Camilla De Riso

# INFORMAL LEARNING OF ENGLISH AT UNIVERSITY

## A cross-sectional and longitudinal perspective

Materiali Linguistici
Università di Pavia

FrancoAngeli

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# List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AS-unit(s) | Analysis of Speech unit(s) |
| AV(s) | audiovisual(s) |
| AVI | audiovisual input |
| CAF | complexity, accuracy and fluency |
| CEFR | Common European Framework of Reference for Languages |
| CLA | Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo – University Language Centre |
| EE | Extramural English |
| EFL | English as a Foreign Language |
| ELF | English as a Lingua Franca |
| ISLL | Informal Second Language Learning |
| L1 | first language |
| L2 | second language |
| LBC | Language Learning Beyond the Classroom |
| MLASU(s) | mean length of Analysis of Speech unit(s) |
| OILE | Online Informal Learning of English |
| RQ(s) | Research Question(s) |
| SLA | Second Language Acquisition |

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# Introduction

In the contemporary context of globalisation and cultural pluralism, English has long established itself as the dominant language for international communication, frequently functioning as the default medium of interaction among speakers of different linguistic backgrounds (Aronin *et al*. 2013). The unprecedented diffusion of English, set in motion by the accelerated mobilities of people, things and information, constantly provides new opportunities for its adoption and adaptation by diverse communities (Benson 2021). This dynamic process fosters the ongoing reshaping of linguistic identities and the transformation of communicative and multilingual practices (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 15). As English increasingly moves beyond the classroom into informal settings, research on informal second language learning (ISLL) has become a fruitful field for investigation, exploring both digital and real-world environments for language learning and use across Europe (Sockett 2014; Sundqvist, Sylvén 2016; Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018; Arndt, Lyrigkou 2019; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Toffoli *et al.* 2023). Despite a growing interest in the topic, comprehensive studies on the issue are still scant in Italy (Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Pavesi, Bianchi 2024) and only recently has research addressed longitudinal development within ISLL (Kusyk 2017). The present study seeks to address this gap, involving a varied group of participants at a medium-sized university in Italy. Building on Pavesi and Ghia (2020) initial investigation, the study provides an updated picture of students' patterns of exposure to different types of informal English input: films and television programmes, YouTube, songs, video games, social networks, web pages, forums and blogs and face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, a longitudinal study was carried out aiming to monitor the evolution of four participants' spoken production in English through time. In this respect, the three constructs of complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF)

have provided a comprehensive framework for analysing second language learners' acquisitional processes longitudinally (Ferrari, 2012; Polat, Kim 2014; Vercellotti 2015; Kusyk 2017). CAF trajectories were observed investigating any possible relationship between second language (L2) development and frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input.

This volume consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the multifaceted nature of informal language learning by presenting first the key concepts and approaches in use in research, including the different labels coined to describe this body of work such as 'extramural', 'beyond the classroom language learning', 'online informal learning of English' and 'informal second language learning'. The centrality of the role of media input in ISLL led to a thorough review of the acquisitional impact of exposure to popular media in several European countries, with special attention to audiovisual (AV) input. Thanks to its multimodal nature, AV input has long been claimed as a naturally facilitating source of L2 learning in both formal and informal settings as studies have supplied evidence on how prolonged exposure to L2 input can enhance advanced receptive and productive skills in L2 learners. Lastly, in this respect, the chapter taps into the three constructs of complexity, accuracy and fluency. CAF measures aim to assess the richness, correctness and naturalness of learners' L2 production and use by providing a comprehensive framework for analysing L2 learners' acquisitional process longitudinally.

Aims, methodology and research questions are discussed in Chapter 2. The dual focus of the study is introduced by two research questions, the first one probing the different sources of informal contact with L2 English, the second one addressing the potential effect of prolonged exposure to informal English input on L2 development. After illustrating the rationale, main aims and sample of the study, the chapter first describes the design, structure and data collection procedure of the questionnaire that tackles participants' frequency and intensity of exposure to informal English through different media. In addition, an overview of respondents' majors, language learning background and self-assessed proficiency level in L2 English frames the ensuing analysis and discussion. The questionnaire, which contains 70 items, drew on previous research on profiles of language contact and recent investigations of students' motivation and attitudes towards L2 English (Cravidi 2016; Aiello 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2021). Data were collected online on KIRO, the University of Pavia e-learning platform, from a total of 572 Italian students. The chapter then moves on to consider the aims, structure and contents of the longitudinal

study. The study, inspired by Kusyk (2017), monitored the evolution of four participants' L2 spoken production from January to November 2021. Its aims were to investigate any relation between frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input and to observe L2 development through 15 measures for complexity, accuracy and fluency. Two monologic storytelling tasks were recorded on one-on-one meetings on Zoom every two months. Furthermore, the study relied on online journals to keep track of participants' contact with informal L2 English and semi-structured interviews to delve into students' attitudes and motivation towards the foreign language.

Chapter 3 describes the findings of the survey on overall informal access to English in the sample. Frequency and intensity of exposure to the different input types are presented and discussed, highlighting specificities of the input as well as common features. For ease of reference, the different sources of informal L2 input investigated in the questionnaire are grouped together as follows: (i) films, TV series and YouTube, (ii) social networks, web pages, forums and blogs, (iii) songs, (iv) videogames and online gaming and (v) face-to-face interactions. Data analysis explores how often and for how long participants engage in these informal activities and their beliefs about the potential learning outcomes arising from extensive exposure. Based on these data, exposure indexes are generated (Pavesi, Ghia 2020) to provide participants' profiles of informal contact with English. In addition, the chapter devotes a section to exposure to films and television series, analysing students' preferred viewing modalities, i.e., subtitled vs. dubbed audiovisual content, as well as their preferred subtitling mode, i.e., same-language subtitles vs. intralingual subtitles.

Chapter 4 describes the findings of the four case studies monitored throughout a 12-month longitudinal study. Each subject is analysed separately and findings can be considered as divided into three sections. Section (i) presents an overview of the subject's habits when accessing informal English input according to the participant's questionnaire response, a semi-structured interview and input access journal. With the analysis of the participant's interview and input access journal, section (ii) explores the relationship with informal English, how it started and how it evolved through time, looking also into the time span of the Covid-19 pandemic. Lastly, section (iii) features the analysis of complexity, accuracy and fluency trajectories in subject's L2 oral productions in time, according to 15 measures of language development. The final part of the chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the four case studies, addressing the

potential impact of informal L2 input on language development and setting the tone for the ensuing general discussion and conclusions.

Chapter 5 draws together the data gathered through the questionnaires and the four case studies and offers some concluding remarks on the implications of the findings. Wishing to provide an updated picture of general trends of exposure to informal English input in Italy, the questionnaire results are first compared with Pavesi and Ghia (2020) initial investigation and subsequently placed in a European context. The findings bear witness not only to the changeable trends of access and use of informal English input, but also to the unpredictability of learners' informal experience with the L2 (Sockett 2014). In only four years, patterns of access to informal English input in Italy have changed considerably in terms of type, frequency and length of exposure – although primacy of audiovisual input remains confirmed. Learner-user profiles have changed too, as frequent access to informal sources of English input is not a prerogative of language specialists anymore. Like their European peers, Italian students access English prevailingly via receptive activities and opt for other similar modalities of exposure to the language (Kusyk 2017; Bednarek 2018; Muñoz 2020). However, major differences concerning L2 awareness and input availability emerged from the comparison between the four longitudinal case studies and Kusyk (2017) investigation. Due to technological advancement, changes in trends of access to informal English input were in part expected. While the advent of online streaming platforms allows viewers to choose their audio language source and preferred subtitles, videocalls and instant messages have shortened distances between people and created the illusion of live conversations happening through face-to-screen interactions. It comes as no surprise that, compared to Kusyk (2017) study, Italian students relied more frequently on English subtitles and engaged more often in live face-to-screen interactions in the L2 to the point of considering them equal to face-to-face conversations. Ultimately, it appears that in just six years, Italian students have developed a more comprehensive understanding of their L2 identity, recognizing both their language competence and confidence thus legitimising the informal sphere as a valid source of learning and skill acquisition. On that note, the chapter continues, presenting findings from the longitudinal monitoring of CAF trajectories and L2 development over time. Development measures were found to be constantly evolving, interacting and adapting across subjects, not only in relation to the different informal activities, but also according to multiple individual factors such as learners' L2 identity and confidence, personal

meaning attributed to the activities, as well as levels of attention and motivation. The final parts of the chapter feature the limitations to the present study and conclusions. The behaviours emerging from the current investigation support the hypothesis that the status of English in Italy is changing, adjusting itself to what is happening in other European countries and worldwide. This shift is likely to intensify even more in the future as a result of growing informal contact with English in an increasingly multilingual, dynamic society (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 18).

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# 1. Informal language learning

## 1.1. New scenarios of language learning and use

About a decade ago, research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) began to question the boundaries of institutional learning environments and started to pay more attention to what was happening outside of the classroom. From this perspective, learning a second language depends on the learners' interactions with the language inside and outside the classroom, rather than on instruction alone (Benson 2021). Globalisation and technological advancements have made English easily and increasingly accessible to learners, who can now choose how to access the L2 from several types of informal input, available in as many formats. With media consumption no longer restricted to television, many people like to catch up with the latest episode of their favourite TV series on their mobile phones, tablets and computers during their lunch break at work or while commuting to and from school. The same devices are used to read books, blogs and the news, as well as to listen to music, podcasts and audiobooks. While language learners might access the informal input with the underlying aim of improving their language knowledge, most L2 users are not concerned with their language learning processes. The informality of the settings alongside the recreational nature of these activities and people's personal interests and motivations usually draw attention away from the awareness of a chance to learn a foreign language. These new scenarios of language learning and use call for a new interpretation of the concept of informal learning itself, contextualised here "as involving free, self-directed contact with the L2 in non-educational locations for entertainment, social and information seeking purposes; it [informal learning] is posited to occur incidentally and in the absence of instruction or self-instruction" (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 40). Because of the different

purposes for engaging in informal L2 activities, the distinction between incidental and intentional learning is a notoriously contested issue. According to Hulstijn (2003), incidental language learning ensues when the learner's attention is on meaning rather than on language form. Since it occurs "without the conscious attention to commit the element to memory" (Hulstijn 2013: 2632, in Pavesi, Ghia 2020), learners pick up words and structures 'peripherally' while attention is focussed on a different learning objective. The process is triggered when learners are assigned a specific task, for example, memorising the names of the characters in a videoclip, but are later tested on different features, e.g., discourse markers. If learners memorise the correct use of discourse markers, their learning will have been incidental, with intentional learning accounting instead for the successful memorisation of the characters' names (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 41). Nevertheless, the boundaries between incidentality and intentionality are not clearly defined and allow shifting behaviours. Learners may set up an activity for themselves where they expect learning to take place, yet, as they forget their initial goal, their attention shifts from language onto meaning (Benson 2011) and the space they have created for intentional learning turns into a naturalistic setting where incidental learning takes over. Conversely, learners' attention might transfer from media immersion to focussing on the linguistic aspects and intentional practice (Dressman 2020). In recent decades, research has devoted particular attention to immersion in mediated activities or environments and to its influence on media users (Wissmath *et al.* 2009; Weibel *et al.* 2010; Weibel, Wissmath 2011). The psychological phenomenon of media immersion consists of four main constructs, i.e., *spatial presence*, *transportation*, *flow* and *enjoyment* (Wissmath *et al.* 2009). When the 'illusion' of spatial presence occurs, media users experience the mediated environment as unmediated. The more media users are mentally drawn away from the actual physical environment into the world of narrative (i.e., transportation), the more they are absorbed in the activity (i.e., flow). Some of the characteristics of the intrinsically rewarding flow experiences are intense involvement, concentration and focus, lack of self-consciousness and suppression of distractors (Wissmath *et al.* 2009: 117). In addition, flow (and spatial presence) enhances media users' enjoyment, corresponding to appreciation, attraction, preference and liking (Wissmath *et al.* 2009: 116-118). A more recent focus on individuals' disposition, has highlighted the influence of users' *motivation* and *immersive tendency* on media immersion and particularly on the occurrence of spatial presence and flow. These two personality factors can indeed facilitate the sensation of "being there" in an environment

portrayed by media (Weibel *et al.* 2010: 251), while maintaining focus on the specific activity (Weibel, Wissmath 2011: 3).

Since informal learning is posited as primarily motivated by leisure and L2 input is encountered spontaneously, any linguistic gains deriving from informal activities should be regarded as incidental. However, given the blurred distinction between 'picking up' a foreign language and learning its words and structures intentionally, intentional learning and incidental acquisition in informal second language learning should be considered as a continuum rather than two separate categorical constructs (Hubbard 2020). Surely, alongside input (see Section 1.3), the newfound attention to learners' attitudes and motivations appears to be increasingly important when researching informal second language learning. Theories of motivation in SLA have traditionally addressed one or more of the three aspects of learners' perceptions, namely *goals*, i.e., learners' perceptions of the language and why it would be useful for them to know it, *attitudes* towards the language and the learning context and *self-perception and L2 identity*, or the extent to which learners imagine themselves as successful user of the L2 (Arndt 2019). Understanding L2 motivation today, however, entails examining it in the context of a changing, interconnected and multifaceted world:

> Language, learning, communication and social relations in today's world function in highly mobile, fluid, instantaneous and interconnected ways, where mobility refers not only to the portable technologies that we use for communication, information access, entertainment, or learning, but also to the constant flow of people traversing political, geographic and linguistic borders. In this evolving new world order, motivation for language learning takes on a range of meanings and implications that are inextricably bound up with the complexities of multilingualism enmeshed in globalization, technologization and mobility in the 21st-century society (Dörnyei, Ushioda 2021: 10).

As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) also point out, the biggest impact of globalisation is that, for many language learners around the world, the L2 is almost invariably English. Estimated to be learnt and spoken by around a quarter of the world's population (British Council 2013), English has become the dominant global language and international lingua franca (ELF)[1]. Even so, the unprecedented rise of multilingualism is currently shaping new stances towards English, which involve novel beliefs,

1. See Jenkins *et al.* (2018) for a wide-ranging discussion of ELF; Formentelli (2017) for an overview of major linguistic, socio-pragmatic and discoursal issues on ELF and the relationship between ELF and English as a foreign language (EFL).

emotions and new behaviours developed by learners, users and expert users of the language (Ferguson 2015). These changes have crucial implications for research on SLA and English, to the point that the language itself requires a new definition, as currently English "does not stand for a discrete, autonomous and well-defined linguistic system, nor even a set of varieties, but covers rather a heterogeneous set of phenomena including images, ideas, or discursive constructions" (Ferguson 2015: 12).

## 1.2. Researching informal second language learning

While searching for a label that would best represent the shift of attention out of and away from the classroom, a variety of terms have been proposed to describe the phenomenon of L2 learning outside institutional settings, including 'extramural', 'extracurricular', 'out-of-the classroom', 'out-of-school', 'informal', 'naturalistic', 'self-directed', 'self-instructed' and 'autonomous' language learning. The following section offers a review of the literature considered to be most relevant to the present study.

*Extramural English*

Sundqvist (2009) first introduced the concept of Extramural English (EE) to refer to the language learners come in contact with or are involved in 'outside the walls' of the classroom. EE encompasses both intentional and incidental informal learning of English through learner-initiated activities that can take place either online or in real life (Sundqvist 2024: 2). According to the EE model, L2 learning depends on two dimensions: *individual learners' driving force* and *physical location* (Sundqvist, Sylvén 2016). Regarding learners' driving force or motivation to learn, extramural learning is built on the principle that access to English is always initiated by the learner and not by teachers or other institutional figures. It is possible that some learners engage in specific EE activities because they feel pressured to do so (by their peers, family, teachers, or for whatever reason), but in general, when engaging in EE, learners purposely exploit out-of-school settings that contribute to the learning of English – and in this respect, EE is related to learner autonomy. As for physical location, chances for extramural learning seem endless, at least for those with a fully functioning Internet connection. For those who lack an online connection, the opportunities are more limited, but still there. The study by Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) referred to a group of learners who acquired English extramurally and, at the same time, were instructed in English at

school. Interestingly, learners argue that they have learned most of their English at home or in other out-of-school settings through YouTube, films and TV series, video games or music, extensive reading, social networks and social networking, as opposed to in school.

*Language Learning Beyond the Classroom*

Benson (2011) proposed the more inclusive label 'language learning beyond the classroom' (LBC) aiming to cover different types of activities and types of learners (for example, those who acquire a L2 without simultaneously attending language classes), as well as their learning preferences and various ages. The preliminary model of LBC identified four dimensions or variables to analyse the field and narrow the scope of language learning beyond the classroom. The first dimension is *location*, i.e., the classroom as opposed to outside institutional contexts. We are accustomed to believing that the classroom is the only logical place for learning to take place, but as foreign languages become increasingly accessible through different media in everyday life, the whereabouts of 'beyond the classroom' continue to expand. The second dimension, *formality*, corresponds to the degree to which learning is structured by educational institutions and aimed at achieving formal qualification. LBC is typically informal, in other words, it is not done for educational purposes to fulfil the requirements of a course or an assignment. Third, *pedagogy*, refers to the degree to which individuals "are being taught" and "have the intention to language learning", i.e., self-instructed vs. naturalistic learning (Benson 2011: 11). The resources or practices of LBC may be didactic to greater or lesser extents regardless of intended audience and, at the same time, pedagogically mediated materials may be meant for both informal and formal uses. Finally, *locus of control*, defines the agent who controls what the learner does, whether it is the teacher (other-directed) or learners themselves (self-directed) (Reinders, Benson 2017: 562). LBC generally requires considerable autonomy on the part of learners insofar as it is engaged in voluntarily and it is usually directed and managed without authoritative supervision. To better represent the different conditions within language learning beyond the classroom, further dimensions were developed and added to the LBC model, such as, *mediation*, i.e., the teaching and learning resources, e.g., authentic texts and technology; *modality*, i.e., the learning practices engaged with as for instance reading, listening, or spoken interaction; the *linguistic* dimension, i.e., regarding language skills and levels of competence involved; and *intentional vs. incidental* learning (Reinders, Benson 2017).

Although language learning takes place beyond the classroom, a certain 'degree of instruction' will always be present in learners. While many individuals initially engage in language learning within the classroom and later continue learning naturalistically, i.e., without attending formal classes (Reinders, Benson 2017: 563), a 'formal learning orientation' may persist in learners, even when they find themselves outside of institutional contexts.

*Online Informal Learning of English*

With Sockett (2014) model of Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) the informal dimension of language learning out of school takes on the central role. In OILE language development emerges "from the intention to communicate and not from an explicit objective of language learning" and is a side-effect of what the "language user" does online (2014: 5). To put it simply, those engaging in these online activities are not primarily seeking to learn English through them, nevertheless language learning may be taking place. The model consists in a complex range of Internet-based activities, where different factors are interconnected and influence one another as language learning occurs. Thus, language development originates from the interaction between a plethora of free activities with which language user engage, the complexity of the language they encounter and use, and the semiotic resources employed in the multiple texts. By placing informality in such close contact with learning online and English, the model identifies the latter as the only L2 involved in the new acquisitional trend, fuelled by the increasing digitalisation of the media and the ensuing changes in L2 exposure. Even though OILE shed a light on the naturalistic dimension of language learning outside school, the model is somewhat limited by the impossibility of isolating the variety of factors which influence language development and separating digital informal learning from learners' other activities, for instance, meeting people, going to language cafés and pubs, or just reading 'offline' media (Sockett, Toffoli 2020). Other attempts in trying to picture the act of learning a language out of school contexts have provided similar labels, such as 'unintentional learning of English' (Forsman 2004); 'fully autonomous self-directed learning' (Cole 2015; Cole, Vanderplank 2016); 'informal digital learning of English' (IDLE) (Lee, Dressman 2017; Lee 2021); 'language learning in the digital wild' or 'wilds' (Sauro, Zourou, 2019).

Despite the great number of terms already in use, the present study adopts the label 'informal second language learning' (ISLL) (along with others, Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018; Arndt, Lyrigkou 2019; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Toffoli *et al*. 2023; Pavesi, Bianchi 2024) to define a form of second language acquisition which is thought to result from leisure-oriented activities not strictly related to the Internet such as watching films or TV series, playing video games, reading, listening to music, or social networking in the L2. These activities take place outside of educational institutions (*location*), are independent of formal frameworks for learning or testing (*formality*) and are directed by the learners themselves (*locus of control*). Moreover, individuals generally participate in these activities out of personal interest rather than for the purpose of language learning (*pedagogy*). Consequently, to indicate those experiencing ISLL the study adopts the term 'learner-users' (Pavesi Ghia 2020).

## 1.3. The role of media input

Increased exposure to comprehensible input has long been claimed to prompt and enhance second language acquisition and holds the key role in all models and theories of SLA, from initial approaches to more recent studies (see Andorno *et al*. 2017 for a thorough review). Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) argued that by receiving comprehensible L2 input, i.e., any language input that can be understood, learners would develop language skills – even though some words and grammatical structures might be unfamiliar. More recently, usage-based approaches (Ellis, Wulff 2015) and Input Processing Theory (VanPatten 2015) have remarked on the importance of frequency of exposure to L2 input for language development. Audiovisual input (AVI), with its multimodal nature, is widely recognised for its accessibility and comprehensibility, making it a valuable resource for second language acquisition (Kuppens 2010; Bednarek 2018; Peters, Webb 2018; Muñoz, Peters 2020; Caruana 2021; Montero Perez 2022; Muñoz 2022; Werner, Tegge 2022; Muñoz, Miralpeix 2024). Empirical studies consistently indicate that exposure to AVI facilitates language learning by providing simultaneous auditory and visual support, often supplemented by on-screen text in the form of subtitles or captions. As early as 1988, Vanderplank (1988: 278) argued that on-screen text can enhance comprehension by making input more accessible

when it would otherwise be too challenging. In this book, on-screen textual support is defined as subtitling and is traditionally categorised into interlingual subtitling, L1 subtitles integrating L2 dialogues and bimodal or same-language subtitling[2], where L2 subtitles match the L2 dialogues. When an L2 translation is added to the AV text in the viewers' L1, this is referred to as reversed subtitling. Research in this field has primarily focused on vocabulary learning and listening comprehension (Montero Perez *et al.* 2013; Peters *et al.* 2016). More recently, studies have also examined grammar (Ghia 2012; Puimège, Peters 2020; Pattemore, Muñoz, 2020; 2023) and pronunciation learning (Wisnieska & Mora 2020; Yibokou 2023). Additionally, factors such attitudes and motivation have been explored in relation to AVI and L2 learning (Aiello 2018; De Riso 2021; Arndt 2023; Schwarz 2023; Ghia 2024; Mariotti 2024; Leone, Paone 2024). Regarding motivation, viewers' perception of learning appears to have a positive impact on their engagement. Studies investigating learners' perception of L2 learning through AVI generally report overall improvements in participants' L2 comprehension (Pavesi, Ghia, 2020; Pavesi, 2024), particularly in vocabulary (Kusyk, Sockett, 2012). On the other hand, grammar consistently emerges as the area where learners perceive the least improvement (De Riso, 2021, 2024; Pattemore *et al.* 2020, 2024).

It is worth mentioning that the impact of AVI on language development has been met with a certain amount of scepticism. Referring specifically to AVI, Vanderplank (2016) addresses the illusion of media comprehensibility, pointing out how "the highly verbal and supercharged medium makes programmes widely *available* for use but hardly *accessible* to language learners" (Vanderplank 2010: 9). Challenges such as the fast pace of dialogues, along with the diversity of English accents, registers, and non-standard forms, pose significant difficulties even for advanced L2 learners engaging with films, TV series, and other media content. Although subtitling can facilitate comprehension, it also requires fast-reading skills in either the L1 or L2, which can make the viewing experience rather taxing for learner-users (Perego *et al.* 2010, 2016; Aiello 2018; Pavesi *et al.* 2019; De Riso 2021). Another perceived limitation of AVI lies in the unidirectionality of screen language (Pavesi 2015). While AVI provides a steady flow of authentic L2 spoken input, learner-users cannot participate in the interactions and the original texts cannot

2. The terms differentiating these two types of on-screen texts are not universal and what is defined as 'bimodal subtitles' in this book could be referred to as 'captions' in other studies.

be adapted to the interlocutors. Conversely, in face-to-face interactions L2 input is made more comprehensible and accessible to learners by the interactional work carried out by participants, not only to guarantee that L2 input is adapted to the learner's competence level, but also to promote L2 development, for instance through scaffolding, error correction and contingent speech production (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 48).

In recent years, the landscape of AVI has evolved significantly, shifting from traditional television broadcasts to a wide range of online platforms and digital environments. This transition has broadened the opportunities for language learners to engage with foreign languages in informal contexts, incorporating interactive and immersive experiences (Dressman, Sadler 2020; Lütge 2022; Reinders *et al.* 2022; Toffoli *et al.* 2023). Video games, in particular, have emerged as a valuable resource for SLA, providing interactive and socially engaging environments that foster motivation, increase willingness to communicate and facilitate language socialisation. These online gaming platforms expose learners to authentic language input while offering opportunities for meaningful interaction, both of which are fundamental to language development (Sylvén, Sundqvist 2012; Chick 2014; Sundqvist, Wikström 2015; De Wilde, Eyckmans 2017; Reinhardt 2019; Knight *et al.* 2020; Bianchi 2024). The integration of digital technologies into language learning reflects a broader shift toward more dynamic and learner-centered approaches, leveraging the affordances of new media to enhance SLA. This evolving media landscape continues to shape how learners interact with language, emphasizing the growing significance of informal L2 learning environments.

### 1.3.1. *Media environments and informal L2 learning*

Across Europe, a growing number of large-scale investigations have confirmed the positive impact of media input, by measuring the amount, frequency and diversity of learners' self-reported ISLL and sometimes also exploring learner attitudes and motivation for engaging in informal L2 activities. Crucial support to the role of media input and ISLL is given by the long-running research programme on the informal learning of Italian in Malta (Caruana 2003, 2006, 2009; Brincat 2011). While most studies focus on the informal learning of English as a second language, as for instance in the Northern countries (Sundqvist 2009; Verspoor *et al.* 2011; Sundqvist, Sylvén 2016; Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018), in France, Germany and Switzerland (Sockett, Toffoli 2012; Kusyk 2017; 2020; Arndt 2019; Krüger 2023), in Spain (Muñoz 2020), in Italy (Pavesi, Ghia 2020;

De Riso 2021; Pavesi *et al*. 2024) and Greece (Lyrigkou 2021), the Maltese research programme stands out as an early and significant contribution to the field. The following sections provide an overview of previous field research on ISLL across Europe deemed most relevant for the present study in terms of input type, methodology and sample.

In Malta, more than 1,000 subjects were involved in a long-running research programme across a timespan of almost 15 years (1991-2003), "when, apart from a single national television station (Television Malta), state-run and private Italian television channels could be received in analogue mode" (Caruana 2021: 1021). The empirical work showed that learner-users benefited considerably from watching television programmes in Italian, enhancing their comprehension, lexis and grammar in the L2, especially when exposure occurred from a very young age. In its initial phases (1991-1996), large samples of television viewers belonging to different age groups were tested on the reception of Italian lexical expressions and short sentences. Findings showed that subjects who watched Italian TV programmes more regularly and did so from a young age, fared better than their counterparts. The second phase of the study focused on L2 oral production, with a more in-depth data collection carried out by Caruana (2003) on two comparable groups of formal and informal learners of Italian. Subjects were involved in a film-retelling exercise and data was recorded and analysed to explore the use of verbs and syntactic complexity (Caruana 2021: 1022). Interestingly, the results showed that irrespective of the benefit of formal instruction, individuals who had been exposed to Italian via AVI from a very young age achieved higher levels of L2 proficiency. By receiving unsubtitled programmes from Italian television stations, Malta inadvertently fostered a remarkable case of immersion in the L2. Further evidence supporting the role of AVI in SLA comes from the subsequent decline of competence in L2 Italian following the advent of satellite television. After a decade (Caruana 2013), media consumption among Maltese youth has changed significantly, with a considerable reduction in exposure to Italian AVI and, consequently, a critical decrease in learners' L2 competence, as observed in replications of the seminal study (Caruana 2013).

A seven-years research project carried out in Iceland (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018) examined the amount and type of exposure to English and language learning outcomes, together with L2 user's attitudes and motivation in the Icelandic population at large. The study comprised L2 learners of different ages and relied on several data collection tools, i.e., surveys, interviews, diaries and proficiency (self-) assessments. Due to their limited formal education in the L2, children represent the most

appropriate population for research on informal language learning. A representative sample of 416 children (aged 9-10) took part in an initial data collection in 2010, by completing a questionnaire on their relationship with informal English. The questionnaire explored students' motivation and attitudes and surveyed seven specific features: Television/Music (watching and listening), Computers (playing videogames), Education (English at school), Peers (speaking to friends), Family (speaking to family members), Texts (reading) and Lingua Franca (speaking to foreigners). Students were also tested on their vocabulary knowledge and results showed that they possessed a good mastery of basic English vocabulary for their age. As regards their habits with the L2, participants primarily used English when watching television, listening to music and playing on the computer, while they rarely read, wrote, or interacted in English. Interestingly, in support to the role of informal input, results also showed that schooling did not appear to contribute to vocabulary scores and learners' outcomes: "a primarily media exposed youth acquire English incidentally through recreational activities rather than focused learning at school" (Johannsdóttir 2018: 72). In a later phase of the project, a national survey conducted in 2014 with 906 participants provided insights into Icelanders' self-perceived proficiency in English. Results and follow-up studies (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018) showed that overall, Icelanders achieved good receptive skills and very highly contextualised colloquial speech through prolonged exposure to the informal input, whereas proficiency in written academic stayed behind. From childhood to adulthood, the success of informal contact with L2 English is confirmed in the whole project, however, it is important to mention that despite the overall positive outcomes, proficiency in written academic English did not meet country's educational demands. The Icelandic project proved that informal L2 exposure is effective in developing comprehension skills and proficiency in colloquial English, but it also warns against considering extensive extramural exposure to informal English "as a panacea for full mastery of the different language levels and registers of the L2" (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 51).

Additional variables related to informal exposure to L2 English emerged in other studies on the role of activity types and gender and their impact on specific L2 skills. In Sweden, a study on the impact of Extramural English on the development of vocabulary and oral proficiency skills among ninth-grade students (age 15-16) highlighted how different types of activities appear to have a diverse impact on learning (Sundqvist 2009). Results showed a positive correlation between the extent of informal access to English and oral and lexical skills in the L2, with vocabulary

knowledge benefiting considerably from exposure. Interestingly, students who engaged more frequently in productive tasks, e.g., gaming, Internet browsing and reading, fared better than those who preferred receptive tasks such as watching films and TV series and listening to music, i.e., activities which "allow[ed] learners to remain passive" (Sundqvist 2009: 203). The distinction between productive vs. more receptive tasks is not straightforward in the study since reading is traditionally considered as less interactive, much like listening to music and watching films and TV series. However, learners can also actively engage in these receptive tasks by cognitively interacting with the input and activating processing strategies (Sockett 2014; Ludke 2020). Finally, a gender difference emerged from the study as Swedish teenage boys were more prone to accessing English informally than their female counterpart.

In Spain, Muñoz (2020) explored the possible age-related and gender-related differences in the amount and type of exposure to informal English. A sample of 3,048 learners[3] of English in Catalonia took part in the survey by completing a questionnaire divided into five sections: activities through the Internet (listening, watching, reading and writing), gaming (multiplayer, massively multiplayer and single player), face-to-face interactions with speakers who do not share the L1 (regardless of whether they are native speakers of English or not), watching films and TV series (with or without subtitles), speaking activities with relatives, with friends and on Skype respectively. As regards the amount and type of contact learners have with informal English, participants most frequently listen to music, followed by watching YouTube videos, reading on the Internet, playing videogames (single player) and watching movies with subtitles in the L1. Age preferences depend on type of activity: adolescents report more gaming and listening to music than adults and, in contrast, adults report higher frequency of reading and watching audiovisuals than adolescents. Moreover, among adolescents, female respondents report reading, watching films, listening to music and talking face to face with friends more frequently than their male counterparts. In the adult group, on the other hand, gender-related differences are only found for gaming and watching YouTube videos, activities in which males engage significantly more often than females. Across the three age groups the most striking difference lies in gaming frequency, with males engaging in this activity significantly more than females. Finally, the analysis of

3. The participants selected belonged to three age groups: younger adolescents (YA) aged 12-14 (n = 1218); older adolescents (OA) aged 15-17 (n = 1154); and adults (AD) aged 18 to 39 (n = 676).

the association[4] between exposure to informal English and participants' English grades reinforces the role of informal L2 audiovisual input in SLA, together with reading and talking face to face. Although listening to music is the activity in which respondents engage most frequently, findings show that it is not as conducive to L2 learning as other informal activities investigated in the study. Interestingly, gaming is the only activity with a significant negative correlation with grades, a result which contrasts with previous studies (Sylvén, Sundqvist 2012; Chik 2014), though it is in line with others that have shown no significant associations of gaming frequency and vocabulary knowledge (Peters 2018).

An initial study on informal English input and AV translation was carried out in Italy by Pavesi and Ghia in 2016. The study reported on a questionnaire-based investigation conducted among 305 postgraduate university[5] students majoring in several disciplines – mainly non-linguistic ones (Pavesi, Ghia 2020). The survey explores the dynamics of informal exposure to English in a variety of informal settings, namely films and TV-series, YouTube, social networks, e-mails, songs, blogs, forums, videogames and interactions. Wishing to offer a picture of the impact of informal media input on the Italian landscape, the study zooms in on audiovisual input and participants' choice of languages and translation mode, i.e., original vs. dubbed version, subtitling and different subtitle types, as well as self-assessed outcomes. In addition, the analysis provides insights on different viewers' profiles by crossing participants' preferred media supports, favourite audiovisual genres and reasons for specific viewing choices, with data on their academic and L2 learning background. Considering frequency and intensity of exposure, input types and participants' profiling, learner-users in the sample report accessing English informally to quite a considerable extent and through a variety of sources, mainly multimodal. In terms of intensity, respondents are mostly exposed to TV-series and films. They also access social media and YouTube to a great extent, but their general exposure time per session is limited, probably due to the shorter length of contents available on these media. Most students also navigate web pages and listen to the lyrics of English songs. E-mails, blogs, forums, videogames and conversational exchanges are less frequently accessed sources of informal input. Despite the significant exposure to informal English, results evidence that the opportunities to use the language productively, i.e., writing and conversing, are not as frequent. Moreover, the questionnaire also explored students'

4. Performed with Spearman's ranks correlations (Muñoz 2020).
5. Università degli Studi di Pavia.

perceptions of their L2 proficiency by asking them to self-report their level of English knowledge. Students who report significant exposure to informal English input tend to self-assess as having advanced proficiency in English. Interestingly, this finding contrasts with previous studies on Italians' self-perceived English proficiency, which is typically low (cf. Aiello 2018). This discrepancy offers new perspectives on the relationship between Italians and the English language. As regards audiovisual input, the emerging picture is diversified between participants who show a strong language orientation and privilege subtitled media and those who still opt for dubbing. Viewers' choices mainly result from self-perceived proficiency in the L2, sociability and watching dynamics (Orrego-Carmona 2014). Participants' access to films and TV-series in English is not only driven by a desire for entertainment, but also by a frequent aspiration to increase proficiency in the L2 while engaging in a motivating, meaning-oriented activity (Caruana 2021). Students at more advanced competence levels in English tend to prefer watching subtitled or non-subtitled material, while dubbing is privileged by those students who are not proficient enough in the L2 to comprehend original English dialogues. Despite the overall preference for subtitling (in particular, bimodal ones), participants tend to appreciate the quality of Italian dubbing, a result that is once again in contrast with what has been observed in other studies (Massidda 2015). Findings on the variability in participants' choices crucially testify to the evolving dynamics of a traditionally dubbing country and supports the role of informal English input in SLA (cf. De Riso 2021). In 2022, the PRIN[6] Project "The informalisation of English language learning through media: Language input, learning outcomes and sociolinguistic attitudes from an Italian perspective" conducted a national study to examine the acquisitional and sociolinguistic impact of media-induced contact with English in Italy (Pavesi, Bianchi 2024). The study involved four[7] medium-to-large universities across the northern, central, and southern Italy, as well as a major island, with a total of 2,525 participants. Data were collected using the Informal English Contact and Learning questionnaire (IECoL, Pavesi *et al.* 2023), which explored participants' linguistic backgrounds, the frequency and intensity of exposure to various input types (AV media, online resources, videogames, reading and face-to-face interactions),

6. 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.

7. University of Pavia, University of Pisa, University of Salento and University of Catania.

attitudes towards English, self-perceived proficiency levels and social backgrounds (Pavesi *et al.* 2023). The analysis identified five prototypical groups of informal learner-users, corresponding to groups of language affordances and activities that tend to occur together in individuals' experiences with English (Pavesi 2024): receptive Internet users, AV media and YouTube viewer-listeners, proactive users involved in writing and listening activities, person-to-person interactants and video gamers, who focus on gaming to the exclusion of other informal practices (Pavesi 2024: 35). The preliminary findings suggest a shift in informal access to English, in line with previous research (Pavesi Ghia 2020). Learner-users' media-driven, self-directed engagement with English encompasses both private and shared dimensions, which are likely to influence the development of L2 competence in various ways (De Riso 2024).

Recently, Krüger (2023) conducted a large-scale investigation in Germany and the German speaking part of Switzerland with 2,847 older adolescents attending upper secondary school. The study addressed the forms and frequencies of media-related extramural English contact, the influence of socio-economic background and gender and the effect on language competences. A questionnaire examined participants' engagement and behaviours with extramural English across ten media categories (music, radio/podcasts, audiobooks, books, newspapers/magazines, movies/TV series, TV shows, online videos, surfing the internet and gaming). Students' reading, listening and writing skills were also assessed. Results indicate that extramural English is a pervasive presence in students' daily media consumption, with music, online videos, and websites being the most frequently accessed forms. However, engagement remains predominantly passive, with active participation largely limited to short social media posts. Students cited the "omnipresence of English online" (Krüger 2023: 198) and its potential for learning and practice as key motivations for their media-related English interactions. They also emphasised the importance of entertainment value, earlier availability, easier access, and the high quality of English media productions. Gender differences were observed, with male students engaging more in gaming and online video platforms, while female students showed a greater tendency to read and engage in online communication. Socio-economic background also influenced engagement patterns, as students from higher socio-economic backgrounds demonstrated more frequent exposure to English-language media, likely due to a more conducive home environment. However, certain media forms, such as social media and general internet use, were popular across all socio-economic groups. Additionally, the results provided evidence for

the positive relationship between extramural English contact and students' reading, writing, and listening skills, reinforcing its value as an additional source of L2 learning.

Another study involving two countries is Kusyk (2017), who conducted a survey on informal online contact with English in France and Germany. The sample consisted of 953 students: 538 enrolled at Université de Strasbourg and École Nationale Supérieure d'Informatique pour l'Industrie et l'Entreprise Strasbourg (ENSIIE) in France and 415 from Pädagogische Hochschule Karlsruhe, Hochschule Karlsruhe - Technik und Wirtschaft, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg and Universität Stuttgart in Germany. The study, using a questionnaire, investigated the types of access to informal input, frequency, preferred modalities and motivations. Regarding what informal language users do and how often they do it, the most popular activities were watching TV-series, films and YouTube videos, followed by reading and listening to music. Music is by far the most frequent activity, with 26% of French students and 30% of German students listening to music in English for approximately one hour per day. Most of the sample reports hardly ever participating in production/interaction activities such as multiplayer and single-player video game, writing e-mails and comments on social networks and online conversation, a result that is consistent with previous studies (Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2021). Interestingly, a striking difference emerges from data on preferred viewing modalities. 52% of French participants states that they watch films and TV-series with subtitles in the L1 and only 9% of German students reports the same. Conversely, only 12% of French students watches audiovisual contents without subtitles, whereas 53% of German participants declares that they watch unsubtitled films and TV-series in English. Kusyk (2017) hypothesizes that this significant distinction in preferred viewing modalities is due to self-perceived English proficiency (cf. Pavesi, Ghia 2020), as French students self-evaluate their L2 knowledge as being lower than their German counterparts. Overall, participants prefer to watch films, TV-series and YouTube videos in English to improve and maintain their L2 skills, but also because English dialogues are perceived as more authentic and untranslated content is available sooner than its dubbed version. According to the students, the other informal online activities investigated in the study pertain exclusively to the sphere of entertainment and leisure. Building on the initial questionnaire responses, Kusyk (2017) conducted a longitudinal study to monitor the development of written and oral L2 production in two informal English learners over a 10-month period. During the longitudinal study, on a regular basis, subjects filled out a survey on informal access habits (i.e.,

how often, for how long and which informal activity they engaged with), wrote short texts on familiar topics (e.g., a TV-series they particularly enjoyed) and were interviewed on their usage of informal activities. Data was analysed according to 23 different measures of linguistic development, assessing learners' written and spoken productions in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF). Although there is no one activity that dominates over the others and not all activities correlate with CAF measures, results show great inter- and intraindividual variation over time, both in subjects' learning trajectories and in the informal activities themselves, highlighting a constant 'push and pull' in L2 development and the non-linearity of ISLL.

## 1.4. L2 performance: a focus on complexity, accuracy and fluency

The multidimensionality of language proficiency and performance can be thoroughly described by the notions of complexity, accuracy and fluency. The origins of this triad lie in the 1980s, when more and more classroom-based research into L2 proficiency and performance started to distinguish between *fluent* versus *accurate* L2 usage (Brumfit 1984). While mean length of utterance (MLU) was an established index of development in first (L1) language acquisition (Brown 1973), L2 researchers were looking for an index that would allow reliable, valid measurements of global L2 proficiency and permit data comparability (Larsen-Freeman 2009). By adding complexity to the triad in the 1990s, Skehan (1998) introduced CAF as the three fundamental dimensions characterising L2 usage in both written and spoken form. The traditional working definitions of CAF are still used today: *complexity* refers to the size, elaborateness, richness and diversity of the L2 performance; *accuracy* is characterised as the ability to produce target-like, error-free speech; *fluency* is described as the ability to produce eloquent speech without undue pausing, hesitation or reformulation. Complexity, accuracy and fluency are multifaceted, multi-layered and multidimensional in nature, as they appear to "progress in tandem" (Wolfe-Quintero *et al.* 1998: 4) and are interrelated in complex and not necessarily linear ways (Michel 2017). Regardless of the considerable amount of research available on CAF, the constructs' theoretical and operational definitions are still controversial topics of discussion. Although many have tried to address the issue and give some clarifications (Pallotti 2009, 2015; Bulté, Housen 2012; Foster, Skehan 2012; Lambert, Kormos 2014; Michel 2017), much of this controversy is due to the lack of an agreed methodology as most of the studies have used

a large selection of measures and operationalisations of both independent variables (e.g., task conditions) and dependent variables (CAF measures) (Pallotti 2021; Hasnain, Halder 2024; Bulté *et al.* 2024; Jin, Yan 2024).

*Complexity*

Considered as the most controversial construct of the triad, the term *complexity* is commonly used to refer both to a structural dimension or the elements and intricacies of a system, and to a cognitive dimension that is the effort needed to process that system (Pallotti 2021). More specifically, *complexity* has been broken down into (a) developmental complexity, which refers to "the order in which linguistic structures emerge and are mastered in second (and, possibly, first) language acquisition" (Pallotti 2015: 2); (b) cognitive complexity, which refers to learner's perception of the difficulty of a language feature as it is processed and learned (Michel 2017: 52); and (c) linguistic complexity, which refers to the objective complexity of the specific properties of the language, such as forms, meanings and form–meaning mappings (Housen *et al.* 2012: 4). To disambiguate, Pallotti suggests reserving the term *complexity* for the structural dimension, i.e., linguistic complexity and *difficulty* for the cognitive aspect, i.e., developmental and cognitive complexity, so that "a text containing many sophisticated structures (because they are acquired late, or because they are often produced with errors) should be said to be more difficult or advanced, but not more complex" (Pallotti 2021: 203).

