pronouns and deictic features, contractions, present tense markers and emphatics abound in films, together with other features of contextualised, impromptu speech. The colloquiality and naturalness of audiovisual dialogue was confirmed by Quaglio's (2009) MD study of *Friends* and by Zago (2016) using the same model to investigate a diachronic corpus of original American films and their remakes,⁸ while Werner (2021) documented an overall increase in emotionality and informality as expressed by several colloquial lexical and lexico-grammatical features in two large diachronic corpora of English telecinematic dialogue. Audiovisual dialogue also foregrounds multimodal semiotics, which assists in both the contextualisation of communication practices and learner-viewers' immersion.

Other contemporary television registers are more orientated towards other dimensions of Biber's (1988) MD model. Berber Sardinha and Veirano Pinto (2017) investigated 31 different television registers, such as drama series, sitcoms, soap operas, live politics, reality shows and news, and provided evidence of similarities and differences both among the television registers and with reference to offscreen registers. Whereas all the television registers were situated towards the involvement end of Biber's (1988) Dimension 1, soap operas, for example, had a far higher score compared to live sports broadcasts. Moreover, political broadcasts and spontaneous speech were very similar in terms of Dimension 3, *explicit* versus *situation-dependent reference*, as they both draw on context through language. A later analysis (Berber Sardinha, Veirano Pinto 2021) revealed that television programmes can be grouped into clusters that share similar dimensional profiles. The resulting typology comprises nine different types of texts,

MD studies have employed the statistical procedure of factor analysis (see also Section 4) to identify the salient linguistic co-occurrence patterns that underlie registers and link them to situational, social and cognitive functions. The resulting dimensions correspond to communicative functions in text. Biber (1988) originally identified five major dimensions of register variation: *involved* versus *informational production*, *narrative* versus *non-narrative concerns*, *explicit* versus *situation-dependent reference*, *overt expression of persuasion* and *abstract* versus *non-abstract information*. These dimensions have enabled registers to be explored and degrees of similarity and differences across registers to emerge. The original MD model has been variously integrated and modified in subsequent MD analyses of media registers (see the references in the present Section).

⁸ See Forchini (2021) for additional evidence pertaining to various film genres.

including texts that mainly present information, convey opinions or employ playful discourse. This brief overview shows how realistic, rich and varied the language of film and television programmes is. These characteristics make it a good model for the acquisition of spoken language in its various realisations.

Using personal computers, mobile telephones and iPads, L2 speakers can access English web products, the availability of which has now increased due to the spread of streaming and Internet-based video platforms, as well as the ever-increasing portability of smart devices. These technological innovations have extended the range of media genres, language varieties and registers with which L2 users can engage online. Overall, web-based registers are hybrid, multi-functional, adjustable and changeable (Page *et al.* 2022). As they vary in terms of audience design, users' participation framework, types of interactivity, and levels of accessibility and complexity, they present a variety of linguistic, multimodal and rhetorical features that lead to highly variable input. As a result, Internet registers make up broader and more diverse categories than do traditional registers (Biber, Egbert 2018). Moreover, while some web registers share many linguistic features with their non-web counterparts (e.g. editorials, news reports, songs and encyclopaedia pages), other web-specific genres, such as online news, travel blogs, discussion forums and question-answer forums, show specific linguistic and generic features (Biber, Egbert 2016; Lewis 2003). For example, discussion forums are characterised by specialised lexical items including *imo*, *FAQ*, *re*, *posts*, *threads* and *clicking* (Laippala *et al.* 2021, p. 782). Furthermore, some web registers, such as song lyrics and sports reports, can be identified more easily due to their lexical and grammatical consistency within and across texts; others, including opinion blogs and travel blogs, show greater variation, with lexical and grammatical choices changing according to the varying situational parameters (Laippala *et al.* 2021).

