

SEM47. In contact with English: Informal language learning practices and processes in Italy

12 September h. 16:30-19:00, S8 Moro

13 September h. 8:30-11:30, S8 Moro

Convenors

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Nowadays, technology, globalization, mobility and multilingualism have brought about a scenario in which English language learning is moving beyond the classroom, propelled by informal, uninstructed practices ‘in the wild’ (Dressman & Sadler, 2020; Toffoli et al., 2023). This shift reflects a transformation in the contemporary linguistic landscape, where contact with English is increasingly embedded in real-life experiences, driven by entertainment, social and information-seeking purposes. English-language media and digital tools now serve as linguistic models and sources of authentic input, forming part of the complex web of online and offline interactions that shape present-day communicative practices (Benson, 2021). In these multimodal, immersive and fluid environments, second language acquisition (SLA) develops naturally as a ‘by-product’ of informal contact with English. An up-to-date ecological paradigm is thus needed to explain the dynamic and multifaceted nature of SLA in today’s media-saturated cultures, in which learner-users can attain high levels of proficiency in English without crossing geographical borders or having extensive contact with native speakers.

Inspired by the results of the 2020 PRIN project “The Informalization of English Language Learning through the Media” (Pavesi & Bianchi, 2024), this Seminar explores the evolving, but largely uncharted, patterns of learner-users’ informal contact with English in Italy. It welcomes contributions that investigate how informal exposure to English is reshaping SLA in the contemporary digital age. Topics for discussion include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Types, modes and degrees of media-based exposure to English outside of the classroom;
- Longitudinal studies of media-related/digitally-induced, out-of-class SLA, along such parameters as complexity, accuracy and fluency;
- Emic perspectives on learner-users’ experiences with English in informal contexts;
- Role of media and digital tools in the development of English language proficiency at the level of grammar, lexis, pragmatics, register awareness, etc.;
- Informal and formal English language learning against the background of the digital turn in education.

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SEM47. Papers

47A 12 September h. 16:30-19:00, S8 Moro

- *The English of social media. Investigating the linguistic features of Instagram posts* (Elena Manca, Università del Salento)
- *Informal access to audiovisual media among university students: Attitudes towards English, motivations for engagement and learning profiles* (Maria Pavesi, Università di Pavia / Maicol Formentelli, Università di Pavia / Elisa Ghia, Università di Pavia)
- *An exploratory study of how informal English language learning practices influence aspects of L2 written and spoken production* (Erik Castello, Università degli Studi di Padova)
- *The impact of informal English input on L2 spoken production over time. An exploratory study of lexical complexity* (Camilla De Riso, Università di Pavia / Elena Ballante, Università di Pavia)

47B 13 September h. 8:30-11:30, S8 Moro

- *Mediated fluency: Leveraging digital content to foster spoken English proficiency* (Francesca Machì, Università degli Studi di Palermo)
- *Pragmatic development in digital spaces: A cross-linguistic study of compliment production on social media* (Silvia Bruti, Università di Pisa / Gloria Cappelli, Università di Pisa / Nicoletta Simi, Università di Pisa)
- *Learning to speak, speaking to learn: A corpus-driven study of Italian university students' representations of English language learning* (Fabio Cangerò, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)
- *Beyond textbook knowledge of the host country's language: Migrants' language-related tactics when not attending classes* (Marco Santello, Università di Torino)

SEM47. Abstracts

Pragmatic development in digital spaces: A cross-linguistic study of compliment production on social media

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This contribution reports on the second phase of an ongoing study exploring the potential of digital exposure to promote the informal development of L2 pragmatic skills. Building on previous work on the recognition of embedded compliments in conflict-laden online interactions and their role in supporting or defending individuals, this presentation focuses on the production of compliments by Italian learners of English (EFL), both in their L1 (Italian) and L2, and compares their performance with that of L1 English speakers.

Compliments are typically not included in formal language instruction programmes, let alone when they occur in the specific interactional contexts examined here, which often elicit examples involving complex interpersonal positioning. As such, they provide an ideal heuristic vantage point for observing the pragmatic strategies and associated linguistic resources that learners may acquire incidentally through online exposure.