According to Michel (2017) further disambiguation is needed, as linguistic complexity itself is a multidimensional construct, consisting of lexical complexity and grammatical complexity, each with its own subdimensions. Lexical complexity features three subdimensions, identified as *lexical diversity* (the size of the lexicon measured by means of, for example, type-token ratio measures), *lexical sophistication* (the depth of lexis measured by means of, for example, frequency of rare or academic words), and *lexical density* (the amount of information in a text, typically measured by the ratio of lexical words per function words) (Jarvis 2013; McCarthy, Jarvis 2013; Michel 2017). Similarly, grammatical complexity may be considered to present different subdimensions. Even though most research has focused on *syntactic complexity* (sentence, clause, phrase), Bulté and Housen (2012) stress the importance of a *morphological complexity* (inflectional, derivational) and *phonological complexity* (suprasegmental, segmental) too (Bulté, Housen 2012: 23). For each dimension complexity can be measured in terms of length (e.g., longer sentences), variation (e.g., more frequent use of different types of

morphemes) and interdependence (e.g., coordination versus subordination) (Michel 2017: 55). Table 1.1 below lists the different subdimensions that constitute the multidimensionality of linguistic complexity (Bulté, Housen 2012; Michel 2017; Pallotti 2021).

*Table 1.1. The multidimensionality of linguistic complexity (Bulté, Housen 2012; Michel 2017; Pallotti 2021)*

| Dimension | Subdimension | Description |
|---|---|---|
| **Lexical Complexity** | | |
| **Diversity** | Size of lexis | Gauged by type-token ratio (the proportion of unique words to total words in a text). |
| **Sophistication** | Depth of lexis | Gauged by frequency of advanced, rare, or academic vocabulary compared to more common words. |
| **Density** | Information packaging | Gauged by the ratio of lexical (content) words to function words. |
| **Grammatical Complexity** | | |
| **Length** | Short vs. long units | Gauged by the number of words per sentence, clause, or phrase. |
| **Variation** | Variety of units | Gauged by the number and variety of morphemes (inflectional, derivational) or syntactic structures used. |
| **Interdependence** | Relation between units | Gauged by the ratio of coordinated clauses (independent) vs. subordinated clauses (dependent). |
| **Morphological Complexity** | | Refers to the variety and use of morphological units (prefixes, suffixes, etc.). |
| **Phonological Complexity** | | Refers to the complexity of phonological units, including segmental (individual sounds) and suprasegmental (stress, intonation) features. |

Before moving to the next component of the CAF triad, some words of caution need to be said about the operationalisation of complexity. Although there is a general tendency to interpret greater complexity as an indicator of better language production, this view has been partially rebutted as it appears to be too simplistic. Linguistic complexity varies by genre (e.g., small talk vs. political debate) and individual stylistic preferences: "Beckett is not Joyce, and this has nothing to do with (in)

competence, but with stylistic choices" (Pallotti 2009: 597). Moreover, recent studies highlight that grammatical complexity is not uniform but varies systematically based on communicative purposes and situational contexts (Biber *et al*. 2022). The Register-Functional approach (Biber *et al*. 2022) emphasizes the need to consider register-specific functions in linguistic complexity analysis. It underscores the interplay between linguistic form and function, reinforcing the view that grammatical complexity should be examined within specific communicative and situational contexts (Biber *et al*. 2023). In addition, in a dynamic process like L2 development, linguistic complexity cannot be expected to grow linearly as it involves fluctuations, regressions, and spurts of growth (Larsen Freeman 2009; Lambert, Kormos 2014). This is due to various factors such as cognitive overload, task demands, the learner's focus on different aspects of language (complexity, fluency, accuracy), and the inherent variability of interlanguage (see 1.4.4).

*Accuracy*

Accuracy is perhaps the most transparent construct of the CAF framework, defined as any deviation from a norm or native-like use of language including diverse types of errors (Housen, Kuiken 2009). The challenge when measuring accuracy is the choice of the linguistic norm(s) at issue and which approach to follow. Accuracy typically refers to the interlanguage system in relation to the target language (L2), often evaluated in negative terms by identifying frequency and types of errors. This "calls into question the very idea of interlanguage as an autonomous system" (Pallotti 2021: 204) and results in the 'comparative fallacy' of describing a language in terms of another, or describing something in terms of what is not, for example describing the language of a pre-schooler by listing the linguistic structure he or she has not mastered yet (Blay-Vroman 1983). While the 'interlanguage approach' (Pallotti 2017) is not as widespread as that of counting and weighing errors, that is, the accuracy perspective, it may be relevant in relation to a psycholinguistic point of view. From this perspective, accurate productions may be seen as depending on the degree of conscious monitoring "so that accuracy would be inversely related to fluency, but this would only apply to occasional mistakes, or slips, while systematic errors due to the inter- language as such could not be corrected by paying greater attention" (Pallotti 2021: 205). The average number of errors per unit (clause, sentence, T-Unit, AS-Unit) or the proportion of error-free units are widely used as common measures of errors (Housen *et al*. 2012). However, it remains difficult

to define what counts as an error "especially if lexical, morphological, syntactic, phonological or spelling errors are bundled together" (Pallotti 2021: 205). Not to mention the degree of personal judgment which needs to be occasionally called upon when assessing accuracy in L2 data, the influence of learners' average length of units on the accuracy index and, due to sociolinguistic variation across social and geographical contexts, the difficulty of referring to a widely accepted system of 'correct' norms.

*Fluency*

From a cognitive perspective, fluency is usually connected to the proceduralisation and automatization of a language, with functions such as planning and monitoring L1 or L2 production. Pertaining first and foremost to spoken language, three main dimensions are typically identified for fluency: speed, breakdown and repair (Pallotti 2021):

- Speed fluency measures how fast language is produced, e.g., by counting the number of syllables per speaking time unit (i.e., articulation rate). In terms of language processing, speed fluency is associated with control of and access to proceduralised knowledge.
- Breakdown fluency observes the number and length of pauses, or vice versa, the phonation time ratio, i.e., a speaker's language production over total time, reflecting the planning and conceptualization stages of L2 production.
- Repair fluency gives an indication of how speakers may consciously monitor their L2 production, by regarding the number of repair phenomena, i.e., self-repetitions, reformulations, false-starts, hesitations.

As with accuracy, where deviance or conformity to a certain norm is considered, L2 learners' fluency is usually compared to that of native speakers (Skehan, Foster 2008). Although most studies discussed fluency in monologic production, more recently, research has stressed the importance of considering dialogic tasks too, given that individual and interactional fluency appear to be two distinct constructs (Sato 2014).

Research on the multidimensionality of SLA has highlighted the challenges L2 learners face due to the limited capacity of working memory (Baddeley 2020). This constraint affects learners' ability to cater simultaneously to meaning and form in language use. Because working memory can only process a limited amount of input and output at once, L2 learners are often forced to prioritise either meaning or form at the expense of the other (Skehan 1998). In terms of input, working memory extracts and temporarily stores information from both input and long-

term memory. For L2 learners, the load on working memory increases, because the extract-and-store processing relies considerably more on controlled processing rather than automatic processing. Similarly, when producing language (output), L2 learners must retrieve information from their long-term memory and hold it in their short-term memory while constructing intentionally meaningful, pragmatically coherent and grammatically correct messages (Skehan 1998). Working memory capacity plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between complexity, accuracy, and fluency in L2 performance. In real-time conversation, with limited planning time, the cognitive load on working memory may hinder the simultaneous processing of comprehension (meaning) and acquisition (form), forcing L2 learners to prioritize one over the other depending on context and orientation (Ellis, Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 142). Consequently, this cognitive constraint can lead to trade-off effects, where focusing on one CAF construct may result in lower performance in one or both of the other constructs (Skehan, 1998).

To investigate CAF and L2 development, research has analysed learners' performance by testing the predictions of two theoretical models, i.e., Skehan's Limited Attention Capacity model (1998) and Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (2011). Skehan's information-processing model predicts a conflicting relationship among the three CAF components where learners emphasize meaning (fluency) over form, potentially hindering further L2 development. When learners do focus on form, there is a secondary contrast between control of form (accuracy) and the use of more advanced language (complexity) (Skehan 1998). Because of limited mental resources, i.e., limited attentional capacity and working memory, all language learners have these tensions during performance which thus entail a single-source view of attention (Skehan 2015). On the other hand, researchers who reject a single-source capacity limitation accept CAF competitiveness as explained by attentional control and interference (Robinson 2003). Robison's Cognition Hypothesis (2011) expects tasks to promote either fluency or combined complexity and accuracy, a theory which supports Skehan's primary trade-off but contrasts with the second. For example, simple monologic tasks are likely to foster fluency to the detriment of complexity or accuracy, whereas accuracy and complexity (but not fluency) are promoted during complex monologic tasks (Robinson 2011). Over the years, many studies have set out to contribute to the debate and despite contrasting results, researchers working in different theoretical frameworks have concluded that trade-off effects impact language performance (Bygate 2001; Yuan, Ellis 2003; Michel *et al.* 2007; Ahmadian, Tavakoli 2011; Ferrari 2012; Sample, Michel 2014, Zhang

2021). Moreover, researchers have also examined how task complexity and task sequencing affect the CAF of L2 performance (Jin, Yan 2024). Findings provide evidence that complex tasks, controlled via elements and reasoning demands, enhance language complexity, while sequencing tasks from simple to complex has been shown to overall improve CAF (Michel *et al.* 2012; Awwad *et al.* 2017; Johnson 2017; Skehan 2018; Awwad, Tavakoli 2019; Lee 2020; 2021; Zhan *et al.* 2021). Despite offering generalisations and implications consistent with trade-off effects, existing research is somewhat limited in that the focus on cross-sectional studies has failed to capture how L2 performance evolves over time. Adopting a longitudinal perspective in CAF research provides a more comprehensive insight into learners' L2 development, particularly the evolution and interplay between CAF dimensions over time. By observing learners' progress over extended periods, longitudinal research facilitates the identification of developmental patterns and individual differences. Few longitudinal studies have provided deeper insights into the non-linear nature of L2 development. Ferrari (2012) identified a trade-off between complexity and accuracy, characterised by regression and progress, reinforcing the notion that development involves continuous restructuring. Polat and Kim (2014) examined untutored L2 learners and reported significant individual variability in the progression of complexity and accuracy over time. Their findings suggesting that while learners may develop advanced lexical and syntactic skills, achieving grammatical accuracy without instruction may be more challenging. Vercellotti (2017) observed improvement in all CAF constructs, supporting the notion of CAF as interconnected dimensions. However, the generally accepted trade-off effects were not evident, as within-individual correlations showed significant positive relationships between each CAF measure. More recently, Kusyk (2017; 2020) examined how exposure to different types of informal L2 input can influence L2 development and CAF trajectories.

While these studies provide valuable insights, further longitudinal research is required to gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between CAF dimensions across both formal and informal learning contexts. Furthermore, the large variety of research designs and the plethora of CAF measures generating conflicting results highlight the need for greater standardisation and a unified methodological approach in what remains an ongoing debate (Pallotti 2023; Hasnain, Halder 2024; Bulté *et al.* 2024; Jin, Yan 2024).

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# 2. Rationale, aims and methodology

## 2.1. Rationale for the present study

Over the past two decades, L2 learners have moved from near-total dependence on the knowledge, expertise and planning of language teachers to an unprecedented level of autonomy and opportunity for self-teaching and 'picking up' new languages (Dressman 2020). Given the broad and diversified availability of L2 input outside institutional settings, research on informal language learning is flourishing in Europe and beyond, exploring ISSL scenarios in different countries with various population groups (i.e., age, degree of instruction, language competence levels) and social and sociolinguistic factors such as educational and translational policies. Nevertheless, the review of the literature presented so far discloses how little informal access to English and informal language learning have been investigated in Italy (Aiello 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2021, Pavesi, Bianchi 2024). In line with ISLL research agenda, the present study explores the degree and modalities of spontaneous and naturalistic access to English by Italian university students. Building on Pavesi and Ghia (2020) initial large-scale investigation, the study first relied on a questionnaire survey to gather insights on participants' patterns of exposure to different types of informal English input. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Pavia. It investigated several contexts of informal exposure to English, from audiovisual input to face-to-face interactions, and tapped into learner-users' reasons for accessing L2 input informally. Moreover, a longitudinal study was carried out aiming to monitor the evolution of four participants' L2 spoken production through time. In this respect, the three constructs of complexity, accuracy and fluency have provided a comprehensive framework for analysing L2 learners'

acquisitional process longitudinally (Ferrari 2012; Polat, Kim 2014; Vercellotti 2015; Kusyk 2017). CAF trajectories were observed investigating any possible relationship between L2 development and frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input.

## 2.2. Aims and research questions

The current study moves from the hypothesis that the shift in patterns of access to English currently taking place in Italy and other European countries may affect L2 learning dynamics among learners-users. In addition, the study questions whether and how access to informal English input may affect L2 development, and it explores learners' attitudes and motivations towards the target language. The study is structured as a questionnaire survey followed by a longitudinal monitoring of a sample of selected students. The questionnaire collected information on participants' demographics, L2 learning background and access to L2 English through a variety of informal resources and activities, including audiovisuals, online media, music and face-to-face interaction. More in detail, following Pavesi and Ghia (2020), the attention was focused on: (i) participants' preferred sources of informal contact with English and their access patterns to different input types and (ii) participants' exposure to audiovisual input in English, preferred viewing and subtitling modalities and main reasons for watching audiovisuals in English. The longitudinal study, besides looking into how learners' attitudes and motivations may change over time, intends to gauge how different access patterns to different types of informal English input may play a role in L2 learning.

The aims of the study converge into two research questions (RQs), which mainly address the overall amount of access to various forms of informal English among Italian university students and how this contact may affect learners' L2 development. The two main research questions and their internal sub-questions are structured as follows:

RQ1: To what extent does a sample of Italian university students access English input informally?

RQ1.a: Which informal activities do learners mostly engage in? How often and for how long? What are the reasons for accessing or not accessing the different input sources?

RQ1.b: Are there any relations between access patterns to different input sources? What participant profiles can be outlined, based on frequency and intensity of exposure to different sources of informal English input?

RQ2: Within a group of self-reported average-to-high exposure subjects, to what extent does prolonged exposure to informal English input affect L2 development?

RQ2.a: Are there any relationships between access patterns and learners' L2 proficiency? Which paths do complexity, accuracy and fluency trajectories follow in elicited production tasks over a 12-month period?

Following up on the main research questions, based on one-on-one semi-structured interviews, the longitudinal study additionally provides qualitative observations about Italian learner-users' attitudes towards the English language and how their motivations may vary in time and in relation to other factors such as increased exposure and better knowledge of the language.

## 2.3. Questionnaire and participants

### 2.3.1. *Questionnaire design*

Questionnaires are one of the most common methods of data collection on the social context of SLA, due to the fact that they are easy to construct, extremely versatile and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processable (Dörnyei, Dewaele 2022). The current study followed the format put forward by Pavesi and Ghia (2020), who constructed a questionnaire focussed on informal contexts of L2 exposure. The questionnaire was also meant to gather detailed information about frequency and intensity of engagement in the various activities and respondents' use of their L1 or other L2s when carrying out the same tasks (Freed *et al.* 2004, in Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 62). In constructing the questionnaire, the outcomes of preliminary studies that employed questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured interviews came in useful (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 62). These surveys were carried out as part of two postgraduate thesis projects on informal contact with L2 English and addressed different clusters, i.e., a wider population of both undergraduate and postgraduate students (Cravidi 2016) and a smaller sample of high school students (De Riso 2021). The two investigations identified main sources of exposure to English out-of-school, main reasons for exposure to different sources or access modalities, difficulties encountered when accessing English informally and attitudes towards the L2 and specific input types. Prior to administration, the present questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of university students and revised according to their feedback.

### 2.3.2. *Structure and contents of the questionnaire*

The questionnaire consisted of a total of 70 questions in Italian, organised in three main parts (see Appendix A). The first part gathered personal data, including gender, date of birth, geographic provenance, university course attended, number of known foreign languages, self-assessed level of English. More specific questions further addressed the age at which respondents first started learning English, participation in any study abroad programmes and their duration in case of positive answer. The second part explored participants' access to films and television programmes in English and the third part focussed on exposure to other online input such as YouTube, videogames, social networks, web pages, forums and blogs. Other sources of informal input investigated in the survey were songs and English-medium face-to-face interaction. The questionnaire included items mostly phrased as two-option and multiple-option questions and items on frequency and intensity of exposure. Participants' frequency of informal contact with different sources of informal English input was quantified through a 4-point Likert scale with the options i) *very often (every day)*, ii) *often (from once to twice a week)*, iii) *sometimes (once in a fortnight)* and iv) *rarely (once a month or less)*. Intensity of access to informal English sources was measured through 5-point Likert scales which involved the options i) *more than 2 hours*, ii) *between one and two hours*, iii) *about an hour*, iv) *between 30 minutes and an hour*, v) *less than 30 minutes* per session. Due to the short duration of a song, different Likert-options focused on attention to the lyrics were given for this input type only, i.e., i) *every song lyric*, ii) *most songs' lyrics*, iii) *certain songs' lyrics*, iv) *few songs' lyrics*. Each section also contained open questions to gain a better understanding of respondents' preferred genres and sub-genres, topics and beliefs on the different input types and the self-perceived improvement of their L2 competence.

Open questions were specifically included in the section on audiovisual products to investigate respondents' reasons and preferences for modality of access and translation. This section also investigated exposure to films and TV-series in English and viewers' preferences between the two; frequency and intensity of exposure to films and TV series respectively; preferred viewing modality and dialogue language, as well as participants' reasons for their choice; subtitling and preferred subtitling modalities; preferred TV-series (titles); preferred genre of TV-programmes; and attitudes to audiovisual input and the development of L2 competence.

The third questionnaire section on access to other media in English included items on frequency and intensity of exposure to YouTube and

preferred video types; frequency of exposure to English-language songs, degree of attention allocated to lyrics, preferred music genres; frequency and intensity of videogame playing in English and preferred game categories; frequency and intensity of access to social networks in English, preferred social media and how participants engage with the L2 online; frequency and intensity of access to English-language web pages, forums and blogs, preferred topics and reasons for access; frequency and intensity of participation in face-to-face interactions in English and interlocutors. Each section included a question on participants' beliefs about the learning potential of the specific input source.

### 2.3.3. *Questionnaire administration and data coding*

The questionnaire was made available for all students at Pavia University. This choice was motivated by the need to gather a large sample of respondents from which subsequently select a smaller group of participants for the longitudinal study through both criterion and convenience sampling (Dörnyei 2007: 98; see Section 2.4). The survey aimed to target Italian students majoring in a variety of disciplines at Pavia University. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the questionnaire was administered online on KIRO, the university e-learning Moodle platform designed to foster distance learning. In a preliminary phase, the Language Centre (*Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo*, CLA for shortening) notified via email the entire student body at Pavia University about the opportunity to participate in a PhD research project with a direct link to the questionnaire. The research purposes and rationale for data collection were explained in the questionnaire homepage and it was made clear to participants that completing the questionnaire was anonymous. However, respondents could disclose their contact information if they wished to be considered as possible candidates for the longitudinal study. The questionnaire completion required about 20 minutes.

The administration was followed by a data coding phase and all individual answers were transferred onto worksheets for subsequent data analysis. Descriptive statistics were applied to the data, including frequency distributions and individual differences (see Chapter 3). Further data coding involved the conversion of Likert-scale options into numeric values to generate conventional indexes of general informal exposure to English or of exposure to specific input types (Chapter 3).

### 2.3.4. *Sampling and participants*

During November 2020, 605 questionnaires were completed. Questionnaires filled out by Erasmus or visiting students, as well as School of Specialization and PhD students, were excluded prior to data analysis, as the aim was to explore the specific exposure habits of undergraduate and postgraduate university students residing in Italy. Following this operation, 572 questionnaires were considered valid for the present analysis. Most of the sample (91%, 518) fell within the age range of 18 to 27 years. Regarding gender distribution, 70% (401 out of 572 participants) identified as female, 28% (160) as male, and 2% (11) preferred not to specify. In terms of geographic origin, participants were predominantly from the North of Italy (79%), followed by the South (16%) and the Centre (5%). The surveyed students were distributed among different courses as follows, in decreasing order (above ten respondents): Medicine (91), Biology (71), Economics (50), Political Science (44), Communication Studies (40), Languages (35), Engineering[1] (32), Linguistics (31), Law School (24), Pharmacy (24), Humanities[2] (23), Psychology (20), Mathematics (15), Philosophy (15), Letters (14), Physics (14), Chemistry (14), others[3] (15). Students thus came from different backgrounds and embodied different academic orientations (Figure 2.1).

A quarter of the respondents (26%, 146) completed a three-year first-level degree (*Laurea Triennale*) and was attending a postgraduate course. Students from Medicine and Law School (20%, 115) attended single-cycle degrees consisting of six and five-years respectively. Respondents' formal instruction in English lasted a considerable time: 46% of the sample (266) began learning the language at primary school at age six, while 22% (125) started between the ages of seven and nine. Additionally, 22% of the participants (124) reported beginning their studies prior to primary school, between the ages three and five. In contrast, 8% of the sample (44) began studying English in secondary school, and 2% (13) in high school. While 72% of the sample (413) estimated their level of English as intermediate or B1 and B2 of the CEFR[4], 17% (99) declared a beginning competence (A2) in the language, while 11% (60) believed they have an advanced mastery

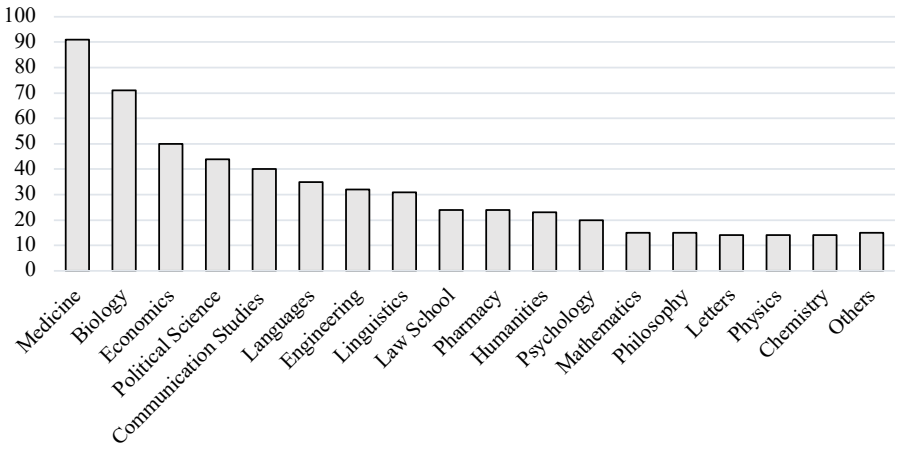
1. Computer Engineering (14), Industrial Engineering (7), Environmental Engineering (7), Biomedical Engineering (2), Construction Engineering (2).

2. Cultural Heritage (7), European and American Literature (4), Musicology (4), Oriental and African Studies (4), European History (3), Modern Philology (1).

3. Natural Science (9), Sport Science (6).

4. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

*Figure 2.1. Participants' distribution by degree course*




or C1 in English. 29% of students (164) declared to know English only, as opposed to more than half of the sample (61%, 349) who reported speaking two foreign languages, while 10% (59) more than two. Besides English, participants reported to know French (142), Spanish (124), German (83) and to a lesser extent Japanese (12), Russian (12), Arabic (10), Chinese (7), Portuguese (5), Dutch (2), Greek (2), Hungarian (2), Korean (2), Hindi (1), Polish (1), Romani (1), Tagalog (1), Thai (1). Only few students in the sample (26%, 146) reported having had a study abroad experience; however, 48% (70) of those have spent more than three months abroad.

## 2.4. The longitudinal study

### 2.4.1. *Planning the study*

The main challenges when posing a research question investigating the nature of spoken language are which type of data collection procedure to employ and how to carry out the analysis of the resulting data. In the early stages, SLA research relied predominantly on cross-sectional, quantitative data, to offer patterns in acquisition or a snapshot of a spoken performance at a specific point in time. Although quantitative approaches have developed considerably, researchers began to frequently integrate qualitative and longitudinal methods to their studies (Derwing *et al.* 2022, Mackey, Gass 2023). A longitudinal study follows the

naturalistic, linguistic development of speakers over an extended period of time. Systematic, longitudinal observations allow researchers to gauge the degree to which an L2 speaker has mastered a given speech variable. They therefore allow close inspection of differences in individual learning trajectories in groups of learners who perform tasks over time or sometimes in just one individual case study (Henry, MacIntyre 2024). The following longitudinal study drew inspiration from the model put forward by Kusyk (2017) who monitored the development of complexity, accuracy and fluency in L2 spoken and written production through informal participation in online activities in English. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to provide in-depth L2 learner-users' profiles from a selected sample of Pavia university students. Participants' frequency and intensity of exposure to informal sources of English input was monitored through a weekly online journal. By means of semi-structured interviews the study explored participants' attitudes and motivations towards the foreign language. Moreover, through L2 monologic tasks the study observed the evolution of participants' L2 spoken production through time by looking at the development of CAF's trajectories in monologic tasks and investigating any relationships among frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input.

### 2.4.2. *Sampling and participants*

Out of the total sample of 605 participants, 264 students gave their consent to participate in the longitudinal study. Given the high number of possible candidates and the need to ensure continuity for almost a year, a selection was needed. Subjects were selected through both criterion and convenience sampling (Dörnyei 2007: 98) according to their responses in the questionnaire. Criterion sampling drew on level and area of study: the study targeted first-year undergraduate and postgraduate students majoring in a variety of disciplines, except for language specialists. Students attending English-medium courses, Linguistics, Modern Languages and English Literature were excluded, along with those who were attending courses for English language certifications at the time or had had a study abroad experience. Since most of the sample (72%, n = 413 cf. Section 2.3.5) estimate their level of English as intermediate (B1 and B2 of the CEFR), only those respondents who identified as such were considered for the longitudinal study.

Once these criteria were applied, 73 students were contacted in December 2020 and eventually 20 students confirmed their attendance

(four males, 16 females). The subjects surveyed attended different faculties, distributed as follows in decreasing order: Biology (6), Medicine (4), Communication Studies (2), Pharmacy (2), Chemistry (1), Computer Engineering (1), Environmental Engineering (1), Philosophy (1), Political Science (1), Psychology (1). As if often happens in longitudinal studies, throughout the year-long observation certain subjects withdrew from the research project, either because they were no longer interested in participating in the study or because they had been accepted in other universities to attend specific degrees, i.e., Medicine, Veterinary Science. By the end of data collection, 10 subjects had completed the study, however, not all participants had updated the online journal regularly. Since it was essential to gather comprehensive data on students' access to informal English input, subjects who had been more consistent in updating their journals were considered for the analysis, which ultimately consisted of four case studies. All subjects were female, and they were all attending undergraduate and postgraduate science degrees. Their formal instruction in English began at primary school and apart from one subject who self-assessed her English proficiency level as advanced (C1), they all estimated their English level as upper-intermediate (B2). Each subject was most frequently exposed to a specific, different type of informal input, i.e., online gaming, anime and manga; books; films and TV series; podcasts and livestreams (Table 2.1).

*Table 2.1. Personal information of the four subjects analysed as case studies*

| Name | Gender | Age | Course | Year | Study English since | Self-reported CEFR | Preferred Input Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Delia | F | 23 | Biology | 1° MA | 8 yrs old | B2 | Films and TV series |
| Grace | F | 20 | Chemistry | 1° BA | 6 yrs old | B2 | Books |
| Marta | F | 25 | Biology | 1° MA | 8 yrs old | C1 | Podcasts and livestreams |
| Lea | F | 20 | Biotechnology | 1° BA | 6 yrs old | B2 | Online gaming, anime, manga |

### 2.4.3. *Structure and contents of the longitudinal study*

The longitudinal monitoring lasted throughout 2021, with one-on-one meetings scheduled every two months, from January to November 2021 for a total of six meetings. Because of the pandemic restrictions, it was not possible to meet the subjects in person, hence the study relied on Zoom, a free videotelephony proprietary software programme which allows videocall recordings and participants screen sharing among other features. Each meeting was organised in two main monologic tasks elicited through story telling (Gass, Mackey 2007; Mackey 2021). In total 24 elicited monologues, i.e., six data collection times four subjects, were recorded and later transcribed for further analysis. The elicitation technique of storytelling allows the researcher to use a wide selection of prompts, leaving respondents relatively free to express themselves on the subject matter. The first part of the online meeting elicited narratives from the retelling of a muted film clip, whereas in the second part participants were asked to tell a story about some past events or the future. Each participants watched the same muted film clip per session; films, in turn, would change every two months for a total of six different films[5] (see Filmography). It was decided to keep a simple, recurring theme for the different films, i.e., wedding scenes. The choice fell on wedding scenes because the related vocabulary should be well known by intermediate-level speakers of English and because most cinematic weddings scenes usually express a wide range of emotions, take place in very different settings and they are usually scenes full of actions. Therefore, even though the vocabulary related to weddings is quite fixed, participants could express a variety of lexical fields by describing the different settings and actions portrayed in the clips. Each videoclip extrapolated from the different films was approximately 5 to 7 minutes long. As regard the second monologic task, participants were encouraged to reflect and provide a narrative on their past experiences, as follows:

1. January: "Would you like to tell me about the first time you went on holiday without your parents? Where did you go and did you enjoy it?",
2. March: "Would you like to tell me about your first day of university? How did it go, and did it meet your expectations?",
3. May: "Do you remember the first time you've found yourself surrounded by a big crowd? Which event was that and how did you feel?",

5. January: *The Wedding Date* (2004); *March: Sex and the City: The Movie* (2008); May: *Four Weddings and A Funeral* (1994); July: *Runaway Bride* (1999); September: *Made of Honor* (2008); November: *Mamma Mia!* (2008).

4. July: “Do you remember the first item you bought on your own?”,
5. September: “Do you remember the first time you went to the cinema? With whom you went, which film did you see and how was the experience overall?”,
6. November: “Do you remember how you felt in the summer of your high school graduation, moving from your teenage years to becoming a young adult?”.

Throughout the longitudinal study participants were asked to write an online journal every week, to keep track of their contacts with informal English input. It was decided to create a shared Word document for each participant on Google Drive. Only the student and the researcher could access the online document. Students journaled about their habits with different sources of informal English, how often they engaged in informal activities, for what reasons and for how long. Apart from simply keeping track of what participants were watching or reading, journals allowed students to reflect on their identity as L2 learner-users, as well as their relationship with the English language. Although it was not a requirement, participants updated their journals using English.

### 2.4.4. *Monologic tasks transcriptions*

Participants’ monologic tasks were recorded on Zoom and later transcribed for further analysis (see Appendix B). When transcribing oral data, the researcher/transcriber is expected to analyse and interpret talk for it to be represented and visualised graphically. If a transcript is data constructed by a researcher for a particular purpose, then transcriptions should be intended as a subjective ‘interpretative act’ based on the goals of the research project. Therefore, oral data undergo selection by the transcriber/interpreter, who chose which aspects deserve attention and how detailed the transcript needs to be, with the aim of maintaining a balance between readability and accuracy (Davidson 2009). Usually, when working with oral data, the first draft is dedicated to orthographic transcription, where orthographic rules are observed (e.g., punctuation, standard spelling, etc.) to facilitate data processing. Afterwards, prosodic features, paralinguistic devices and deixis are introduced (i.e., intonation patterns, stress and pausing) and the orthographic transcript is changed accordingly (Davidson 2010). While recognising the importance of these components to obtain a clear interpretation of participants’ speech, due to unexpected problematics with file format and occasional poor quality of audio recordings, it was not possible to include all these elements in

the transcriptions. Consequently, the present study adapted and simplified elements taken from widely used systems of transcription (Davidson 2010, 2018). Intonation in participants' monologues was simply associated with grammatical functions. Besides the declarative tone, for the interrogative tone a question mark was placed at the end of the utterance and an exclamation mark was used for the exclamatory tone. In terms of annotation, bold type was used to mark grammatical mistakes, while parentheses signal missing word or missing word ending, e.g., "with one of the **third** guys", "that is something to laugh (**about**)". No information about the manner of speech (e.g., laughter) was provided. As regards hesitations and pauses, because of technical issues with audio recordings it was decided to avoid the transcription of both filled and unfilled pause. A comma identified a simple intonation break with no actual pause, whereas full stops indicated clear interruptions of speech before starting a new utterance. Hyphens were used for interrupted speech, to signal both reformulations and repeats as shown in the following examples (from Appendix B - *d*):

(1) "Maybe they were not really- they didn't really agree with this wedding, or maybe they thought that she was too young, I don't know, because it- I couldn't even think of some- something that could- they could have said to interrupt it that often",
(2) "It felt right I mean, nobody was pushing the others to-to stay in a group. Everybody was free, but at the same time we were together. And-and in the end when the the midnight was-was up, we didn't have any champagne or alcoholic drinks to celebrate, so we celebrated with-with juice!".

### 2.4.5. *Tool for analysis: selected set of measures for complexity, accuracy and fluency*

As previously mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 1), a final agreement on the best measures to assess the development of complexity, accuracy and fluency and how many should be employed has not been reached yet. For a better comparability of results, it was initially decided to adopt the same set of 21 CAF measures proposed by Kusyk (2017). However, the technical issues encountered during data collection made it impossible to accurately measure certain aspects of participants' L2 oral production such as, for example, speed or breakdown fluency. Consequently, the present study relied on a reduced set of 15 CAF measures to observe participants' L2 development trajectories. To be able

to visualise and analyse the development of the 15 measures concurrently, results were standardised (z-scores) to bring them to the same scale. Each monologic task was transcribed and subsequently analysed according to the measures outlined in Table 2.2 below.

*Table 2.2. Selected set of measures for complexity, accuracy and fluency*

| |
|---|
| **Complexity** |
| *Lexical*: |
| 1 - Diversity: VOCD |
| 2 - Sophistication: Lexical Frequency Profile (LFP) |
| *Grammatical*: |
| 3 - Length: mean length of AS-unit |
| **Accuracy** |
| 4 - Global: Normalised error rate (per 1000 words) |
| *Lexis*: |
| 5 - Non-normative in L1 |
| 6 - Non-normative word formation |
| 7 - Non-normative word choice |
| *Syntax*: |
| 8 - Non-normative use of singular-plural |
| 9 - Non-normative use of articles, pronouns and prepositions |
| 10 - Non-normative order or sentence structure based on L1 |
| *Verb*: |
| 11 - Non-normative form (conjugation) |
| 12 - Non-normative choice of tense, aspect and mood |
| 13 - Other (missing word) |
| **Fluency** |
| 14 - Reformulations (normalised per 1000 words) |
| 15 - Repeats (normalised per 1000 words) |

Complexity was analysed in terms of (a) lexical complexity and (b) grammatical complexity. Assessing lexical complexity implies calculating the variety of lexemes within a text and instead of relying on type-token ratio (TTR for shortening, i.e., the ratio of the number of different lexical items to the total number of words) which is influenced by text length, the present study adopted VOCD[6] as a measure for lexical diversity. VOCD analysis is based on the probability of new vocabulary being introduced into longer and longer samples of speech or writing (MacWhinney 2000; McCarthy, Jarvis 2013). VOCD uses random sampling of tokens in plotting

6. Using Coh-Metrix (Graesser *et al.*), available at http://cohmetrix-new.memphis.edu/.

the curve of TTR against increasing token size for the transcript under investigation. The measure has three advantages: (i) it is not a function of the number of words in the sample, (ii) it uses all the data available and (iii) it is more informative, because it represents how the TTR varies over a range of token size (MacWhinney 2000: 111). Lexical sophistication was measured through Lexical Frequency Profiles (LFPs for shortening) which describe the lexical content of a text in terms of frequency scores (Laufer, Nation 1995; Kusyk 2017). LFPs were calculated via VocabProfile[7], a free computer programme that performs lexical text analysis and allows to choose among several frequency framework and corpora for reference. VocabProfile takes any text and divides its words into four categories by frequency in the language at large not necessarily in the text itself. The first category consists of the most frequent 1000 English words, the second one of the most frequent thousand English words, i.e., 1001 to 2000[8], the third category includes academic English words (the Academic Word List or AWL, i.e., 550 words that are frequent in academic texts across subjects) and the fourth and last category comprises the remainder words which are not found on the other lists (Laufer, Nation 1995). The reference corpora selected for the present analysis were the British National Corpus or BNC (100,000,000 words, spoken and written) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English or COCA (450,000,000 words, spoken and written). The BNC-COCA 1-25K word family lists (Nation, 2017) derive from a harmonisation of the two corpora. It consists of 25,000 integrated word family lists, organised in groups of 1000 word families: from the first 1000 most frequent word families, i.e., 1001 to 2000, to the least frequent 1000, i.e., from 24,001 to 25,000.

Turning now to grammatical complexity, the present study relied on the mean length[9] of Analysis of Speech unit (AS-units) as a global measure for syntactic complexity, with AS-unit defined as "a single speaker's utterance consisting of an independent clause, or sub-clausal unit, together with any subordinate clause(s) associated with either" (Foster *et al*. 2000: 365). Mean length of AS-unit (or MLASU for shortening) is a widely accepted measure of L2 development; however, within CAF framework it has been used to measure both complexity (Polat, Kim 2014; Vercellotti 2017) and fluency (Wolfe-Quintero 1998; Larsen Freeman 2006). The debate stems from how to interpret an increase in length of

7. Coded by Tim Cobb, available at www.lextutor.ca/vp/comp/.

8. The 1st and 2nd 1000 words family lists comprise six million tokens of spoken British and American English including films and TV programmes (Nation 2017).

9. Using Coh-Metrix (Graesser *et al*.), available at http://cohmetrix-new.memphis.edu/.

AS-units. Learners could increase the length of a unit either by using more words and phrases (i.e., longer clauses) and consequently produce more *fluent* speech (Wolfe-Quintero 1998), or they could use more subordinate clauses which entails higher *complexity* (Norris, Ortega 2009). Based on current literature (Polat, Kim 2014; Kusyk 2017; Vercellotti 2017 among others, see Chapter 1), the present study interpreted MLASU as a measure to ascertain complexity in L2 development.

Regarding accuracy, the study adopts the 'accuracy perspective', which consists of counting or weighing errors, operationalised through global measures such as the proportion of error-free units, or, conversely, the average number of errors per unit. Challenges remain in defining what errors are, "especially if lexical, morphological, syntactic, phonological or spelling errors are bundled together" (Pallotti 2021: 205); not to mention the degree of personal judgment which needs to be occasionally called upon when assessing accuracy in L2 data (Foster, Wigglesworth 2016); and the influence of the average length of units on the accuracy index. Keeping these theoretical issues in mind, participants' L2 oral productions were assessed according to ten measures of accuracy. Given that, throughout the longitudinal study, the length of L2 productions fluctuated consistently within each participant, the first, global measure is *normalised error rate*, i.e., the number of errors per 1000 words. For the remaining measures, the study takes its cues from Kuysk (2017, who in turn took from Verspoor *et al.* 2011) and included three lexical measures: *words in L1*, *non-normative word formation* and *non-normative word choice*; three syntactic measures, *non-normative use of singular-plural*, *non-normative use of articles, pronouns and prepositions*, *non-normative order or sentence structure based on L1*; two measures related to verbs, *non-normative form (conjugation)*, *non-normative choice of tense, aspect and mood*; and one *other 'missing word'* measure.

Finally, looking at fluency, the study was initially set to measure speed, breakdown and repair fluency, data were collected during the pandemic when lessons in all institutions, from primary school to university, were held online. It often happened, then, that Zoom videocalls would end unexpectedly or that the video or audio would lag whenever the servers were overloaded. These unforeseen events compromised the reliability of speed and breakdown fluency; hence, it was decided to focus on repair fluency, i.e., repeats and reformulations (see Sections 2.4.4 and 5.3). According to Biber *et al.* (2021: 1048):

> Conversation is characterized by what has been called 'normal dysfluency': for example, it is quite natural for a speaker's flow to be impaired by pauses,

hesitators (er, um) and repetitions such as I - I - I at points where the need to keep talking threatens to run ahead of mental planning and the planning needs to catch up.

Repeats are commonly used by speakers to "gain time" and "in the simplest and most common cases, one word or even less than one word (half a syllable, say) is repeated, producing a momentary 'stutter' effect" (Biber *et al.* 2021: 1055):

"*Ah but it's silly because the thing is,* ***th- the- they're,*** *well* ***the, fh- those th- those*** *two rooms look as if a bloody tip has hit it!*" (Note that in these examples the - indicates the end of a word-fragment, i.e., a word which is incompletely articulated).

On the other hand, when a speaker retraces (or notionally 'erases') what has just been said and starts again, this time with a different word or sequence of words, then he or she has produced a retrace-and-repair sequence, i.e., a reformulation (Biber *et al.* 2021: 1061):

In the following examples showing some typical features of retrace-and-repairs, the retrace is in bold, whereas the repair is enclosed in […]: "*So* ***before we issue*** *– [before we hand over]* the B one what do we do?"

Just as with accuracy, due to the fluctuating length of L2 productions within each participant, raw numbers of reformulations and repeats were normalised per 1000 words.

### 2.4.6. *Semi-structured interviews*

In the second session of data collection (i.e., March 2021), respondents were interviewed on their habits and attitudes towards the English language. To facilitate freedom of expression, the semi-structured interviews were carried out in Italian. Interviews lasted from 25 to 45 minutes, depending on respondents' willingness to share their personal experiences: not all subjects are in fact similarly extroverted. The main purpose of the interviews was to further explore the nature of respondents' relationship with the English language. Starting from their replies to the questionnaire, subjects were asked about their first approaches to informal English input and how their access habits have evolved through time. Although the questionnaire investigated several sources of input, interviews focussed more on films and TV series, touching on topics that

range from their preferred subtitling modality and the quality of Italian dubbing to the advent of online streaming platforms and piracy. The open structure of the interviews allowed for an in-depth look at respondents' motivations for engaging with the informal input; their perception of L2 development in relation to their frequency of access to informal English input; as well as their experiences using and learning English and consequently building their L2 identity. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic was also mentioned. Having experienced a couple of months in full lockdown, followed by several weeks of 'on and off' everyday life restrictions, participants' input access habits might have changed. Respondents were therefore asked about how they spent their time in these unprecedented moments, to find out whether their contact with informal L2 input had either increased or decreased and if they had picked up (and eventually maintained) new access habits. In Chapter 4, all quotes taken from the semi-structure interviews were translated from Italian.

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# 3. Informal exposure to English: sources of input, patterns of access and participants profiles

The primary aim of the survey is to gauge the extent of exposure to English in informal contexts among a sample of Italian university students, to identify the major sources of informal input and investigate any patterns of access among respondents (Research Question 1, Research Question 1.a). Furthermore, the study attempts to define participant profiles based on frequency and intensity of exposure (Research Question 1.b).