Among the most popular and potentially influential web registers, social media posts are characterised by dialogic and interactional quality, and are orientated towards the expression of stance and interpersonal exchanges of information (Berber Sardinha 2018). Since they activate an increased range of multimodal resources – including emojis and emoticons – and are realised as short texts, social media may be easier for L2 users to access compared to longer, monosemiotic texts. However, comprehension issues may arise due to the widespread use of non-standard spelling, punctuation, abbreviations and hashtags (Berber Sardinha 2022, p. 657). In an MD study of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, Berber Sardinha (2022) further emphasised the relevance of individual variations across the different user platforms and categories (e.g. politicians and celebrities). Individual users tended to opt for either one of the two dimensions of variation identified,

namely *formal, informational, argumentative discourse* versus *informal, interactive, speaker-oriented discourse*, while simultaneously exploiting the rhetorical richness of the media register – a key feature of optimal input for SLA (Long 2020). In summary, Internet registers offer extremely rich and highly diversified language input that can be exploited for informal language learning in various ways in the digital wild.

From a varilectal and multicultural perspective, it is important to note that social media, social platforms and new media readily allow for the combination of semiotic resources, including different languages and language varieties, polylinguaging (Jørgensen *et al.* 2011) and translingualism (Canagarajah 2012). The implications for informal language learning of the widespread presence of non-native Englishes in the media deserve in-depth investigation.

2.3.1. Media input and second language acquisition

Systematic exposure to online and offline registers is likely to contribute to SLA in several ways, in line with the theoretical premises outlined above. Different media registers will collectively add to the amount of representative language data that is necessary for language learning to occur, and will allow L2 speakers to draw generalisations implicitly, to activate statistical learning and to extract form-function mappings from the target language. As instances of specialised discourses, these registers can also offer evidence of distinctive type and token frequencies while providing instances of contextualised language and text variation. When their linguistic composition is similar to unplanned, unmediated language, media registers will also contribute to the development of general L2 proficiency, as well as to the acquisition of registers that are less readily accessible in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. In turn, interactional exchanges in social media and onscreen can assist L2 users to unpack complex input while adding salience to specific L2 features.⁹

Some studies have shown that informal access to media has a positive effect on L2 proficiency (Berns *et al.* 2007; Cole, Vanderplank 2016; Verspoor *et al.* 2011). The most robust evidence at present is Azzolini *et al.*'s (2022) investigation of a representative sample of approximately 20,000 school learners from 14 European Union countries.¹⁰ The participants were tested on three language skills, while their informal experience with English was investigated and correlated with other relevant variables. The findings

⁹ The same acquisitional advantages will apply to multiplayer video games (see Bianchi this volume).

¹⁰ Italy was not included in the study.

showed that the association between exposure to English-language media and English-language competence was particularly sizeable. Informal experience with English – particularly via cultural artefacts and the media – was shown to play a key role in students’ L2 proficiency, noticeably exceeding that of formal instruction and other significant variables such as language distance (Azzolini *et al.* 2022, p. 167).

Large-scale empirical research on informal language learning has also suggested that some media access produces better linguistic outcomes with regard to specific language skills (e.g. De Wilde *et al.* 2020; Krüger 2023; Muñoz 2020; Winke, Gass 2018). A national project involving the whole of Iceland (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018) showed that L2 learner-users benefitted strongly from accessing English-language television and the Internet outside of formal settings, as they became highly proficient conversationalists in English. However, they lagged behind considerably in formal academic reading and writing skills, as their out-of-class exposure to these language skills was limited. Careful mappings of informal exposure can provide the necessary information to predict what learner-users will acquire spontaneously through the media.

Studies of informal learners’ uptake of specific English-language features have also shown that web-based and audiovisual input affected the acquisition of register-specific features. Sockett and Kusyk (2015) reported that frequent L2 viewers of television series produced more idiomatic texts in English and knew the most pervasive 4-grams in an *ad hoc* compiled corpus of popular television series. From the perspective of interlanguage pragmatics, Lyrigkou’s (2023) investigation revealed that English discourse markers, which were found to be absent from classroom instruction, were successfully acquired by Greek school learners who accessed L2 media informally. Overall, however, fine-grained research on SLA-oriented analyses of media registers is limited, and studies that correlate specific media engagement in English with learner-users’ competence development are scarce (but see De Riso this volume; Kusyk 2020). As a result, the PRIN project aims to describe the salient features of relevant media discourses to contribute to characterising the multifaceted multimodal and web-embedded English input to which Italian users are informally exposed (see works by Bianchi, Formentelli and Zago, and Galiano this volume). Moreover, the findings pertaining to media registers will inform the choice of features to be investigated in the longitudinal studies of individual high-exposure participants (see Section 3.2 for further details).