A total of 400 Italian EFL learners of varying proficiency levels and 200 L1 English participants completed an elicitation task in which they responded to highly critical and confrontational comments on social media posts. All the respondents stated that they are regular social media users, but did not specify how much time they devote to this activity. The comments covered five topics: looks, personality, skills, performance, and belongings. Responses were analyzed comparatively using a multidimensional coding scheme designed to capture both linguistic and pragmatic features in the two languages.

The study contributes to our understanding of informal learning in digital environments by gaining insights into how online engagement may foster the development of pragmatic competence beyond the classroom. It discusses implications for L2 pedagogy, particularly with regard to the role of authentic digital contexts in shaping learners' interpersonal communicative repertoires.

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Learning to speak, speaking to learn: A corpus-driven study of Italian university students' representations of English language learning

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This study investigates how Italian university students linguistically represent their experience of learning English as a foreign language, with the aim of uncovering the emotional, cognitive and sociocultural dimensions that underpin their language learning trajectories. Motivated by the need to better understand learners' voices in shaping inclusive and effective pedagogical practices as well as a desire to centre students' voices in discussions about language education, the research combines corpus linguistics (Baker, 2023) with corpus-driven sociolinguistics (Baker, 2010), language psychology (Dörnyei, 2009), and Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2017). Specifically, the study seeks to explore how variables such as age, gender, motivation, academic progression and exposure to English shape learners' perceptions, affective responses and discursive representations of English language learning. To address these aims, the study draws on the Your Voice in English Language Learning (YVELL) corpus, which consists of open-ended responses to eight prompts collected from 146 students enrolled at the University of Naples Federico II. The respondents represent a wide range of academic disciplines and demographic backgrounds. The corpus was compiled and annotated using Sketch Engine (Kilgariff, 2014), a leading platform for corpus analysis, and is enriched with metadata including age, gender, degree cycle, motivation, self-assessed proficiency, exposure to English, employment status, and academic progression. Preliminary analyses reveal that demographic and psychological factors, such as age, gender and motivation, shape distinct patterns in learners' language use, reflecting varying emotional and strategic orientations toward English language learning. In line with recent research in applied linguistics and language education (Pavesi, 2024), the study highlights the importance of informal learning environments, including media, digital tools and everyday interactions, in complementing formal instruction. These findings, which contribute to ongoing debates around learner-centred and inclusive language education, point to the need for more emotionally responsive and differentiated pedagogical strategies, capable of engaging diverse student profiles and creating more equitable and empowering language learning environments.

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An exploratory study of how informal English language learning practices influence aspects of L2 written and spoken production

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Recent research on informal English language learning (IELL) has explored effects of informal exposure to English on both L2 English receptive and productive skills (Olsson, 2012). Regarding writing skills, Kaatari et al. (2023) found that the specific type of informal input plays an important role, with reading in English leading to higher adjectival

modification of the noun phrase and conversing in English and watching TV programs positively impacting lexical diversity.

The study presented in this paper contributes to the project “The informalization of English language learning through the media” (Pavesi, 2024), the third phase of which involved carrying out semi-structured interviews with a group of Italian university students and collecting longitudinal data from them in response to two set tasks. These consisted in writing reviews of films, books etc. and in performing monologues in which the students retold the contents of short clips and expressed their opinions/feelings about them. This study explores a corpus of texts produced by 12 students, who contributed 5 written and 5 spoken texts each, over a period of about one year (26,145 and 45,612 tokens, respectively). Before collecting the data, they sat a language test, which placed 2 of them at CEFR level B1, 5 at level B2, and 5 at level C. During the data collection period they kept a weekly diary and annotated the number of hours devoted to various types of IELL activities.