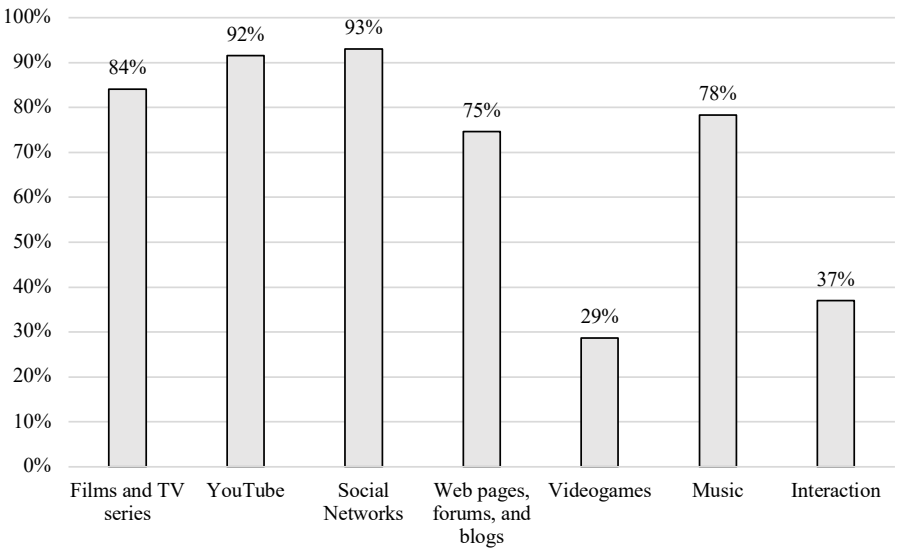
The present chapter addresses Research Question 1 and its sub-questions 1.a and 1.b by focussing on the analysis of questionnaire results on participants' overall informal contact with English through several media, including films and TV-series, YouTube, videogames, social networks, web pages, forums and blogs, songs and interactions with either English native or non-native speakers. Additionally, questionnaire results provide further insights on participants' exposure to telecinematic input, the preferred viewing modalities and subtitling strategies, as well as respondents' main reasons for watching films and TV-series in English. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of participants' informal contact with L2 English and by analysing length and frequency of access, identifies the major activities which learner-users report engaging in. The study relies on descriptive statistics to outline in detail the results for each input type, together with considerations and comparisons to previous research projects. The second part of the chapter endeavours to define, through descriptive statistics, participant profiles drawing on individuals' length and frequency of access patterns. Exposure indexes (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 81) are computed based on students' self-reported extent of access to different media and the exploration of such exposure patterns allows to picture more detailed participants profiles.

## 3.1. Major sources of English input outside the classroom

To gather insights on participants' habits, a series of questions were asked about i) whether users access the different input sources, ii) how frequently they do so and iii) for how long. Four frequency options were provided, including *very often* (every day), *often* (once or twice a week), *sometimes* (once a fortnight) and *rarely* (once a month or less). Length ranged from a maximum of *more than two hours* per session to a minimum of *less than 15* minutes (see Pavesi, Ghia 2020 for reference).

Before delving into each different input sources in detail, Figure 3.1 outlines students' access to different media in English irrespective of the amount of exposure.

*Figure 3.1. Percentages of participants accessing different media in English*




The near totality of respondents claim to regularly access English contents via social networks (93%, 532 out of 572) and YouTube (92%, 524). 84% of participants (481 students) watch films and television programmes[1] in English (with or without subtitles) and 78% (448 students)

1. Films and TV-series were considered as a single category to facilitate questionnaire completion (see Appendix A) and given their similarities (see also Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2021).

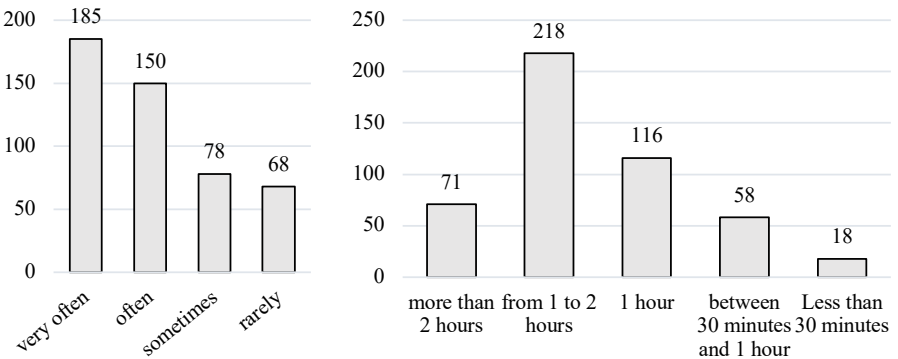
state that when they listen to English songs, they focus on the lyrics. Web pages, forums and blogs gain similar figures, with 75% of the respondents (427) browsing English websites online. 37% (212) of the surveyed students claim to participate in interactional exchanges involving the use of English as the language of communication. Lastly, videogames in English seem to attract a scarce audience (29%, 173).

In the following sections, exposure trends are described more thoroughly in terms of frequency, length and participants' preferences.

### 3.1.1. *Access to films, TV-series and YouTube videos in English*

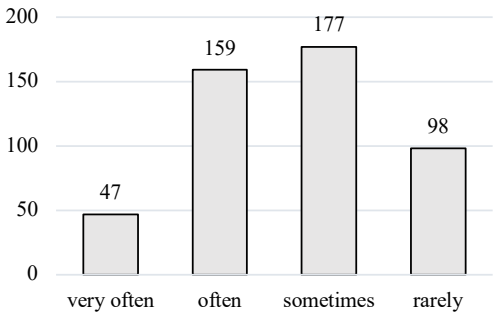
Those participants who watch films and television programmes in English tend to do so quite frequently (for television series see Figure 3.2, for films see Figure 3.3). In terms of frequency, 31% of the surveyed students (i.e., 150 out of 481) declare to watch television series at least once a week, while 38% of the sample (185) watch them every day. As regards length of exposure, 45% of the participants (218) spend from one to two hours watching TV-series in English, while 24% (116) spend at least one hour. A small number (71 out of 481, about 15%) may even be prone to binge watching as they say they access TV-series for more than two hours each time (Figure 3.2).

*Figure 3.2. Frequency and length of exposure per session to English-language television series in the sample*



Films are watched at least once a week by 33% (159) of the respondents. The frequency of access to films seems lower than for TV-series, but films require longer individual exposure time considering their average length being between 90 and 120 minutes (Figure 3.3).

*Figure 3.3. Frequency of exposure to English-language films in the sample*



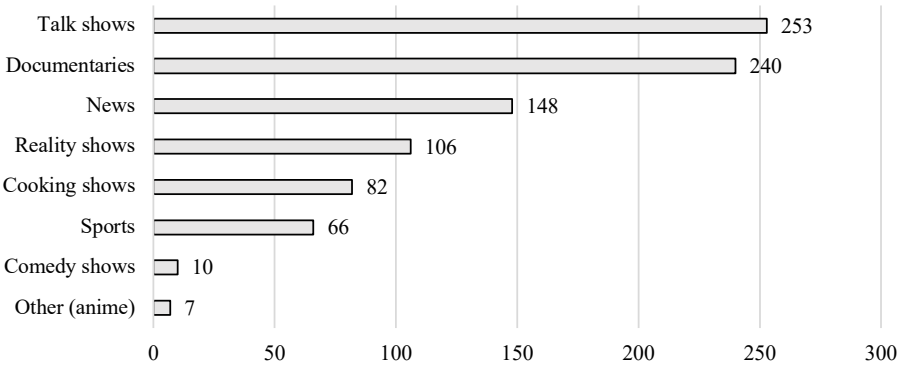

Although films and TV-series are considered as a single category in this survey, based on frequency and length of access reported by the respondents, it could be said that there is a preference for television series over films and other audiovisual genres. This result is consistent with previous large-scale surveys on informal exposure to English (Sockett 2014; Kusyk 2017, Bednarek 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020) and is related to the ever-growing popularity of TV series as a genre, as well as their immediate availability on a multitude of different online and offline streaming platforms.

The questionnaire section devoted to films and TV-series included an item on other genres of telecinematic input, with more than one answer option available:

Item 3.1.
Besides films and TV-series, what other types of programmes do you watch in English? (More than one option is possible)
- ○ Sport
- ○ Documentaries
- ○ Reality shows
- ○ Talk shows
- ○ Cooking shows
- ○ News
- ○ Comedy shows (stand-up comedy)
- ○ Other (please specify)

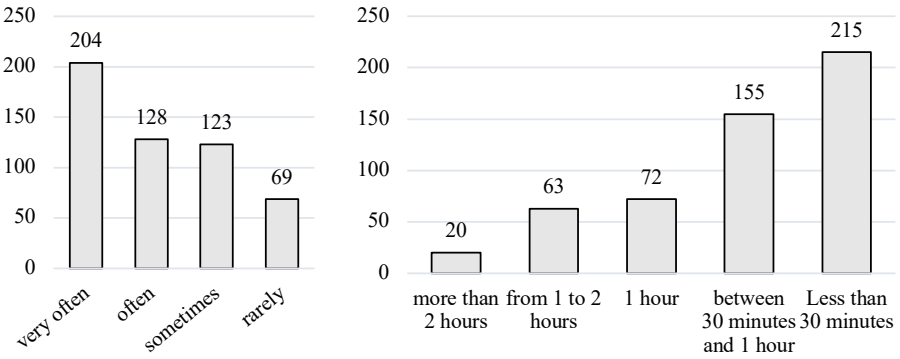
Learner-viewers express a preference for talk shows, documentaries and the news, as well as reality shows and cooking shows. Moreover, they enjoy stand-up comedy shows and anime (Figure 3.4). This variety of genres is likely promoted by the extensive catalogues of audiovisual products available on the multitude online and offline streaming platforms, which, in order to keep up with new audiences and viewers' demands (Massidda 2020), have become true 'forges' of telecinematic products.

*Figure 3.4. Other genres of telecinematic input accessed in English by the sample*




In terms of number of students involved, YouTube attracts even more users, with 92% of the participants (524 students, Figure 3.1) reporting that they connect to the video-site in English and almost 39% (204) do so every day (Figure 3.5). In general, YouTube is a very popular resource among younger generations and is often conducive to informal learning (Sundqvist 2020). However, compared to films and television programmes, time of exposure is reduced with only 14% of viewers in the sample (72 students) accessing YouTube for at least one hour each time. About 41% of the respondents (215) report that they use it less than 30 minutes every time. Considering the average short duration of YouTube videos this is a rather expected trend (Figure 3.5).

*Figure 3.5. Frequency and length of exposure per session to YouTube contents in English in the sample*

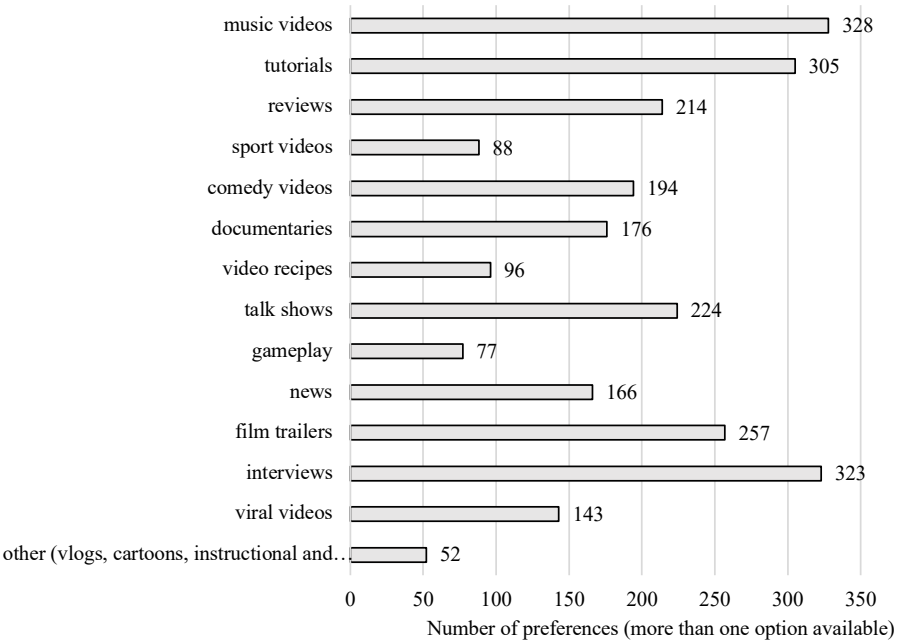



The questionnaire section devoted to YouTube included an item on preferred video genres on the platform, with more than one answer option available:

Item 3.2.
Which type of video do you search for on YouTube? (More than one option is possible)
- ○ Music videos
- ○ Tutorials
- ○ Reviews
- ○ Sport videos
- ○ Comedy videos
- ○ Documentaries
- ○ Video recipes
- ○ Talk shows
- ○ Gameplay
- ○ News
- ○ Film trailers
- ○ Interviews
- ○ Viral videos
- ○ Other (please specify)

Among YouTube genres, learner-users express a preference for music videos, interviews, video tutorials and films trailers (Figure 3.6).

*Figure 3.6. Preferred English-language YouTube genres in the sample*




It appears that, overall, entertainment is the primary reason for accessing English language contents on YouTube. Students also access this input source for information gathering (i.e., reviews, documentaries, news), but they seem to do so to a lower extent. Similarly, genres that typically provide (and require) more specialised registers of the language such as sport videos, recipes and gameplay, are less frequently accessed. Other genres reported by the students include vlogs (i.e., video blogs), cartoons and instructional and educational videos.

Participants report accessing English films, television programmes and YouTube to a considerable extent, however, not all of them do. Interestingly, only 15 participants in the sample (less than 3%) access neither telecinematic input nor YouTube contents in English. More respondents use YouTube in English, but do not watch films and TV series in the L2 (76, i.e., 13% of all participants). Similarly, 6% (33 students) of the sample watch films and TV series in English but do not access YouTube. These findings suggest that learner-users have quite diversified habits and perceive YouTube and telecinematic products as clearly distinct input sources (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 74). More specifically, YouTube offers a

wider range of video genres, often with a prevalent (if not exclusive) visual component, hence YouTube videos may be less linguistically demanding for L2 learner-users than films and TV-series.

*A focus on telecinematic input and viewing modalities*

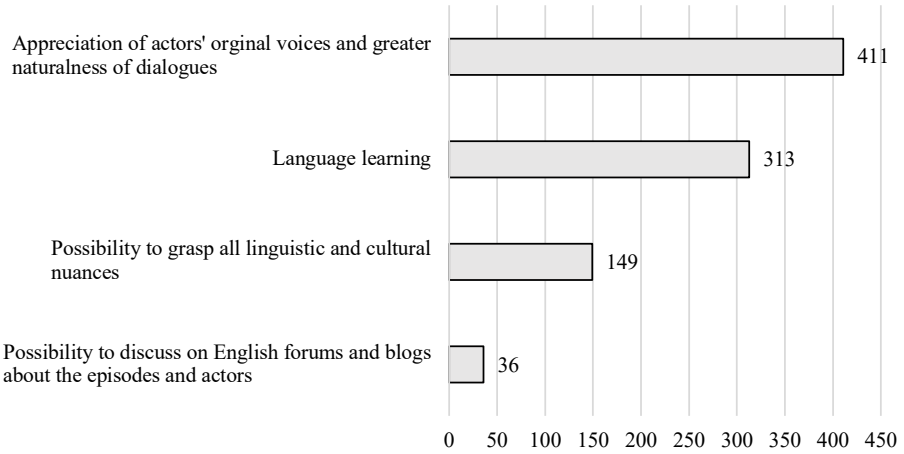
As seen in Figure 3.1, exposure to films and television series represents the major informal activity that participants in the sample engage in in the foreign language. In the questionnaire section dedicated to audiovisual input, several items explore learner-viewers' habits and preferences in terms of cinema and television products, the role and preferred types of subtitles, participants' reasons for their choices and self-evaluated language learning outcomes (see Appendix A).

To gain more details on access in the sample, Item 3.3 investigates the reasons for English-language films and TV-series in their original version:

Item 3.3.
You enjoy watching films and TV-series in their original language with or without subtitles because… (More than one option is possible)
- ○ You like listening to the actors' voice and original dialogues
- ○ You enjoy discussing the episodes (or the film) on English forums, blogs, etc.
- ○ You want to learn the language
- ○ You want to grasp all linguistic and cultural nuances
- ○ Other (please specify)

A variety of reasons triggers participants' preference for English-language films in their original version (Figure 3.7). Language authenticity and naturalness prevails among the respondents, as the desire for authentic, unmediated product and for the original dialogues comes first among the options offered (411 out of 481, 85%). Viewers' reference to the possibility of learning the language (313 out of 481, 65%), as well as grasping all linguistic and cultural nuances (i.e., instances of humour and wordplay; 149 preferences, 31%) also testifies to an interest in the English language. Finally, only 36 out of 481 participants (7%) indicate the opportunity to discuss on English forums and blogs about their favourite TV-series and films as one of the reasons for accessing English telecinematic input (Figure 3.7).

*Figure 3.7. Reasons for watching films and television series in English*




Despite the general language orientation and the desire to learn the L2 when watching English-language films and TV-series, it does not follow that participants get involved in this activity with an intention to learn. As stated by Pavesi and Ghia (2020: 96):

> Attention is likely to fade away as soon as viewers are absorbed in the film [or episode] and enjoyment and immersion in the fictional worlds depicted on screen are likely to take over […], making them forget about their physical environment and causing them to become engrossed in the fictious universe.

In these circumstances, leisure is likely to take over, no matter what learners' primary reported reasons for viewing were; a phenomenon attributable to self-directed naturalistic learning, where learners' focus of attention might be on communication or on learning something other than the target language, at the time of the learning event (Sundqvist 2009: 24).

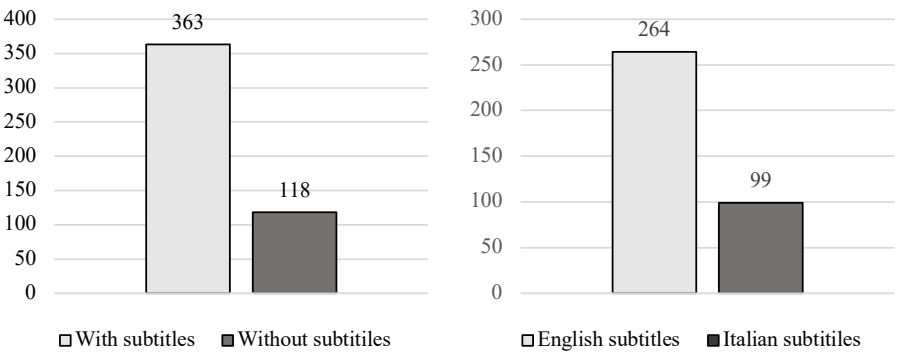
A subsequent set of questions investigates participants' use of subtitles when accessing audiovisuals in English. Separate items focus on viewing modality and preferred subtitles, respectively:

Item 3.4.
You prefer watching films and TV-series in English:
○ With subtitles
○ Without subtitles

Item 3.5.
If you watch subtitled films and TV-series, which subtitles do you prefer?
○ Original-language subtitles
○ Italian subtitles

When watching films and TV-series in the L2, the great majority of students report adding subtitles (363 out of 481, 75%) (Figure 3.8, left). Participants say they use both the same-language, i.e., English and interlingual, i.e., Italian subtitles, with a clear preference for same-language subtitles (264 versus 99 preferences respectively, 73% vs 27% of the respondents that add subtitles) (Figure 3.8, right).

*Figure 3.8. Use of subtitles (left) and preferred subtitle type (right) for English films and TV-series*



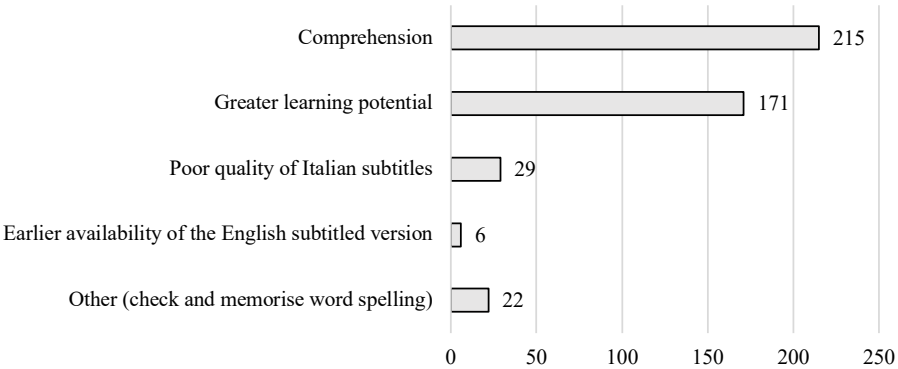

The strong preference for same-language subtitles within the sample suggests that a large part of the students consider themselves proficient enough in English to be able to understand bimodal input in the L2, a fact that, compared to previous studies (Aiello 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020), suggests a shift in viewing habits and a boost in confidence in students' self-perceived English proficiency. The following items inquire about viewers' reasons for selecting specific subtitling modalities, starting from same-language subtitles:

Item 3.6.
If you watch English-language films and TV-series with same-language subtitles, you do that because… (More than one option available)
○ They help you understand original dialogues
○ You think you can learn more by listening to original dialogues with English subtitles

○ The English subtitled version is available earlier
○ Italian subtitles are poor quality
○ Other (please specify)

Same-language subtitles are selected by participants primarily for text comprehension (215 preferences out of 264, 81%) and learning potential (171 preferences, 65%) (Figure 3.9). Bimodal subtitles in the L2 allow viewers to simultaneously access oral and written input, with the latter clarifying or reinforcing the former and filling any gaps in comprehension (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 101). Despite their potential influence on subtitling choices among young Italian audiences, the poor quality of Italian subtitles (due to tight deadlines, market requirements and priorities see Massidda, 2015: 33) and the earlier availability of English ones show low incidence in the sample (29 and 6 preferences respectively). In addition, 8% (22) of the respondents wrote in the 'Other (please specify)' answer option that they use same-language subtitles to compare words' spelling and pronunciation.

*Figure 3.9. Reasons for choosing same-language subtitles*

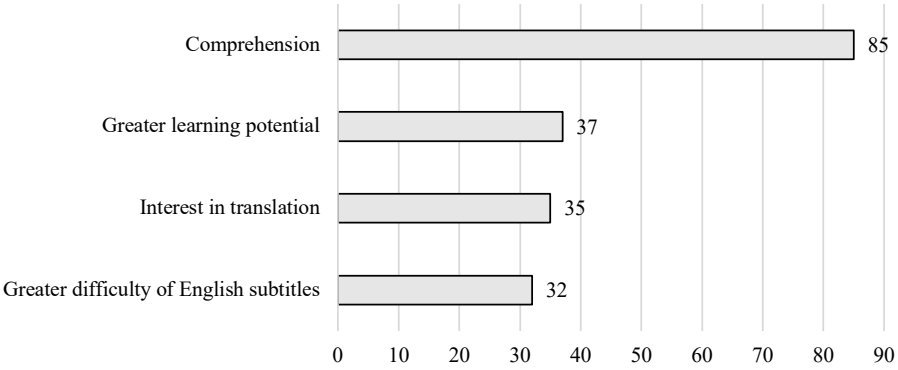



As for subtitles in Italian, respondents were given the following options:

Item 3.7.
If you watch English-language films and TV-series with Italian subtitles, you do that because… (More than one option available)
○ They help you understand original dialogues
○ You think you can learn more by listening to original dialogues with Italian subtitles
○ You are interested in translation
○ English subtitles are too difficult
○ Other (please specify)

According to most of the respondents, the main reason for choosing interlingual subtitles when watching English-language films and TV-series is that they increase the comprehension of the telecinematic text (86%, 85 preferences out of 99) (Figure 3.10). Compared to comprehension, the other answer options scored much lower with learning potential of L1 subtitles at 37% (37 preferences) and interest in looking at the translation in Italian at 35% (35 preferences). The overall difficulty of English-language subtitles (32%, 32) may be linked to a lower proficiency level in the L2, which probably prevent viewers from grasping most of the meaning in same-language subtitles. For this question, no 'Other (please specify)' answer options were given (Figure 3.10).

*Figure 3.10. Reasons for choosing interlingual subtitles*



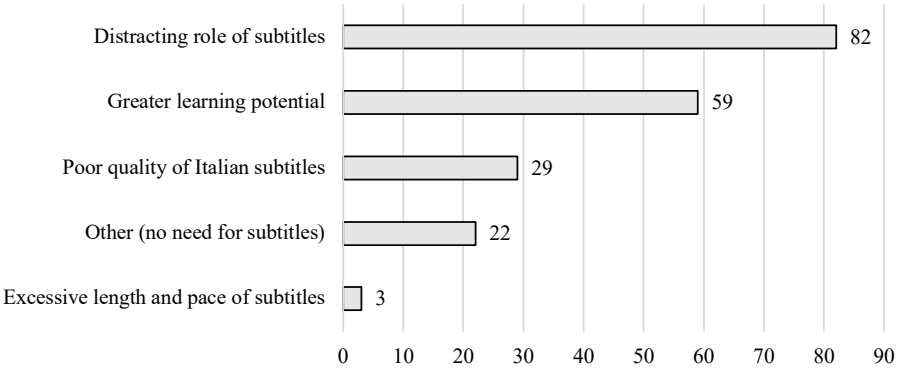

The following item focusses on non-subtitled L2 input:

Item 3.8.
If you watch English-language films and TV-series without subtitles, you do that because… (More than one option available)
- ○ Subtitles are too long and fast
- ○ You think you can learn more by listening directly to original dialogues without the support of subtitles
- ○ Subtitles distract you from the film or episode
- ○ Often subtitles do not match dialogues
- ○ Other (please specify)

Most respondents mention the distracting nature of subtitles as the main reason for accessing non-subtitled audiovisuals (82 preferences out of 118, 69%) (Figure 3.11). The counterproductive role of subtitles is

reinforced by 29 answers (25%) addressing the fact that there is often a lack of correspondence between original dialogues and subtitles, whereas only three students (3%) mention the fact that the written lines are too long and change too quickly on screen. 59 students (50%) list language learning as a reason for preference, as they believe that accessing non-subtitled audiovisual material benefits L2 acquisition the most and 22 respondents (19%) wrote in the 'Other (please specify)' answer option that they do not need to use subtitles under any circumstances.

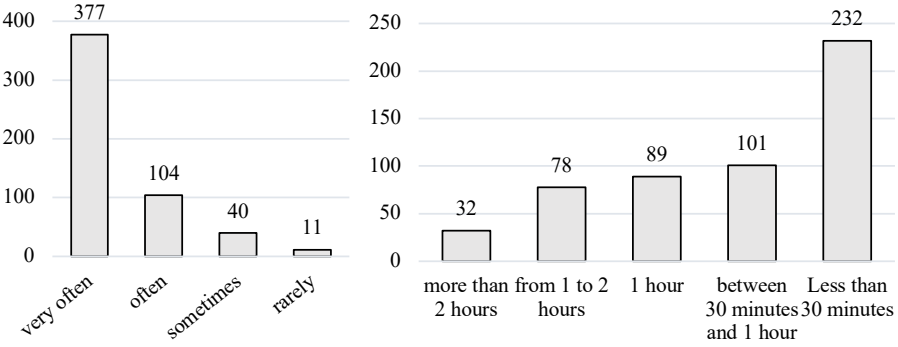
*Figure 3.11. Reasons for watching non-subtitled films and TV-series in English*




### 3.1.2. *Access to social networks, web pages, blogs and forums in English*

After a focus on audiovisuals, the following questionnaire items address social networks, web pages, blogs and forums. The near totality of the respondents (93%, 532 out of 572, Figure 3.1) state that they access contents in English through social networks. Although more than half of the respondents say they use social networks in English often and very often (18%, 104 at least once a week; 66%, 377 every day), only 35% of the students (199) report spending one hour or more online each time they log in (17%, 89 one hour; 15%, 78 from one to two hours; 6%, 32 more than two hours). Most participants (41%, 232) access social media in English language for less than 30 minutes per session (Figure 3.12). Given the immediacy of communication on social networks, usually conveyed through short posts, images, threads or multimodal content, these trends of frequency of access were expected.

*Figure 3.12. Frequency and length of exposure per session to social media in English in the sample*




Almost everyone claims to use Instagram, a strongly visual social network, in English (88% of the sample, 470 users), followed by Facebook (51%, 271 users) and Twitter (23%, 120 users), which rely on both textual messages and images. Only 22% of the sample (119 users) is on TikTok, a social network solely based on short-form videos which can range in duration from 15 seconds to a maximum of 10 minutes. Other social media follow at considerable distance (3% or less each, by number of users: Reddit 19, LinkedIn 14, Telegram 2, Webtoon 2, Snapchat 1, Wattpad 1). The use of social networks varies greatly, as respondents access them to read the news, retrieve information, follow the lives of their favourite actors and singers, as well as to share their thoughts, chat with their friends and react to posts.

More than two thirds of the respondents (75%, 427, Figure 3.1) state that they navigate web pages, blogs and forums in English and 48% (272) of the informants say they do so on a regular basis (Figure 3.13). Most of the participants claim to search the web for personal research (61%, 347), study reasons (58%, 330) and leisure (46%, 264). Although the students surveyed presumably receive plenty of written English input while they browse for general information, discipline-specific contents and entertainment, these activities appear to be occurring in a short timeframe, with only 19% (81) of the respondents accessing this input type for more than 1 hour (Figure 3.13). When surfing the web in English, books, technology, cinema and music are the top content selections (Figure 3.14).

*Figure 3.13. Frequency and length of exposure per session to web pages, forums and blogs in English in the sample*

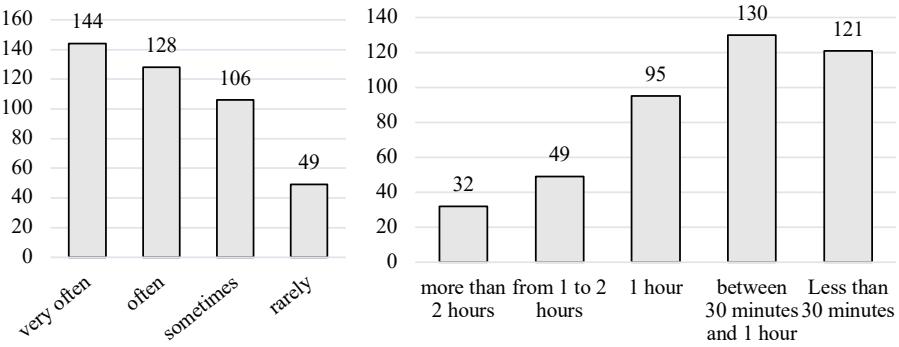
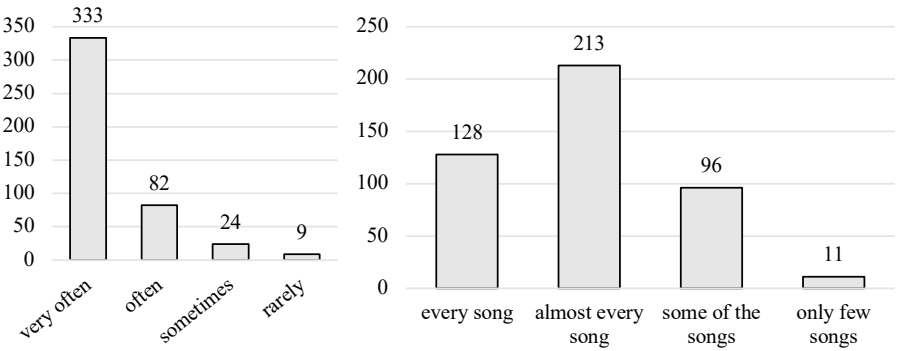



*Figure 3.14. Content of most frequently accessed English-language web pages, blogs and forums*

3.1.3. *Listening to songs in English*

English music represents a considerable potential source of comprehensible input for the respondents, as 78% (448 students) state that when they listen to English songs, they focus on the lyrics (Figure 3.1). These students are frequently exposed to music in the L2 and the large majority (72%, 415) say they engage with song lyrics often and very often (Figure 3.15). Given the focus on lyrics, this section did not include questions related to the frequency of access to the input, however, participants were asked for how many songs they pay attention to the lyrics on average.

*Figure 3.15. Frequency and length of attention allocation to lyrics when listening to English-language songs*



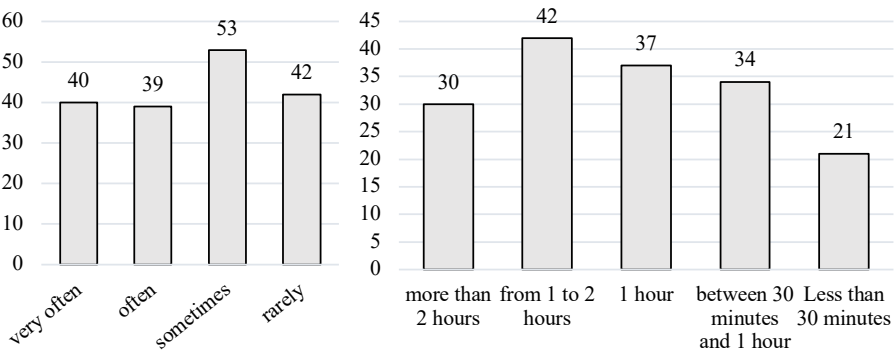

Recent survey-based research has led to similar findings, showing that English music ranks among the top means of informal contact with the L2 (Toffoli, Sockett 2010, 2014; Ludke 2020; Muñoz 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020), however, researchers do not unanimously agree on the role of song lyrics in informal L2 learning. While lyrics' repetitiveness and memorability, together with learner-users' prolonged and recurring access to the same songs over time, may improve pronunciation and vocabulary skills (Ludke 2020), listening to music in a foreign language seem to be less effective for L2 learning than other informal activities (Peters 2018; Muñoz 2020). Although acquisitional outcomes are less evident and more difficult to determine, most learners agree on the beneficial impact of songs boosting greater confidence in L2 pronunciation skills and an increased motivation to engage with the foreign language (Toffoli, Sockett

2014). According to the present survey, 84% of the respondents (378 out of 448 students who reported to focus on song lyrics) believe that their language competence has improved as a result of paying attention to song lyrics (see later in the chapter, Section 3.2, Figure 3.19 and 3.20). Among these, 85% (322) declare an improvement in listening comprehension and 66% (248) in L2 lexis. Paying attention to English lyrics is not considered as beneficial for the acquisition of grammar (12%, 47) and interestingly, only 23% (88) of these students think they have improved their L2 pronunciation, a result that seems to be in contrast with the above-mentioned studies but perhaps is in line with Italians' self-perceived low proficiency in English (Aiello 2018). Nevertheless, exposure to L2 music may work synergically with other informal activities and autonomous learning practices, as learner-users are likely to pay attention to reading and re-enacting the lyrics, if only because they want to know the meaning to the song and sing along with it (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 80).

### 3.1.4. *Videogames and online gaming in English*

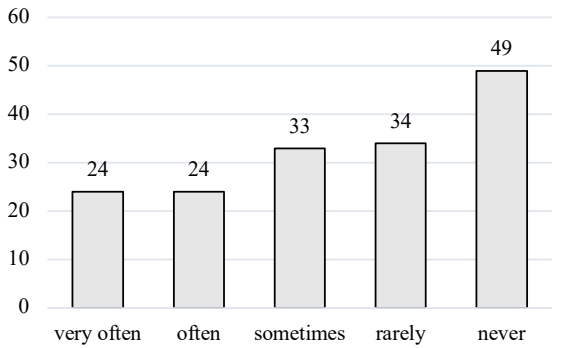
Only about a quarter of all participants (29%, 164, Figure 3.1) say that they play videogames in English and most of these students (58%, 95 out of 164) do not engage in this activity very frequently. However, when playing videogames, 66% (109) report playing for one hour or more each time (Figure 3.16).

*Figure 3.16. Frequency and length of exposure per session to videogames in English in the sample*



In several studies on ISLL, game players (predominantly male) are found to access videogames on a regular basis, often in the form of multiplayer online role-playing games, which entail interactions with several other players worldwide, as well as the re-enactment of settings and identities (Sylvén, Sundqvist 2012; Chik 2014; Knight *et al*. 2020, Muñoz 2020). Even though the sample of this study is predominantly female (70%, 401 out of 572 participants; 28%, 160 males; 2%, 11 who preferred to non-specify), male students play videogames more than their female counterpart (47%, 75 male students vs 21%, 84 females). Out of the 164 surveyed students 115 (70%) access online gaming, though once again most of them do not engage in this activity very frequently (Figure 3.17, 49%, 56 females; 45%, 54 male).

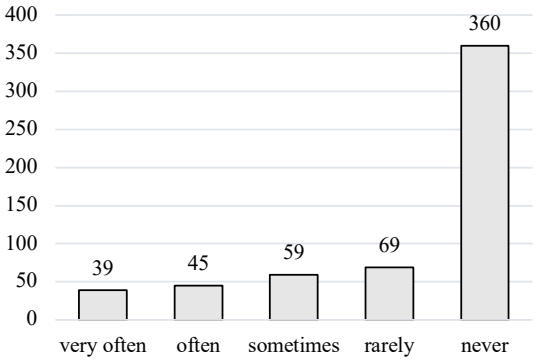
*Figure 3.17. Frequency of access to online gaming and exposure to English interactions in the sample*




### 3.1.5. *Interaction in English*

The questionnaire also investigates learner-users' participation in interactional exchanges involving the use of English as the language of communication. More than half of the students surveyed state that they do not experience direct contact with English-speaking partners (63%, 360 students). Among those who do, only few (15% of the whole sample, 84) interact in English with other people regularly, whereas most do so only occasionally or rarely (Figure 3.18).

*Figure 3.18. Frequency of interaction in English in the sample*




The most frequent partners of these interactions are friends (36%, 129), acquaintances (22%, 81) and university classmates (14%, 51), hence, people with whom respondents will have an ongoing and mostly informal relationship. Although the questionnaire specifically asked about live interactions, respondents used the 'Other (please specify)' answer option to point out that these interactions mostly happened via videocalls, written texts and voice messages with either native or non-native speakers of English. It appears that students do not distinguish between face-to-face or live conversations and conversations mediated through a screen (face-to-screen). The questionnaire was administered after the Covid-19 pandemic and prolonged lockdown; thus, it could be hypothesized that the increased and extensive face-to-screen conversations from that period may have shortened distances and cemented the illusion of having live, face-to-face interactions (Marinucci *et al.* 2021).

## 3.2. Participants' beliefs in L2 learning potential per sources of input

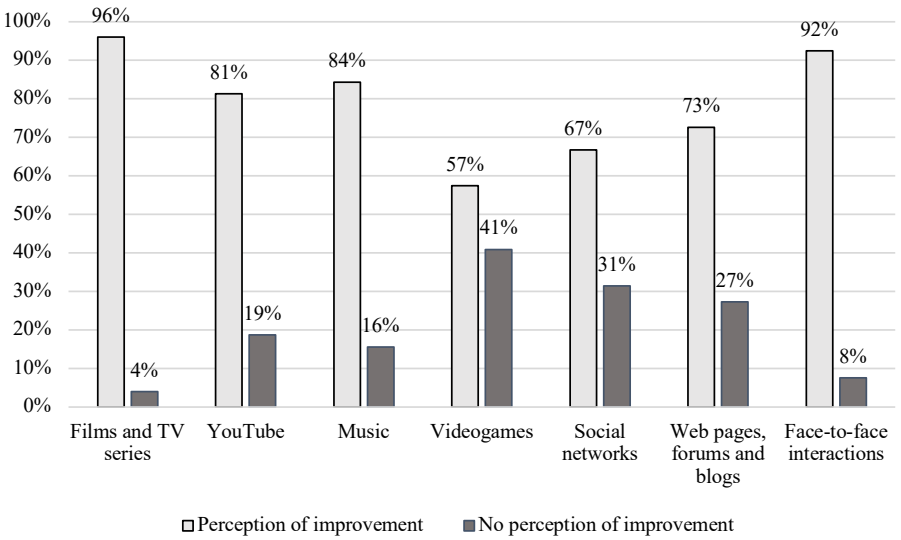
For each source of informal English input investigated in the study, the questionnaire included additional questions about participants' beliefs on the impact of these informal activities on the development of their L2 competence:

Item 3.9.
Do you believe your L2 competence has improved by watching films and television series/YouTube videos/listening to songs/playing videogames/etc., in English?
○ Yes
○ No

Item 3.9.1.
If your answer to 3.9. was yes, which skills do you believe have improved?
○ Listening skills
○ Vocabulary skills
○ Grammar skills
○ Conversation skills
○ Other (please specify)

Overall, most students believe in the acquisitional value of the several sources of informal English input and recognise them as a support to L2 learning (Figure 3.19).

*Figure 3.19. Participants' perception of L2 development per source of input*

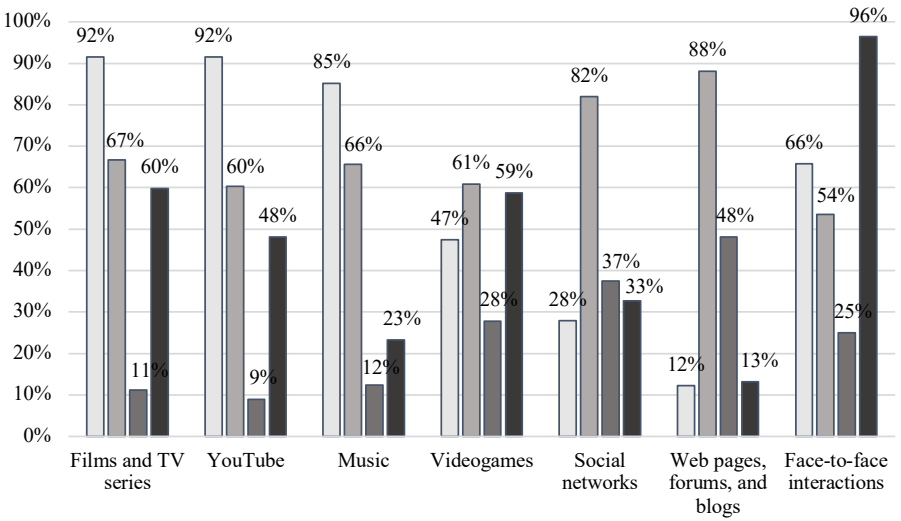



More specifically, 96% (462 out of 481) of the students who have experienced exposure to telecinematic input in English believe that they have improved their language competence in the L2 thanks to this

activity. The positive attitude towards these media and their role in SLA is consistent with reports from other large-scale investigations across Europe (Sockett 2014; Munõz 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi *et al.* 2023). Similarly, 92% (196 out of 272) of participants who engage in interactions with either native or non-native speakers of English, even occasionally, consider this activity beneficial for their L2 competence. Participants also believe that other activities in the L2 such as listening to songs (84%, 378 out of 448), watching videos on YouTube (81%, 426 out of 524) and browsing web pages, forums and blogs (73%, 343 out of 472) have improved their English knowledge. Social networks and videogames are considered just as valuable (67%, 355 out of 532 and 57%, 97 out of 164, respectively), however, the percentage of students who do not believe in the acquisitional role of these resources is higher compared with all the other types of input investigated (social networks 31%, 177; videogames 41%, 67).

When asked about specific competence areas (Item 3.9.1.) (Figure 3.20), participants indicate grammar as the least improved L2 component, irrespective of input type.

*Figure 3.20. Participants' perception of L2 development per skill per source of input*




Conversely, perception of improvement in L2 vocabulary is consistent throughout the resources of informal English input. Students believe that their L2 listening skills have mostly benefitted from exposure to films

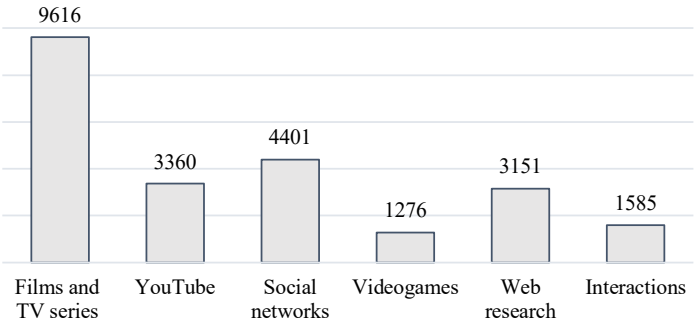
and TV series (92%, 423 out of 462), YouTube (92%, 390 out of 426) and listening to music (85%, 322 out of 378). Web pages, forums and blogs (88%, 302 out of 343) and social networks (82%, 291 out of 355), are the two sources of input in which vocabulary knowledge is believed to have most improved among L2 skills. Interactions in English are almost unanimously (96%, 189 out of 196) perceived as the most beneficial resource for boosting speaking competence, followed at considerable distance by films and TV series (60%, 276 out of 462) and online gaming interactions (59%, 57 out of 97). In general, these findings are very much in line with parallel reports from other countries, as learner-users primarily sense an improvement in their receptive skills (mostly listening comprehension) and a development in their L2 vocabulary.