2.4. Learners' attitudes, perceptions and motivations

The ubiquity of English and the changing language learning landscapes have strong implications for the ways in which L2 users conceptualise English and English language learning (Aiello 2018; Ferguson 2015; Gnutzmann *et al.* 2015). In their study involving several European countries, Berns *et al.* (2007) showed that not only was there a positive correlation between school learners' exposure to English-language media and their language performance, but their attitudes towards English were also affected positively by out-of-school contact with the target language. Accordingly, the PRIN project started from the assumption that attitudes towards the language and its speakers would both predict and result from language use and language learning.

Language attitudes can generally be defined as evaluative reactions to languages and language varieties (Dragojevic 2017); more precisely, they identify affective, cognitive and behavioural stances towards the speakers of those languages and language varieties (Ryan *et al.* 1982, p. 7). Consequently, the three components of attitudes that need to be examined are feelings, beliefs and activities (Kircher, Zipp 2022). Language attitudes also need to be considered in conjunction with learners' perceptions of their L2 selves, their goals and reasons for accessing English, and their motivations for acquiring the language (Dörnyei, Ushioda 2009; Lee, Xie 2023). For example, Schneider (2020, p. 225) pointed out that, whereas extensive evidence testifies to the role of instrumental motivation in the spread of English worldwide, less research evidence supports a similar role of integrative motivation.

Since attitudes and motivation develop based on experience (Kircher, Zipp 2022), we expect informal contexts to influence the ways in which L2 speakers view themselves as learners or users of the language (Aiello 2018). In a case study by Pavesi and Ghia (2020), many of the 305 Italian university students who were surveyed stated that they watched audiovisual products in the L2 because they wanted to improve their English, hence revealing a language learning motivation for access. However, as the respondents added that they enjoyed the aesthetic, narrative and sociable dimensions of the audiovisual products, their identity as language users – rather than as language learners – also emerged quite strongly. In fact, changes in language practices over time and space may determine identity shifts (Eskildsen, Theodórsdóttir 2017; Ishikawa 2017; Sockett 2023). According to Mauranen (2018), traditional learners of English progressively become ELF users, who do not identify with models of English as a native language (ENL), presumably as a result of their greater experience with the language outside of the classroom.

L2 learner-users' orientations towards English will be influenced by several factors, such as EMI and living abroad experiences, intrinsic liking of the language, as well as frequency and intensity of contact with native and non-native varieties of English (De Wilde 2020; Modiano 2024). Audiovisual texts such as television series, films and stand-up comedies will lean more towards the use of native, mainly northern American, varieties, while blogs, forums and YouTube videos may contain more instances of ELF and texts in second language varieties. As Schneider (2020, p. 235) highlighted, the Internet plays a considerable role in spreading aspects of World Englishes outside of their regions of origin.

These initial considerations call for a wider-scoped, deeper research investigation to account for all the subtleties in the evolving attitudes and stances towards English and informal English language learning.

3. The investigation

3.1. *Research questions*

Starting from these premises, the project appraises how declared and more hidden engagements with English media are currently affecting the ways in which Italian university students approach the learning and use of the global language. For maximal substantive representativeness, the investigation focuses on four middle-sized/large universities in the North, Centre, South and a major island of Italy. The Universities of Pavia, Pisa, Salento and Catania are long-standing, multidisciplinary institutions of higher education that reflect diverse student populations.

A series of research questions is addressed in the project. The six main ones are:

1. To what extent do the sampled Italian students engage with English for leisure through the media? Which modalities of access (e.g. receptive or interactive) and affordances (e.g. subtitles and online communities) are favoured?
2. What correlations are there among the frequency, intensity and type of informal contact with English and major individual and social variables, such as self-assessed L2 competence, disciplinary area, attendance at secondary school and gender?
3. Does one single correlation and interpretation model apply to the four sample universities? If not, according to which factors do the groups differ?
4. What are the attitudes towards the English language, informal language learning and various modalities of access to English? What are the relationships between English media exposure and orientations towards

ENL/EFL/ELF? Can associated L2-identity issues be identified?