### 3.3. Exposure indexes and type of input

In the next phase of the analysis, all data on participants' frequency and length of exposure to different media were used to generate overall exposure indexes (cf. Pavesi, Ghia 2020, Chapter 4). Indexes were computed by converting exposure frequency and estimated session duration into ordinal values on two distinct scales: one ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often) for frequency and the other from 0 (no time at all) to 5 (more than two hours) for duration. The final exposure index was obtained by multiplying these two values, resulting in a scale ranging from 0, i.e., lowest exposure rate, to 20, i.e., highest exposure rate. Individual exposure rates were then added up to obtain total exposure indexes indicating a conventionalised, aggregate value of access to different input types. Individual, per-subject indexes thus ranged from 0 (minimum score) to 140 (maximum score). Consistently with Figure 3.1, total exposure indexes consider input from films and TV series combined as a single category, as the two are comparable types of audiovisual input, whereas for individual indexes films and TV-series are analysed as separate sources of input. The indexes do not include songs since respondents were not specifically asked about length of access to this resource, for which only frequency data were collected. Figure 3.21 shows total exposure indexes in the sample.

Based upon exposure indexes, films and television series represent the greatest source of informal L2 English input (9616 index) according to respondents, followed by social networks (4401 index) and YouTube (3473 index). From participants' percentages of access to different media in English (Figure 3.1), social networks (93%) and YouTube (92%) scored

*Figure 3.21. Total exposure indexes (frequency X length of exposure) per input source*




the highest rates followed by films and TV series (84%). However, the comparison with Figure 3.21 highlights the primacy of telecinematic input over all other sources of informal English input. Although, in terms of frequency, one is likely to scroll social networks every day, the time dedicated to this activity is less than what watching a film or binge-watching a TV series requires. More to the point, films and TV series have the highest average exposure (16.81) thus resulting in the prominent source, followed by social networks (7.69) and YouTube (6.07) (Table 3.1).

*Table 3.1. Descriptive statistics of exposure indexes per input type*

| **Input type** | **mean** | **std_dev** | **min** | **max** | **tot** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Films and TV-series | 16.81 | 9.91 | 0 | 20 | 9616 |
| YouTube | 6.07 | 5.29 | 0 | 20 | 3473 |
| Videogames | 2.26 | 4.64 | 0 | 20 | 1293 |
| Social networks | 7.69 | 5.70 | 0 | 20 | 4401 |
| Web research | 5.51 | 5.59 | 0 | 20 | 3151 |
| Interactions | 2.77 | 4.87 | 0 | 20 | 1585 |

Looking at the other sources of informal input, lower exposure indexes are observed for web pages, forums and blogs (3151 index), face-to-face interaction in L2 English (1585 index) and videogames (1293), with the latter contributing the least on average exposure (interactions 2.77 and videogames 2.26) (Table 3.1).

### 3.3.1. *High-input learner-users versus low-input learner-users*

In response to Research Question 1.b, further analysis of individual questionnaire items can help outline participant profiles. Overall, data reveal a clear distinction between 'strong' English users, who regularly engage in multiple activities in the L2, and 'weak' users, who have limited or no exposure to English in informal settings. Consequently, it is possible to differentiate between 'high-exposure subjects' or 'high-input learner-users,' who frequently interact with English, and 'low-exposure subjects' or 'low-input learner-users,' who receive minimal input (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 87).

High-exposure subjects are defined as participants who report frequent access to English input, ranging from *often* to *very often*, with each session lasting more than one hour. A threshold level was established by multiplying the highest frequency values by the highest duration values. Accordingly, high-exposure subjects are conventionally identified as those with a total exposure index of 84 or higher, which corresponds to individuals who engage with various English-language resources at least once per week for a minimum of one hour per session per source. The potentially highest value is 140[2]. A maximum 120 value was reached by only one student. A total of only 17 high-exposure subjects can be identified, scoring 84 or higher and accounting for about 3% of the sample. Participants with an exposure rate of 7 or lower – indicating either no or minimal exposure and an average session duration of less than 30 minutes – can be classified as low-exposure English learner-users. 34 respondents classify as low-exposure and account for about 6% of the sample. Only one student claimed not to be exposed to any type of informal English input (score 0). Most students rank in-between the two poles (91%, 521 subjects) and show diversified behaviour. The trend is evident in Figure 3.22 and 3.23, which illustrate the dispersion of subjects and the normal distribution of their index values, respectively. In Figure 3.22, most participants (horizontal axis) place in the middle and lowest grid areas based on their individual exposure indexes (vertical axis), following rather variable and unsystematic patterns. As shown in Figure 3.23, the distribution of individual exposure indexes predominantly cluster around middle values (*mean* 41, *standard deviation* 21), with most of the sample scoring between 20 and 62 (mean±std dev, 68%, 390 respondents).

2. Identified by multiplying highest individual index-score (20) by types of input (7; films and TV-series were considered as single categories).

*Figure 3.22. Dispersion plot of individual exposure indexes in the sample*

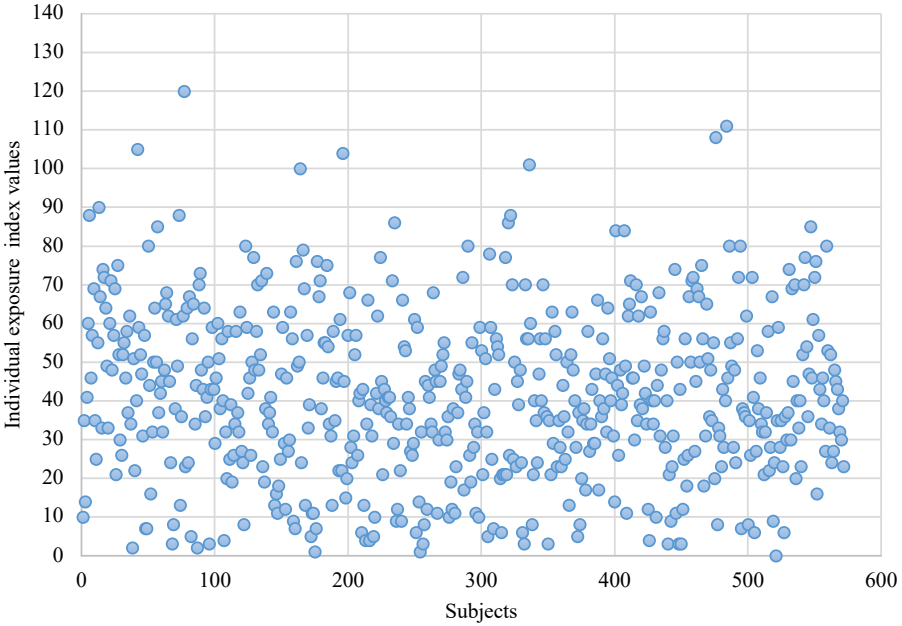
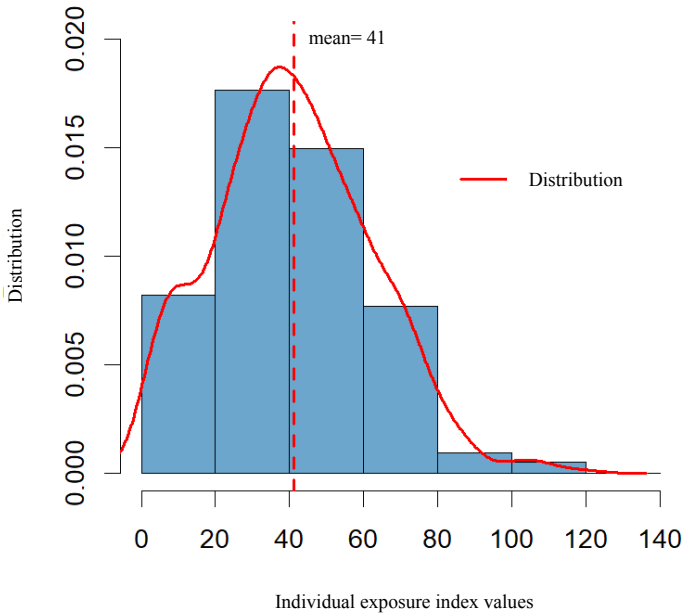



*Figure 3.23. Distribution trend of individual exposure indexes in the sample*



When referring to all input sources, high-input subjects represent a very small section of the sample (3%, 17 students). The group is predominantly female (3%, 12 females and 3%, 5 males), with students attending diverse undergraduate and postgraduate university courses[3]. The majority state to have reached an upper-intermediate proficiency level in English (B2 level, 11 students), whereas four subjects consider themselves as advanced learners of English (C1 level) and two as lower-intermediate (B1 level). Only five students have had a study abroad experience for no longer than six months, while 12 have not. Based on these data, it is interesting to notice that frequent access to informal sources of English input is not a prerogative of language specialists nor of people who already share an interest in language, a result that is in contrast with previous findings (Pavesi, Ghia 2020) and perhaps showing a shift in access to informal input trends. Low-exposure subjects (34), on the other hand, are mainly enrolled in hard science degrees (Biotechnology, Engineering, Medicine, Pharmacy) and Economics, with fewer students enrolled in humanities[4]. Once again, most of the sample is female (28 females, 6 males). Their self-assessed proficiency level in English is split between elementary (A2 level, 19 subjects) and intermediate level (B1-B2 level, 14 subjects), with one student claiming to have achieved advanced C1 level. The great majority (22 out of 34) has never been on a study abroad programme, however, among those low-input learners who have (12), four of them have spent one year of high-school abroad as part of an international exchange programme with the USA.

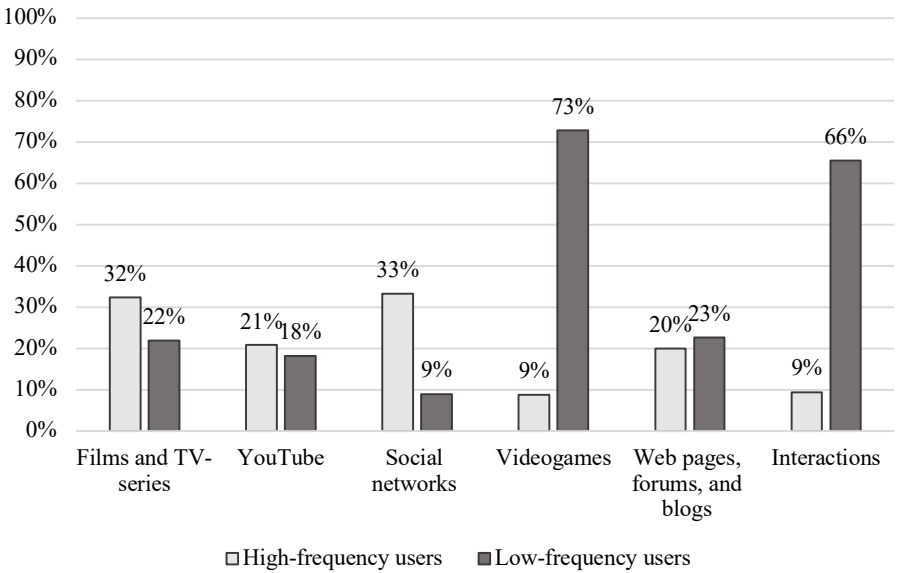
Turning now to individual exposure index values per input source, when looking at exposure to telecinematic input (telecinematic index) and YouTube, data interestingly show a lack of polarisation of users, a result that is in contrast with previous findings (Pavesi, Ghia 2020) thus reinforcing the hypothesis of a shift in trends of access and use of informal English resources (Figure 3.24).

In a 2020 study (data collected in 2016), Pavesi and Ghia observed a polarised pattern in the use of telecinematic input and social networks, with more than half of their sample engaging in these activities frequently and for extended periods. In contrast, participants who accessed YouTube did so infrequently. The current study's findings indicate that while participants engage with these activities more regularly and for longer durations (films and TV series: 32%, 185 participants; YouTube: 21%, 120 participants) compared to those with minimal or no engagement (films and

3. Biotechnology (3), Medicine (3), Political Science (3), Linguistics (2), Oriental and African Studies (2), Psychology (2), Environmental Engineering (1), Law (1).

4. Philosophy (2), Cultural Heritage (1), Linguistics (1), Musicology (1), Modern Philology (1).

*Figure 3.24. High-frequency and low-frequency users for input source*




TV series: 22%, 125 participants; YouTube: 18%, 104 participants), there is no significant distinction between high- and low-frequency users. However, a clear divide is evident with respect to social networks, where a marked difference is observed between high-frequency (33%, 190 participants) and low-frequency (9%, 52 participants) users. The results seem to suggest that, unlike other resources, social networks exhibit a noticeable polarization. A smaller proportion of the sample (20%, 114 participants) regularly engage with web pages, forums, and blogs, while 23% (130 participants) access these resources infrequently. As previously noted, access to videogames and face-to-face interactions is more limited and generally occasional. Only 9% (50 participants) report engaging in English-language video games at a higher-than-average frequency, whereas 73% (417 participants) identify as infrequent users, with most indicating no exposure at all. Furthermore, while 9% (54 participants) engage in L2 English interactions frequently or very frequently, more than half (66%, 375) report never doing so.

## 3.4. Summary of the results

The present chapter focussed on Research Question 1 and its sub-questions and investigated the main trends on informal exposure to English among a sample of Italian university students by taking into

account frequency and intensity of exposure, input types and participants' profiling. In response to RQ1 and RQ1.a, learner-users in the sample report accessing English informally to quite a considerable extent and through a variety of input, mainly multimodal. In terms of intensity, participants are mostly exposed to TV-series and films in English. They also access social networks and YouTube to a great extent, but because of the short length of contents usually available on these resources, their general exposure time per session is shorter. Most students also pay attention to the lyrics of English songs and navigate web pages, forums and blogs in English. Less frequently accessed input sources include conversational exchanges and videogames. Findings show that while there is a considerable exposure to English, especially insofar as 'recognition' (i.e., listening, reading) is concerned, opportunities to use the L2 productively (i.e., speaking, writing) are not as frequent. This is reflected in participants' beliefs in the learning potential of exposure to L2 informal input, which they consider to be particularly effective in the development of listening comprehension and vocabulary skills. Moreover, by zooming in on telecinematic input, participants access films and TV-series in English mainly for language related reasons, such as L2 learning and appreciation of the original accents and sounds. Authenticity also plays a relevant role and relates to the pleasure of listening to the actors' original voices and to the greater naturalness of original dialogues. When watching films and TV-series in English, most students add bimodal or interlingual subtitles, with a marked preference for bimodal subtitling. Dialogue comprehension is the primary factor driving viewers choices, followed by L2 learning. An interest in translation, as well as a lower L2 proficiency, reportedly leads to choosing L1 subtitles. A small number of students declare that they do not add subtitles, especially when these are perceived as distracting and deviant from the original dialogues, or when the subject has achieved an advanced level of L2 proficiency. Finally, addressing RQ1.b, participants' profiles suggest that exposure to informal English input is quite diverse. Frequent access to English-language input is not a prerogative of language specialists, nor is exclusive to students who self-assess as advanced-proficiency in the L2. In terms of patterns of informal access to telecinematic input and YouTube in English no specific trend has been identified. On the other hand, there is a marked divide between learner-users who regularly access social networks in the L2 and those who do not, showing a major increase in the use of social networks compared to previous studies (Pavesi, Ghia 2020). The number of students who browse web pages, forums and blogs regularly is lower than those who do it on an infrequent basis and access to videogames and face-to-face interactions in English is more limited and generally occasional.

# 4. Four Italian case studies: observing informal exposure to English and L2 development in time

The present chapter describes the findings of four longitudinal observations conducted over a period of 12 months in 2021. The four subjects stated in the questionnaire (Chapter 3) to be frequently exposed to informal English input and each subject mainly accessed a specific type of informal input, namely fantasy novels, online videogames, television series and films, podcasts, livestreams and gameplay videos. The aim of the longitudinal study was to observe the evolution of participants' L2 spoken production through time by exploring any relation among frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input (Research Question 2) and by looking into the development of complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) trajectories in monologic tasks (Research Question 2.a). Moreover, the study wanted to provide in-depth L2 learner-users' profiles from a selected sample of Pavia university students, by monitoring their frequency and intensity of exposure to informal sources of English input, as well as exploring participants' attitudes and motivations towards the foreign language.

Each case study is analysed separately. The analysis is divided into three parts: (i) an overview of the subject's habits when accessing informal English input, (ii) a discussion of the relationship with informal English, how it started and how it evolved over time and (iii) the analysis of CAF trajectories in subject's L2 oral productions through time. While the last section analyses two monologic tasks (i.e., storytelling) elicited over a 12-month period, parts (i) and (ii) draw data from participants' questionnaire responses, semi-structured interviews and journals (Chapter 2). To monitor the evolution of participants' L2 oral production, once every two months two monologic tasks (i.e., storytelling) were recorded on Zoom and later transcribed for analysis (cf. Section 2.4.4). For each case study, a total of six monologues was collected. The first monologic task

elicited narratives from the retelling of a film clip without sounds, whereas in the second task participants were asked to tell a story about some past events or the future. Despite the repetitiveness of the tasks, to avoid familiarisation both films and discussion topics varied at every meeting, albeit maintaining a common topic (see 2.4.3. Structure and contents of the longitudinal study). The development of complexity, accuracy and fluency will be first analysed separately and then followed by a conclusive, comprehensive review. The analysis included comments taken from the transcriptions of the two tasks and from participants' online journals, all produced in English. All quotes from the semi-structured interviews were translated from Italian.

## 4.1. Findings from the case study: Delia

Delia was a 23 years old first-year postgraduate student in Experimental and Applied Biology at Pavia University. She recalled having started studying English in school at eight years old. Her self-assessed level of English proficiency was B2, described in the questionnaire as: '[You] Can express yourself articulately on complex and abstract topics, such as politics, the environment and economy; you can have a long conversation with a native English speaker without too much effort'[1] (see Appendix A). Besides English, she also knew French and little German. She had never been abroad on an Erasmus experience, but when she was in high school (2016), she went to Dublin for a two-weeks study vacation. It was her first time speaking in English in an English-speaking country (from Delia's monologic tasks):

(3) "It was hard the first few days but the (hosting) family was very kind […] there was another girl staying with me and she spoke even less than I did […] so I kind of started talking more and then I found it easier with the time passing".

However, most students attending her English classes were Italians and she reported that in those two weeks abroad she spoke more Italian than English.

During the longitudinal study she did not attend any English classes or lessons taught in English. Occasionally, in some of her classes, lecturers used scientific terms, papers and PowerPoint presentations in the L2.

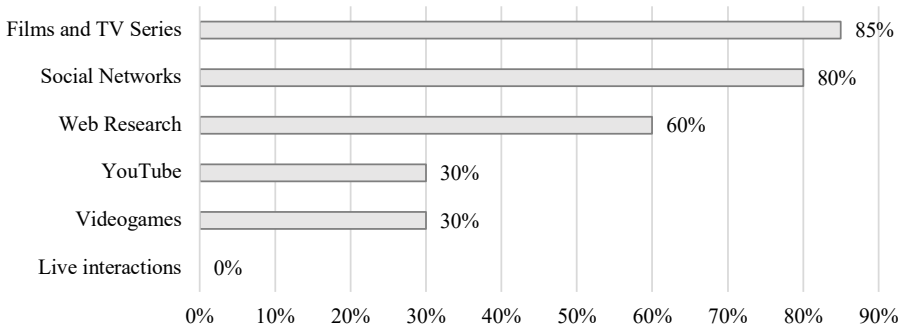
1. Wording elaborated from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) self-assessment grid.

In the summer of 2021, Delia worked part-time at Pavia University's Student Secretariat and exchanged emails with incoming Erasmus students. She reported that it was difficult to immediately understand the requests coming from the international students, as most of them were non-native speakers of English, but overall, she found this experience to be linguistically useful (from Delia's journal): "I have learned how to deliver the best answer in English, in a short, precise and clear way".

### 4.1.1. *Major sources of informal English input*

According to her responses to the questionnaire, Delia scored an exposure index of 57, placing herself above the mean (i.e., 41) and on the higher end of the average-values cluster (i.e., 20-61) (see Section 3.3). Her primary sources of informal English input were films and TV series (85%), followed by social networks (80%) and web research (60%). Videogames and YouTube (both at 30%) followed at distance, with no instances of live face-to-face interactions in the L2 (0%) (Figure 4.1).

*Figure 4.1. The distribution of Delia's informal access to L2 English input*




Before looking into each source of informal input, it is worth remembering that music was also investigated in the questionnaire. Participants were asked how often they listen to music in English and for how many songs they focus on the lyrics. No exposure index was computed for music. However, Delia claimed that she frequently listened to English music (once or twice per week) and although she only paid attention to few songs' lyrics, she believed that this activity improved her listening skills and vocabulary retention.

*Films and television series*

Delia reported in the questionnaire that, on average, she was exposed to 3-4 hours of films and TV series per week, as well as to sports, documentaries and cooking shows. However, by looking into Delia's journal, it appeared that almost every day she used to watch at least one film in the evening, or one or two episodes of a TV series during her lunch break. Hence, Delia exposure to films and TV series was considerably higher that what she had previously stated in the questionnaire, approximately around 12-14 hours per week. Some of her favourite shows, plus what she was watching when she responded to the questionnaire, were: *Sherlock* (UK), *The Crown* (UK), *Breaking Bad* (USA), *Stranger Things* (USA), *Sex Education* (UK) and *Scrubs* (USA). She preferred the original English version because she liked to listen to the natural voices of the actors and original dialogues "because sometimes, idiomatic expressions and untranslatable jokes get lost in the Italian dubbed translation" (from Delia's journal). For a better understanding, she relied on English subtitling. Delia noticed that the prolonged exposure to films and TV series improved her listening and reading comprehension, as well as her vocabulary retention and grammar.

Even though watching films and TV series was her main source of informal English input, it was a rather recent activity facilitated by online streaming platform such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Before moving to Pavia to attend university, Delia lived with her parents and she used to watch films and TV series on television, as she did not trust pirated websites for illegal streaming. It was because of her strong interest for *Game of Thrones* (USA) and *The Walking Dead* (USA) that Delia changed her viewing habits: at first, she switched from Italian dubbing to English because she preferred the original voices of the actors. Later, when Sky TV began to premiere the new episodes of the series in English (with Italian subtitles), she did not want to wait for the dubbed version to come out. She now watches English and American films and TV series in the L2 with English subtitling for a better understanding of the dialogues.

*Social networks and web research*

Every day and more than once per day, Delia said to check Instagram and Facebook where she followed international profiles and pages, with a large majority of accounts run by English native speakers. By habitually reading posts and watching short content videos in English on social networks, Delia perceived a boost in her listening skills, reading

comprehension, vocabulary retention and grammar, while no improvement was noticed in terms of her conversational skills. She used social networks for her personal interests, as well as academic ones. Delia appeared to be a keen, dedicated student. As she intended to write an experimental dissertation on animal behaviour, she spent her time doing field research and extensive online research in English (2-3 hours per week). During the longitudinal study, an article by Delia was published in the scientific journal *Animal Behaviour* and she began to write a new article. She also attended the 31st National Congress of the *Societas Herpetologica Italica* with a poster presentation in English. Similar to previous sources of informal input, her opinion was that the prolonged online research in English improved her reading comprehension, vocabulary retention and grammar.

*Videogames and YouTube*

During data collection Delia occasionally played videogames by herself, and she rarely engaged in online gaming (about one hour each time). However, from secondary school through her first years of high school (from Delia's interview):

(4) "*Diciamo che alle medie e i primi anni delle superiori, io non è che ero una persona molto sociale, c'è non mi piaceva proprio stare con tanta gente e quindi tendevo più a farmi un po' il mio piccolo mondo online, con gli amici online, avevo tipo dei giochini e cose del genere, quindi i primi approcci sono stati proprio su questi giochi online, in cui dovendo per forza parlare con qualcuno, facevo amicizia con la gente*" [I was not exactly a very social person, I did not really like being around so many people, so I had the tendency to create my little online world, with online friends, with which I used to play online videogames where I necessarily had to talk to somebody and eventually become friends"] (author's translation).

Since she wanted to know more about her favourite videogames, Delia began to watch gameplay videos on YouTube and quickly widen her interests by also watching video tutorials, reviews, music video, stand-up comedy, film trailers and recipe videos. Back then there were few Italian YouTubers streaming on her main topic of interest (i.e., gameplay), therefore watching YouTube videos in English was inevitable. At the time of the study Delia still watched YouTube videos regularly (about 2 hours per week) and believed that this activity improved her listening skills, reading comprehension, vocabulary retention and grammar. However, she was no longer interested in gameplay videos like she had been when she was younger:

(5) "*Si è visto un po' com'è cambiato il mondo di YouTube, è un po' brutto da dire però è diventato proprio per bambini. Le persone che seguivo hanno smesso di fare video gameplay e quindi mi sono più concentrata magari a giocare per conto mio quando riesco*" ["It's sad to say but the YouTube scenario has changed, and these videos today are a bit childish. The people I used to follow do not even do gameplay videos anymore, so whenever I have time, I just play videogames by myself"] (author's translation).

*Other activities: Pen Pal World*

During the first online meeting, almost by chance, Delia revealed that from 2012 to 2018-19 she wrote letters in English to Anna, her pen pal from Pasadena (USA), met through the *Pen Pal World*[2] programme. When they began exchanging letters, Delia was in second grade of secondary school and her American friend was already in high school, being two years older. They used to write about their own cultures, exchanging little gifts such as candies and postcards, and Anna would tell her about life in the American high school. In 2017, the two met in person for the first time as Anna organised a trip to Italy and stayed at Delia's house for a couple of weeks. At that time, Delia was in her last years of high school. Ideally, Delia was supposed to go and visit Anna in the USA and Anna wanted to come back to Italy, but the Covid-19 pandemic put plans on hold. The two were still in contact and sometimes they texted via WhatsApp. When asked if she had noticed any improvement in her English competence thanks to this prolonged and continuous activity, Delia was not sure about her answer because she had never thought about the language learning aspect since she was just making friends; however, she supposed so.

### 4.1.2. *The relationship with the English language*

The first time Delia had to deal with English outside school contexts was when she was in elementary school and her uncle, who had moved to Canada, used to call frequently Delia's parents. Sometimes, he would ask to put Delia through the phone and instead of Italian he would talk to her in English to make her practice. At that time, she had been studying English for just two years, and she dreaded those phone calls with terror: "*Vivevo queste telefonate con un terrore assurdo. Andavo totalmente in panico perché non sapevo cosa dire, facevo brutta figura e quindi mollavo il telefono a mio un papà*" ["I lived these phone calls absolute

2. www.penpalworld.com.

terror. I usually panicked because I did not know what to say, thinking I was making a bad impression and handed the receiver back to my father"] (author's translation). In recalling these episodes, Delia admitted that as 'forced' as those phone calls were, she regretted not having engaged in conversations in English with her uncle while growing up. It was only afterwards, when Delia was about 13-14 years old, that she willingly approached informal English input: first through videogames and then with YouTube shortly after. As mentioned above, Delia's reserved nature got her close to these sources of informal input and her access habits widened with time (cf. 4.1.1). Concurrently, she began to realise that those English was becoming easier to understand:

(6) "*Più video guardavo più era chiaro, a scuola la professoressa ci ha sempre molto spinto a parlare con lei, fare ricerche, compiti eccetera, ma sicuramente YouTube e le cose che facevo per conto mio hanno aiutato tanto*" ["The more gameplay (videos) I watched, the easier it became and yes in school our teacher was very insistent on practicing conversation and gave us active tasks, research, for homework, but I think what really did it for me was YouTube and the other things I did on my own"] (author's translation).

Another episode she liked to recall was related to music:

(7) "*Avevo questo CD della colonna sonora di Mamma Mia! che adoravo che adoravo cioè lo ascoltavo sempre, però non capivo niente delle parole. Anni dopo riascoltandolo a caso mi sono veramente accorta che le capivo e riuscivo a tradurle, ma senza pensarci, e quindi capivo il senso delle canzoni*" ["I had this CD of the *Mamma Mia!* soundtrack I adored, and I used to listen to it all the time without understanding a word. A couple of years later I was randomly listening to it again and without really realising at first, I could get every word and meaning of the songs"] (author's translation).

Entertainment was the primary reason for accessing informal English input and her wish to enjoy YouTube videos and music even more prompted Delia to improve her L2 competence:

(8) "*Diciamo che mi veniva di più da cercare di studiare meglio e capire meglio per potermi godere questi video*" ["In order to appreciate these videos more, it made me try to study better"],
(9) "*Mi ricordo che ogni volta che ascoltavo queste canzoni mi dicevo 'Un giorno riuscirò a imparare l'inglese in modo tale da capirle mentre le sento'. E effettivamente è successo*" ["I remember I listened to these songs, and I used to say to myself 'one day I will manage to learn English to the point where I will understand them as I listen to them' and that is what happened"] (author's translation).

Although Delia did not believe to have achieved a high-level of English proficiency, she did not feel the need to study the L2 to appreciate informal English activities anymore. In retracing her relationship with the English language, Delia's words revealed her driven personality and her constant aspiration for self-improvement. However, at the opposite end of this motivation, her low self-perceived English proficiency level emerged together with a mild social anxiety. In more than one occasion, during the longitudinal study, Delia pointed out that despite really liking the language she always had trouble speaking it: "*Ho il timore di quello che pensa la gente. Ma tuttora io mi faccio veramente tanti tanti problemi all'idea di dover parlare davanti a della gente in inglese*" ["I am afraid of what people may think. Still today, I make such a big deal out of the idea of having to talk in English in front of other people"] (author's translation). Even in familiar situations, for example with her American friend: "*Lei mi dice 'Ma sentiamoci ogni tanto'. E io già lì dico 'Oddio' so che poi mi impappino dall'ansia*" ["She said that we should call each other sometimes and just at the thought of it, I know I am going to stumble with words from nerves"] (author's translation). Delia defined her relationship with the English language as *complicated*. She did not find the language hard to use, but the pressure of delivering errorless sentences to avoid judgment led her to doubting herself and second-guessing her words:

(10) "*Quando parlo in inglese mi rendo conto che voglio dire una frase e la voglio dire bene […] mi agito perché non voglio fare errori e che gli altri pensino che non sono brava e alla fine balbetto*" ["When I speak in English, I know what I want to say […] but I get nervous since I do not want to make mistakes, because I imagine that people will assume I am not good at it and I begin to stutter"] (author's translation).

Since she only had these difficulties with conversation, she presumed it was because she lacked practice: "Right now I mostly read or write stuff in English. In high school I used to practice conversation more and I think that was better for my conversation skills". Delia said she was always aware whether she was talking in a proper manner or not, but her low self-perceived L2 competence appeared to be somehow disproven as she recalled an encounter with an American student visiting Pavia University:

(11) "*E non so, forse per il fatto che non c'era nessuna aspettativa che io parlassi bene, o non c'era nessun altro che stava ad ascoltare, lui alla fine mi fa 'Ah ma parlano tutti così bene l'inglese a Pavia?' Quello è stato il momento mio un po' più di orgoglio*" ["Maybe because it was just the two of us a nobody could judge me, or because there were no expectations about me speaking well, however at the end of our tour he asked me if everyone spoke English so well in Pavia. In that moment I was very proud of myself"] (author's translation).

Eventually, Delia admitted that she might have been too hard on herself and that she should always be proud of her L2 knowledge.

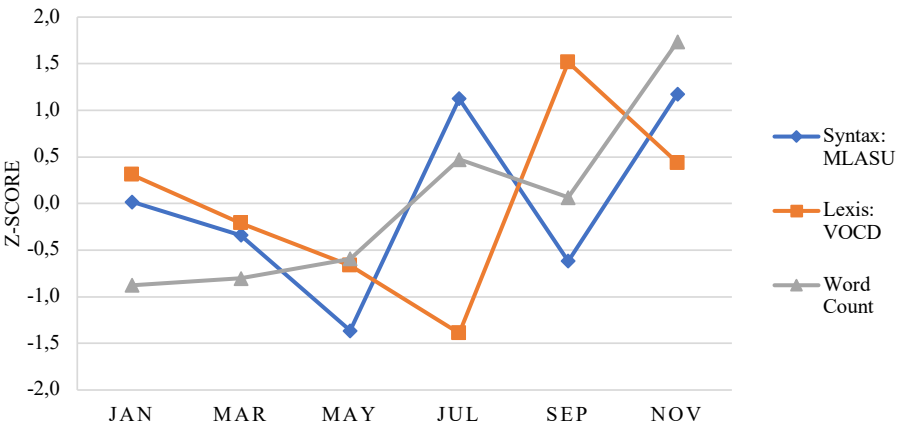
Before moving to the analysis of Delia's L2 oral productions, a brief comment on the pandemic and exposure habits during lockdown. Delia described that period as dull and monotonous. Having more free time, she watched more films and TV-series than usual, however since she also had to attend online classes, she tried to reduce her screen time devoting herself to more relaxing activity such as cooking. As soon as restrictions were lifted and life slowly began to move back to normal, her viewing habits returned to how they were before the pandemic hit.

### 4.1.3. *L2 development: observing CAF trajectories through time*

It should be recalled that, for the present study, complexity was analysed by means of (a) grammatical complexity and (b) lexical complexity, which in turn comprised two sub-dimensions, i.e., lexical diversity and lexical sophistication.

Figure 4.2 shows the development of Delia's complexity, measured by mean length of AS-units (MLASU for shortening) for grammatical complexity and VOCD (lexical diversity) for lexical complexity. Word count (normalised rate) was added for further analysis.

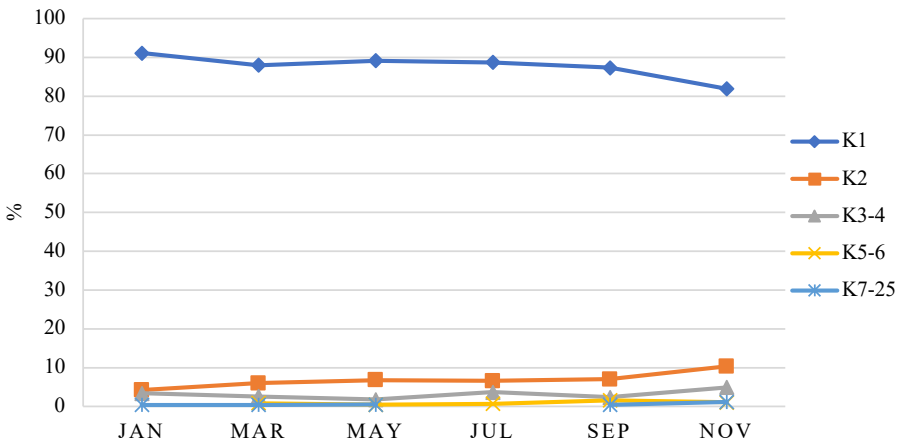
*Figure 4.2. Delia's grammatical and lexical complexity between January and November 2021*



During the first half of the study, the two trajectories shared the same downward direction, with lexical diversity (VOCD) ranking just above grammatical complexity (MLASU), which in turn reached its lowest point in May. Interestingly, this trend changed abruptly in July, when VOCD's lowest score was opposed to MLASU's significant upturn. The two measures strongly contrasted with each other until the end of data collection, switching positions in September as lexical diversity upstaged grammatical complexity one last time. At the end of the longitudinal study the two measures were still in contrast, however, the gap had narrowed as both grammatical complexity and lexical diversity placed themselves above the mean. Despite fluctuations, an overall ascending course can be observed among the two measures, meaning that by the end of the longitudinal study Delia produced more complex and more diverse monologues.

Moving now to the other dimension of lexical complexity, i.e., sophistication, Figure 4.3 outlines the distribution of Delia's lexical sophistication by means of 1-25K word frequency lists over time.

*Figure 4.3. The distribution of lexical sophistication in terms of 1-25K word frequency lists*

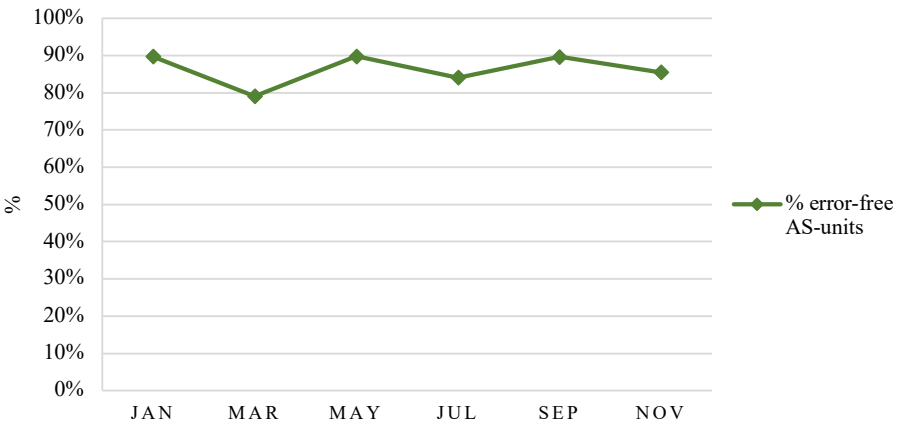



It is interesting to notice how, as time passes, Delia's L2 oral production slightly gained in sophistication, with K1 word list gradually decreasing from 91% in January to 82% in November. However, looking at the other K lists' scores, it is quite clear that Delia's lexical sophistication range was rather small, i.e., from K1 to K13 out of the 25K word

frequency lists. Although K2 word list was rising steadily from 4% to 10%, K3-4 fluctuated unevenly at the bottom (from 3% to 5%). As word families get more sophisticated Delia's percentages went even lower, with K5-6 and K7-25 barely reaching 1%. Some examples of her K7-25 words are *stutter*, *adrenaline*, *cheesier*, *togas*; K5-6: *cute*, *altar*, *pyjamas*, *dubbing*; K3-4: *flaws*, *plot*, *eager*, *portrayed*; K2: *cheating*, *punch*, *disappointing*, *attachment*; K1: *kisses*, *friends*, *pretty*, *wondering.*

Ten accuracy measures weighed errors in participants' monologues, consisting of a global measure of normalised error rate (1), specific measures for lexis (3), syntax (3), verbs (2) and (1) other (missing word). Figure 4.4 below shows the percentages of error-free AS-units per data collection.

*Figure 4.4. Percentages of error-free AS-units through time*




In March Delia's L2 production was less precise (79% of error-free AS-units), but as previously stated she improved in the following sessions. Overall, her monologues were quite accurate, with an average of 86% error-free AS-units. No significant improvement or decline can be reported. For an in-depth look at the different types of error produced in each data collection, Table 4.1 below presents raw data (i.e., raw number of errors) of the eight remaining measures for accuracy, i.e., lexis, syntax and verbs. Measure 13 – Other (missing word) is not represented since Delia never made this type of error. No remarkable trends nor evident relations between measures can be reported overall.

*Table 4.1. Delia's type of errors in each data collection over time (raw data)*

| Session | Words in L1 | Words based on L1 | Wrong word choice | Singular / Plural | Articles/ Preposition/ Pronouns | Syntax based on L1 | Form | Tense, Aspect, Mood | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jan | | | 2 | | | 1 | | 2 | 5 |
| Mar | | 2 | | | 2 | 1 | | 7 | 12 |
| May | 1 | | 1 | | 2 | 1 | 2 | | 7 |
| Jul | 1 | | | 2 | 1 | 2 | | 1 | 7 |
| Sep | | 1 | | 1 | 3 | | | 1 | 6 |
| Nov | | | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 | | 1 | 9 |
| **Total** | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 10 | 8 | 2 | 12 | 46 |

Throughout the study, Delia resorted to Italian words in only two instances, while trying to recall the English word for what she wanted to say. Interestingly, she used the right English words after the Italian ones:

(12) "My dad was the one giving me, I don't know how to say this, the *paghetta*? The the, like monthly, the pocket money",
(13) "Because then they put the *palco*, stage, right? The stage, they just […]".

Apparently without any notice, she produced lexical transfers of Italian words such as 'labial' instead of 'lip-reading', from Italian *labiale*: "through the **labial**, I understand that he says 'I'm sorry'", and 'genetist' instead of 'geneticist', from *genetista*: "famous people have studied there before, like Carlo Goldoni or Cavalli Sforza who is a famous **genetist**. Other examples of L1 based formation are: "**How** do you call like, the person that controls the lights?" instead of 'what', from Italian *come* and "she told me like, some kind of **argument**" instead of 'topic', from *argomento.* Only in January Delia made two wrong word choices: "one of the **third** guys" instead of 'three' and "talk to the other **guys** of the family" instead of 'people' or 'members', since she was not referring exclusively to the male members of the family. While 'guy' traditionally referred to a male individual, the plural form 'you guys' has become a widely used, gender-neutral address term. This use is especially prevalent in TV series and films, wherein a mixed-gender group is commonly addressed as 'you guys' (Heyd 2010). Given this linguistic trend, Delia's generalisation of 'guys' beyond direct address may reflect the influence of the widespread neutral usage of '***you guys***' in the media.

A further look into Delia's L2 production revealed that she struggled in maintaining tense consistency when she was telling stories, either at past or present tense. Since lack of tense consistency can be occasionally

considered as target-like, for example with reported speech and 'historical present'[3], only a-grammatical forms were considered for analysis:

(14) "I think I just had a few lessons, and I don't think I even **have** an introduction […] I was expecting like a special day to introduce us on what we **are** going to study and what we **are** going to do […]",
(15) "I found it easier with the time passing. But at the same time, we-we **have** to go to this school in Dublin and we **have** to take English lessons. The problem was that […]",
(16) "He understands something looking at the dog and he **decided** to get back to her",
(17) "But at the same time we-we **have** to go to this school in Dublin and we **have** to take English lessons, but the problem was that the majority of the students were Italians so […]".

In May Delia produced two wrong forms (conjugation) in two separate utterances, i.e., "It became clear they had **forgot**(ten) […]" and "I'm used to **see**(ing) people […]". As regards the use of singular and plural agreement, Delia made two rather serious errors in two separate sessions: "there **is** a lot of people" and "there **were these** news". At times she omitted articles, prepositions, or pronouns, but it appeared to be a lack of automaticity, since in other instances these features were correctly produced, for example: "So, like the first day, everyone dress- dresses up in their pyjamas, the second day everyone dresses up elegant and (**the**) third day in their bikinis". Other times she just used prepositions and articles incorrectly as shown in the following examples:

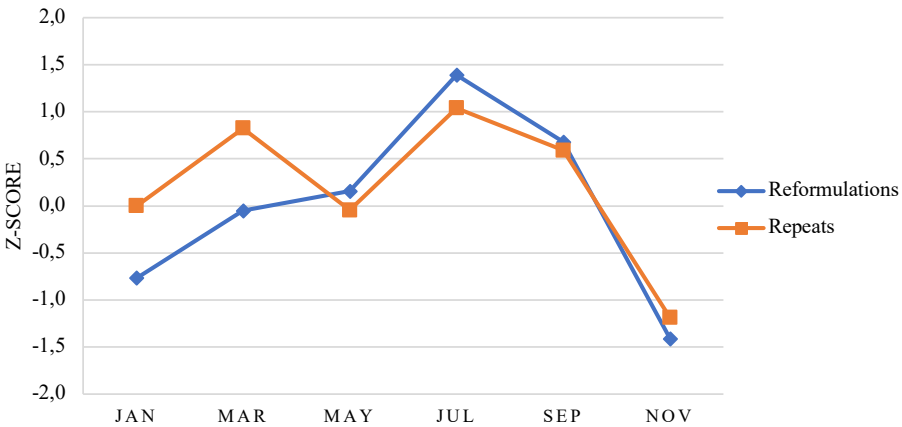
(18) "It was a normal experience **to** me",
(19) "[…] it was **a** middle school or the first year of high school".

Throughout the study, apart from September, Delia produced at least one utterance with L1 based structure in each data collection, for example: "**it's not enough what I earn** to pay all the expenses" which calques the Italian *non è abbastanza* by anticipating 'it' instead of the subject 'what I earn'. However, as previously stated, given the low occurrence of these errors, no syntactic pattern of errors has been identified.

3. Defined by Collins dictionary as "the present tense used to narrate past events, usually employed in English for special effect or in informal use, as in *A week ago I'm walking down the street and I see this accident*", www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/historical-present.

The present study focused on repair fluency, measured through reformulations and repeats, both normalised per 1000 words. During her interview, Delia pointed out more than once how much speaking in English made her anxious to the point of stuttering, so hesitation phenomena were expected. As shown in Figure 4.5, the two trajectories seem to follow a quite similar upward trend at first, with the course of reformulations fluctuating slightly and repeats following a more linear trend. In other words, as time passed, Delia was becoming more fluent.

*Figure 4.5. Delia's reformulations and repeats over time*




By the end of July, she seemed to have achieved greater confidence. However, as the length of her L2 monologues grew (cf. Figure 4.2), so did her hesitations, leading to a noticeable decline in fluency and ultimately resulting in less fluent speech by the end of the longitudinal monitoring. By comparing these results with complexity and accuracy (Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.4), it appears that longer, more complex utterances (i.e., MLASU) negatively affected Delia's fluency but not accuracy. A greater number of repairs could be interpreted as an indicator of increased speech monitoring or heightened attention on accuracy (Kormos, 1999; Lambert *et al.* 2017, 2020; Suzuki 2021). Therefore, it could be argued that the increase in repair frequency (i.e., less fluent speech) may be a sign of positive L2 developmental change (e.g., more frequent speech monitoring and consequently more accurate). The following examples are taken from Delia's L2 production in November:

(20) “But in the end, I guess, because my, how do you say, like the years I spent in high school, I actually had good grades and I really liked it, so my professors decided to give me the maximum grades, the maximum grade”.
(21) “And but I remember and one thing I remember is that from my final exam, I-I actually brought this, the topic was the-the feeling of how do you say, like when you feel that you belong to-to a place, but because it’s that there is a family there or because it’s just a physical place”.

Delia’s deliberate attempts to find the right words and structure seem to suggest that she was prioritising accuracy over fluency. For example, the repetition of “I remember” and the use of fillers such as “how do you say” indicate an ongoing search for the appropriate vocabulary and expression. Additionally, her frequent restructuring of ideas, such as in “the feeling of how do you say, like when you feel that you belong to a place,” reflects an effort to communicate more precisely. While these repairs suggest heightened attention to accuracy, they also disrupt the flow of the conversation. The presence of disfluencies, such as “and but” and multiple instances of “to,” further signals Delia’s struggle to balance accuracy with fluency. On the other hand, Delia’s stuttering was also influenced by her anxious predisposition, which may have shaped her speech with what is known as ‘normal dysfluency’, including pauses, hesitators (e.g., er, um) and repetitions (Biber *et al*. 2021: 1048).

#### 4.1.4. *Summary of Delia’s case study*

A closer observation of Delia’s private sphere provided a more complete picture of her exposure habits to informal sources of English input, as well as her attitudes and motivations towards the L2. Compared to what she had previously stated in the questionnaire, Delia’s exposure to the different types of informal English input was considerably higher, especially in terms of films and TV series, going from 3 to 4 hours to approximately 12-14 hours per week. While her first contacts with informal L2 resources were out of necessity i.e., lack of Italian YouTubers dealing with her interests, she accessed informal L2 input because of authenticity and media immersion. Additionally, motivation played a significant role, as Delia’s driven personality and her constant aspiration for self-improvement (positively) conflicted with her low self-perceived English proficiency level. This contrast encouraged her to actively seek informal exposure to the L2.

Delia’s L2 oral development was characterized by both stability and instability. Analysing the in/stability of CAF trajectories can be helpful in identifying different types of relationships, as for instance the potential

relation between fluency and accuracy. As previously stated, greater number of repairs can be interpreted as an indicator of increased speech monitoring or heightened attention on accuracy (Kormos, 1999; Lambert *et al*. 2017, 2020; Suzuki 2021). By comparing Delia's accuracy and fluency rates it could be tentatively argued that the increase in repair frequency (i.e., less fluent) may be a sign of positive L2 developmental change (e.g., more frequent speech monitoring and consequently more accurate). Nevertheless, Delia's stuttering could be influenced by other individual factors such as for instance her anxious nature and hence her repeats could be considered as 'normal disfluencies' (Biber *et al*. 2021: 1048). While grammatical complexity (MLASU) and lexical diversity (VOCD) showed clear signs of gradual improvement, lexical sophistication improved slightly. By the end of the longitudinal study, it appeared that Delia used more moderately sophisticated vocabulary but avoided high sophistication level (i.e., K7-25), a result that seems to contrast previous studies (Kusyk 2017) where watching videos informally was found to positively influence sophistication. More details on these matters will be discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

## 4.2. Findings from the case study: Grace

Grace was a 20 years old first-year undergraduate student in Chemistry. She had been studying English since primary school when she was six years old, and she self-assessed her English proficiency level as B2[4]. Prior to university, Grace attended a language-specialised high school where, in addition to English, she studied German and Spanish. At that time, she went to Ireland for a three-months study vacation where she met her international friends (both native and non-native speakers of English) with whom she was still very much in contact via social networks during the longitudinal study (from Grace's journal, in English):

(22) "I took advantage of the European Football Cup and spoke with many of my international friends, from Ireland, Bavaria and Latvia. They all support Italy",
(23) "My Irish friend Danny shared his spectacular pasta-fail with me, it involved not enough water, too much cooking time, some chicken, cheddar and what I presume was pesto sauce. A horrific conversation for my Italian soul, but extremely funny altogether".

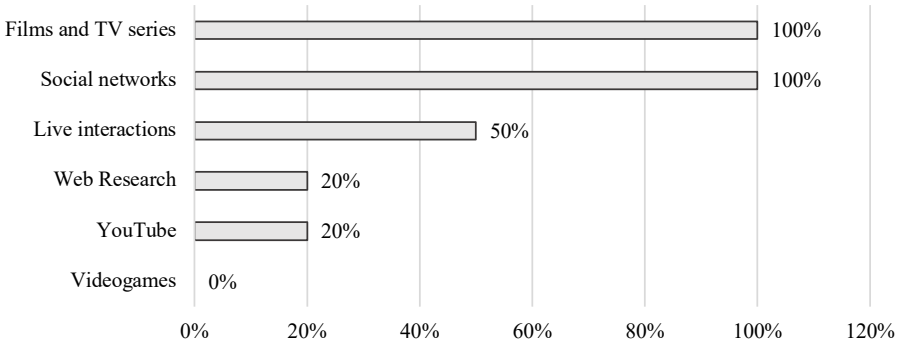
4. Wording elaborated from the CEFR self-assessment grid: 'you can express yourself articulately on complex and abstract topics, such as politics, the environment and economy; you can have a long conversation with a native English speaker without too much effort'.

During data collection she did not attend any English classes or lessons taught in English. Interestingly, Grace's journal revealed that she was an avid reader. Books were not investigated as a source of informal English input in the questionnaire, but Grace's journal allowed to keep track of her readings in English throughout the longitudinal study. She claimed to read at least three hours per day and when she really enjoyed a novel, she could read from four to five hours straight or more, thus making books her primary source of informal English input. Before delving into Grace's readings, the following sections investigate the other sources of informal English input surveyed in the questionnaire.

### 4.2.1. *Major sources of informal English input*

According to her responses to the questionnaire Grace scored an exposure index of 58, placing herself above the mean (i.e., 41) and on the higher end of the average-values cluster (i.e., 20-61) (see Section 3.3). Grace's primary sources of informal English input were films and TV series and social networks (both at 100%), followed by live face-to-face interactions (50%) and at considerable distance web research and YouTube (both at 20%). Grace did not play videogames in English language (Figure 4.6).

*Figure 4.6. The distribution of Grace's informal access to L2 English input*




Although no exposure index was calculated for *music*, Grace claimed to listen to English music every day and that she paid attention to most songs' lyrics. She believed that this activity led to improvement in her vocabulary retention only.

*Films and television series*

Grace reported in the questionnaire that, on average, she was exposed to 4-5 hours of films and TV series per week. On top of that, she watched the news in English. However, by looking into Grace's journal, it emerged that every day she watched at least two episodes of a TV series with a tendency to binge-watch: "every episode lasts about 25 minutes, so I think I have watched four or five episodes in a row"; "episodes last around 40 minutes each, so I manage to at least two episodes in a row". Therefore, Grace exposure to films and TV series was higher than what she had previously stated in the questionnaire, approximately around 9-10 hours per week. Some of her favourite shows and the one she was watching when she responded to the questionnaire were: *Shadows and Bone* (USA), *Legacies* (USA), *The 100* (USA), *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (USA), *Sex Education* (UK), *A Discovery of Witches* (UK). Grace preferred to watch films and TV series in original English because she liked to listen to the actors' natural voices. Moreover, she believed that this activity could help her improve L2 knowledge and specifically, she noticed that the prolonged exposure to films and TV series improved her vocabulary retention. She found subtitles too distracting, and she did not like how sometimes they did not match the dialogues. Nevertheless, there were some occasions in which she preferred the Italian dubbed version, especially when dialogues were technical and complicated, or when she was too tired and did not feel like paying attention to the dialogues.

According to her journal, Grace mainly watched films and TV series on Netflix, hence relied on the streaming platform's programming and releases without looking for other pirated sources.

*Social networks and live interactions*

Social networks and live interactions were investigated in the questionnaire as two separate sources of informal input. However, in Grace's case they appeared to be strongly interconnected. Every day and more once per day, Grace logged into her Instagram and Snapchat profiles where she checked the latest news, watched short content videos on her favourite topics, namely books: "*Seguo scrittori, cosplayers, pagine sui libri e consigli di lettura [...] nei salvati ho tantissimi video e post che ti suggeriscono cosa leggere in base alla trope preferita oppure le nuove uscite*" ["I follow writers, cosplayers, pages about books and readings […] I save so many videos and posts about books suggestions based on which trope you prefer or new publications"] (author's translation). She engaged in written and video chats with her international friends through Snapchat

and Instagram and even though these conversations were mediated by a screen, she considered them as face-to-face interactions. On Instagram you can post photos and videos to which your followers can reply with short comments and direct messages on written form. On the other hand, Snapchat mostly relies on short videos to which your friends usually reply with another video, thus resulting in some sort of 'spoken' video chat. Grace engaged in these face-to-screen conversations on Snapchat at least twice per month and for more than two hours each time. Whenever Grace and her friends had the chance, they turned these interactions into actual videocalls. The recent introduction of voice messages on Instagram gave her yet another chance to use spoken English instead of its written form.

By habitually using social networks as a mean of communication, Grace noticed a considerable improvement in her conversational skills, whereas her vocabulary retention, grammar, listening comprehension as well as conversational skills benefited from her face-to-screen interactions with her international friends.

*Web research and YouTube*

Even if for a very short time (i.e., less than 30 minutes), every day Grace liked to browse YouTube or do some web research on the latest news, books, cinema, music and travels. She also liked to watch video tutorials and reviews, as well as interviews and music videos. Sometimes she did online research for academic purposes, but for the most part she accessed these informal sources of L2 input for personal interests and entertainment. Grace noticed that watching videos in English on YouTube as well as searching the web in the L2 led to improved vocabulary retention and she believed that web research also improved her English grammar. Apart from language learning benefits, using English as a research tool allowed her to find the latest news on almost any given topic and that was Grace's main reason for accessing YouTube and the web in the L2.

*Other activities: reading novels*

As previously mentioned, Grace's journal entries immediately revealed a strong passion for reading books in English, in particular fantasy novels. Throughout the longitudinal study Grace scrupulously annotated her readings and showed an impressive reading speed with 25 books read between January and December 2021. However, considering her speed, the total number of books read during the study could be even more: on August 8 (2021) she wrote: "I began this four-book saga [1,552 pages long]

called *The Bargainer* by Laura Thalassa" and on the 15th of the same month: "I have finished the saga, I have read for a couple of hours every day". Consequently, it can be said with certainty that reading books was her primary source of informal English input. She read at least three hours per day and if the story was particularly good, she could easily stay up all night to finish the novel or the whole saga at once (from Grace's journal, in English):

(24) "Last night I stayed up until 4 AM reading *The Shadows Between Us* by Tricia Levenseller. About 300 pages in four hours",
(25) "I came across this saga by Tracy Wolff, I read the first book at once on Thursday afternoon and I have finished the last one today [Sunday]. Friday night I stayed up until 5 AM to finish the second book of the saga, I think I read for about six hours every day".

She prioritized books over TV series (from Grace's journal): "I momentarily quit watching *Gossip Girl* because I just received this new book […]" but was very careful of her university career: "I had to restrain myself from reading because I have the exams session now and I was reading three to four hours per day, sometimes even more". Despite her good intentions, sometimes her passion and curiosity won over her diligence. On June 6 (2021) she wrote: "I have read *The Bridge Kingdom* by Danielle L. Jensen at once, in a little bit more than three hours per day. But I will wait to download the second book because I must study for my exams" and only a few days later (June 26th, 2021): "Here goes my good intentions: I downloaded Jensen's second book and read it in one day". Her dedication to fantasy sagas was remarkable, so much that when a new volume of a series was published, she occasionally liked to re-read all the books from the beginning: "I am planning to read *An Ember in The Ashes* by Sabaa Tahir again because I have just realised that the whole saga has been published".

In her interview Grace explained that, besides a general interest for the genre, she first approached fantasy novels in English due to force majeure, i.e., the unavailability of fantasy books translated in Italian. Fantasy novels are still considered quite a niche in Italy and the Italian translations are either scarce or published after a very long time, hence Grace 'by-passed' the issue by purchasing the books directly in English. On rare occasions, she waited for the Italian translation, for instance when she did not know the original language. She also made an effort to support Italian writers, even though she did not like what was being published at the time of the study.

Although Grace approached this source of informal English input out of personal interests and motivations, she acknowledged that, over the years, fantasy novels' rich and varied vocabulary improved her grammar and lexical competence.

### 4.2.2. *The relationship with the English language*

Grace's passion and predisposition for foreign languages has been with her for as long as she could remember, as proven by her choice to attend a language-specialised high school where she studied English, German and Spanish. During high school she learned to appreciate every aspect of the English language, "*sia l'aspetto puramente grammaticale che i modi tutti particolari di dire le cose, come i modi di dire che abbiamo noi*" ["from the purely grammatical aspect to every idiomatic expression"] (author's translation). However, the real coup de foudre happened with English literature: "*Soprattutto la letteratura. A me la letteratura inglese piace tantissimo, specialmente quella del diciannovesimo secolo, di tutti i tipi, gotica, da Cime Tempestose a Frankenstein, Dracula, Dickens, la Austen*" ["Literature in particular. I really like English literature, my favourite is the nineteen-century English literature, any kind, gothic novels, from Wuthering Heights to Frankenstein, Dracula, Dickens, Jane Austen"] (author's translation). Her love for reading moved her to approach English informally for the first time:

(26) "*E ho iniziato, ho provato la prima volta con un libro che conoscevo molto bene che era l'ultimo libro della serie di Harry Potter. L'avevo già letto 200 volte in tutti i modi possibili e ho provato per approcciarlo in inglese e facevo molta fatica al punto che mi scrivevo sopra il libro che era un cartaceo le parole che non conoscevo ed erano molte, e avevo iniziato verso forse le medie quindi tredici anni quattordici anni*" ["The first time I tried I was 13 or 14 years old. I remember I began with a *Harry Potter* book. I have read it already, at least 200 times and when I began to read it in English I had some difficulties, to the point where I began to write on the book all the words that I did not know, and they were a lot"] (author's translation).

However, her study commitments led her to put this interest on hold in favour of an extra-scholastic activity in English, to which she fully acknowledged a significant improvement in her L2 competence:

(27) "*Poi in seconda superiore ho iniziato un'attività extra scolastica che era una simulazione dell'Onu fatta tutta in inglese. Ci incontravamo una volta a*

*settimana, avevamo anche dei compiti da preparare a casa. All'inizio è stata una fatica, poi è scattato qualcosa e ho realizzato che a leggere documenti formali in inglese e fare le simulazioni delle conferenze delle nazioni unite il mio livello si è alzato molto*" ["When I was in my second year of high-school I began this ONU simulations. We met once every week and we also had some homework to do. At first it was very hard, but then something just clicked, and I realised that by reading all these documents and taking part in simulations of UN conferences my English level had improved significantly"] (author's translation).

This language awareness boosted her L2 confidence and urged her to pick up her favourite novels once more. The difference was immediate:

(28) "*C'era stato un netto miglioramento e riuscivo a leggere senza problemi. Certo il linguaggio del fantasy è molto specifico e a volte dovevo cercare qualche parola ma ne avevo sempre meno bisogno*" ["There was a clear improvement, I was able to read effortlessly. Of course, fantasy novels' vocabulary is so specific that sometimes I looked some words up, but most of the time I did not need to"] (author's translation).

Given the difficulty in finding the books she wanted to read in Italian, Grace began to purchase fantasy novels in English and that still was her primary source of informal L2 input.

Grace defined her relationship with the English language as a wonderful *love story*, one that was meant to last:

(29) "*Mi piace veramente tutto. E mi piace molto la semplicità dell'inglese cioè il modo molto semplice e diretto che ha di centrare il punto, non fa troppi giri di parole, però al contempo il modo di trasmettere cose che noi magari in italiano ci perdiamo nel senso che a me l'espressione che piace tantissimo dell'inglese, ad esempio, è 'to fall in love' cioè che ci cadi dentro e non lo scegli che noi invece ci perdiamo nella nostra espressione*" ["I love English, its simplicity and straightforwardness amaze me all the time. Without using too many words, it conveys things that for example in Italian we might lose, like the expression 'to fall in love' it means that you actually fall into it and not by choice and that is impossible to translate in Italian"],
(30) "*Devo dire che ogni volta che posso parlarla, leggerla, sentirla, sono sempre molto contenta per cui se potessi coscientemente scegliere di dire 'leggo il libro in inglese' 'lo leggo in italiano', lo leggerei in inglese probabilmente*" ["Every time I have the chance to speak, read, listen to it [the English language] I am always very happy and today if I can choose between reading in Italian or in English, I chose English"] (author's translation).

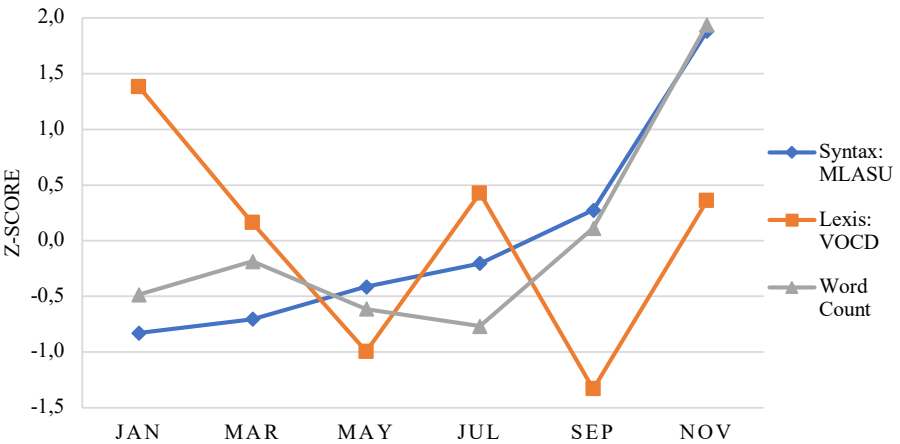
Before moving to the analysis of Grace's L2 oral productions, a brief comment on the pandemic and exposure habits during lockdown. At that

time Grace was in her final year of high school and during the first month of lockdown the school was not able to schedule an organic study programme. Therefore, Grace had a lot of free time and she tried to keep herself busy to avoid thinking about the events that were happening which made her rather blue: "*Non mi piaceva pensare alla situazione perché poi mi buttano giù di morale non potevo vedere gli amici per cui non mi piaceva pensarci. E quindi tutti i libri che su cui riuscivo a mettere le mani li leggevo, praticamente non mi staccavo, ero in pianta stabile sul letto a leggere*" ["I was reading every book that I could find, all day, every day. I did not want to think about it [the pandemic], it made me pretty miserable, especially thinking about my friends that I could not see for who knows how long"] (author's translation). Hence, access to books in the L2 grew considerably in the first months of lockdown, however, as soon as online classes were scheduled on a regular basis, she went back to her usual reading time (i.e., a couple of hours before bedtime) and dedicated more time to the preparation of her high school exams.

### 4.2.3. *L2 development: observing CAF trajectories through time*

Figure 4.7 shows the development of Grace's complexity, measured by mean length of AS-units (MLASU) for grammatical complexity and VOCD (lexical diversity) for lexical complexity. Word count (normalised rate) was added for further analysis.

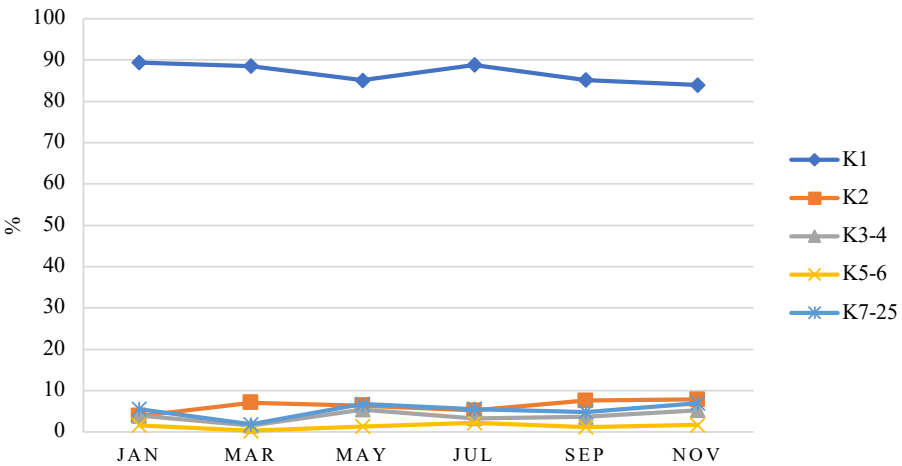
*Figure 4.7. Grace's grammatical and lexical complexity between January and November 2021*



It is immediately noticeable how grammatical and lexical complexity followed two different trajectories. While MLASU ascending course suggests that throughout the longitudinal monitoring Grace elicited longer, more complex sentences, lexical diversity (VOCD) follows an uneven course. From the beginning of data collection until the session in May, Grace's monologues were increasingly less diverse, meaning that the range of words found in her language use was less complex. Despite the small improvement in July, in the following session (September) diversity reached its lowest score, only to recover slightly at the end of the study and yet still placing at a lower score than average. It is said that as a text increase in length, there is a corresponding decrease in the value of diversity as measured by VOCD (and vice versa; cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.4.5) and while this seemed to be the case, by comparing Grace's first and last monologues, it also appeared that her L2 oral production did not gain in diversity.

Moving now to the other dimension of lexical complexity, i.e., sophistication, Figure 4.8 outlines the distribution of Grace's lexical sophistication by means of 1-25K word frequency lists over time.

*Figure 4.8. The distribution of lexical sophistication in terms of 1-25K word frequency lists*

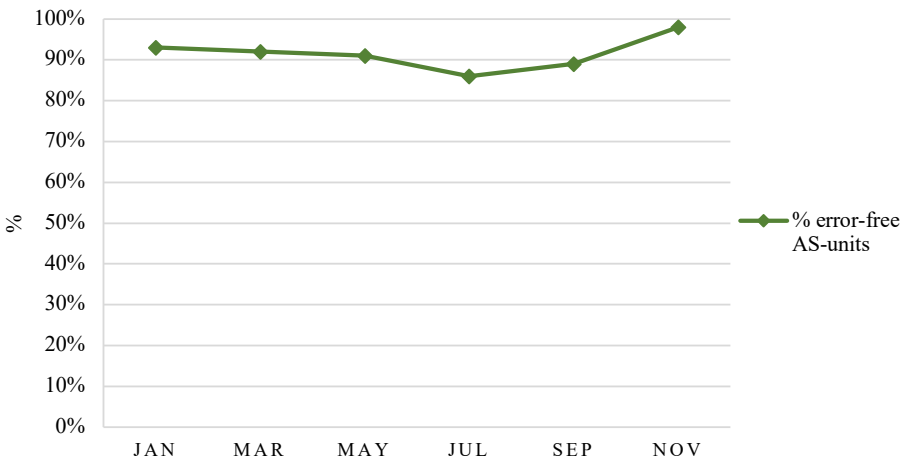



As time passes, Grace's L2 oral production gained in sophistication, with K1 word list (i.e., the most common, most frequently used words) gradually decreasing from 89% in January to 83% in November. Looking at the other K lists' scores, it is possible to notice that Grace had a fairly

large range of lexical sophistication, i.e., from K1 to K23 out of the 25K word frequency lists. K2 word list went from 4% to 8%, K3-4 from 4% to 5% and K5-6 always around 2%. The group K7-25 (i.e., the most sophisticated and thus less frequently used words), moved from 6% in January to 7% in November, showing not only an improvement, but also that Grace vocabulary was rather sophisticated from the beginning of the study. Some examples of her K7-25 words are *officiated*, *crone*, *cufflinks*, *horrendous*; K5-6: *flirt*, *converge*, *braces*, *footing*; K3-4: *distinctly*, *landscapes*, *flock*, *preacher*, *confirmation*; K2: *elder*, *faints*, *amused*, *clever*; K1: *expectations*, *raisings*, *bedsides*, *troubled*.

Ten accuracy measures weighed errors in participants' monologues, consisting of a global measure of normalised error rate (1), specific measures for lexis (3), syntax (3), verbs (2) and (1) other (missing word). Figure 4.9 below shows the percentages of error free AS-units over time.

*Figure 4.9. Percentages of error-free AS-units through time*




Overall, Grace's L2 oral production was fairly accurate with an average of 92% error-free AS-units. In July, Grace's monologues were less precise (86% of error-free AS-units), however, from the beginning of data collection (January, 93%) to the end of the longitudinal monitoring (November, 98%) her L2 oral production clearly gained accuracy. For an in-depth look at the different types of error produced in each data collection, Table 4.2 presents raw data (i.e., raw number of errors) of the seven remaining measures for accuracy, i.e., lexis, syntax and verbs.

Measure 5 – Words in L1 and measure 6 – Word formation based on the L1 are not represented since Grace never made this type of errors. Grammatical errors occurred more frequently than lexical ones, however, no remarkable trends nor evident relations between measures can be reported overall (Table 4.2).

*Table 4.2. Grace's type of errors in each data collection over time (raw data)*

| Session | Wrong Word Choice | Singular/ Plural | Articles/ Prepositions/ Pronouns | Syntax based on L1 | Form | Tense, aspect, mood | Other (missing word) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jan | 1 | | | | | 2 | | 3 |
| Mar | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | 7 |
| May | | | 2 | | | | 3 | 5 |
| Jul | 3 | | 2 | 1 | | 2 | 2 | 10 |
| Sep | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 2 | 7 |
| Nov | | 1 | | | 1 | | | 2 |
| **Total** | 8 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 34 |

Throughout the study, in separate occasions, Grace repeated the same type of errors concerning verb form and the use of singular and plural agreement. More specifically, she sometimes omitted the ending -s: "[…] before the actual wedding **start**(s)" and "The man **gesture**(s) for music to start" and allocated the word 'people' (uncountable) as singular: "[…] and there **is** a lot of people around her", "There **is** a lot of people watching". Although the contracted form '***there's a lot of people***' is widely used and considered acceptable in informal speech, Grace explicitly produced the full form '***there is***', suggesting a more conscious grammatical choice rather than an automatic use of informal contractions. The repetition of the same type of error (in separate sessions) also happened with the omission of the possessive pronoun 'my': "Since I am in **(my)** first year here at university" and "My family from **(my)** mom's side is from the south of Italy". However, as shown in the last example, it appears to be a lack of automaticity, since in the same utterance the possessive pronoun was correctly produced.

On rare occasions Grace misused articles, prepositions and pronouns, as in the following examples:

(31) "And this guy, **which** is Richard Gere",
(32) "And then the car goes **on** the flower",
(33) "Because the priest made **the** face like he was absolutely surprised",
(34) "And it was **a** New Year's actually".

More frequently she used one word instead of another (i.e., wrong word choice), as for instance:

(35) "[…] not enough space to, you know, **settle** your bags and so on",
(36) "At the beginning it was, you know, a very small sum, something like 10 cents, 20 cents, just so I could learn the whole concept of how many **objects** you actually needed to save",
(37) "It is not a single story, but rather two parallels, **one-parallel ones**".

However, these mistakes seem to happen because of a lack of automaticity since they do not follow any lexical pattern.

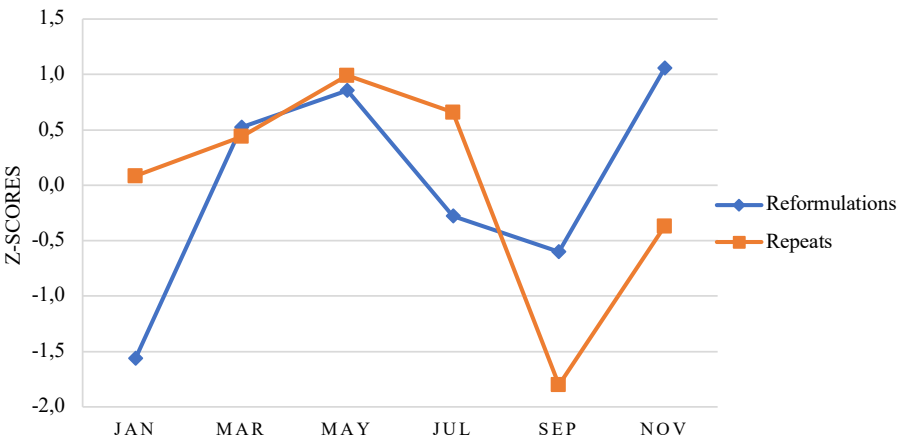
Finally, looking at tense, sometimes Grace lacked consistency while storytelling, as reported in the next examples:

(38) "I believe it might have been a memory in which they **are** getting married",
(39) "So, the wedding ends happily and they **got** married".

To conclude the review of Grace's accuracy in L2 oral production, given the low occurrences of errors considered for the present analysis, no syntactic nor lexical pattern of errors has been identified.

Finally, the analysis focused on repair fluency, measured through reformulations and repeats, both normalised per 1000 words. Throughout the longitudinal study, the elicitation of reformulations and repeats followed two different non-linear trajectories (Figure 4.10).

*Figure 4.10. Grace's reformulations and repeats over time*



Between January and November 2021 reformulations followed an ascending trend (i.e., fewer reformulations, more fluent speech), whereas repeats substantially worsen (i.e., more repeats, less fluent speech). Interestingly, at the beginning of data collection the two measures were already at odds with each other but on reverse, i.e., Grace produced fewer repeats and more reformulations. In consideration of the non-linearity of the two trajectories, it is possible to assume that Grace's fluency did not vary much throughout the longitudinal study. Overall, her L2 productions presented syntactic complexity, generally accurate grammar with minor spoken-language errors, and consistent fluency despite occasional repetitions and hesitations.

#### 4.2.4. *Summary of Grace's case study*

A closer look into Grace's private sphere provided a more complete picture pertaining to her habits of exposure to informal sources of English input, as well as her motivations and attitudes towards the language. Compared to what she had previously stated in the questionnaire, Grace's exposure to the different types of informal English input was considerably higher. For example, exposure to films and television series in the L2 went from 4 to 5 hours per week to approximately 9-10 hours per week. Moreover, in-depth data analysis led to discover that her daily access to social networks corresponded to daily conversations with her international friends, who were both native and non-native speakers of English, in either written or spoken form. Despite this extensive exposure, Grace's journal revealed that her primary source of informal English input was reading fantasy novel, an activity in which she engaged every day for at least 2-3 hours. Given how passionately she wrote about these novels and the number of hours she spent reading (sometimes for more than five hours straight), it is possible to say that Grace habitually experienced complete immersion[5] in the story. Although her first contact with the L2 outside school context did not go as planned (i.e., when she tried to read *Harry Potter*), she soon gained enough L2 confidence to give it another try, precisely because of her love for fantasy novels. As regards her relationship with English, Grace expressed a strong fondness for the language, to the point of preferring it over Italian for its simplicity and meaningfulness.

5. A psychological construct that can be analysed as comprising *spatial presence*, *transportation*, *flow* and *enjoyment* (Wissmath *et al.* 2009; cf. Chapter 1).

Throughout the longitudinal observation, Grace's L2 development showed an overall improving trend, albeit characterized by non-linearity as reflected in the development of CAF trajectories. Overall, Grace's speech was particularly accurate (with an average of 92% error-free AS-units), whereas her fluency followed a non-linear path. As previously mentioned, greater number of repairs can be interpreted as an indicator of increased speech monitoring or heightened attention on accuracy (Kormos, 1999; Lambert *et al*. 2017, 2020; Suzuki 2021). By comparing Grace's accuracy and fluency rates it could be tentatively argued that the increase in repair frequency (i.e., less fluent) may be a sign of positive L2 developmental change (e.g., more frequent speech monitoring and consequently more accurate). On the other hand, syntactic complexity showed clear signs of improvement: as Grace's monologues grew in length her utterances became more articulated. Lexical diversity (measured with VOCD) followed a more fluctuating path, albeit with a final positive tendency. Consequently, it can be said that Grace's L2 oral productions featured a rich, complex vocabulary. This result seems to be reinforced by lexical sophistication which, besides presenting good scores from the beginning of the study, improved constantly. Findings from the analysis of lexical diversity and sophistication seem to support the reported positive impact of reading on vocabulary retention and second language acquisition (from Elley, Mangubhai 1983 to Grabe, Yamashita 2022).

## 4.3. Findings from the case study: Marta

Marta was a 25 years old first-year postgraduate student in Experimental and Applied Biology. She began studying English in primary school when she was eight years old. Her self-assessed level of English proficiency was C1, described as: '[You] can express yourself fluently and spontaneously, producing clear, well-structured, detailed texts on complex topics and understanding demanding texts and implicit meanings; you can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes'[6] (see Appendix A). Marta's family on her mother side was Spanish and thanks to her bilingual upbringing in Spanish and Italian she was fluent in both languages. She believed that growing up in a bilingual environment gave her an extra boost with foreign languages and described the switch from one language to another as a 'change input language' command:

6. Wording elaborated from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) self-assessment grid.

(40) "*Se comincio a pensare in italiano, mi risulta difficile parlare subito in inglese, ma mi succede anche con lo spagnolo, devo cambiare il chip della lingua. Se uno mi chiede 'Come si dice questa cosa in spagnolo?', la mia prima risposta è 'Boh' io non è che ho studiato, lo so e basta. Lo stesso con l'italiano, che però ho studiato a scuola, e con l'inglese, non so spiegare perché le cose sono come sono. Se uno mi chiede 'Perché si dice così?' l'unica risposta che mi viene è 'perché sì'*" ["If I'm thinking in Italian, I find it hard to immediately translate in English, it's the same with Spanish, I must change the language chip. If someone asks me to translate from Spanish my first answer is 'I don't know' I did not study Spanish, I just know it without thinking. The same thing happens with Italian and English although I studied them at school, I don't know how to explain why things are the way they are. Most of times if people ask me: 'Why is it like that?' my reply is: 'Because it is'"] (author's translation).

Marta has never been abroad on an Erasmus experience, but when she was in high school, she spent three weeks between Ireland and the UK as part of an exchange study programme. During the longitudinal study she did not attend any English classes or lessons taught in English. Occasionally, some of her professors used scientific terms, papers and PowerPoint presentations in the L2. From March 2021 through the end of the longitudinal observation, Marta regularly chatted in English with one of her thesis advisors, a PhD student from Scotland whom she met while working in the Laboratory of Biology at Pavia University.

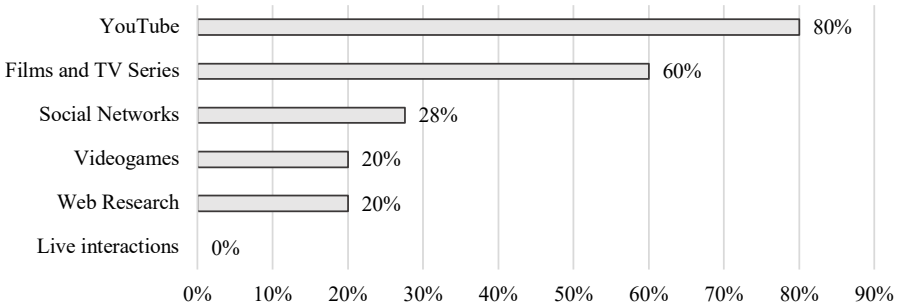
### 4.3.1. *Major sources of informal English input*

According to her responses to the questionnaire, Marta scored an exposure index of 64 placing herself on the high-exposure end of the sample, above the mean (i.e., 41) and above the average-values cluster (i.e., 20-61) (see Section 3.3). Her primary sources of informal English input were YouTube (80%) and films and television series (60%). Social networks followed at considerable distance (28%), together with web research and videogames (both at 20%), with no opportunity for live face-to-face interactions in the L2 (0%) (Figure 4.11).

Music was also investigated in the questionnaire as participants were asked how often they listened to music in English and for how many songs they focused on the lyrics. Marta claimed that she listened to English music every day and paid attention to most songs' lyrics. She believed that this activity boosted her vocabulary retention and grammar.

The following sections provide an in-depth look into the different sources of informal input investigated in the study. The evolution and

*Figure 4.11. The distribution of Marta's informal access to L2 English input*




changes of Marta's exposure habits to informal English input during the longitudinal study has been well documented in her journal. Besides an overall increase in exposure to informal L2 input, Marta's journal allowed to discover that not only did she begin to frequently engage in live, face-to-face conversations with an English native-speaker (i.e., her lab advisor as mentioned above), but that she also occasionally engaged in online interactions with both native and non-native speakers of English while livestreaming on Twitch[7]. Between February and March, Marta read a book in English because the original version was cheaper than the Italian one and throughout the longitudinal study she often listened to podcasts and occasionally wrote some pages in English on her own paper journal (from Marta's online journal, in English): "I find it very therapeutic to write stuff down when my mind starts racing, the notebook becomes sort of a 'brain dump'".

*Films, TV series and YouTube*

In the questionnaire Marta reported that, on average, she was exposed to 12-14 hours of telecinematic input per week, with a strong preference for TV series (i.e., 'every day' and 'for more than two hours') over films (i.e., 'once a week'). Some of her favourite shows, plus the one she was watching when she responded to the questionnaire were: *Fleabag* (UK), *Misfits* (UK), *Skins* (UK), *Shameless* (USA), *Brooklyn 99* (USA) and *Friends* (USA). Marta also enjoyed watching stand-up comedy shows and animated series on Netflix (*BoJack Horsman*, *Futurama* and *Love, Death*

7. Twitch is an interactive livestreaming service for content that range from gaming to entertainment, sports, music and more. Content on the site can be viewed either live or via video on demand.

*& Robots*, USA). In addition to films and TV series, Marta claimed to watch videos on YouTube every day from one to two hours. By reading her journal, it appears that while exposure to films and TV series was a little less than previously stated (10-12 hours per week), Marta's exposure to YouTube videos was considerably higher. Every day she spent from one to three hours (7-8 per week) on YouTube watching documentaries, film reviews, recipes, interviews, comedy shows and her favourite videos: gameplay. While on YouTube she did not use subtitles: "*Alla fine non mi serve, il sottotitolo mi distrae e basta*" ["I don't need them anyway, I find them distracting"] (author's translation), she watched films and TV series in English with English subtitles. She preferred this modality because:

(41) "*Mi sono resa conto che mi piacciono molto di più, per capire le battute, i giochi di parole, riferimenti culturali che molto spesso si perdono nella traduzione. Poi parte della recitazione è anche la voce, quindi il doppiatore per quanto possa fare un bel lavoro non sarà mai in grado di ricreare la stessa recitazione dell'attore in lingua originale*" ["I like them more in their original language to better understand jokes, puns and cultural references that get usually lost in translation. In addition, the actors' voice is a fundamental part of the acting experience, hence, as far as dubbing can be done right, it will never be the same as the original"] (author's translation).

It is interesting to notice how Marta experienced the two types of informal English input and their viewing modalities in two completely different ways. While she watched YouTube videos with ease, without subtitles and regardless of genre – almost as if they were background noise:

(42) "*Alla fine dicono cose semplici non è che devo stare attenta a quello che dicono, o forse è perché parlano proprio più vicino a un microfono e quindi non ho problemi a capire, spesso lo guardo a velocità doppia mentre faccio altro, perché cioè capisco anche a velocità doppia*" ["Maybe it is because they use simple terms and I do not have to careful to what they are saying, or maybe because they speak closer into a microphone and I hear them better, but most of times I do other stuff while listening YouTube videos. Sometimes I even listen to these videos at double speed"] (author's translation).

She admitted that she needed to pay more attention when watching films and TV series: "*Forse ho un problema con i livelli dell'audio dei film, mi servono i sottotitoli per sentire meglio non so se mi spiego*" ["I might have an issue with audio levels, but I need subtitling to 'hear' better"] (author's translation). Although Marta dismissed her experience

with telecinematic input as an 'hearing impairment', it is worth remembering the paradox of television as a medium of language learning (Vanderplank 2010) whereby highly verbal and supercharged medium makes programmes "widely *available* for use but hardly *accessible* to language learners" (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 47). Sometimes, even advanced L2 learners may find it challenging to deal with the fast dialogues and the variety of English accents, registers and non-standard forms from telecinematic input (Aiello 2018).

Nevertheless, Marta believed that the prolonged exposure to films and TV series in English improved both her listening and speaking skills, as well as vocabulary retention. Extensive access to YouTube videos in the L2 on the other hand, benefited her listening and speaking skills, as well as vocabulary retention and grammar.

*Videogames and livestreams*

In the questionnaire Marta claimed to never play online videogames and to rarely play videogames in English; however, when she did, she tended to play from one to two hours minimum. No L2 enhancement was noticed following this informal activity. Nevertheless, through Marta's journal it turned out that her access habits to online gaming in English underwent some considerable changes. During the first six months of the study, Marta took part in livestreams on Twitch, where she talked and texted in English with an international community of players about videogames and gameplay. While enjoying the livestreaming platform as a simple user (i.e., watching live gameplay and interacting via live group chat), Marta had several opportunities of being an active interlocutor during other people's livestreams:

(43) "*È un mio amico che ha aperto 'sto canale di gaming e visto che ha appena cominciato non ha particolari follower e ogni tanto mi invita nella live. Io non sono lì fisicamente è come se fossi in chiamata, lo senti che parla con qualcuno che sono io, ma a me non si vede. Parliamo in inglese per coinvolgere, anche perché un po' lo scopo sarebbe avere un pubblico bello grande*" ["My friend just opened this gaming channel [on Twitch] and since he does not have many followers, sometimes he invites me while he's livestreaming. I am not physically there, it is like we are on a phone call, you can hear me talking with him, but you cannot see me. And we talk in English to get people involved and also because the goal is to gain followers"] (author's translation).