5. What are the results of informal media experience for high-exposure learner-users of English over time? Can both individual learning trajectories and common traits be identified?

6. How can L2 higher education be reframed to bridge formal and informal learning and to foster students' self-regulated learning?

3.2. Methodology and research stages

To address these research questions, we adopted a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, together with collections of cross-sectional and longitudinal data. The research design includes empirical tools that balance etic and emic perspectives of data analysis. Such a complex approach will decrease the limitations of each individual procedure and allow for the triangulation of the results.

The project is structured into three major phases. In Stage 1, a fine-grained questionnaire about university students' contact with English has been constructed, piloted, validated and administered online to students in intact classes to avoid self-selection issues (Pavesi *et al.* 2023). Questionnaires have been widely used in research on informal language learning to collect behavioural and attitudinal data from large samples of L2 learner-users (e.g. Krüger 2023; Kussyk 2020; Muñoz 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Toffoli, Sockett 2010). The Informal English Contact and Learning (IECoL) questionnaire contains 72 questions and is divided into three macrosections. The first section gathers general information about the participants' language backgrounds and previous linguistic experiences; the second section focuses on the frequency and intensity of exposure to various input types, with subsections pertaining to audiovisual products, YouTube videos, video games, songs, other Internet resources (e.g. blogs, forums, web pages, podcasts and apps), reading practices (e.g. newspapers, books and magazines) and additional input sources such as online video calls and face-to-face interactions. The third macrosection comprises queries about attitudes towards English, self-perceived proficiency levels and social backgrounds. IECoL has been linked to a vocabulary test to obtain first-hand learning data (Pavesi *et al.* 2023). The final sample consisted of approximately 4,000 valid questionnaires and tests that were distributed equally at the four universities to students specialising in the humanities, social sciences and science and technology in comparable proportions. The vast majority of the participants were non-specialist learners of English who were expected to access the L2 in informal contexts independently of language instruction. However, a small number of language students was also included to provide a view of learners who were still learning English in the classroom and had an “intense and

proactive approach to the learning of the target language” (Sockett, Kusyk 2015, p. 163). The identification of disciplinary areas ensured better comparability among the target universities, while also enabling the evaluation of the behaviour of students with different academic backgrounds.

Following the first stage, each unit is pursuing its own research agenda characterised by individual objectives that integrate with each other to provide a broader picture of the different aspects that are involved in informal contact with English (Figure 1). In Stage 2, semi-structured interviews are being conducted with selected (high-, medium- and low-exposure) students who are being asked to reflect on various aspects of their relationship with L2 English and their informal engagement with English-language media (Dressman 2023; Kusyk 2020). Due to the private nature of most informal learning, ethnographic studies using semi-structured interviews were deemed necessary to obtain in-depth opinions and long-term accounts of behavioural patterns, language beliefs, affiliations with communities of practice and affinity groups, together with motivations for informal exposure to English (Kusyk *et al.* 2023). A general difficulty has been noticed when measuring L2 viewers’ “orientations towards learning or leisure-based motivations” in survey-based studies if follow-up qualitative research on participants’ attitudes and their processing of verbal input is not conducted (Sockett 2014, p. 96). Therefore, Stage 2 in the present project is a response to Kusyk *et al.*’s (2023, p. 5) call for research that focuses on individual acquisitional pathways, as well as the personal and social variables that are associated with individual learner-users.