Followers can interact only via written messages in the live group chat and streamers usually reply instantly, thus creating a sort of mediated,

text-to-voice conversations which Marta seemed to consider as a normal interaction: "*Una volta ho chiacchierato con sto ragazzino che seguiva dall'Australia*" ["I talked a bit with this kid who was watching us from Australia once" (author's translation). It is a curious fact that Marta's friend, who is Italian native speaker, asked her to continue to interact in English even in everyday life:

(44) "*Dice che gli viene più facile esprimersi in inglese*" ["He says it's easier for him to express himself in English"],
(45) "*Lui passando tantissimo tempo su Internet, molto più di me, l'ha imparato molto di più e quindi molte cose gli vengono semplicemente più facili in inglese che in italiano, gli viene più spontaneo mettiamola così, e quindi io sapendo l'inglese a mia volta gli ho dato corda e adesso viene spontaneo anche a me ogni tanto parlargli in inglese senza che abbia cominciato lui a parlare in inglese ecco*" ["He spends so much time on the Internet, way more than me and for that I think he knows English better than I do. It is more natural to him, more spontaneous […] I got so used to it [interacting in English with him] that now it is almost natural to me too, whenever I text him, I just do it in English"] (author's translation).

Whenever Marta was using Twitch by herself, she liked to play livestreams or gameplay videos as podcasts, another source of informal English input that she enjoyed:

(46) "*In genere le uso come podcast. Mentre sto facendo altro mi tengo come sottofondo quello che parla di questa cosa qua, qualunque sia l'argomento, loro parlano, e io me li ascolto mentre faccio qualcos'altro. Mentre gaming che durano anche più di tre ore me li tengo lì a velocità doppia, tutto il resto a velocità normale*" ["I like to play them as if they were podcasts. So, while I am doing something else, there is this background noise of people talking about any given topic. Gaming videos are so long, sometimes they can last for even more than three hours so I play them at double speed. Any other topic, I usually listen to scientific podcasts, I keep their original pace"] (author's translation).

Language learning did not seem to be one of the reasons for accessing the informal input in the L2, but rather the use of contents itself, as she stated when describing her motivations: "*La mia motivazione era appunto 'voglio fruire di questi contenuti, se i contenuti sono in inglese va bene lo stesso'*" ["My motivation was 'I want to watch this content, if the content is in English, then so be it"] (author's translation).

*Social networks and web research*

Everyday Marta spent from one to two hours scrolling through posts and videos in English on Instagram. She mostly followed international

influencers and activists, actors, artists and comedians, as well news outlets and famous gamers. In her input access journal, she wrote (in English):

(47) "I spend more time on Instagram than I would like to admit, probably more than a couple of hours every day. I am trying to cut it down to one hour maximum for my mental health and productivity, as scrolling mindlessly for hours can be pretty detrimental to both my grades and mental health".

By habitually reading posts and watching short content videos in English on Instagram, Marta noticed a boost in her reading comprehension, vocabulary retention, grammar and conversational skills, while no improvement was noticed in terms of listening skills.

Moving now to web research in English, it appears that Marta rarely engaged in this activity, i.e., once a fortnight and for less than one hour. She browsed English websites for either academic or personal research, such as online shopping and entertainment. Given the little time she devoted to this informal activity, it is hardly surprising that no L2 improvement was noticed overall.

### 4.3.2. *The relationship with the English language*

Marta's first contacts with the English language outside school context occurred between primary and secondary school. She has always been very fond of music and her favourite singer at the time was the American pop star Hilary Duff: "*Da piccolina adoravo Hilary Duff e ovviamente da piccola non capivo i testi chiaramente, andavo a orecchio*" ["When I was very little, I adored Hilary Duff. Of course, I did not understand the lyrics, but I used to sing along by ear"] (author's translation). Over time she realised that just singing by ear alone, albeit without understanding all the lyrics, significantly helped her improve her L2 knowledge: "*A scuola facevo le verifiche di grammatica pur senza studiare, sentivo la frase se mi suonava bene o mi suonava male e in genere ci azzeccavo*" ["At school I was doing grammar tests without studying, I just read the sentences and tried to hear if it sounded good or bad and I almost always got it right"] (author's translation). From that moment onwards she continued to listen to English music and when she was in high school, she began to read the lyrics for better understanding. Access to the Internet and YouTube broadened the scope of Marta's informal contacts with the L2, because at first most YouTube contents were in English, so it was her only choice. Although initially she relied on Google Translator and YouTube automatic

subtitling, she slowly began to improve and eventually abandoned all language aids. While access to YouTube videos in English occurred as a 'necessary step', watching films and TV series in English occurred a little later:

(48) "*Guardavo tutto in italiano. Poi mi sono appassionata al cinema e agli attori in generale, cercavo le serie su internet in streaming e molto spesso non erano doppiate quindi le trovavo in inglese coi sottotitoli in italiano o uguali o anche senza. Era prima di Netflix*" ["I used to watch everything dubbed. Then I became passionate about cinema and actors in general and I started to search for the TV series I wanted to watch online, it was pre-Netflix, so you usually found the shows in English with Italian or English or no subtitles [i.e., illegal streaming websites]" (author's translation).

Personal interest moved Marta to access the various sources of informal English input from the start. However, with time, she grew fond of the language too:

(49) "*È iniziato per caso perchè le cose che volevo vedere erano solo in inglese, ma più lo ascoltavo più mi piaceva*" ["It happened by chance because I wanted to watch that specific content and it was only available in English, but the more I listened to the language the more I liked it"],
(50) "*Ho sempre trovato la lingua [inglese] molto musicale. Anche se ti dicono che è l'italiano, però come suono a me [l'inglese] piace. Sarà che appunto forse è un bias mio perché avendo cominciato a ascoltare, cioè avendolo cominciato ad imparare tramite la musica, forse per quello dico mi suona bene, mi sembra bello, mi piace proprio il suono*" ["I know people always say this about Italian, but to me, English is a very musical language. Maybe I am biased because I basically begin to learn it through music, but I truly like the way it sounds"] (author's translation).

She was proud of her relationship with the English language, not only because of her high self-perceived L2 competence, but also because she believed that knowing a foreign language was a matter of the utmost importance:

(51) "*Trovo che sia fondamentale saperlo non solo appunto se ti vuoi guardare qualcosa su internet, ma perchè trovo che sia una cosa abbastanza fondamentale ormai anche conoscere nuove culture, saper comunicare con gli altri, è una skill necessaria e qualcosa di cui essere anche un po' orgogliosi*" ["I think that today it is fundamental to know English, not just because you can access hundreds of contents online, but because knowing another language and culture, being able to communicate with other people, is like a necessary life skill and it is something to be proud of"] (author's translation).

The English language has become part of her everyday life and Marta admitted that sometimes she had found herself thinking or writing things down in the L2:

(52) "*Forse dipende da quanto tempo passo a fare qualcosa in quella lingua, per esempio mi son vista un video di cucina in inglese, farò la lista della spesa in inglese, anche perché alcuni ingredienti li ho scoperti grazie a internet e li ho scoperti in lingua inglese come la curcuma e l'oatmeal*" ["Maybe it depends by how much time I have just spent interacting with the language, for example I like to watch video recipes and cooking shows and now when I write my grocery list, I write certain products in English because I came to know about their existence in English, like turmeric and oatmeal"],
(53) "*Dopo un po' che ascolto cose in inglese mi viene da pensare in inglese molto spesso. A volte quando scrivo, beh per dire scrivo pensieri miei così, mi capita a volte di scriverli l'inglese*" ["The more I listen to it the more I think in English. I occasionally write my thoughts in a personal journal and sometimes I find myself writing in English, it comes rather naturally to me"] (author's translation).

Interestingly, Marta acknowledged that a possible reason behind her natural predisposition for so easily picking up a new foreign language was her bilingual upbringing and the 'multiple language microchips' in her head:

(54) "*Mi rendo conto di essere abbastanza privilegiata da questo punto di vista, perché comunque so che chi cresce ascoltando due lingue è molto più propenso a impararle facilmente rispetto a una persona che, per esempio io ho un'amica che mi dice 'Io voglio imparare l'inglese ma faccio fatica', perché giustamente lei è cresciuta con solo il chip di italiano appunto, e quindi lei fa fatica quindi lei vorrebbe migliorare. E mi sento parecchio fortunata da questo punto di vista perché per me è stata abbastanza spontanea come cosa*" ["Of course, I know I am privileged from a linguistic point of view, I know that people who grew up in bilingual environments are more inclined to learn new languages. For example, I have a friend who wants to learn English and finds it very hard, because she grew up with just the Italian chip you know, so she struggles a lot even though she really wants to improve. I consider myself extremely lucky because for me it was a rather spontaneous thing [to learn English]"] (author's translation).

Before moving to the analysis of Marta's L2 oral productions during the longitudinal study, a brief comment on the pandemic and exposure habits during lockdown. Due to the sudden excess of free time, there was a major increase in Marta's exposure to films, television series and YouTube videos in English. Although she was already highly exposed to the informal L2 input before the pandemic hit, and at the time of data collection she was busy attending classes and studying, Marta reflected on the fact that perhaps her access to the input constantly grew with time:

(55) "*Con l'Università e tutto sarebbe impossibile tenere gli stessi rimi del lockdown, però se dovessi paragonare prima e dopo la pandemia ti dico sì penso di passare sempre più tempo a guardare, leggere, ascoltare cose in inglese*" ["It is impossible to access the same amount of English contents as I did during lockdown you know with university and stuff, but if I have to compare before and after the pandemic then yes, I think I spend more time watching, reading, listening to things in English and so on"] (author's translation).

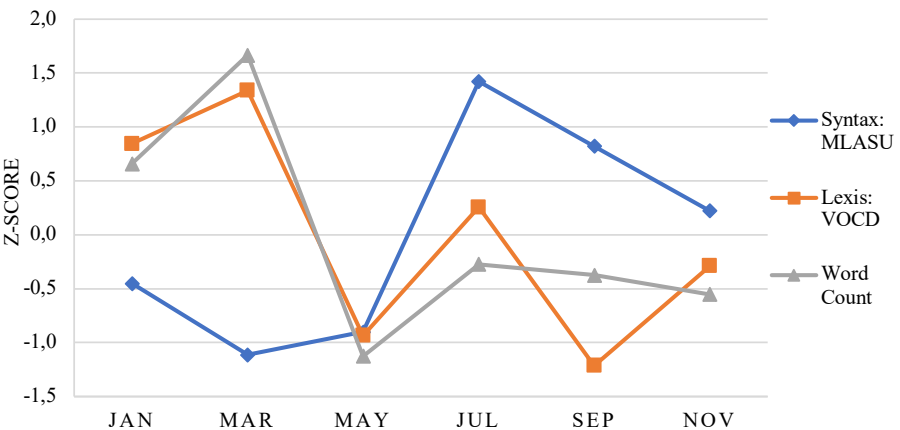
Consequently, she presumed that the extensive exposure to the L2 boosted her language competence constantly:

(56) "*Secondo me più ti esponi più assimili, e anche se ero già messa abbastanza bene prima probabilmente la mia competenza è migliorata un pochino*" ["I think the more you are exposed to a language the more you understand, so even though I already considered myself at a good proficiency level, probably my L2 competence improved a little"] (author's translation).

### 4.3.3. *L2 development: observing CAF trajectories through time*

Figure 4.12 shows the development of Marta's complexity, measured by mean length of AS-units (MLASU for shortening) for grammatical complexity and VOCD (lexical diversity) for lexical complexity. Word count (normalised rate) was added for further analysis.

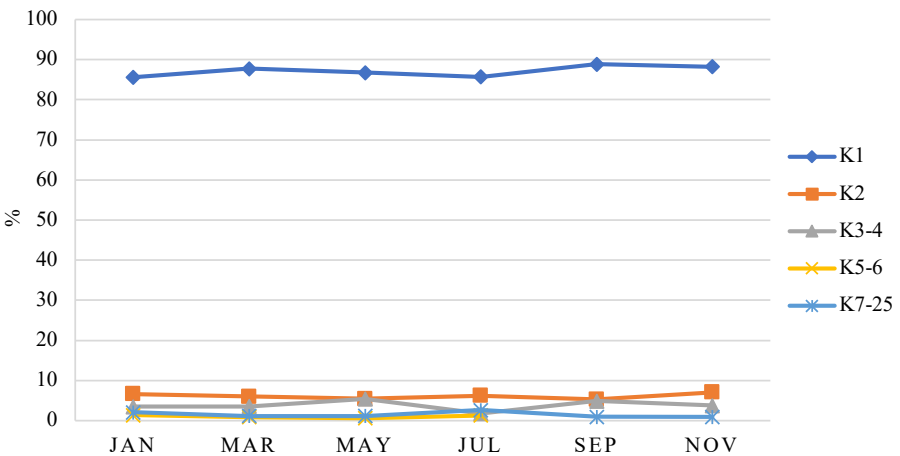
*Figure 4.12. Marta's grammatical and lexical complexity between January and November 2021*



The two trajectories representing Marta's grammatical complexity and lexical diversity followed a non-linear, declining path. From the very beginning of the study Marta produced rather short utterances, although her monologues were longer and more diverse if compared to the rest of data collection (cf. March). In May, however, there was a general worsening of all measures, meaning that at that time Marta produced her shortest monologue, shortest utterances and least diverse vocabulary. Despite a small recovery, it seems that, overall, Marta's L2 oral production lacked grammatical and lexical complexity.

Moving now to the other dimension of lexical complexity, i.e., sophistication, Figure 4.13 outlines the distribution of Marta's lexical sophistication by means of 1-25K word frequency lists over time.

*Figure 4.13. The distribution of lexical sophistication in terms of 1-25K word frequency lists*

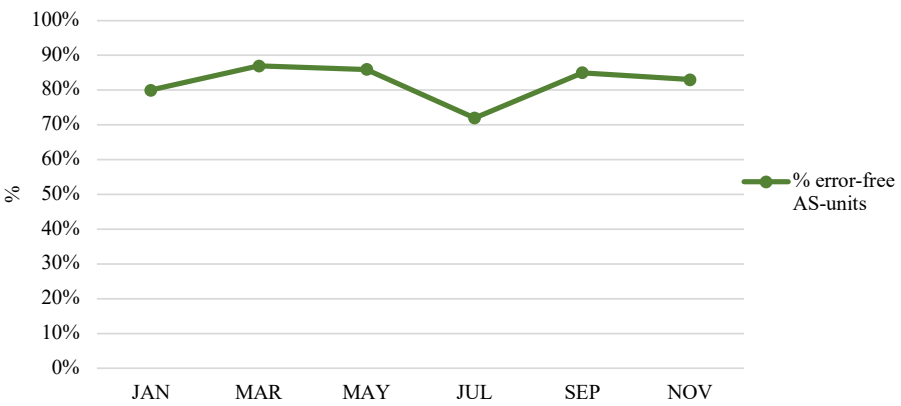



Despite a rather wide range of lexical sophistication, i.e., from K1 to K23 out of the 25K word frequency lists, during the longitudinal study Marta's speech lost sophistication, meaning that as time went by, she used simpler terms. K1 word list were used more frequently, moving from 86% in January to 88% in November, whereas K2 word list remained stable at 7%. Similarly, the group K3-4 was stable at 4%. Data from the group K5-6 were only available from January to July (1%): in the last two session Marta did not use words belonging to these frequency lists. Lastly, the group K7-25 (i.e., the most sophisticated and thus less frequently used words), slowly decreased from 2% to 1%, meaning that although

at first her vocabulary was a little more sophisticated, eventually it got less refined. Some examples of her K7-25 words are *dovey*, *trampoline*, *patchy*, *obnoxious*; K5-6: *retrospective*, *altar*, *stubborn*, *tanning*; K3-4: *ache*, *highway*, *burden*, *plot*; K2: *affair*, *overreact*, *fancy*, *committing*; K1: *handling*, *obviously*, *cheaper*, *experience*.

Participants' monologues were assessed on the basis of ten accuracy measures, consisting of a global measure of normalised error rate (1), specific measures for lexis (3), syntax (3), verbs (2) and (1) Other (missing word). Figure 4.14 below shows the percentages of error-free AS-units per data collection.

*Figure 4.14. Percentages of error-free AS-units through time*




Overall, Marta's monologues were quite accurate (82% error-free AS-units on average) and over time her accuracy slightly improved, going from 80% of error-free AS-units in January to 83% in November. In July her L2 oral production was less precise (72%), whereas in March she reached the maximum score of 87% of error-free AS-units. For an in-depth look at the different types of error produced in each data collection, Table 4.3 presents raw data (i.e., raw number of errors) of the eight remaining measures for accuracy, i.e., lexis, syntax and verbs. Measure 5 – Words in L1 is not represented since during the study Marta never relied on Italian vocabulary. No remarkable trends nor evident relations between measures can be reported overall (Table 4.3).

*Table 4.3. Marta's type of errors in each data collection over time (raw data)*

| Session | Word based on L1 | Wrong Word Choice | Singular/ Plural | Articles/ Prepositions/ Pronouns | Syntax based on L1 | Form | Tense, Aspect, Mood | Other (missing word) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jan | | 3 | 1 | 6 | | | 2 | 1 | 13 |
| Mar | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | | 1 | 2 | 2 | 14 |
| May | | 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Jul | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | | 2 | 1 | 2 | 11 |
| Sep | 1 | | | 1 | | 1 | 2 | | 5 |
| Nov | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | 3 | 7 |
| **Total** | 6 | 7 | 5 | 13 | 1 | 4 | 9 | 9 | 54 |

Despite being less precise in July, it appears that by the end of the longitudinal study Marta's L2 oral production became more accurate. Since the raw number of errors was normalised per 1000 words, the July session seems to be the worst among the sample (number of raw of errors = 11). However, a closer look into raw data reveals that Marta made the most mistakes in March (n = 14) when she elicited her longest monologue (1245 words). By comparing these initial results with Figure 4.12 above, it could be tentatively argued that when Marta focused on form (i.e., accuracy), it was to the detriment of complexity (cf. May). Vice versa, whenever she used more advanced language, she lost control of form (cf. March and July).

Throughout the study, Marta forgot, misused and misplaced articles, prepositions and pronouns:

(57) "He did this weird entrance where he fell **out of** the horse",
(58) "But then one of the guys (**who**) was supposed to be the father of the girl proposed to […]"
(59) "And then the second one was (**a**) more conventional one in the church and then the third one, oh yeah, with the-with (**the**) […]".

However, in other instances these features were correctly produced. It could be argued that Marta's L2 oral production lacked automaticity, insofar as greater language competence comes by having a more automatised access to a larger repertoire of lexical and grammatical knowledge (Kormos 2006; Tavakoli, Writght 2020).

At times, she either did not know or struggled to remember words in English. However, she never relied on L1 vocabulary but rather she tried to come up with plausible, albeit wrong, words. For example, when describing a voluminous dress, she used the term volumptuous, which seems like a hybridization of the words voluptuous and voluminous: "The dress was

very-was very **volumptuous**". Interestingly, this word is featured in the Collins Dictionary online as a 'new word suggestion' used to describe a person characterized by "a generous figure and a bubbly personality"[8]. Nevertheless, the online dictionary dismisses the word since it is an inappropriate spelling of the original word, voluptuous: "it is unacceptable and should be avoided in official writings". On another occasion, while talking about game cards, she could not remember the word laminated and said laming instead: "[…] actually, how is it called, like cards, **laming** cards, you know like the *Pokémon* cards?".

The influence of the L1 was evident in other instances, like when she invented the word *subsceptive* from Italian *suscettible* instead of sensitive: "I was so scared, when I was younger, I was much more **subsceptive**", or when she transferred the Italian idiomatic expression "*parlare con i sassi*" to describe a person who talks a lot: "She would talk with rocks".

During her storytelling tasks, sometimes Marta lost tense consistency shifting back and forth between past and present. Tense consistency is the only mistake she made in every data collection. However, the incidence is so low that it would be incautious to make a generalisation out of these findings:

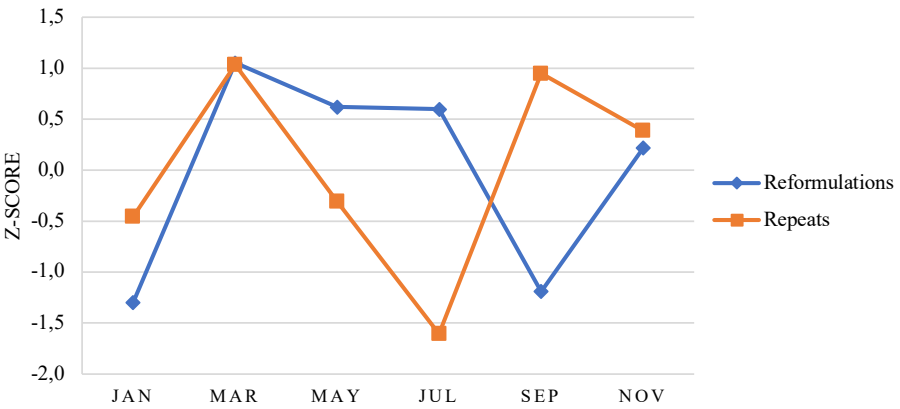
(60) "But (**the**) funny thing looking back, is that when I came back home from the holiday, my **tan**(ned) skin started to fall off because of the **sunburnt** and so-so my skin was all patchy",
(61) "But when he, I mean, when he realized what she was going to do, I mean, what he was going to lose, basically, he start(**s**) chasing her, but she already left. She was on this boat and she (**had**) already left. So, he start(**ed**) chasing her […]",
(62) "But then one of the guys (**who**) was supposed to be the father of the girl, proposed to Meryl Streep and they start(**ed**) singing and she said 'Yes'",
(63) "The scenes are very dramatic. Maybe the fact that I listen(**ed**) to it without the audio made it even more obvious".

Moving now to repair fluency, as shown in Figure 4.15, the trajectories of reformulations and repeats contrasted with each other until the very end of data collection. Despite these fluctuations, by the end of the longitudinal study Marta's monologues appeared to be less hesitant and more fluent.

By comparing these results with complexity and accuracy (Figure 4.12 and Figure 4.14), it appears that longer and more complex utterances (i.e., MLASU) negatively affected accuracy and fluency (cf. July), whereas shorter, less complex utterances resulted in more accurate and more fluent

8. www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/1090/Volumptuous .

*Figure 4.15. Marta's reformulations and repeats over time*




speech (cf. November). It is also worth focusing on data collected in March, when Marta elicited her longest monologue (word count = 1245). Although her L2 oral production was lexically complex (i.e., VOCD), the mean length of utterances reached its lowest score. Conversely and proportionally, Marta's speech was more accurate and more fluent. Considering these data, it could be tentatively hypothesised that Marta's fluency and accuracy were positively sensitive to each other at the expenses of complexity and vice versa. The following examples compare Marta's L2 oral production in March (64-65) and July (66-67):

(64) "So, yeah, I feel like it was, everything was made worse by the fact that the, like the ceremonial place seemed-seemed very, very big, very, almost obnoxiously big",
(65) "And she just- and I was standing, I was sitting on my own and she turned back like, "Hi, I'm Natasha, how are you?" And so, we kind of became friends",
(66) "Yeah, I mean, it was kind of fun to see her running away in the kindergarten with the kids, the little children stopping the-the groom and him being-being quite what's the world, the word, like he actually waited for her",
(67) "And then the second one was (**a**) more conventional one in the church and then the third one, oh yeah, with the-with (**the**) majestic entrance on the-on the horse that she used to actually run away (**with**), so it is kind of-it is kind of funny".

While in March, prioritising fluency and accuracy led to simpler constructions, greater syntactic complexity in July resulted in reduced fluency and accuracy. This shift suggests that fluency was particularly

sensitive to increases in complexity, as demonstrated by the occurrences of reformulations and repetitions in the later data (66-67).

#### 4.3.4. *Summary of Marta's case study*

By taking a closer look into Marta's private sphere, it was possible to present a more exhaustive picture of her exposure habits to informal sources of English input, as well as her motivations and attitudes towards the language. Compared to what she previously stated in the questionnaire, it was ascertained that Marta's exposure to the different types of informal input was higher and more diverse. Face-to-face interactions experience a distinct change, as Marta went from no interactions whatsoever to frequently conversing with native and non-native speakers of English both in person and online, on topics that ranged from personal matters to work and leisure, i.e., gaming. She was aware that her bilingual upbringing (Italian and Spanish) conferred her an advantage in L2 learning, as she stated more than once that instead of studying English she just: "picked it up playing it by ear", thanks to those "language microchips" in her brain. She never accessed informal English input with the intention to learn the language, however, she has always been convinced of the beneficial effects of the prolonged exposure to L2 input. A more detailed discussion on these topics will follow in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

The analysis of Marta's CAF trajectories allowed the suggestion that fluency and accuracy positively influence each other to the detriment of complexity. These findings seem to follow Skehan's information-processing model (1998) which suggests that when L2 learners focus on form (i.e., accuracy), there is a secondary contrast between control of form and use of more advanced language (complexity). Moreover, they also seem to support CAF interdependence insofar as "fluency can be accompanied by either accuracy or complexity, but not both" (Skehan 2018: 24). Finally, it is worth mentioning that lexical sophistication deteriorated slightly despite the extensive exposure to audiovisual input, a result that differs from previous studies (Kusyk 2017) where watching videos informally was found to positively influence sophistication.

## 4.4. Findings from the case study: Lea

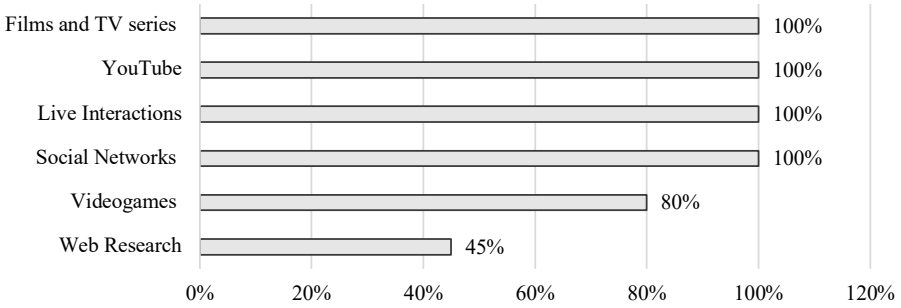
Lea was a 20 years old first-year undergraduate student in Biotechnology. She began studying English in her first years of primary school at six years old and her self-assessed level of English proficiency

was B2, described as: '[You] can express yourself articulately on complex and abstract topics, such as politics, the environment and economy; you can have a long conversation with a native English speaker without too much effort'. During data collection she did not attend any English classes or lessons taught in English. Lea has never been abroad on an Erasmus experience nor study vacation or exchange study programme, in fact, she has never travelled outside of Italy but was planning to do so. In 2020, while playing a multiplayer online videogame called *League of Legends*, she met a couple of gamers from Norway and quickly became long-distance friends. Besides online gaming, the group was in contact via social networks, direct messages and videocalls. In her interview and on several occasions throughout the longitudinal study, Lea described herself as a reserved person who found live social interactions somewhat challenging. Therefore, this screen-mediated interactions helped her to break the ice and build strong relationships. At the time of data collection, the travel restrictions due to the pandemic had been recently removed, hence Lea intended to finally meet her virtual friends in person.

### 4.4.1. *Major sources of informal English input*

Among the four case studies analysed in the present work, Lea scored the highest exposure index, i.e., 105. She was part of that 3% of the whole sample (see Section 3.3) who has been identified as high-exposure subjects, corresponding to participants who accessed different resources in English at least once a week for at least one hour per session per source. Figure 4.16 below shows the distribution of Lea's informal access to L2 English input according to her responses to the questionnaire.

*Figure 4.16. The distribution of Lea's informal access to L2 English input*



Every day Lea spent more than two hours watching audiovisuals (films and TV series 100%; YouTube 100%) and browsing social networks (100%). She also spent a considerable amount of time playing videogames in English (80%) and she frequently engaged in conversations with other gamers while playing online. Although her interactions in the L2 were always screen-mediated, Lea perceived them as live face-to-face interactions (100%) with non-native speakers of English, i.e., her friends from Norway, her boyfriend at that time and other gamers met online. Web research in the L2 followed at considerable distance (45%, once a week for about one hour) and while no exposure index was calculated for *music*, Lea declared to listen to English music every day and that she paid attention to most songs' lyrics. She believed that this activity led to improvement in her listening skills and vocabulary retention. Even though in the questionnaire *reading* was not investigated as a source of informal English input, Lea's journal revealed that almost every day she read comics and manga in the L2 from 30 minutes to one hour, both online and on paper.

*Films, television series and YouTube*

Lea reported in the questionnaire that, every day, she was exposed to at least 2 hours of audiovisual contents either coming from YouTube or telecinematic input. Besides films and television series, she also liked to watch talk shows, cooking shows, video tutorials, gameplay videos, stand-up comedy, musicals and film trailers in English (from Lea's journal, in English): "I watched various videos on YouTube, one about a game that's under development and other videos about video games (mainly Pokémon related), I don't know for how long"; "I watched the Hamilton musical (2 hours and 40 minutes). It was really good! If you ever find the time to watch it, I recommend you give it a try". Lea's input access journal overall confirmed the length of exposure to audiovisuals, but it also revealed that she prefers to watch anime over films and TV series. When watching anime in original language, e.g., Japanese, Lea relied on English subtitles, however, if the original language was English, she did not use subtitles at all:

(68) "*Con gli Anime uso i sottotitoli perché per esempio non so il giapponese. Sono già in inglese quando scarichi l'episodio ci sono già, perchè il sito è inglese quindi i sottotitoli sono in inglese*" ["With anime I need subtitles to understand because, for example, I do not know Japanese. They [the subtitles] are already there actually, in English, when you download the episode, the official website is in English, so the subtitles are in English"],
(69) "*Non mi servono i sottotitoli se guardo qualcosa in inglese. A parte che spesso sono fatti male e non voglio perdermi delle espressioni, modi di dire,*

*perchè viene tradotta o perché non c'è il tempo per scrivere tutte le parole che l'attore dice*" ["I do not need subtitles when I am watching something in English. Most of the time subtitles are of poor quality and I do not want to miss, for example, idiomatic expressions because of the translation or because there is no time to write all the words the actors say"] (author's translation).

Moreover, Lea believed that watching audiovisual contents without subtitles could foster the potential for L2 learning and she noticed that this activity led to improvement in her vocabulary retention, listening and conversational skills. According to her journal, Lea mainly watched films and TV series on Netflix and downloaded anime from official websites, hence relied on the streaming platforms' programming and releases without looking for illegal streaming and pirated downloads.

*Social networks, videogames and live interactions*

Social networks, videogames and live interactions were investigated in the questionnaire as three separate sources of informal input. However, in Lea's case they appeared to be closely related. According to her questionnaire response, every day and more than once per day, Lea logged into her Instagram, Twitter and TikTok accounts where she checked the latest news, watched short content videos on her topics of interest, i.e., videogames and anime and chatted with her international friends via direct messages in English. Similarly, at least twice a week from one to two hours, Lea played videogames online, where she interacted with her friends and other gamers in the L2:

(70) "*Sempre giocando online avevo conosciuto questo ragazzo italiano che si era unito alla chiamata con me e la mia amica in Norvegia. Io e lei parlavamo proprio tranquille in inglese, lui arrancava un po'. Quando lei si è allontanata un attimo mi fa che non capiva e mi ha chiesto "come fai tu a intrattenere un discorso così fluido?" Quindi io facevo l'interprete in quella chiamata*" ["Last month I was playing online with my friend from Norway and an Italian friend of mine joined us. The two of us [Lea and her Norwegian friend] were chatting in English as usual and he [her Italian friend] was struggling a bit. Then when we were alone, he told me he did not understand and asked me "How can you deliver such a fluent interaction?" So, I begin to translate things to him, I was like an interpreter"] (author's translation).

Lea and her friends interacted through Discord, a social gaming platform where users can communicate via voice calls, video calls and text messaging while playing their favourite videogames. Discord is a

social network specifically designed to facilitate live interactions among gamers while they are playing online. Therefore, it is understandable how according to Lea's personal experience the three different sources of informal input were strongly intertwined. In addition to conversing while playing videogames, Lea has taken on the habit of having long and frequent videocalls with one of her friends from Norway, where they talk about their everyday life (from Lea's journal): "I chatted with my online friends for about six hours"; "Chatted 1-2 hours with my online friends"; "It's been two weeks since I started talking every night before going to sleep to my Norwegian friend, like it's some kind of daily appointment, at least two hours per day"; "I did a loooong call with a friend of mine (always the one from Norway) talking about a boy I have a crush on. Just a normal gossip-call between two best friends". By habitually using social networks and videogames in English, in addition to frequent interactions with both native and non-native speakers of English, Lea has noticed considerable improvements in her conversational skills, listening comprehension and vocabulary retention.

*Web research*

In the questionnaire Lea reported that once or twice per week she did some web research in English for both personal interests and academic purposes for about one hour each time. Her usual web searches revolved around books, comics, videogames and anime, however throughout the study she occasionally looked for topics related to her studies (from Lea's journal): "I read some chemistry documents for 10 minutes out of curiosity about a certain substance"; "I had to read some texts about medicines, chemistry and various illnesses online for an upcoming exam". Although Lea did not engage in this informal activity quite often, she noticed that browsing online in the L2 improved her grammar knowledge and vocabulary retention.

*Other activities: Reading comics and manga*

As mentioned above, Lea's journal revealed that every day she liked to read comics and manga for about one hour, both on paper and online. She mostly relied on two different online social reading platforms where users can read and write original stories, namely Wattpad and Webtoon. Wattpad is a social platform where users can create and share their own stories in all genres, from teen fiction to poetry, action, adventure and more. On the other hand, Webtoon is a social network specifically created

for digital comics, where each episode is published either once a week or once per month on one long vertical strip so that it is easier to read on a smartphone or computer (from Lea's journal): "I read for the second time the available chapters of an online comic *The Remarried Empress* (around 2 hours)"; "Just like every morning I read my daily webtoons (around 30 minutes). Recommended: *The Remarried Empress*, *Lore Olympus*, *True Beauty*, *Luff*, *Let's Play* (currently on a hiatus)". On Webtoon, everyone can post their comics and if the story is successful, it can be turned into an animated series (from Lea's journal): "These are original comics made by ordinary people, not famous cartoonist […] there is this Netflix series called *Sweet Home*, the story was first published on Webtoon".

In her interview Lea explained that she read comics and manga in English because most titles were not translated in Italian: "*Le cercavo in inglese perché sapevo che c'era una varietà più ampia proprio per il fatto che non vengono tradotti alcuni*" ["I have always looked for comics and manga in English because I knew there was a larger selection since they do not translate most titles"] (author's translation). Lea approached this source of informal English input out of personal interests; however, she acknowledged that over the years extensive reading has improved her grammar and lexical competence. Although manga are still quite a niche in Italy, the comic book industry is gaining momentum, with dedicated events of worldwide appeal such as *Lucca Comics & Games*[9] which Lea attended during data collection. At the event, she bought some Italian manga to support Italian publishing (from Lea's journal): "I found these Italian manga. The author is Italian, and the drawings are so cute. It's just three volumes"; "Also I have these ones in Italian, but the structure is more like a fantasy or romance, I call it manga because it's still cartoonish, but it's like a hybrid".

### 4.4.2. *The relationship with the English language*

It was difficult for Lea to find an exhaustive word to describe her relationship with the English language. While she perceived English almost as a necessity, she also considered it as some sort of routinized second language:

9. *Lucca Comics & Games* is an annual comic book and gaming convention in Lucca, Italy. It is the largest comics festival in Europe and the second biggest in the world after the *Comiket* (JP).

(71) "*Non saprei come fare senza, mi ha permesso di conoscere nuove persone da tutto il mondo per me è quasi una necessità […] E il fatto di utilizzarla proprio così spesso, quasi come fosse una seconda lingua, come l'italiano tranne qualche parola che magari non ricordo*" ["I could not do without [English], it allowed me to meet new people from all around the world, to me is almost a necessity […] I use it so often, almost as if it was my second language, like Italian but with few, occasional difficulties when I do not remember a word"] (author's translation).

It was almost as if Lea has interiorized English so much that it was now a part of her being:

(72) "*È proprio un pezzo di me. Non so come descriverlo, per me è normale parlare in inglese o leggerlo. Appunto magari non ricordo qualcosa a volte ma in generale è una cosa davvero ordinaria*" ["It's like a part of me. I do not know how to describe it because to me it is normal to speak English or read things in English. Of course, with some difficulties here and there, but overall, it is something ordinary"] (author's translation).

Although she self-assessed at an upper-intermediate English proficiency level (i.e., B2), Lea was extremely proud of her ability to communicate effectively with both native and non-native speakers of English, and she tried to practice every chance she got:

(73) "*Era venuta in visita un'amica di mia mamma dalla Svizzera, molto tempo fa, e in quel periodo stavo facendo alle superiori chimica in inglese e avevo questi fogli da cui dovevo studiare. E questa signora qua mi aveva fatto domande e io ero entusiasta di poterle spiegare perché con lei dovevo per forza parlare in inglese e mi ricordo che mi ha fatto i complimenti proprio per l'entusiasmo che dimostravo*" ["When I was in high school, we did Chemistry in English and I remember that one time I was at home studying and this friend of my mother came by, she is from Switzerland, and she asked me things about the subject and I was so happy I could speak in English with her, because she did not speak Italian. I remember I was so excited to talk in English and she complimented me for my enthusiasm, it was great"] (author's translation).

Lea has been studying English since primary school, and she assumed that her liking for the subject perhaps had made it easier for her to engage with the L2 outside school contexts while growing up:

(74) "*Anche il fatto che mi piaceva proprio inglese come materia scolastica, quindi magari il fatto che già dalle elementari mi piacesse così tanto mi ha permesso alle medie poi di poterla portar fuori anche dall'ambito scolastico*" ["Maybe it is because I liked the subject so much in elementary school that when I was in secondary school, I just approached it out-of-school, like naturally"] (author's translation).

Her first informal contacts with the English language happened in secondary school, when Lea began to play videogames and search for digital comics and YouTube videos online. It was easier to look for contents in English rather than Italian, and what started out as a necessity soon became a habit:

(75) "*Ho iniziato a guardare video o comunque molta più roba in inglese o il fatto di andare online magari per leggere qualche fumetto in digitale perché ai tempi ne avevo pochi e in italiano quindi per leggerne altri andavo online. […] c'era molta più roba in inglese e quindi questa cosa poi è rimasta*" ["I began to watch a lot of videos [on anime and videogames] and read digital comics online because I did not have a lot of comics back then […] soon I realized that there was a larger selection in English, and it became a habit"] (author's translation).

When the longitudinal study was carried out, Lea still read most of her comics and manga in English, played videogames online with her international friends and watched YouTube videos in the L2. Overall, Lea accessed the different sources of informal English input out of personal interests rather than language learning purposes. Nevertheless, she acknowledged the impact that these informal activities had on her L2 competence:

(76) "*Non l'ho mai fatto perché volevo imparare, ma sapevo che aiutava. Forse il fatto che mi piacesse ha aiutato anche*" ["I never did it [accessing different sources of informal English input] with the intent to learn the language, but I knew that it would improve my L2 competence. Probably, the fact that I liked it [English] helped a lot"],
(77) "*Penso al liceo mi sono accorta che ero migliorata perché, per esempio, quando facevamo gli esercizi di comprensione, sapevo già il significato delle parole perché le avevo lette in qualche fumetto o sentite in qualche videogame fuori da scuola*" ["I believe I was in high school when I realized that my L2 knowledge was improving thanks to comics and videogames. We used to do reading comprehension, and I knew the meaning of words beforehand, because I had already read them somewhere else out-of-school"] (author's translation).

Before moving to the analysis of Lea's L2 oral productions, a brief comment on the pandemic and exposure habits during lockdown. At that time Lea was in her final year of high school and during the first month of lockdown the school was not able to schedule an organic study programme. Consequently, her access to the different sources of informal English input grew considerably. She did not change her input access habits: "*Non saprei cosa aggiungere, ne faccio già un sacco*" ["I do not even know what I could have added, I already do a lot of things"] (author's

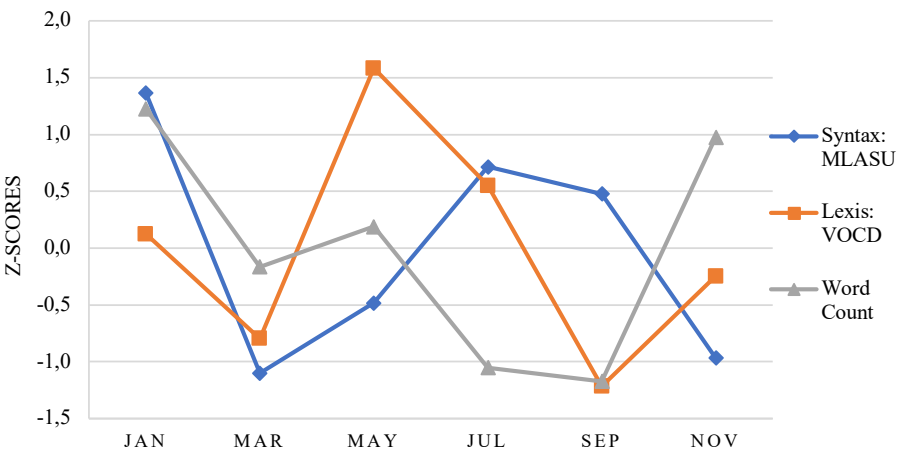
translation) and when the lockdown was lifted, she went back to her usual routine which was still quite busy:

(78) "*Tutti i giorni leggo qualcosa su Webtoon, gioco a qualche videogame perché magari hanno le missioni giornaliere. Parlo con i miei amici sui social o se abbiamo tempo facciamo delle chiamate, poi giochiamo un po' […] a volte guardo qualche serie TV ma più spesso Anime*" ["Every day I read some strips on Webtoon, then I play some videogames because with some of them you have daily missions. I speak with my friends through social networks, sometimes we call each other and if we manage to find the time, we also play videogames online together […] then maybe I watch a few episodes of a TV series, more frequently anime"] (author's translation).

### 4.4.3. *L2 development: observing CAF trajectories through time*

Figure 4.17 below shows the development of Lea's complexity, measured by mean length of AS-units (MLASU) for grammatical complexity and VOCD (lexical diversity) for lexical complexity. Word count (normalised rate) was added for further analysis.

*Figure 4.17. Lea's grammatical and lexical complexity between January and November 2021*

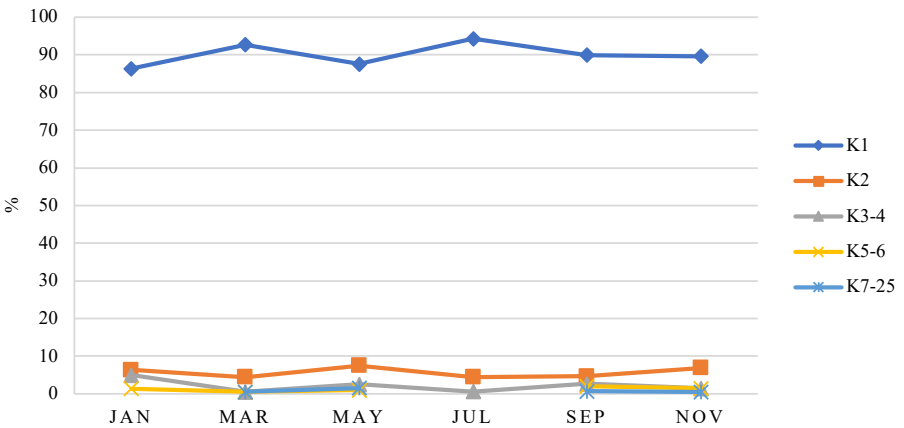



The two trajectories representing Lea's grammatical complexity and lexical diversity followed a non-linear, declining path. At the beginning of the longitudinal study, Lea's monologue was grammatically complex but

not particularly diverse. In March, there was a general worsening of all measures followed by a small recovery in May, when Lea's monologues gained lexical diversity. In July, the two measures appeared to have reached a positive balance, however, in the following and final sessions the two trajectories suffered a sharp decline. It appears that, despite the swinging trajectories, by the end of the study Lea's L2 oral production lacked both grammatical and lexical complexity.