In Stage 3, longitudinal case-studies of individuals’ development in selected language areas are carried out to provide access to the temporal dimension of media-triggered informal learning and to allow for more thorough analyses of individual learning trajectories. As SLA is a process that requires prolonged and extensive engagement with the L2, investigating SLA is best accomplished through repeated samplings, observations and measurements at regular intervals across extended periods (Ross, Masters 2023). The aim here is not the generalisability of the results, but rather the specificity of detail pertaining to individual learning trajectories (Ross, Masters 2023). In this stage, the acquisition of morpho-syntactic, pragmatic and lexical features, such as speech acts and specialised vocabulary, is investigated. Centre stage is occupied by the three constructs of complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) to be analysed individually and in interaction to provide details regarding the multifacetedness and dynamicity of L2 development over time (Hasnain, Halder 2024; Michel 2017; Pallotti 2021). For example, CAF measures allow researchers to compare L2 learners’ productions in different tasks (e.g. written compositions versus oral narrations), thus capturing different aspects of learners’ language (Skehan, Foster 2008).

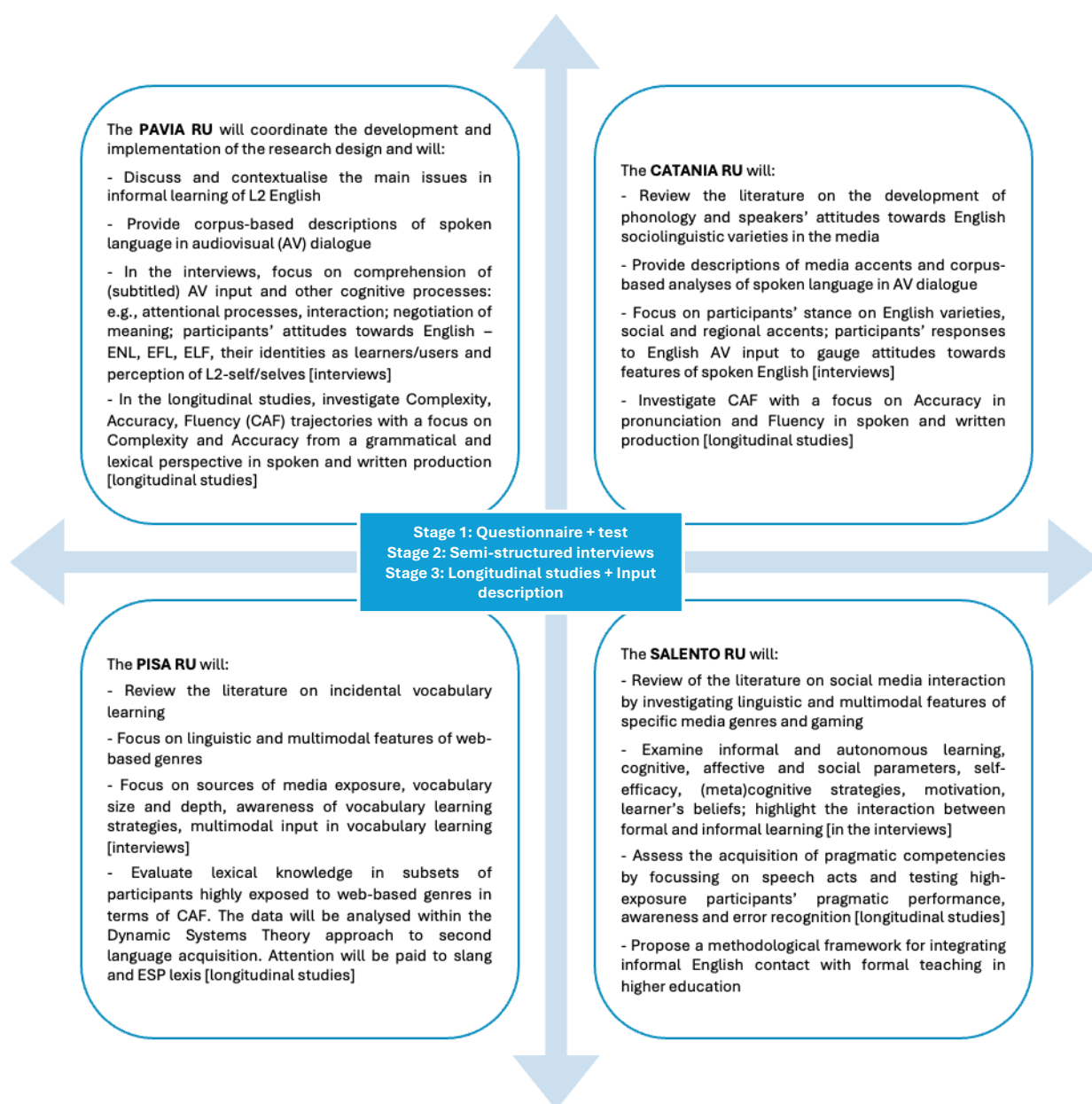


Figure 1
Outline of the specific goals of the four research units.

Overall, moving from cross-sectional surveys to interviews and longitudinal investigations of individual participants is deemed to be crucial to fully depict the ecology of informal approaches to English at present. “Every digital learner of English has a story to tell about ‘how they did it’. Those stories are often impressive and share both commonalities and peculiarities” (Dressman 2023, p. 29). At the core of the research output, the emic accounts will integrate the quantitative results and provide insights into learner-users’ language behaviours, language attitudes and evolving L2 competencies.

4. L2 users' profiles: Patterns of informal contact with English

An illustration of the research potential of the PRIN project is provided in the final part of this contribution. An overview of the ways in which practices of informal contact with English typically co-occur in the surveyed learner-users' experiences is presented; that is, informal practices that tend to be carried out by the same participants and are shared across many learner-users can be identified.¹¹ This profiling operation can also be seen as a first step in the mapping of the informal learning spaces that learner-users create for themselves in the wild, in line with the spatial perspective that is adopted in the project.

To conduct the investigation, the individual replies from the IECoL questionnaire were extracted and subsequently grouped together using a factor analysis, which is a statistical procedure that brings together variables that are strongly correlated while setting apart those that are not, hence identifying underlying traits. In this process, a factor analysis clusters several variables into more general, higher-level factors that help to identify the latent structure in the data (Dörnyei 2007, pp. 233-236). In the present investigation, a factor analysis was used to extract the informal learner-users' profiles. In other words, a factor analysis was functional to combining different input sources and identifying which ones tend to be accessed by the same learners when they engage with English outside of traditional learning settings.

To conduct the factor analysis, an index of exposure was calculated for each individual respondent¹² who had submitted a completed questionnaire, resulting in 2,525 questionnaires in total. The selection of a factor analysis with five factors revealed that distinctive clusters of types of English-language input could be identified which distinguish among English-based practices (Table 1).¹³ These draw on the Internet or more traditional media, involve a greater or lesser degree of receptive use, feature multimodality in texts, activate interactivity and so forth.

¹¹ By correlating favourite activities, Berns *et al.* (2007) isolated different learners' profiles among informal learners of English across several European countries. More recently, Lee and Xie (2023) discussed types of recurrent informal exposure using a large sample of Korean students.

¹² Indexes of exposure were obtained following Pavesi and Ghia's (2020, pp. 81-83) calculation procedure.

¹³ The applied method was maximum-likelihood factor analysis. The rotation method was promax with power 4. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin factor adequacy was meritorious (overall value = 0.86). The factors showed good to excellent levels of internal consistency, with values of alpha varying from 0.71 to 0.92. The analysis was performed using R 4.2.0.

Factor 1 – Receptive Internet access		Factor 2 – Multimodal input		Factor 3 – Proactive Internet use		Factor 4 – Personal contact		Factor 5 – Video games	
Internet_I read socials	<i>1.05</i>	TV-series	<i>0.94</i>	Internet_I write blogs	<i>1.04</i>	Chats	<i>0.76</i>	Gaming alone	<i>0.89</i>
Internet_I read webpages	<i>1.02</i>	Films	<i>0.94</i>	Internet_radio	<i>0.73</i>	Online face- to-face	<i>0.75</i>	Group video games	<i>0.83</i>
Internet_app	<i>0.99</i>	Other TV programmes	<i>0.58</i>	Internet_I write on socials	<i>0.66</i>	Email	<i>0.65</i>		
Internet_I read blogs	<i>0.74</i>	YouTube	<i>0.36</i>	Internet_podcast	<i>0.34</i>	In presence	<i>0.60</i>		
Internet_ shopping	<i>0.71</i>	Songs	<i>0.31</i>	Internet_other	<i>.030</i>				
Internet_podcast	<i>0.42</i>								
Internet_other	<i>0.44</i>								