Moving now to the other dimension of lexical complexity, i.e., sophistication, Figure 4.18 outlines the distribution of Lea's lexical sophistication by means of 1-25K word frequency lists over time.

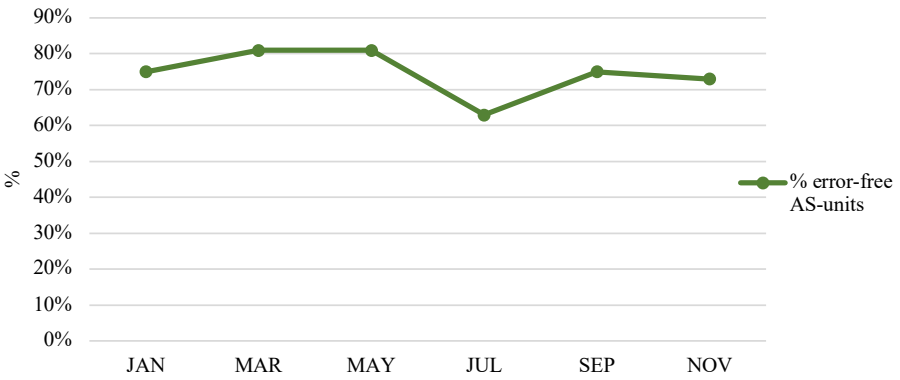
*Figure 4.18. The distribution of lexical sophistication in terms of 1-25K word frequency lists*




Lea's range of lexical sophistication was rather small, i.e., from K1 to K7 out of the 25K word frequency lists, with just one word from K19: *emo*, produced in May. Moreover, with time, Lea's L2 oral production seemed to lose sophistication, with K1 word list gradually increasing from 86% in January to 90% in November (increased use of more frequent word, less sophisticated vocabulary). While K2 word list remained stable around 6-7%, the group K3-4 decreased from 5% in January to 1% in November, confirming that over time, she used simpler terms. K5-6 word lists fluctuated unevenly at the bottom (from 1% to 2%) and the group K7-25 (i.e., the most sophisticated and thus less frequently used words) hardly reached 1%. Some examples of her K7-25 words are *sequel*, *subway*, *vanilla*, *emo* (K19); K5-6: *aisle*, *groom*, *wallet*, *winking*; K3-4: *anxiety*, *fond*, *hugging*, *solve*; K2: *awkward*, *argued*, *punched*, *rushes*; K1: *honour*, *growing*, *pretty*, *stuff*.

Participants' monologues have been assessed on the basis of ten accuracy measures, consisting of a global measure of normalised error rate (1), specific measures for lexis (3), syntax (3), verbs (2) and (1) other (missing word). Figure 4.19 below shows the percentages of error-free AS-units per data collection.

*Figure 4.19. Percentages of error-free AS-units through time*




Overall, Lea's monologues were quite accurate (75% of error-free AS-units on average), however, over time, her speech was less precise going from 75% of error-free AS-units in January to 73% in November. Lea's L2 oral production in July was the least accurate (63%), whereas in March and May she reached the maximum score of 81% error-free AS-units. For an in-depth look at the different types of error produced in each data collection, Table 4.4 presents raw data (i.e., raw number of errors) of the eight remaining measures for accuracy, i.e., lexis, syntax and verbs. Measure 6 – Word formation based on the L1 is not represented since Lea never made this type of error throughout the longitudinal study. No remarkable trends nor evident relations between accuracy measures can be reported overall.

Despite the ups and downs, it appears that throughout the longitudinal study Lea's L2 oral production worsened in accuracy. Although at first Lea showed good control of form, meaning that her speech was more precise, in the second half of the longitudinal monitoring she became less accurate and produced more mistakes (November, raw number of errors = 16). By comparing these initial results with Figure 4.17 above, it could be hypothesised that Lea focused on form (i.e., accuracy) to the detriment of complexity (cf. March) and vice versa, whenever she used more advanced language, she lost control of form (cf. July).

*Table 4.4. Lea's type of errors in each data collection over time (raw data)*

| Session | Words in L1 | Wrong Word Choice | Singular / Plural | Articles / Pronouns / Preposition | Syntax based on L1 | Form | Tense, Aspect, Mood | Other (missing word) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jan | | | 1 | 5 | 1 | | 2 | | 9 |
| Mar | | | | 2 | | | 3 | | 5 |
| May | | | | 3 | | 1 | 1 | | 5 |
| Jul | 1 | | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 8 |
| Sep | | 1 | | 2 | 2 | | 1 | | 6 |
| Nov | | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | | 6 | 1 | 16 |
| **Total** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 19 | 7 | 2 | 13 | 2 | |

Throughout the study Lea occasionally misused and misplaced articles, prepositions and pronouns:

(79) "In the end when **the** midnight was-was up […]",
(80) "He realized that he lost the rings that he was supposed to give **for-for** the bride and the groom",
(81) "She walks down the, towards **his** future husband",
(82) "**I saw even** the other one, being a little older, but I didn't feel the same **about** what I felt **on** the first movie",
(83) "And then we went, we just went to high school that was like five minutes by foot **for** my home so not-not that far".

Similarly, she occasionally misused singular-plural agreement:

(84) "So, he starts to ask for help inside the church and this friend of his finds the first two ring(**s**) he can get",
(85) "But if you look at them once, you'll never meet them again, so you'll never know what their name is, what they-what they want to do or what happened to their lives, **life** recently".

However, in other instances these features were correctly produced. It appears that these types of errors were frequently preceded or followed by disfluency phenomena (i.e., repeats and reformulations), hence it could be argued that Lea's L2 oral production lacked automaticity, insofar as greater language competence comes by having a more automatised access to a larger repertoire of lexical and grammatical knowledge (Kormos, 2006; Tavakoli, Wright 2020).

ìIn only two instances Lea chose the wrong word. Once when she wanted to say that she had an argument with one of her friends: "I already had, I had an **argue** with who I thought was my friend", and when somebody changed their mind about something: "But then after seeing the-

the dog, he changes his **idea** and tries to find a way to reach the woman", which transfers the Italian *cambiare idea*. Only once she relied on L1 vocabulary, though apparently without noticing, when she used the word *camion* instead of 'truck': "[…] and she start(**s**) running away, jumping on the first, jumping on a **camion** and then disappearing".

The influence of the L1 can be traced in adjectives placement. Lea frequently inverted the order of 'very first', 'first ever' and 'even', producing utterances that resonated more in Italian than English: "Because I-I lost my-my wallet like on **the first very day** of 2020" transfers *primo vero giorno*, "I don't remember the **first ever time** I went to the cinema" transfers *prima vera volta*, "**I saw even** the other one, being a little older […]" (transfers *ho visto anche*).

Finally, looking at verb tense, aspect and mood, sometimes during her storytelling tasks Lea lost tense consistency shifting back and forth between past and present. Although it is normal and conventionally accepted to switch verb tense while speaking, for example inserting backstories, reported speech, or 'externing' internal dialogue: "And the more I got closer to the university, the more I started to feel anxious because *I mean, I only know him and nobody else*, so, I tried to stay with him […]", in some cases Lea simply chose the wrong tense:

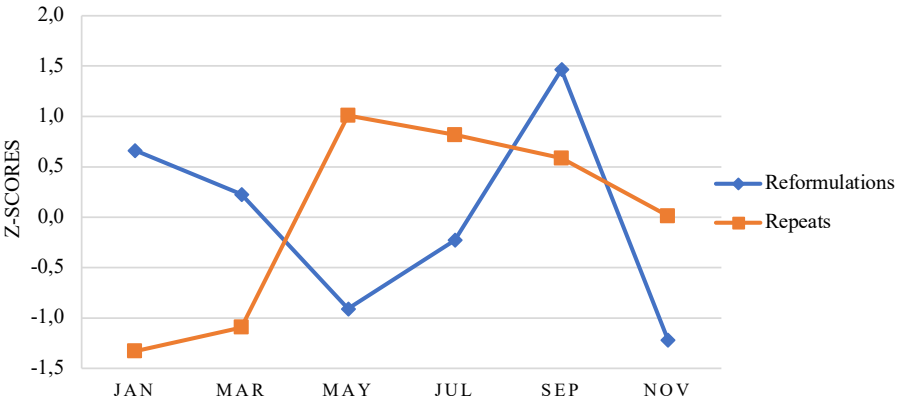
(86) "Even because, when the-the girl we-we *saw* at the beginning *arrived* at the church she **start** talking to another man, I guess one of the groom's friend(**s**) and I think they-they said all things […]",
(87) "But it felt different because it *was* something that I *was* not used to **doing**",
(88) "The video *starts* with this guy waking up and then looking at the clock and **realized** that he overslept".

In November, Lea particularly struggled with conditional when, to talk about an event in the past, she used a second conditional structure (i.e., if + past simple, would + verb) instead of the correct third conditional (i.e., if + past perfect, would + past participle):

(89) "Because after it [school] ended I was just at my home being like, OK, I just finished my lesson, now I have to prepare my-my exam. So, I didn't have that joy of I fin- it's the final day of school. And even **if I was actually there**, I-I think **I wouldn't be** that happy or sad, **I wouldn't feel** anything".

Turning to the analysis of repair fluency in Lea's L2 oral production, Figure 4.20 illustrates how the trajectories of reformulations and repeats contrasted throughout the entire study. If, at the beginning of data collection, Lea was less fluent in terms of repeats, by the end of the observation she was still less fluent but this time in terms of reformulations.

*Figure 4.20. Lea's reformulations and repeats over time*




Lea appeared to be more fluent when the length of her monologues was shorter (i.e., 385 words in July and 372 words in September) and less fluent when her monologues were longer (i.e., 631 words in January and 697 words in November). By comparing these results with complexity (Figure 4.17), it appears that longer and more complex utterances negatively affected fluency (cf. January and November) and vice versa, shorter, less complex utterances resulted in more fluent speech (cf. September). Moreover, by looking at fluency and accuracy (Figure 4.19), it appears that less fluent speech corresponded to less accuracy on form and vice versa (cf. September and November). The following examples compare Lea's L2 oral production in January (90-91) and in September (92-93):

(90) "We booked this little apartment from-from *Booking*, we settled everything, and some people decided not to join in at the end but thank-thank God they already paid so, there wasn't any problem about-about that",
(91) "And all the and even if we were like all the time with-with, together there wasn't any moment that felt awkward when somebody decided to be on-on its own, it felt right, I mean, nobody was pushing the others to-to stay in a group, everybody was free, but at the same time we were together",
(92) "And then he tells her what he-he was feeling, maybe telling her what she, what his, why he has done what he did.
(93) "And he tried to ruin the-the wedding because he was in love with her. So, in that scene, he was not going to the-to the wedding because he didn't want to see her getting married to someone else".

Although Lea's case seems to reflect a trade-off between complexity and fluency/accuracy, it is worth mentioning that the raw number of repeats far exceeds reformulations. For example, in January Lea produced 31

repeats and only 4 reformulations, whereas in March, 22 repeats vs. 4 reformulations. Therefore, it could be hypothesised that Lea's repetitions may reflect her way of speaking rather than an actual disfluency phenomenon.

#### 4.4.4. *Summary of Lea's case study*

A closer observation of Lea's private sphere provided a more complete picture of her exposure habits to informal sources of English input, as well as her attitudes and motivations towards the L2. According to what she had previously stated in the questionnaire, Lea's exposure to the different types of informal input was extremely higher and her habits were confirmed by her input access journal and interview. Lea scored an exposure index of 105 (out of 140) and thus belonged to the high-input learner-users group. Besides watching films, TV series and YouTube videos, listening to music and playing videogames, every day Lea engaged in face-to-screen interactions with her international friends (on average for more than two hours) and read comics and manga (for about one hour each time). The English language has become a part of Lea's everyday life, and she could not imagine living without it. She believed that, ever since she was little, she might have been advantaged by her positive predisposition towards the L2, which allowed her to naturally draw from the different sources of informal English input for leisure and entertainment. Although she has never approached English informally with the intent to improve her L2 knowledge, she recognized the impact that these activities had on her language competence.

Throughout the longitudinal study, Lea's L2 oral development was characterised by considerable variability. Analysing the fluctuations of CAF trajectories suggests that her L2 oral development did not show noticeable improvements nor severe worsening, although they consistently exhibited relatively low complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Despite the prolonged exposure to audiovisual input, videogames, extensive reading and live interactions with non-native speakers of English, Lea's monologues were neither particularly complex, diverse, nor sophisticated. These findings contrast with previous study, where prolonged exposure to different sources of informal English input positively influence L2 learning (Chik 2018; Kusyk 2017; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Grabe, Yamashita 2022) and with the other case studies analysed in this chapter. At times, Lea's speech was disfluent. Although this might be typical of her way of speaking, usually a greater number of repairs can be interpreted as an indicator of increased speech monitoring or heightened attention on accuracy (Tavakoli, Wright 2020; Suzuki 2021). However, this does not seem to be the case, insofar as less fluent speech (i.e., more repeats and reformulations) corresponded to less precise monologues (i.e., more errors) and vice versa.

# 5. General discussion

The present study would like to contribute to the research within the field of applied linguistics and informal second language learning (ISLL) (along with others, Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018; Arndt, Lyrigkou 2019; Dressman, Sadler 2020; Kusyk 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). ISLL is defined as a form of SLA which is thought to result from leisure-oriented activities such as watching films or TV series, playing video games, reading, listening to music, or browsing social networks in the L2. These informal activities take place outside educational institutions, are independent of formal frameworks for learning or testing and are directed by the learners themselves. Moreover, individuals generally participate in these activities out of personal interest rather than for the purpose of language learning. The study moves from the hypothesis that the shift in patterns of access to English currently taking place in Italy and other European countries may affect L2 learning dynamics among learners-users and thus questions *if*, *how* and *to what extent* access to informal English input may affect L2 development, as well as exploring learners' attitudes and motivations towards the target language. Before delving into the general discussion of the results, it is worth remembering that the current study made use of a mixed-method approach and therefore data analysis relied on descriptive statistics and qualitative, observational data such as participants' interviews and input access journals.

## 5.1. Current trends of informal contact with English

Building from Pavesi and Ghia (2020) initial large-scale investigation, the present study aimed to provide updated trends of informal contact with English in Italy. The questionnaire (Chapter 3) distributed to a sample

of Italian undergraduates and postgraduates coming from the University of Pavia offers a picture of students' current behaviours and motivations in accessing English informally, in out-of-school contexts. Most of the students surveyed are not language specialists, therefore their interest in the L2 is not motivated by a specialisation in English studies or a focus on language learning. In the sample, English is mainly accessed through social networks (93%), YouTube (92%), films and television series (84%), music (78%), web pages, forums and blogs (75%) and videogames at clear distance (29%). In terms of intensity of exposure, telecinematic input has a predominant role insofar as it is accessed by a considerable number of students for more extensive timespans as compared to other input sources (cf. Figure 3.21. Total exposure indexes per input source). Participants watch television series in English more than films and choose to be exposed to telecinematic content in the L2 because they appreciate the authenticity of the original version (85%) and reference to the possibility of language learning (65%). When watching telecinematic products in English, respondents generally add subtitles (75%), with a strong preference for bimodal ones (73%, versus 27% interlingual), to enhance comprehension and boost L2 learning. Students believe in the acquisitional value of telecinematic input (96%) and reckon that their listening comprehension and vocabulary retention have mostly benefitted from the prolonged exposure to this specific source of informal English input (92% and 67% respectively). Apart from social networks, which offer a broad range of interactional activities, the most common sources of informal contact with English in the sample are receptive and monodirectional (i.e., telecinematic input and YouTube). Participants appear to engage less frequently in interactive tasks such as accessing English-language web pages, forums and blogs and playing videogames. Even face-to-face, conversational exchanges in English are rather infrequent among respondents. Interestingly, despite engaging in this informal activity to a lesser extent, students consider face-to-face interactions to be highly beneficial for L2 development (92%). Participants also believe that listening to songs (84%), watching videos on YouTube (81%) and browsing web pages, forums and blogs (73%) informally has improved their English knowledge. Social networks and videogames are considered just as valuable (67% and 57% respectively). Looking into specific competence areas (cf. Figure 3.20. Participants' perception of L2 development per skill per source of input) participants indicate grammar as the least improved L2 component, irrespective of input type. Conversely, perception of improvement in L2 vocabulary is consistent throughout the resources of informal English input. In general, learner-users primarily sense an

improvement in their receptive skills (mostly listening comprehension) and seem to be aware of the impact that these sources of informal English input can have on pragmatic competence and productive skills, as well as in overall confidence building when using the L2.

It appears that, in a timeframe of only four years[1], patterns of access to informal English input have changed considerably. Access to social networks, YouTube and telecinematic input outperformed access to web pages, forums and blogs, which in turn was the primary source of informal English input among Pavesi and Ghia's sample (2020). Music too seems to have lost appeal, descending from second (Pavesi, Ghia 2020) to fourth most accessed source of informal English input. In terms of intensity of exposure, on the other hand, results are consistent with Pavesi and Ghia (2020) and confirm the primacy of audiovisual input over the other sources of informal English input investigated in both studies. Even though the present study relied on a larger sample (i.e., 305 vs. 572), findings clearly show that there has been a significant increase in frequency and length of exposure as well as a greater variety of informal English input to choose from. These results seem to support the assumption that ISLL involves a high degree of unpredictability and diversification of learners' informal exposure to English, as they engage with individually tailored, user-controlled input across a wide range of genres and registers (Sockett 2014; Kusyk 2017; Arndt 2019; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Toffoli *et al*. 2023; Pavesi, Bianchi 2024).

### 5.1.1. *Learner-user profiles*

The sample mostly included Italian undergraduate and postgraduate students who self-assessed their English proficiency level as intermediate or upper-intermediate (72%, CEFR B1 and B2). 17% of participants rate themselves at beginner's level, whereas only 11% as advanced (see Section 2.3.4. Students' background, self-evaluations and language-related data). In Chapter 3, more detailed participants profiles were outlined in relation to comprehensive exposure data. Drawing on Pavesi and Ghia (2020) exposure indexes were calculated based on participants' frequency and intensity of informal contact with English and indicate that students divide into three main groups (see Section 3.3. Exposure indexes and type of input). 'High exposure' students (3%) access English informally

1. Questionnaire administration: 2016 Pavesi and Ghia; 2020 De Riso.

in a wide range of contexts, quite often and extensively. On the opposite end, 'low exposure' subjects (6%) are never or rarely exposed to English in informal settings. Most students rank in-between the two poles (91%) and show diversified behaviour, i.e., position themselves between regular English users and non- or only occasional users and engage variably and unpredictably with different input sources (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 119). High-input and low-input students generally show different profiles; however, it is interesting to notice how, compared to Pavesi and Ghia (2020), frequent access to informal sources of English input is not a prerogative of language specialists nor of people who already share an interest in language. Nevertheless, most low-exposure students self-assessed as low-proficiency in L2 English, thus mirroring the tendency for less advanced learners to search for fewer or no opportunities of contact with the foreign language (Verspoor *et al.* 2011) – while conversely more proficient learner-users would engage in more L2-based activities (Pavesi and Ghia 2020).

Despite being clearly identifiable in the sample, high-input and low-input learner-users represent a minority. Most participants fall in between and access informal English input more variably. When considering exposure to telecinematic input and YouTube data interestingly show a lack of polarisation of users, a result in contrast with previous study (Pavesi, Ghia 2020) and thus bearing evidence – within only four years – not only to the different trends of access and use of informal English input, but also to the unpredictability of learners' informal experience with the L2 (Sockett 2014). In their study, Pavesi and Ghia (2020, data collected in 2016) found a rather polarised use of telecinematic input and social networks, with more than half of their sample accessing the resources frequently and at length. Participants who accessed YouTube, on the other hand, did so on a rather infrequent basis. In the present study, findings show that although participants engage in these activities more frequently and more at length (32% films and TV-series, 21% YouTube) than those who have little or no contact at all (22% films and TV-series, 18% YouTube), there is no marked divide between high-frequency and low-frequency users. On the contrary, when looking at social networks, it is possible to notice a clear divide between users (high-frequency: 33%, low-frequency: 9%). Only few students access the other input sources investigated in the study on a frequent or very frequent basis. While 20% of the sample access web pages, forums and blogs regularly, 23% of the participants access these resources on an infrequent basis. Access to videogames and face-to-face interactions is more limited and generally occasional. Only 9% of all respondents play videogames in English at higher-than-average frequency, whereas most subjects rank as infrequent

users (73%, with most reporting no exposure whatsoever). Some of the students in the sample engage in L2 English interactions frequently or very frequently (9%), but more than half never do so (66%).

### 5.1.2. *Placing the study in a European context*

Compared to other European countries, Italy appears to fall behind in terms of citizens' competence in L2 English and their extent of exposure to the language in informal learning settings (Eurostat 2016; EF EPI 2019; Eurobarometer 2024). Findings from previous studies (Aiello 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2021; Pavesi 2024) suggest encouraging trends in the growing incidence of untutored contact with English in the country and results from the present investigation positively support this growth. Nevertheless, the emerging picture still differs from the situation in northern European countries, where informal contact with English starts at a very early age and is strongly rooted in everyday life (Verspoor *et al.* 2011; Henry and Cliffordson 2017; Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018b; Johannsdóttir 2018; Peters 2018). Being traditionally subtitling countries, contact with English in northern Europe is extensive among teenagers and continues throughout adulthood, with differences in preferred input sources according to age and gender (Sundqvist 2009; Peters 2018). The massive L2 exposure through media led to higher English proficiency levels and is most evident in vocabulary development, reading, listening and speaking skills (Arnbjörnsdóttir 2018). Receptive activities like watching television and browsing the web are most popular, though listening to music and playing videogames are also widespread (Sylvén, Sundqvist 2012). Because of media specificity, users tend to acquire colloquial and informal registers of the language, to the detriment of academic writing skills required in the educational and professional sphere (Arnbjörnsdóttir, Ingvarsdóttir 2018b; see Chapter 1 for a detailed review).

Amidst the great number of recent European studies on the informal learning of English, the surveys carried out by Kusyk (2017) in France and Germany, by Munõz in Spain (2020), by Pavesi and Ghia in Italy (2020) and by Krüger (2023) in Switzerland and Germany allow interesting and systematic comparisons of the results. More specifically, some trends appear to be quite generalised and shared by French, German, Spanish and Italian university students when approaching English in extramural contexts. Informal contact with English seems to occur at later age in dubbing countries such as France, Germany, Spain and Italy, namely in secondary school or at the start of university (Kusyk 2017; Bednarek 2018;

Muñoz 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). Until recently, learner-viewers coming from these countries had limited chances to watch audiovisuals in the original language. Content in the L2 was of course available online, but it could only be accessed through illegal streaming and pirated downloads. The advent of satellite television and online streaming platforms has contributed to the availability of original language telecinematic products and to their growing popularity in dubbing countries as well. The French, German, Spanish and Italian students represent a section of the population that nowadays engages in extramural English activities to a considerable extent, for both leisure and educational reasons. Among audiovisuals, TV series appear to be the most popular choice (Kusyk 2017; Bednarek 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020) and for the most part, learner-viewers say they rely on the support of subtitles – although preferred viewing modalities vary according to content availability and L2 proficiency. More advanced users tend to opt for bimodal subtitles or no subtitles at all (Kusyk, 2017; Bednarek 2018 in Germany) whereas interlingual subtitles are preferred at lower L2 proficiency levels (Kusyk 2017 in France; Munõz 2020; Pavesi, Ghia 2020). Another common topic throughout these studies is the polarisation between receptive and productive skills (Krüger 2023). It appears that learners from central and southern European countries tend to engage with English informally in primarily receptive tasks such as watching audiovisuals, listening to music and searching the web. The divide in participants' frequency of access to receptive vs. productive input sources is wider than in northern Europe and, apart from availability, this gap can still be attributable to L2 proficiency and familiarity with extramural English (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 122). Higher degrees of linguistic self-confidence can lead to greater willingness to engage in more activities that involve the English language, including those that require L2 production. Although today opportunities to use informal English productively in Italy are still rather scarce, in both written and spoken form, students who accessed productive input sources informally self-assessed at an advanced L2 proficiency level. This newfound L2 confidence contrasts with previous research which has alluded to a lack of English proficiency among Italians as perceived by other Europeans, as self-reported by university students and as persistently indicated in European reports (see Aiello 2018, Chapter 6 for further review) and thus reinforcing the hypothesis of new, positive relational dynamics between Italians and the English language.

Before moving to the second part of the discussion dedicated to the longitudinal study, a final mention to learner-users' motivations and reasons for accessing English input informally. Entertainment is the

primary reason that drives students to access the different input sources, both online (Kusyk 2017) and offline. Another crucial aspect is availability, insofar as content in the L2 is usually available sooner, in greater quantity and larger variety. Potential language learning comes next, as students believe in the acquisitional value of informal English input, especially in terms of audiovisuals (Kusyk 2017; Pavesi, Ghia 2020) and face-to-face interactions in the L2.

In conclusion, the common patterns and trends shared by French, German, Spanish and Italian university students presented above, seem to suggest that learner-users' behaviour is not necessarily specific to nationality or source culture, but rather is seen as quite fluid and changeable over time, in that is one of the most distinctive features of informal language learning and its globalisation (Kusyk 2017: 173; 147; Benson 2021).

## 5.2. A longitudinal study on informal contact with English and L2 development

Four case studies were carried out over a one-year period from January to December 2021. The aim of the longitudinal study was to investigate the potential relations between patterns of access to the different sources of informal English input and L2 development. The study observed the evolution of participants' L2 spoken production by looking into the development of complexity, accuracy and fluency trajectories. In addition, it explored students' attitudes and motivation towards the English language. Every two months, two main monologic tasks (recorded and transcribed for further analysis) were elicited through story telling in one-on-one online meetings (see Chapter 2 for methodology). Every week, participants were also invited to keep a record of their contacts with informal English through an online journal. Finally, in-depth interviews delved into students' relationship with the L2, from their first contacts with the foreign language to today's feelings and attitudes towards English.

### 5.2.1. *Informal language user profiles*

For ease of reference, Table 5.1 below provides initial personal information of the four case studies analysed in the present investigation (Table 5.1).

*Table 5.1. Personal information of the four case studies*

| Name | Sex | Age | Course | Year | Study English since | Self-reported CEFR | Preferred Input Type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Delia | F | 23 | Biology | 1° MA | 8 yrs old | B2 | Films and TV series |
| Grace | F | 20 | Chemistry | 1° BA | 6 yrs old | B2 | Books |
| Marta | F | 25 | Biology | 1° MA | 8 yrs old | C1 | Podcasts and livestreams |
| Lea | F | 20 | Biotechnology | 1° BA | 6 yrs old | B2 | Online gaming, anime, manga |

When the study commenced, the four participants attended first year of both undergraduate and postgraduate Science courses. Their formal instruction in English began at primary school and they estimated their English proficiency level as upper-intermediate and advanced (CEFR B2 and C1). Participants' informal L2 usage profiles were representative of the informal habits surveyed in the questionnaire, insofar as they participated in multiple informal activities (with one subject, Lea, belonging to the high input users' group) and showed a strong preference for a specific type of input (cf. Table 5.1). Participants' main reasons for engaging in informal activities in English included entertainment, leisure, content availability and communication. Their participation in informal activities did not vary particularly over the 12 months, apart from fading slightly during exam periods and summer vacation and in one specific case (see Section 4.2. Grace), increasing considerably out of interest in a particular activity and availability of desired content.

Delia's primary source of informal English input was watching films and TV series in the L2, an activity in which she engaged daily. She preferred television series over films and relied on English subtitling for better comprehension. Her first contact with informal English however, happened in secondary school when – due to the lack of Italian YouTubers – Delia began to watch videos in the L2 on her topics of interest. She began to watch L2 telecinematic input extensively during her first years of university through online streaming platforms. Before that, Delia lived with her parents and used to watch films and TV series on television, as she did not trust pirated websites for illegal streaming. When Sky TV

began to premiere the new episodes of her favourite TV series (namely *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead*) in English with integrated Italian subtitles, Delia began to watch the original versions because she did not want to wait for the dubbed ones to come out. Soon, she realised that she preferred to listen to original dialogues and the natural voices of the actors and decided to opt for bimodal subtitles. Besides television series and films, Delia regularly accessed social networks, YouTube and videogames in English for leisure and entertainment. In addition, she did extensive online research in English for academic purposes. Delia was a keen, dedicated student and during the longitudinal study she not only she attended a scientific congress with a poster presentation (in Italian), but also one of her articles (in English) was published by a scientific paper and she began to write another one. Overall, Delia was aware of the beneficial impact of extensive exposure to informal English input, as she constantly aspired for improvement in her L2 knowledge. However, at the opposite end of her motivation, Delia's low self-perceived L2 competence emerged, showing a complicated relationship with English on a receptive vs. productive tasks level. In other words, Delia's appreciation of the English language (i.e., receptively) was partially clouded by the pressure of delivering errorless sentences to avoid other people's judgment (i.e., productively).

Grace was an avid reader whose passion for fantasy novels led her to read extensively in the L2 due to the unavailability of Italian translations. During the longitudinal study she read English fantasy novels at least three hours per day and if the story was compelling, she would stay up until late to finish it at once. In addition to reading, Grace also watched at least two episodes of a TV series in English every day and showed a tendency to binge-watch. She did not rely on subtitles when watching audiovisuals in original English because she found them too distracting, and she did not like how sometimes subtitles did not match the dialogues. However, when dialogues were technical and complicated, or when Grace was too tired and did not feel like paying attention, she turned to the Italian dubbed version. Every day, through social networks, Grace kept herself updated on the latest news and upcoming publications as well as interacting almost daily with her international friends via text, voice messages and sometimes videocalls. While growing up, Grace approached the different sources of informal English input out of necessity and personal. She acknowledged that, over the years, her L2 competence benefited considerably from extensive L2 reading and exposure to L2 telecinematic input, as well as interacting with native and non-native speakers of English. She believed her grammar, lexical competence and conversational skills to

have improved the most. Grace was convinced to have had a natural predisposition for foreign languages, as proven by her choice to attend a language-specialised high school. There, she learned to appreciate every aspect of the English language and particularly its simplicity and straightforwardness. Despite this profound language awareness, Grace self-assessed her English proficiency level as upper-intermediate (CEFR B2), a self-evaluation that somehow clashes with her strong L2 confidence and advanced L2 development (see following Section 5.2.2. Language development for further analysis) and, at the same time, supports Italians' low self-perceived L2 competence (Aiello 2108).

Marta was bilingual and spoke both Italian and Spanish. She believed that her bilingual upbringing had given her an extra boost with foreign languages and described the process of switching from one language to another as a 'change input language' command. The first time Marta noticed that she was picking up the English language was in primary school, when she first began to listen and later sing along to Hilary Duff's music on repeat. Her primary sources of informal contact with English were podcasts and livestream videos which she usually accessed via YouTube. In addition to YouTube videos, she regularly watched films and TV series, totalling about 19-20 hours of screentime per week. She frequently used YouTube videos as podcasts, meaning that she used to play them as background noise while being engaged in other activities. Although she did not use subtitles on YouTube (unless they were integrated by the content creator), she watched films and TV series in English with L2 subtitles for better comprehension and authenticity. Interestingly, Marta experienced the two types of informal input and their viewing modalities in two completely different ways: while she watched YouTube videos with ease, irrespective of genre or accents, she admitted that she needed to pay more attention with films and TV series, finding telecinematic multimodality more demanding. Nevertheless, Marta believed that the prolonged exposure to YouTube videos and telecinematic input in the L2 boosted her listening comprehension, speaking skills, vocabulary retention and grammar. During the longitudinal study, Marta also began to frequently engage in face-to-screen and face-to-face interactions in English, thanks to online gaming and a Scottish laboratory advisor working at Pavia University respectively, thus showing a significant change of habits from what she had previously stated in the questionnaire. Considering English as an integral part of her life, whenever an opportunity presents itself, Marta naturally accessed the different sources of informal English input almost without noticing which language she was using.

Lea belonged to the group of high-input learner-users, meaning that every week she accessed several informal sources of English for at least one hour per session per source. Lea watched audiovisual contents, scrolled social networks and listened to music in English, played online videogames and interacted with non-native speakers of English from two to six hours every day. In addition, she also read daily comics and manga in the L2. She preferred to watch anime over films and television series and relied on integrated English subtitles to understand the original version (e.g., Japanese), while she did not need subtitles when watching audiovisuals in English. Before the pandemic, she befriended a group of Norwegian peers while playing videogames online and friendships grew over time. At the time of data collection, Lea interacted daily with them, either while playing online or via private messages and videocalls. Although she was aware of the potential L2 benefits resulting from the prolonged exposure to informal English input, Lea never accessed the different sources of informal L2 with the aim of improving her language competence. Since her interests (i.e., anime and manga) were quite niche, when she was younger, she began to look for contents in English because it was available sooner, in greater quantity and larger variety. Over the years she realised that her vocabulary retention, listening comprehension and conversational skills benefited the most from informal English input, however, she believed that her appreciation of the language has facilitated her L2 development. At the time of data collection, Lea perceived the English language as a 'piece of her':

(72) "*È proprio un pezzo di me. Non so come descriverlo, per me è normale parlare in inglese o leggerlo. Appunto magari non ricordo qualcosa a volte ma in generale è una cosa davvero ordinaria*" ["It's like a part of me. I do not know how to describe it because to me it is normal to speak English or read things in English. Of course, with some difficulties here and there, but overall, it is something ordinary"] (author's translation).

The present section offered a new, varied perspective of Italian informal English users. The current study drew on Kusyk (2017) investigation[2] on informal English learning in France, consequently, findings allow for a comparison between Italian and French informal L2 users profiles. Two major differences emerged from the comparison between the four Italian case studies and the French one concerning L2 awareness and face-to-face interactions. From the beginning of the longitudinal study, the Italian students appeared to be fully aware of

2. Data collected over a 10-month period, from May 2015 to March 2016.

their L2 identity and competence, whereas for the first half of Kusyk (2017) study, Jérôme found it difficult to self-assess his L2 skills "as his conception of assessment was tightly associated with notions of (scholastic) testing and he had not been graded on certain aspect of his L2 for quite some time" (Kusyk, 2020: 340). Moreover, even though Jérôme participated in multiple informal activities, opportunities for face-to-face interactions in the L2 were almost non-existent. For a very short period, he interacted via written chats with his teammates when playing at the multiplayer online game *League of Legends*. However, he did not like the verbal aggressiveness of other players and soon abandoned the game and the daily chitchats with native and non-native speakers of English (Kusyk 2020). A third, minor difference emerged regarding viewing modality. Jérôme regularly used French and English subtitles when watching audiovisuals, with a tendency to use L1 subtitles more frequently than the ones in English. Although he admitted preferring to have the French subtitles at hand (rather than having to pause the series and look up unknown words), Jérôme mostly watched films and TV series via illegal streaming websites, hence most times French subtitles were already integrated into the screen (Kusyk 2020: 339). The advent of online streaming platforms allowed viewers to choose audio language source and preferred subtitles bypassing integrated subtitles and amateurs (i.e., fansubbing) (Massidda 2020), therefore, changes in trends of access to informal English input were in part expected. In addition, in recent years technological advancement and the Internet have committed themselves to shorten (or even eliminate) distances between people, creating the illusion of live conversations happening through face-to-screen interactions. It comes as no surprise then, that Italian informal L2 users engaged frequently in this activity and struggled to distinguish the two types of interaction. Lastly, as regards L2 awareness, it appears that in just six years informal English users have developed a more comprehensive understanding of their L2 identity. Apart from being generally more aware of the language skills they would like to possess and believe one should possess (Dörney 2009), learner-users also acknowledged their identity in relation to specific contexts and learning experiences and thus recognised the informal sphere as a legitimate source of learning and skill acquisition (Dressman, Sadler 2020).

### 5.2.2. *Language development*

The present study relied on 15 measures for complexity, accuracy and fluency to observe the evolution of participants' L2 oral production over the course of 12 months. Every two months, two main monologic

tasks were elicited through story telling techniques in recorded, one-on-one online meetings and later transcribed for further analysis (see Chapter 2 for methodology). Complexity stands for the ability to produce sophisticated constructions, in terms of both lexis and grammar. Accuracy is denoted by an absence of errors and an ability to produce the language in accordance with target language grammatical rules. Fluency indicates the automaticity of access to L2 knowledge, or in other words, the ability to produce the L2 in real time without undue hesitations (Skehan 1998; 2018; Michel 2017; Pallotti 2021, see Chapter 1). Due to limitations in working memory capacity, it is difficult to simultaneously process or produce both the meaning (fluency) and form (complexity and/or accuracy) of linguistic content and, either consciously or unconsciously, one is prioritized over the another (Ellis, Barkhuizen 2005). Inspired by Kusyk (2017), the longitudinal investigation aimed first at discovering *if*, *how* and *to what extent* access to informal English input affected L2 development. Secondly, it has observed the different relationships that exist between CAF measures and how language developed over time (Kusyk 2020).

Among the several sources of informal English input investigated in the present study, extensive reading appears to be by far the most effective activity for language learning in the sample. While SLA researchers agree on the value of extensive reading for L2 learning, they also warn about the possible risks of text selection (Grabe 2004; Yamashita 2007, 2008; Grabe, Stoller 2011; Nakashini 2014; Grabe, Yamashita 2022). A key feature of extensive reading is that learners ultimately choose what they want to read, consequently they could select a text that is too 'simple' compared to their proficiency level to the detriment of L2 learning (Arnold 2009). On the one hand, Grace (cf. Section 4.2) read fantasy novels in English to a great extent, showing strong tendencies of media immersion and being highly motivated by her interest in the story. Her L2 competence, especially in terms of lexical and grammatical complexity, improved greatly throughout the longitudinal study, reflecting the sophisticated structures and rich vocabulary typical of prose. On the other, Lea (see Section 4.4) too read every day: her literary genre of choice was comics and manga (typically written with short sentences and simple vocabulary) which she usually read for a shorter time while doing other activities, e.g., on the train, while having breakfast, etc. and thus lacking media immersion and motivation to read the whole story at once. Despite extensive exposure, her L2 development lacked grammatical and lexical complexity, perhaps echoing the simple structures and minimal vocabulary of comics and manga and suggesting that less attention and motivation towards the informal activity may interfere with L2 development. For ease of reference, the following

examples compare Grace and Lea's L2 oral production in November, when participants were asked to describe their last day of high school. While Grace produced longer, more structured utterances accompanied by a diverse, sophisticated vocabulary:

(94) "People from the last year would go up there and they would wave flags with clever things written on them, they actually cannot be translated to English, but they were very funny usually fun quotes about getting just 60 at the exam and being kicked out or being stressed about the exam. And a lot of people would run around in the- in the courtyard, throwing eggs against the school that we had in front of us with which we had a very strong rivalry with and throwing eggs at each other throwing wine, sometimes it was flour and other stuff like that. It was very messy, but I really liked it and it was a moment that I had waited for five years and it was taken from me because I-I really couldn't experience it you know because of coronavirus and so on".

Lea's L2 production is characterised by shorter, less structured utterances and simpler vocabulary:

(95) "So I was nervous at-at the beginning, but it ended up being something I-I laugh (**about**) while I- when I tell it. And when I was done I was- I was still with this friend of mine Clarissa and we went- we went to eat outside- out. We were at Vanilla Bakery, we got a toast, it was really good. And after that we just went separate ways because it-it was really hot and we didn't want to-to walk under the sun so yeah it was a very kind of a normal day for me. My parents were- weren't at home either because they were outside on a- on a barbecue with friends so in the morning of my exam I was alone, neither my- neither my sister was here because I think she was with them, so it was just me and this friend of mine. And after everything ended I was alone at home doing my stuff".

Throughout the longitudinal study all four students were largely exposed to informal L2 audiovisual input and some more than others (see Section 4.1). Although it would be an overstatement to imply that exposure to audiovisual input did not affect L2 development in the sample, findings differ and in part contradict each other. Similar to Kusyk (2017), it appears that watching videos informally positively affect L2 development in the measure of lexical sophistication, for example in the case of Delia who by the end of the longitudinal study used more moderately sophisticated vocabulary – albeit avoiding high sophistication level (i.e., K7-25) (cf. Section 4.1.3.1). Nevertheless, the same positive influence was not found in the case of Marta, whose lexical sophistication remained unchanged despite extensive exposure to L2 audiovisual input (cf. Section 4.3.3.1). On that note, some limitations of the study should be considered. First,

the lack of pre/post linguistic tests made it difficult to identify subtle language improvements, especially if participants were already proficient in the L2. Secondly, the study analysed the oral production of elicited monologues whose phrasing and structure is inherently different from the spoken registers and colloquialisms of telecinematic dialogues (Zago 2016) (see Section 5.3).

Three students out of four used the L2 productively by habitually interacting with both native and non-native speakers of English through text messages and videocalls. Although they perceived a general improvement in their L2 competence and particularly in conversational skills, this development was not reflected in their CAF trajectories. Once again, it is worth mentioning the limitation of analysing monologic tasks instead of conversation on the one hand and on the other the potential problematic of construct validity and operationalisation. As previously stated in Chapter 1, CAF theoretical and operational definitions are still controversial topic of discussion. For instance, despite the great achievements SLA research has made in understanding, operationalise and measuring *fluency*, researchers' decisions about which measure should be used and how it should be applied will always have a direct impact on the results. The lack of consistency in what different researchers may do still pose a challenge when it comes to comparing results from different studies (Tavakoli, Wright 2020: 62). Ultimately, multiple individual factors affect L2 production and development too, insofar as the level of attention dedicated to the informal activity, participants' motivation, their enjoyment and anxiety also came into play – not only when learners access the different sources of informal English input, but also when they use the L2 productively (Li *et al.* 2022). Individual differences within and across learners makes it difficult to identify similarities or typical patterns between the developmental paths of different learners (Bulté, Housen 2020). Having said that, even though each case study was analysed separately, few similarities can be observed across results. Findings showed that there is a constant push and pull among CAF measures, i.e., progression and regression, as language develops dynamically in nonlinear change. Among CAF measures, accuracy and fluency seemed to be particularly sensitive to each other, insofar as some participants (see Section 4.1 and 4.2) tended to prioritise complexity and accuracy to the detriment of fluency (Robinson 2011). Although a trade-off between fluency and accuracy seems to be a particularly robust finding in literature (Yuan, Ellis 2003; Michel *et al.* 2007; Ahmadian, Tavakoli 2011), competitiveness between the two measures could be interpreted as a sign of positive L2 developmental change, insofar as a greater number of repairs

may be indicative of increased speech monitoring (Kormos 1999; Lambert *et al.* 2017, 2020; Suzuki 2021). The following examples are taken from Delia's L2 production in November:

(20) "But in the end, I guess, because my, how do you say, like the years I spent in high school, I actually had good grades and I really liked it, so my professors decided to give me the maximum grades, the maximum grade".
(21) "And but I remember and one thing I remember is that from my final exam, I-I actually brought this, the topic was the-the feeling of how do you say, like when you feel that you belong to-to a place, but because it's that there is a family there or because it's just a physical place".