Table 1
Five factor clusters for informal English input.¹⁴

The first factor (Factor 1) identifies online, web-based practices through which learner-users mainly access English-language input receptively. They read content on social networks and webpages, read blogs, use apps (sometimes to make purchases online) and occasionally listen to podcasts. This factor can be labelled ‘Receptive Internet access’ because users experience English online but mainly in one-way communication, occasionally becoming involved in human-non-human interactions. Importantly, the receptive online affordances in this factor mainly provide written language input, as listening practices in English are correlated less strongly with the other language affordances in the factor. A second major group of correlated activities in English includes watching original language films and television series, which are the two types of input that contribute most to this factor. Significantly, this second factor also includes access to other audiovisual programmes, as well as to YouTube resources and songs, although their weight is lower than that of telecinematic input. Affordances in this factor provide spoken input and are markedly multimodal as they are characterised by the co-deployment of several semiotic resources beyond verbal language, such as images, gestures, movements, gazes and music. Therefore, the second factor can be labelled ‘Multimodal input’. Telecinematic input represents a separate category regardless of the support on which it relies in that it consists of full-length audiovisual narratives in contrast to generally shorter YouTube video clips and equally short songs. Factor 2 also mainly corresponds to receptive contact with English, namely

¹⁴ The five factors are shown separately and are ranked by loading, with highest values, or weight, per cluster in italics.

one-way access to language practices onscreen or song lyrics, but differs noticeably from Factor 1 because exposure here is predominantly to spoken language. Due to their strengths, the first two factors capture the respondents' tendency to experience English via screens, often online and with very limited, if any, two-way communication.

Active engagement emerges via Factor 3, which identifies practices whereby learner-users play a more dynamic role on the web, such as when they write blogs or write on social media. This factor can be labelled 'Proactive Internet uses' because it concerns students who like to become directly involved online often through writing practices. We also found access to English through radio stations and podcasts in this factor; radio stations and podcasts are posited as being active listenership given the strong correlations among the variables. Moreover, as comprehension in these modalities relies on linguistic and paralinguistic components, greater effort and involvement is required on the part of the L2 listeners. Factor 4 is also characterised by strong involvement because it combines various types of interactions, such as online chats, online video calls or video conferences, 'person-to-person interactions', as well as emails; that is, language experiences that encompass two-way communication with other people. These practices cut across online and offline distinctions by identifying L2 users who like talking, chatting and generally having exchanges through 'personal contact', hence the name assigned to this factor (see Verspoor *et al.* 2011). Finally, all gaming activities – comprising both single and group video games – are included in Factor 5. These activities have the potential for considerable interactivity, and involve speakers of many native and non-native varieties of English (Bianchi this volume). As no other practices were loaded in this factor, 'Video games' in English appeared to stand alone and to have a weak correlation with other types of engagement with the L2 outside of the classroom.

The five factors that emerged from the analysis can be used to identify groups of prototypical informal users of English: those who like to access the web in English, to read content and to surf the net (Factor 1); viewers of English-language audiovisual programmes and YouTube videos (Factor 2); proactive Internet users who enjoy being involved in writing texts and listening to specific content online in English (Factor 3); and students who use the language in personal interactions, both face-to-face and online (Factor 4). Video gamers stand out due to focusing on that activity, both individually or in groups, but to the exclusion of other informal practices in English (Factor 5). The last trend was evidenced by a further analysis of the correlations among the five factors (Table 2).

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Factor 1	1.00				
Factor 2	0.29	1.00			
Factor 3	0.21	0.33	1.00		
Factor 4	0.69	0.21	0.11	1.00	
Factor 5	- 0.44	- 0.50	- 0.29	- 0.40	1.00

Table 2
Correlation coefficients among factors.