Delia's deliberate attempts to find the right words and structure seem to suggest that she was prioritising accuracy over fluency. For example, the repetition of "I remember" and the use of fillers such as "how do you say" indicate an ongoing search for the appropriate vocabulary and expression. Additionally, her frequent restructuring of ideas, such as in "the feeling of how do you say, like when you feel that you belong to a place", reflects an effort to communicate more precisely. While these repairs suggest heightened attention to accuracy, they also disrupt the flow of the conversation. The presence of disfluencies, such as "and but" and multiple instances of "to", further signals Delia's struggle to balance accuracy with fluency. On the other hand, Delia's stuttering was also influenced by her anxious predisposition, which may have shaped her speech with what is known as 'normal dysfluency', including pauses, hesitators (e.g., er, um) and repetitions (Biber *et al.* 2021: 1048). Conversely, in some cases (cf. Section 4.3), fluency and accuracy positively influenced each other to the detriment of complexity (Skehan 1998) and in some others (cf. Section 4.4) the three measures for L2 development did not seem to be related at all.

Findings from the longitudinal monitoring of CAF trajectories and L2 development over time contribute to some generalisations that echoed previous studies on informal language learning and L2 development in general (Polat, Kim 2014; Kusyk 2017; Michel 2017; Vercellotti 2017; Bulté, Housen 2020; Pallotti 2021; Peng *et al.* 2022 among others). First, complexity, accuracy and fluency are multifaceted, multi-layered and multidimensional in nature, as they appear to "progress in tandem" (Wolfe-Quintero *et al.* 1998: 4) and are interrelated in complex and not necessarily linear ways (Michel 2017). Even though one activity may dominate the informal landscape it cannot be assumed that it will affect language development *a priori*, as seen in the case of Lea (see Section 4.4) whose L2 did not evolve particularly during the longitudinal study – despite being the subject who accessed several types of informal input

the most. By comparing Lea's case study with Grace (see Section 4.2), it appears that reading different literary genres differently affect L2 proficiency, i.e., reading novels led to better L2 competence than reading comics. Moreover, other individual factors emerged from the comparisons of the two case studies, especially in relation to learners' L2 identity and confidence, personal meaning attributed to the activities, levels of attention, engagement and motivation. Although both subjects were highly motivated towards the L2, they differed in terms of L2 confidence, as well as attention and motivation towards the informal activities. Being primarily driven by personal interests and motivations when accessing informal L2 input, Grace showed a clear tendency to media immersion and in terms of L2 progress she is the subject who has improved the most within the sample. However, she was not the most exposed. As stated above, despite extensive exposure to different sources of informal input, Lea's L2 oral production did not evolve particularly during the longitudinal study. Besides input type (or genre), it could be tentatively argued that Lea's motivation and level of attention while engaging in informal activities were not as strong as Grace's, thus leading to different results. In addition, Lea's anxious nature should be considered when analysing CAF performance, especially since 'natural disfluencies' (Biber *et al*. 2021) ought to be expected in conversation.

Overall, development measures were found to be constantly evolving, interacting and adapting across subjects and while this study focussed on the relation with the different informal activities, it also highlighted the necessity to look further into the multiple individual factors that may influence L2 development and learning (Arndt 2019; Li *et al*. 2022).

## 5.3. Limitations of the present study

The study aimed to provide a detailed, updated picture of habits of informal access to L2 English among a sample of Italian university students. Moreover, it wanted to provide better insights on informal L2 learner-users' individual profiles as well as analyse *if*, *how* and *to what extent* access to informal English input may affect L2 development. However, it shows some limitations inherent to participant self-selection bias, questionnaire structure, lack of language testing, the reiteration of the same monologic tasks and potential respondent bias. Regarding the structure of the questionnaire, despite the inclusion of several input types, no data on length of access per session is available for songs. Due to the pandemic, the questionnaire was made available online for the entire

student body on KIRO, the Pavia University e-learning platform. Students were invited to respond to the questionnaire by the university Language Centre (CLA). Even though CLA e-mail promotion was fundamental to gather a significant number of questionnaires, this modality of administration has increased the chances of participant self-selection bias, according to which mainly most motivated students tend to volunteer for surveys or research projects (Dörnyei 2003: 75). A similar issue emerged in the longitudinal study, where all subjects (initially 20, four males and 16 females) were highly motivated and had positive attitudes towards English and ultimately all four case studies were women. In addition, the lack of pre/post L2 proficiency tests made it difficult to properly assess L2 development and identify subtle improvements, especially if participants were already proficient in the L2. Nevertheless, the longitudinal monitoring of CAF trajectories allowed to thoroughly observe the evolution of participants' L2 oral production. Moreover, results might have been somehow influenced by task design, as the reiteration of the same monologic tasks for a long period of time may result in task familiarity and affect performance (Vercellotti 2017). At each data collection participants were asked to tell the same story, i.e., Test 1: four participants tell story A; Test 2: four participants tell story B, etc. Perhaps, results would have varied if each storytelling task was distributed differently among the four informants every time, ensuring that the task construct did not influence overall task performance over time i.e., Test 1: participant 1 tells story A, participant 2 tells story B, participant 3 tells story C, …; Test 2: participant 1 tells story C, participant 2 tells story A, participant 3 tells story B, etc. Finally, respondent bias is sometimes inevitable and concerns participants' tendency to provide answers in compliance with what they believe to be researchers' expectations and the prestige of given target languages (Dörney 2003: 12; Bednarek 2018: 222). For these reasons, respondents may report using English more than they actually do, or conversely, they may report using English less than they actually do being too embarrassed to admit how much time they spend watching films and TV-series or playing videogames every day. However, data triangulation, particularly the inclusion of entries taken from participants' input access journal, provided a more detailed and nuanced account of their habits when accessing the informal input, offering insights that complemented and refined the questionnaire responses.

Although the data collected via the present study may not reflect exact trends on contacts with informal English and L2 development trajectories, they still reflect an overall assessment of English-based informal activities, as well as providing year-long observations of frequency and intensity of

exposure to a variety of informal sources of English input and insights on informal language user profiles. Therefore, the study provides an updated perspective of current trends, behaviours and attitudes of informal English learner-users in Italy today.

## 5.4. Conclusions

This study has drawn upon the concepts and research of ISLL to investigate informal contact with English among a sample of students attending a medium-sized university in Italy. This involved surveying the vast array of self-directed activities (primarily focused on entertainment and socialisation) with which L2 learner-users engaged regularly, e.g., access to English-language audiovisual products, social media, music, digital games and online and offline interactions with peers. The greater availability of media affordances, as well as the effect of globalisation on second language learning (Benson 2021), have brought new opportunities of L2 access and acquisition even in national communities where contact with English was mainly traditionally restricted to educational settings with rare occasions of social interaction (Pavesi, Ghia 2020: 137). The unprecedented increase in out-of-the-classroom contacts with English that has recently affected several European countries (Kusyk 2017; Bednarek 2018; Muñoz 2020, Lyrigkou 2021; Krüger 2023 among others) suggests that a similar trend of informalisation in exposure to English may be taking place in Italy too (Pavesi, Ghia 2020; De Riso 2021; Pavesi, Bianchi 2024). By positioning itself in the eclectic field of ISLL, the study also explored the thoughts and feelings of L2 learner-users who accessed different sources of informal English input extensively, questioning participants' L2 awareness in relation to themselves, the others and the informal activities they access habitually (Kusyk 2017; Aiello 2018; Arndt 2019). Moreover, regarding the latter, aiming to investigate any potential relation among frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input and L2 development, the study observed the evolution of complexity, accuracy and fluency trajectories in L2 oral production of four case studies over a 12-month period. For ease of reference, the study should be therefore considered as composed of two main parts: (i) a large-scale investigation, i.e., a questionnaire, to explore the degree and modalities of spontaneous and naturalistic access to English by Italian university students and (ii) four longitudinal case studies to provide better insights on informal L2 learners' individual profiles as well as analyse *if*, *how* and *to what extent* access to informal English input may affect L2 development.

The questionnaire results based on the present sample suggested a dynamic picture of a growing, diverse informal exposure to English. Participants also showed a keen interest in both linguistic and cultural authenticity and awareness of the learning potential arising from above mentioned activities. According to participants' reports, several media such as TV series, social networks, YouTube videos and songs are accessed often and very often in English – as opposed to others such as web pages, forums and blogs, videogames and face-to-face interactions, activities with which students do not engage frequently or at all. The pattern of access emerging from the survey may reflect changes and tendencies occurring among younger generations and help to better understand the role of L2 input in the enhancement of new acquisitional profiles. Compared with previous study (Kusyk 2017; Aiello 2018; Pavesi, Ghia 2020) new learner-user profiles emerged, both in terms of different trends of access to informal English input and newfound L2 confidence. More specifically, frequent access to English-language input is not a prerogative of language specialists anymore, nor is exclusive to students who self-assess as advanced-proficiency in the L2. In addition, easier, faster, larger access to English-language input paved the way for new media affordances (e.g., Twitch, Discord and other opportunities for face-to-screen interactions, see Chapter 4) through which the language can be used, learned and appropriated by L2 learner-users.

The increase in informal contacts with English appears to have repercussions on learner-users' identities and beliefs, competence and skill development, L2 input and output. The in-depth analysis of a year-long observation of four case studies highlighted strong variability across participants and within individual L2 development, as measured by complexity, accuracy and fluency trajectories. The four students showed different behaviours, attitudes and motivations towards the English language; individual factors which, together with frequent access to different informal activities, seem to have influenced L2 development in different ways. More to the point, while certain informal activities appear to have prompted L2 learning more than others, findings also showed that special attention should be given on the one hand to the specificity of input type and on the other to multiple individual factors that come into play when accessing the informal resources. Although the longitudinal study limited itself to observe the evolution of CAF trajectories in time, findings offer some generalisations on construct validity and trade-off effect. The multidimensionality of CAF measures posed several challenges in terms of validity and limitations of the proposed measures as well as internal relationships and competitiveness between measures (see

Chapter 2). Taking fluency as example, repair fluency measures, i.e., the number of reformulations and repeats produced by speakers, were found to be somewhat problematic since a greater number of repeats does not necessarily correspond to less L2 competence (Biber *et al.* 2021) and a greater number of reformulations could be interpreted as an indicator of heightened attention on accuracy (Kormos, 1999; Lambert *et al*. 2017, 2020; Suzuki 2021). In addition, multiple individual factors may influence L2 production, such as for instance speakers' way of talking and natural predisposition (e.g., extroverted vs. introverted; confident vs. anxious). If it is quite natural for a speaker's flow to be impaired by 'normal disfluencies', boundaries between deviance from and conformity to the target-language are increasingly difficult to find, insofar as repair fluency measures appear to be sensitive to the individual. Moreover, although findings seem to support the oft-cited fluency-accuracy trade-off on the one hand (Yuan, Ellis 2003; Michel *et al.* 2007; Robinson 2011; Ahmadian, Tavakoli 2011, see Section 4.1 and 4.2) and meaning versus form trade-off hypothesis on the other (complexity vs. accuracy, Skehan 1998, see Section 4.3) it is worth remembering that the present data analysis relied on descriptive statistics of a small sample of students. Consequently, assumptions of trade-off effects should be made conservatively.

To conclude, this study is meant to provide a contribution to the informal second language learning (ISLL) field of inquiry, as it presents a new, updated picture of a sample of Italian university students' current behaviours and motivations in accessing English informally, in out-of-school contexts. Moreover, wishing to provide better insights on informal L2 learners' individual profiles as well as analyse *if*, *how* and *to what extent* access to informal English input may affect L2 development, the study observed L2 oral production of four case studies over a 12-month period. Findings support the great variability of input and the diversification and unpredictability of learners' informal experience with English, identified as common features of ISLL (Sockett 2014; Kusyk 2017; Arndt 2019; Pavesi, Ghia 2020; Toffoli *et al*. 2023; Pavesi, Bianchi 2024) and could serve as a starting point for further research and more exhaustive studies comprising inferential statistics, a larger set of quantitative data and a closer match between participants' actual behaviour (as recorded in access journals) and L2 performance at given points in time.

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**Filmography**

*Four Weddings and A Funeral*, Mike Newell, UK, 1994.
*Made of Honor*, Paul Weiland, USA, 2008.
*Mamma Mia!*, Phyllida Lloyd, USA, 2008.
*Runaway Bride*, Garry Marshall, USA, 1999.
*Sex and the City: The Movie*, Michael Patrick King, USA, 2008.
*The Wedding Date*, Clare Kilner, USA, 2004.

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# Appendix A – The questionnaire

Questionario

Pagina 1

1 * Tipologia di utente (es. *studente; dottorando; studente di Master*):

2 * Sesso:

- M
- F
- Preferisco non specificare

3 * Età (indicare anno di nascita)

4 * Corso di Laurea

5 * Tipo di corso

- Triennale
- Magistrale
- Ciclo unico

6 * Anno di corso

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V
- VI

7 * Provincia di residenza (indicare sigla)

8 * Lingua madre

9 Lingue conosciute oltre alla propria lingua madre almeno a livello elementare (selezionare la casella e scrivere la lingua, sono possibili più risposte):

10 * A che età hai iniziato a studiare lingua inglese?

Pagina 2

11 * Quando parli o scrivi in lingua inglese (scegli l'opzione che rispecchia meglio le tue capacità):

- ○ Ti esprimi in modo semplice su argomenti quotidiani come informazioni personali di base, fare la spesa; riesci a sostenere un breve scambio di informazioni di base con una persona madrelingua inglese.
- ○ Ti esprimi in modo chiaro su argomenti personali come il tuo lavoro, i tuoi sogni, speranze e esperienze; trovi difficile parlare a lungo con una persona madrelingua inglese.
- ○ Ti esprimi in modo articolato su argomenti complessi e astratti, come la politica, l'ambiente e l'economia; riesci a parlare a lungo con una persona madrelingua inglese senza sforzo eccessivo.
- ○ Ti esprimi in modo spontaneo senza alcuno sforzo, riuscendo a utilizzare l'espressione più adatta anche in ambito accademico e professionale.

12 * Stai seguendo dei corsi di studio con didattica in lingua inglese (es. Medicine and Surgery; Economics; Computer Engineering)?

○ Sì ○ No

13 * Stai seguendo un corso di lingua inglese in preparazione di una certificazione (es. IELTS)?

○ Sì ○ No

14 * Hai trascorso un periodo di studio all'estero con il progetto Erasmus o altri programmi di scambio?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 3

15 * Quanto tempo hai trascorso all'estero con il progetto Erasmus o con altri programmi di scambio?

- ○ 1-3 mesi
- ○ 3-6 mesi
- ○ 9-12 mesi
- ○ Altro

Pagina 4

16 * Guardi film o programmi quali serie, news, talk show ecc. in lingua inglese?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 5

17 * Quanto spesso guardi i film?

- ○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
- ○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
- ○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
- ○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

18 * Quanto spesso guardi le serie TV?

- ○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
- ○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
- ○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
- ○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

19 * Per quanto tempo guardi le serie ogni volta?

- ○ Più di due ore
- ○ Da una a due ore
- ○ Circa un'ora
- ○ Da trenta minuti a un'ora
- ○ Meno di trenta minuti

20 * Elenca le serie TV in lingua inglese che segui abitualmente (separate da ; e a capo):

21 * A parte film e serie TV, quali altri generi televisivi ti piace guardare in lingua inglese? (sono possibili più risposte):

- [ ] Sport
- [ ] Talk show
- [ ] Reality show
- [ ] Documentari
- [ ] Programmi di cucina
- [ ] News
- [ ] Altro

22 * Ti piace guardare film e serie TV in lingua inglese (sono possibili più risposte):

- [ ] Per il piacere di ascoltare la voce originale degli attori e i dialoghi in lingua inglese
- [ ] Per poterne discutere con altre persone (su forum, social network o faccia a faccia)
- [ ] Perché vuoi imparare la lingua straniera
- [ ] Per capire gli usi e i costumi dei Paesi di lingua inglese
- [ ] Altro

Pagina 6

23 * Preferisci guardare film e serie TV in lingua inglese:

- ( ) Con i sottotitoli
- ( ) Senza i sottotitoli

Pagina 7

24 * Quando guardi film e serie TV in lingua inglese con sottotitoli, quale tipo di sottotitoli preferisci?

- ( ) Sottotitoli in italiano
- ( ) Sottotitoli in lingua originale

Pagina 8

25 * Quando guardi film e/o serie TV in lingua inglese sottotitolati in italiano, lo fai perché (sono possibili più risposte):

- [ ] Ti sono utili nella comprensione del dialogo originale
- [ ] Ti interessa vedere la traduzione
- [ ] Pensi di imparare di più ascoltando il dialogo originale con i sottotitoli in italiano
- [ ] I sottotitoli in inglese ti risultano troppo difficili
- [ ] Altro

Pagina 9

26 * Quando guardi film e/o serie TV in lingua inglese sottotitolati in lingua originale, lo fai perché (sono possibili più risposte):

- [ ] Ti aiutano nella comprensione del dialogo originale
- [ ] Pensi di imparare di più ascoltando il dialogo originale con i sottotitoli in inglese
- [ ] Perché la versione con sottotitoli in lingua originale è disponibile prima
- [ ] La qualità dei sottotitoli in italiano non è soddisfacente
- [ ] Altro

27 * Quando guardi film e/o serie TV e film in inglese senza sottotitoli, lo fai perché (sono possibili più risposte):

- [ ] I sottotitoli sono troppo lunghi e veloci
- [ ] I sottotitoli ti distraggono dalla visione del film/dell'episodio
- [ ] Pensi di imparare di più ascoltando direttamente il dialogo originale senza l'aiuto di sottotitoli
- [ ] I sottotitoli spesso non corrispondono al dialogo
- [ ] Altro

Pagina 11

28 * Ritieni che la tua competenza linguistica sia migliorata guardando film e serie TV in lingua inglese con o senza sottotitoli?

- ○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 12

29 * In quale ambito ritieni di avere migliorato la tua competenza guardando film e serie TV in lingua inglese? (sono possibili più risposte):

- [ ] Nell'ascolto
- [ ] Nel lessico
- [ ] Nella grammatica
- [ ] Nella lettura
- [ ] Nella conversazione
- [ ] Altro

Pagina 13

30 * Ti capita di guardare contenuti in inglese su Youtube?

- ○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 14

31 * Quanto spesso guardi contenuti in inglese su Youtube?

- ○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
- ○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
- ○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
- ○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

32 * Per quanto tempo guardi video su Youtube ogni volta?

- ○ Più di due ore
- ○ Da una a due ore
- ○ Circa un'ora
- ○ Da trenta minuti a un'ora
- ○ Meno di trenta minuti

33 * Quale tipo di video cerchi? (sono possibili più risposte):

- [ ] Video musicali
- [ ] Tutorial
- [ ] Recensioni
- [ ] Sport
- [ ] Video comici
- [ ] Documentari
- [ ] Ricette di cucina
- [ ] Talk show
- [ ] News
- [ ] Trailer
- [ ] Interviste
- [ ] Video virali
- [ ] Commento videogiochi (Gameplay)
- [ ] Altro

34 * Ritieni che la tua competenza linguistica sia migliorata guardando video su Youtube in lingua inglese?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 15

35 * In quale ambito ritieni di avere migliorato la tua competenza guardando video in inglese su Youtube? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Nell'ascolto
- ☐ Nel lessico
- ☐ Nella grammatica
- ☐ Nella lettura
- ☐ Nella conversazione
- ☐ Altro

Pagina 16

36 * Quando ascolti la musica in inglese, ti concentri sul testo delle canzoni?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 17

37 * Quanto spesso ascolti musica in inglese?

- ○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
- ○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
- ○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
- ○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

38 * Ti concentri sul testo di:

- ○ Tutte le canzoni
- ○ La maggior parte delle canzoni
- ○ Alcune canzoni
- ○ Solo poche canzoni

39 * Indica il genere di canzoni ascolti in inglese (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Rock
- ☐ Pop
- ☐ Hip-hop
- ☐ Metal
- ☐ Indie
- ☐ Rap
- ☐ R&B
- ☐ Elettronica
- ☐ Altro

40 * Ritieni che la tua competenza in inglese sia migliorata prestando attenzione ai testi delle canzoni?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 18

41 * In quale ambito ritieni di avere migliorato la tua competenza ascoltando musica in lingua inglese? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Nell'ascolto
- ☐ Nel lessico
- ☐ Nella grammatica
- ☐ Nella conversazione
- ☐ Altro

Pagina 19

42 * Ti capita di giocare ai videogame (online e/o offline) in lingua inglese?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 20

43 * Quanto spesso?

○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

44 * Per quanto tempo ogni volta?

○ Più di due ore
○ Da una a due ore
○ Circa un'ora
○ Da trenta minuti a un'ora
○ Meno di trenta minuti

45 * Indica a quale tipo di videogame giochi abitualmente (sono possibili più risposte):

☐ Strategia
☐ Azione
☐ Sport
☐ Simulazione
☐ Sparatutto
☐ Di ruolo
☐ Altro

46 * Ti capita di giocare ai videogame online e di interagire con gli altri utenti in lingua inglese?

○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)
○ Mai

47 * Ritieni che la tua competenza linguistica in inglese sia migliorata giocando ai videogame in inglese offline e interagendo con altri utenti in inglese se giochi online?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 21

48 * In quale ambito ritieni di avere migliorato la tua competenza giocando ai videogame in inglese? (sono possibili più risposte):

☐ Nell'ascolto
☐ Nel lessico
☐ Nella grammatica
☐ Nella conversazione
☐ Altro

Pagina 22

49 * Ti capita di incontrare contenuti in lingua inglese sui tuoi social network?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 23

50 * Quanto spesso?

- ○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
- ○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
- ○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
- ○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

51 * Per quanto tempo li leggi/ascolti/guardi ogni volta?

- ○ Più di due ore
- ○ Da una a due ore
- ○ Circa un'ora
- ○ Da trenta minuti a un'ora
- ○ Meno di trenta minuti

52 * Su quali social network? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Pinterest
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Tumblr
- ☐ Altro

53 * Indica in quali contesti sui social network ti capita di trovare contenuti in lingua inglese (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ In chat o DM
- ☐ Quando imposto la lingua inglese per i miei account
- ☐ Pubblicità e sponsorizzazioni
- ☐ Profili e pagine internazionali
- ☐ Ricerca di informazioni
- ☐ Altro

54 * Ritieni che la tua competenza linguistica in inglese sia migliorata da quando incontri contenuti in lingua inglese sui tuoi social network?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 24

55 * In quale ambito ritieni di avere migliorato la tua competenza grazie ai contenuti in inglese sui social network? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Nell'ascolto
- ☐ Nel lessico
- ☐ Nella grammatica
- ☐ Nella conversazione
- ☐ Altro

Pagina 25

56 * Ti capita di fare ricerche web, visitare forum e/o blog in lingua inglese?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 26

57 * Quanto spesso?

- ○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
- ○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
- ○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
- ○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

58 * Per quanto tempo ogni volta?

- ○ Più di due ore
- ○ Da una a due ore
- ○ Circa un'ora
- ○ Da trenta minuti a un'ora
- ○ Meno di trenta minuti

59 * Con quale scopo navighi su pagine web in lingua inglese? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Ricerche universitarie
- ☐ Svago
- ☐ Shopping
- ☐ Ricerche di interesse personale
- ☐ Altro

60 * Che genere di pagine web, forum e/o blog visiti più frequentemente? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Abbigliamento
- ☐ Cucina e alimentazione
- ☐ Libri
- ☐ Auto
- ☐ Bellezza
- ☐ Tecnologia
- ☐ Viaggi
- ☐ Sport e fitness
- ☐ Cinema
- ☐ Musica
- ☐ Altro

61 * Elenca i siti web, forum e/o blog che visiti abitualmente specificando a quale tipologia appartiene, es. *UniPv, sito web; UniBg, blog; etc.* (separati da ; e a capo):

62 * Ritieni che la tua competenza linguistica in inglese sia migliorata navigando frequentemente su siti web, forum e blog in lingua inglese?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 27

63 * In quale ambito ritieni di avere migliorato la tua competenza navigando frequentemente nel web in inglese? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Nell'ascolto
- ☐ Nel lessico
- ☐ Nella grammatica
- ☐ Nella conversazione
- ☐ Altro

Pagina 28

64 * Oltre le modalità delle domande precedenti, hai contatti faccia a faccia con persone con cui comunichi in inglese?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 29

65 * Quanto spesso?

- ○ Molto spesso (tutti i giorni)
- ○ Spesso (da 1 a 2 volte alla settimana)
- ○ Qualche volta (una volta ogni 15 giorni)
- ○ Raramente (1 volta al mese o meno)

66 * Per quanto tempo ogni volta?

- ○ Più di due ore
- ○ Da una a due ore
- ○ Da 30 minuti a un'ora
- ○ Da 15 a 30 minuti
- ○ Meno di 15 minuti

67 * Con chi ti capita di interagire? (sono possibili più risposte)

- ☐ Parenti
- ☐ Compagni di corso
- ☐ Amici
- ☐ Compagni di collegio internazionali
- ☐ Conoscenti
- ☐ Altro

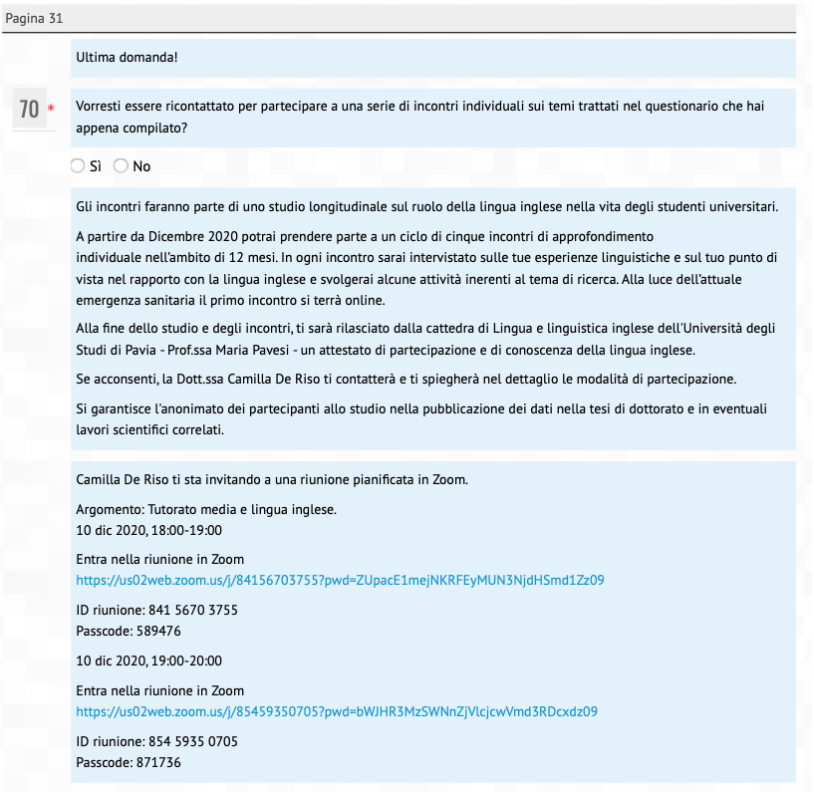
68 * Ritieni che la tua competenza linguistica in inglese sia migliorata da quando hai contatti faccia a faccia in lingua inglese?

○ Sì ○ No

Pagina 30

69 * In quale ambito ritieni di avere migliorato la tua competenza in inglese grazie ai contatti faccia a faccia? (sono possibili più risposte):

- ☐ Nell'ascolto
- ☐ Nel lessico
- ☐ Nella grammatica
- ☐ Nella conversazione
- ☐ Altro


Pagina 31

Ultima domanda!

70 * Vorresti essere ricontattato per partecipare a una serie di incontri individuali sui temi trattati nel questionario che hai appena compilato?

○ Sì ○ No

Gli incontri faranno parte di uno studio longitudinale sul ruolo della lingua inglese nella vita degli studenti universitari.

A partire da Dicembre 2020 potrai prendere parte a un ciclo di cinque incontri di approfondimento individuale nell'ambito di 12 mesi. In ogni incontro sarai intervistato sulle tue esperienze linguistiche e sul tuo punto di vista nel rapporto con la lingua inglese e svolgerai alcune attività inerenti al tema di ricerca. Alla luce dell'attuale emergenza sanitaria il primo incontro si terrà online.

Alla fine dello studio e degli incontri, ti sarà rilasciato dalla cattedra di Lingua e linguistica inglese dell'Università degli Studi di Pavia - Prof.ssa Maria Pavesi - un attestato di partecipazione e di conoscenza della lingua inglese.

Se acconsenti, la Dott.ssa Camilla De Riso ti contatterà e ti spiegherà nel dettaglio le modalità di partecipazione.

Si garantisce l'anonimato dei partecipanti allo studio nella pubblicazione dei dati nella tesi di dottorato e in eventuali lavori scientifici correlati.

Camilla De Riso ti sta invitando a una riunione pianificata in Zoom.

Argomento: Tutorato media e lingua inglese.
10 dic 2020, 18:00-19:00

Entra nella riunione in Zoom
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84156703755?pwd=ZUpacE1mejNKRFEyMUN3NjdHSmd1Zz09

ID riunione: 841 5670 3755
Passcode: 589476

10 dic 2020, 19:00-20:00

Entra nella riunione in Zoom
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85459350705?pwd=bWJHR3MzSWNnZjVlcjcwVmd3RDcxdz09

ID riunione: 854 5935 0705
Passcode: 871736

# Appendix B – Sample of the transcriptions

a) *Delia*

Okay, I think my first real experience was in 2016 when I went to Dublin for- it wasn't an exchange program but it was like, you spent two weeks there studying in this English school and living with an Irish family. And it was a very big group of students from all over Italy so I wasn't really alone but I didn't know anyone so it was almost like I was alone. And I actually went to Dublin and I went to this family. It was the father the mother and two girls and a dog, and it was my first experience speaking in English in an English speaking country, abroad. And my first real experience speaking with- I don't know like, face to face because with my American friend, we actually met but like years later. And so regarding the Dublin experience it was my real first experience with speaking to- with English speaking people and I was really nervous because I was- I don't really know how to explain it but when I speak in English I know what I want to say and I think- like, I almost understand everything other people say but I find it harder to transform what I'm-I'm thinking into words and to create phrases. So sometimes- I don't know if it's the right- the word, but I stutter, ok? And I get really nervous because I don't want to make mistakes because I think that the other people are going to think that she's not good that she is stupid such thin- things. So it was hard the first few days, but the family was very kind and they didn't really pushed me or anything into speaking English. And I think what helped me the most was that there was another girl in the family that had to stay there with me, and she spoke even less than I did. So I kind of felt like a motherly figure I had to help her I wanted to help her feel at home so since I was the only one of the two that could somehow talk to the other guys of the family I kind of started talking more and then I found it easier with the time passing. But at the same time, we-we have to go to this school in Dublin and we have to take English lessons but the problem was that the majority of the students were Italians so, as you know, when Italians are together they don't really speak English but Italian (January 2021).

OK, so I'm not sure if the fact that I have already seen this movie made it a bit more understandable, but I think it was more linear than the other movies you showed me. So there are the- there is Amanda Seyfried that is actually getting married to the other guy that I-I don't remember his name, but her mom actually, Meryl Streep? She probably said something about not inviting her dad or something. And-and I actually don't remember because I saw it a long time ago but I-I'm pretty sure that Amanda the-the- her character actually invited all three of her dads, so they appear in the scene. And I guess each one of them actually presents his- I don't know how to call it, but each one of them says why he thinks that he has to bring his daughter to the altar I guess. And so, in the end, they argue a little bit with the mom but then they decide to stay together for their daughter but Amanda decides not to marry because she's happy anyway and then, plot twist, one of the dads actually proposes to Amanda's mom to marry him, because I remember that's the one guy that she was actually in love with. They have quite a few songs together, and then they start singing. And I think that's it (November 2021).

b) *Grace*

Well that's-that's a quite recent experience I have to say, because it happened right before my final year of high school and since I am in first year here at university it's quite recent. So it was the summer right before COVID my two best friends and I we decided to go to Rimini because we didn't want to go too far from home. We didn't want to travel outside of Italy especially since one of us was underage at the time so we didn't really want to risk that much and we wanted to be in a place where our family could come, let's say, rescue us if we needed it. It was quite fun actually, we stayed there for- I think it was like five nights six days more or less. We stayed in a hostel. We knew that hostel because one of my friends, she has an old- like an elder brother and he went there previously so we knew it was a good place, we had a lot of fun. Actually our sleep schedule was mixed up quite a bit because we basically stayed out until like four a.m. five a.m. then we went to sleep we got up for breakfast and then we went to sleep again until 2:00 in the afternoon and then we went to the beach and then repeat. And it was quite fun it was a lot of fun we met a lot of people, we made friends with a group of Swiss guys yes, they spoke both German and English all three of us we-we knew German but we didn't feel very confident talking to them in German because we were always afraid that they could say something and we wouldn't understand or we would understand something else completely different so we asked them to please speak in English and they were very happy to accommodate us on that front. And yes, it was one of the funniest experience-experiences ever because for the first time I actually had to kind of, like, deal with my friends for more than a single day or more than a couple of days on our own. We had to cook, cooking was a fun experience, and we also- I mean, made some bad impressions and there were embarrassing moments but the kind of moments that you think about afterwards and you were like I was so stupid, but this is just so much fun to think about. So yeah, it was amazing (January 2021).

So like- there's this wedding that I know- I do know some-some bits about *Mamma Mia!* so I know it's taking place in Greece but it's taking place at like sunset. It's-it's very beautiful actually. So the bride walks in, she is walking down the aisle with Meryl Streep I mean I know that Meryl Streep is playing the mother of the bride so, Meryl Streep walks her down the aisle and she looks very happy, it's a very romantic moment. There is a lot of guests watching a lot of them are wearing white I noticed. Then, also the groom is wearing white, they arrive in front of the priest and the mother goes to sit down, the priest begins the whole you know ceremony and then the mother stands up and says something and I cannot really imagine what it is because the bride looks like she's pissed at the beginning which I mean, I could understand, like her mother is interrupting her wedding that's not very nice, but then she-she looks kind of like, not happy but emotional? Like her mother is saying something big something important. Then three men stand up and then-they stay you know on their feet for a while, and then they sit down again the mother says something she goes on she says something to like all of the guests, it's clear that she's saying it very loudly and then she-she-she probably says something along the lines of, I'm done like, you can continue. She sits back down and she's chatting with her friends I think. The priest is trying to go on with the whole ceremony but then he's stopped once again because one by one the three men that stood up previously stand up again and then they move to the bride and I do think it has something to do with them walking her down the aisle or, in another, you know way, taking part in the ceremony as if they were like her dads? Because they stand behind her it looks like they want to give her away, you know when-when the priest asked, who's giving the bride away? And they all want to be the one to say, I do. And then it's the bride who stops the poor priest for the third time and she basically doesn't really wait for the priest to say that they are husband and wife, she just goes on- on her own and she kisses the husband and they're all happy, and then the bride and the groom seem to like, exit the church but I did notice that the bride stayed behind. And then the mother goes to talk to the priest and he's there with all her- her friends, they're chatting with the priest and there's this very clear division of like, men on one side and women on the other side, except for the bride staying behind one of the three men, she then moves very quickly to the women's side and I know it's a musical and actually one of the men starts to sing something, you can very clearly see that he's singing and he has all these like- I don't know, chorus line of people behind him echoing what he's saying and then he gets down on one knee and I think he's asking the mother of the bride to marry him but she doesn't look very sure of it like she looks angry at the beginning. And then she looks very surprised then angry again and she's not very sure but all her friends are there and they're like, Yeah, you should really say I do! They're like encouraging her very strongly. The man gesture for music to start so they're all singing at this point and at the end of it the mother of the bride says, very clearly like- I could read her lips, she says I do which is very convenient actually, because there is a priest right there who didn't even manage to finish one wedding so he would probably be happy to officiate another one. And they get married and they're all very happy and she very clearly-clearly like shows her-

her ring, no, her ring finger and they're all very happy yeah. That was a nice part (November 2021).

c) *Marta*

I mean completely unsupervised I thought it was the holiday of 2015 after graduation from high school, because I did go on trips in school. It was exchange trips in- it was two. The first one was to- I went to England and the second one I went to Ireland but it wasn't completely unsupervised because obviously there were teachers, but we were pretty free to do whatever we wanted in our free time. But yeah I think, like with friends, completely unsupervised, it was yeah probably graduation trip. I went to Barcelona with some- some school friends. We were specifically- we went to the house, OK so it was my best friend's cousin's house- home so we were with her family was her mum and her brother and we were all staying there so it was a bit crowded. I didn't really know her very well so it was a little bit embarrassing at first because obviously I didn't know these girls very well and I was basically sleeping in her own room and- but she was very nice, she-she made me- she made me feel very comfortable and same for her mom because at that time I was vegan actually, and I felt very uncomfortable, obviously, asking for different food. I didn't really want to be a burden but her mom was super nice like, she made me gazpacho, which is a Spanish dish that I really enjoy because I'm actually half Spanish so I went to Spain on holidays a lot and my grandma makes- used to make us gazpacho. So yeah she-she did that and she had no problems like, she bought me like, soy milk and cereal and all these things and she was amazing honestly so I didn't feel bad for that. But yeah I tried not to be too picky with food because I understand that my personal choices should not reflect on other people's lives yeah. The nice thing that happened was at the time actually I was- I had been dating one of the boys that I went on holidays with but we got the tickets when we were dating, the tickets for the holiday we got them when we were still dating but by the time we actually went on holiday we had broken up. It was a bit uncomfortable because the break up was pretty recent and he started dating this girl- the one- the Spanish girl, so I was living with them while we- well they were at the beginning of the relationship so they were all lovey dovey and kissing and hugging and it was like I was watching them yeah, so it was pretty uncomfortable but I had fun because obviously I had other friends there so I would mostly hang up- hang out with them. Then the girls showed us the-the Spanish *movida*, so we went out at night, the disco, and so it was actually funny and as I said, that girl was really nice like, I remember not having nice shoes and she let me use a pair of her shoes. She also lent me, I think it was a lipstick or something, so she was really nice. So really I had no problems with her at whole- at all. Another thing that happened during the holiday for the first time in my life, I got very sunburned at the beach, I fell asleep under the sun and it was probably 2:00 PM so it was pretty hot and when I woke up I had a headache and then that night I got a fever and because, yeah, I got, I don't know how it's called English when you, sun hits very hard and you

get sick for it and then not really funny. But funny thing looking back is that when I came back home from the holiday my tan skin started to fall off because of the sunburnt and so-so my skin was all patchy. So I had like white patches and I think I still had pictures for you because it was-it was weird honestly. But yeah, I think retrospectively it was a bit uncomfortable at first but it got pretty funny (January 2021).

So I remember watching the movie when I was younger but I mean I was too young I don't remember the plot actually. The one thing I remembered watching the scene is that apparently the girl who was getting married is the daughter of the character of Meryl Streep right? And the mother didn't really know who the father was. So the three guys who stood up during the wedding were the supposed fathers? And she didn't know exactly which one was it. And I remember like, apparently they, the girl and the guy who actually looked-kinda looked like Harry Styles, I don't know, he reminds me of Harry Styles, I don't think by looking at the scene I don't think they ended up getting married because apparently then I don't know what the character of Meryl Streep told her daughter, and there were some shocking revelation and they didn't get married. But then one of the guys was supposed to be the father of the girl proposed to Meryl Streep and they start singing and she said Yes, right? And then they got married instead of the daughter (November 2021).

d) *Lea*

I only have like, one experience that-that recently happened, like only one year ago, and it was when I went to Levanto in Liguria with my group of friends to celebrate New Year's Eve. We booked this little apartment from-from Booking, we settled everything, some people decided not to join in at the end but thank to God they already paid so there wasn't any problem about-about that. And it was pretty funny, I mean it was the first time I was only with my friends in-in an apartment alone, I had to-to deal with the cooking the grocery shopping, even it's-if it's something that I usually do. But it felt different because it was something that I was not used to do. And all the- and even if we were like, all the time with-together, there wasn't any moment that it felt awkward when somebody decided to be on-on its own. It felt right I mean, nobody was pushing the others to-to stay in a group. Everybody was free, but at the same time we were together. And-and in the end when the midnight was-was up, we didn't have any champagne or alcoholic drinks to celebrate, so we celebrated with-with juice! We stayed there like three days and two nights. And it was at the beginning of 2020 so it didn't start good to me because I-I lost my-my wallet like on the first very day of 2020 yeah, and that was like the first time that I had to deal with this kind of situation alone. I went to the- to the police to say that I lost my wallet, and then I called my dad to tell him about this and he was like Ok when you come back you-you have to block all your credit-credit cards and see if they can give you another one. And I-I went- I was panicking because I have this anxiety that makes me panic like

really fast, but the the good thing was that my friends were there so I was able to calm down a bit (January 2021).

OK this time I didn't really get it, what was happening? So the video begins with this young girl walking down the aisle with who I think is the mother, and just walking down the aisle to get married. And then even before it can start the wedding, everybody starts to interrupt it to-to say things. Maybe they were not really- they didn't really agree with this wedding, or maybe they thought that she was too young, I don't know, because it- I couldn't even think of some- something that could- they could have said to interrupt it that often. And then at the- at the end, the man proposes to the mom of the young girl. This is the only thing I could-I could understand (November 2021).

# Appendix C – Outline of the semi-structured interviews

Questionnaire responses and input access journal:
- "*Ti piace leggere libri/vedere video su YouTube… come e quando ti sei approcciato a questi media? Come ci interagisci oggi?*" ["You said that you like reading books/watching YouTube videos… How and when did you approach these media? How do you interact with it today?"]

Films, TV series and television programmes:
- "*Come e quando hai iniziato a guardare film e serie TV in inglese? Perché? Ti piaceva?*" ["How and when did you begin to watch films and TV series in English? Why? Did you like it?"]
- Current habits with subtitles and dubbing, streaming platforms and illegal streaming websites

L2 competence:
- "*Come hai imparato l'inglese? Ti trovi a tuo agio con la lingua, è sempre stato così?*" ["How did you learn English? Are you comfortable with the language? Has it always been like this?"]
- "*L'accesso all'input informale ti ha aiutato con l'inglese? Se sì, come te ne sei accorto?*" ["Has access to informal input helped you with English? If so, how did you notice?"]

Expectations and beliefs:
- "*Come ti senti quando parli/leggi/ascolti in inglese?*" ["How do you feel when speaking/reading/listening in English?"]
- "*Secondo te è importante conoscere l'inglese? Perché?*" ["Do you think it is important to know English? Why?"]

Motivation:
- "*Cosa ti spinge ad accedere all'input informale?*" ["What drives you to access the informal input?"]: leisure, socialising, learning…

The relationship with English:

- "*Come descriveresti il tuo rapporto con l'inglese? Prova a usare una parola sola e poi argomenta*" ["How would you describe your relationship with English? Try to use just one word and then explain."]

Covid period:

- "*Hai notato dei cambiamenti tra periodo pre/post lockdown?*" ["Did you notice any changes between the pre/post lockdown period?"]
- More/less access to informal input led to improved/worsened L2 competence

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## Materiali Linguistici

With English increasingly moving beyond the classroom and into informal settings, research on informal second language learning (ISLL) has emerged as a fruitful field of study, exploring both digital and real-world environments for language learning and use across Europe. The unprecedented availability of informal English input has paved the way for new media affordances through which the language can be accessed, used and appropriated by L2 learner-users. This book investigates how Italian university students access English spontaneously. A questionnaire survey gathered insights into participants' patterns of exposure to different types of informal English input, from audiovisuals to face-to-face interactions, as well as into learner-users' reasons for accessing L2 input informally. Moreover, a longitudinal study monitored the evolution of participants' L2 spoken production, observing complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) trajectories to explore possible relationships between L2 development and frequency, intensity and type of exposure to informal English input. Findings highlight ongoing shifts in patterns of access among younger generations and provide insights into the role of L2 input in shaping new acquisitional profiles. Participants show distinct behaviours, attitudes and motivations towards the English language; individual factors that, alongside some specific elements such as immersion and register, appear to have influenced L2 development in different ways.

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La passione per le conoscenze