Noticeably, Factor 5 correlated negatively with all the other factors, a statistical trend that once again suggests that students who like to play video games in English tend to become absorbed in that activity while neglecting other opportunities for engaging informally with English. In this regard, students who mainly navigate the net, access YouTube and social networks, or watch films and television series in English – but who also engage in face-to-face interactions – tend not to play video games in English

On the whole, the positive, although often relatively weak correlations among and across the other four factors indicated that students access a variety of input types in English. However, they do so to different extents. One interesting, strong correlation between ‘Receptive Internet access’ (Factor 1) and ‘Personal contact’ (Factor 4) was noted, suggesting that students who mainly like to surf the net to read and, less often, to listen to online texts, reserve their interactional practices for more direct, personal encounters, both in person and online. Overall, based on the analysis, five prototypical profiles of informal learner-users of English have emerged, who favour but do not restrict themselves to the preferred type of contact with the L2, as summarised in Figure 2.

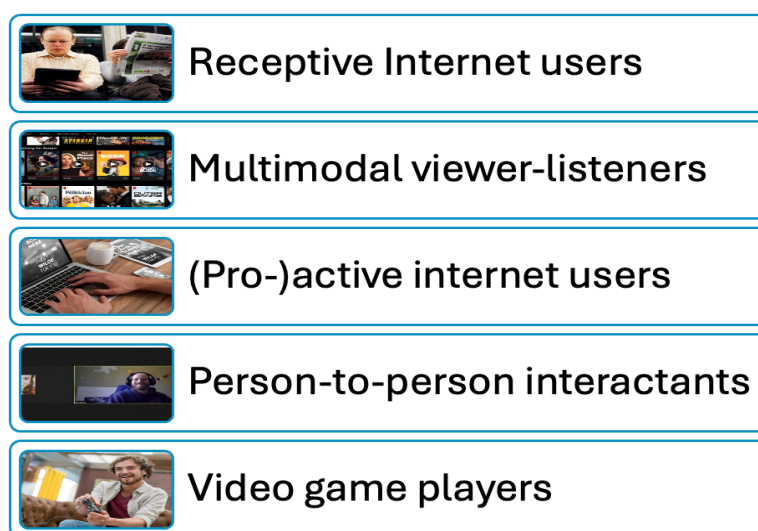


Figure 2
Access profiles of informal L2 English users.

Depending on their access profile, learner-users are expected to engage with diverse discoursal registers in English that are collocated differently on the written-spoken language continua and involve varying degrees of active production and interaction. These profiles are expected to be related to the ways in which learner-users' develop their attitudes towards English and their competence in the L2, as is being investigated in the current stages of the research project.

5. Conclusions

We are witnessing a revolution in the learning of English across the globe. English-language affordances are multiplying and are becoming easily accessible through a wealth of media for the benefit of the receptive, curious and adventurous L2 user. The increasing phenomenon of informal access to English first pertains to individuals, but clearly extends to groups, communities and society at large. As a result, learner-users' media-triggered self-directed contact with English exhibits both private and shared dimensions, all of which are bound to have a dramatic impact on L2 speakers' developing competence at present and in the future. Starting from these considerations and in the wake of recent research in Europe, the PRIN project regarding the informalisation of English language learning through the media is being developed with the overarching aim of mapping Italian university students' informal experiences with the L2 at a time at which they have mainly completed their formal education in English. In the previous sections, the descriptive and theoretical background to the national investigation was outlined, together with the three main phases that were envisaged in the data collection and analysis. To obtain a preliminary overview of the participants' behavioural patterns, a factor analysis was conducted on the approximately 2,500 fully completed questionnaires. Five prototypical profiles of informal learner-users emerged, corresponding to groups of language affordances and activities that tend to occur together in individuals' experiences with English. The detailed patterns of students' behaviour, together with the personal, social and language variables that are associated with these patterns – including attitudes and motivations, disciplinary areas, and the language input provided by each media register – have been explored in the various phases of the research project and are discussed in the contributions to the present volume. Many challenges have been encountered in the initial stages of the study and are being addressed as they emerge in the day-to-day management of the complexities that are intrinsic to research involving real people. Some changes to the initial plan needed to be made to accommodate the shifting contexts and the different

settings at the four universities. Despite the adjustments required by the socially engaging and participatory nature of the investigation, we trust that, by the end of the project, we will have obtained a broader and more insightful perspective on the rapidly changing relationships that university students experience with English in Italy at present.

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