Research on written reviews as a genre (Taboada, 2011) has highlighted the importance of skilfully using adjectives and complex noun phrases for both descriptive and evaluative purposes. For the present study all the instances of adjectives in each text and ‘adjective+noun’ and ‘noun+noun’ combinations in the corpus were retrieved and quantified with the aid of the software Sketchengine. Furthermore, indices of lexical diversity were obtained from the software TAALED 1.4.1. The specific aspects explored are whether and to what extent the initial CEFR level and the frequency of reading/writing and conversation/watching influence the measures calculated for both tasks. Preliminary results show that learners at higher CEFR levels perform better on both lexical diversity and adjective use/noun phrase complexity regarding the written task, while they are better only at lexical diversity in the spoken task. Frequent reading/writing appears to be conducive to better performance on adjective use/noun phrase complexity in the written task but not in the spoken one. Other informal activities seem to be less impactful on the complexity measures that were considered.

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The impact of informal English input on L2 spoken production over time. An exploratory study of lexical complexity

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Studies on informal English language learning (IELL) suggest that prolonged exposure to informal L2 input enhances receptive and productive skills in L2 learners (Toffoli et al., 2023). However, only recently has research begun investigating longitudinal development within IELL, focusing on complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) (Kusyk, 2020; De Riso, 2025). In previous studies on CAF, findings have shown that lexical complexity – as lexical diversity and lexical sophistication – tends to increase throughout development, while being a reliable indicator of L2 proficiency. Lexical diversity measures vocabulary range and is calculated as the ratio of unique words (types) to total word count (tokens) (Malvern et al., 2004). Since the probability of introducing new types decreases with text length, measures such as D have been developed to assess lexical diversity independently of text length (McCarthy & Jarvis, 2007). Lexical sophistication reflects the use of less frequent, more advanced vocabulary, operationalized as word frequency lists (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Nation, 2016).

The present study is placed within the national PRIN project “The informalisation of English language learning through the media” (Pavesi, 2024) and aims to assess media-driven longitudinal development among Italian L2 speakers of English. Focusing on lexical complexity as diversity and sophistication, the study will draw on 12 university students’ spoken productions, collected through narrative and interview tasks over a 12-month period. Additionally, it will compare the narrative and interview data to evaluate how different tasks may elicit different degrees of lexical complexity. Results reveal distinct performances between narrative and interview tasks. When narrating a silenced short film, L2 users consistently improved in both diversity and sophistication over time. In turn, across the five interviews, lexical

sophistication consistently increased although diversity did not yield comparable results. These findings suggest that informal language input has a general impact on lexical complexity among L2 users of English. However, increasing task familiarity and repetitiveness through time may favour the use of the same vocabulary items. Findings further highlight that as narrative tasks are more diverse in topics and more creative as a genre, they may provide greater opportunities for complex lexical performance. The paper will further discuss the impact of the type and amount of informal exposure to English at advanced stages of development.

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Mediated fluency: Leveraging digital content to foster spoken English proficiency

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In recent years, the role of media in second and foreign language acquisition has become increasingly prominent, especially in informal learning contexts. For non-native English speakers, media exposure, whether through television series, YouTube videos, podcasts, music, or social media has proven to be a valuable tool in developing communicative competence. This is particularly relevant in environments where spoken interaction is essential and where fluency is often prioritised over grammatical accuracy (Soyoo et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023). Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), as it is now frequently termed, allows learners to be constantly in touch with authentic, dynamic, and different uses of the language, outside the traditional boundaries of the classroom (Lee & Sylvén, 2021; Reinders & White, 2022).

What becomes evident in this context is that exposure to a variety of linguistic registers and dialects of English provides learners with rich opportunities to observe, analyse, and emulate real-life language use. This contact with authentic Englishes enables them to develop not only linguistic knowledge, but also pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence, which are essential in modern communication (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2023).

This paper reports on a teaching experience carried out within the English courses of students enrolled in the Bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences at the University of Palermo. The course design aimed to bridge formal and informal learning practices, emphasizing oral interaction and media-based exposure. A combination of interactive methodologies and learner-centered strategies was employed, with a particular focus on the use of media content (TV shows, news broadcasts, podcasts, and social media clips and videos) to provide students with real-world examples of English language use across different registers, accents, and cultural contexts.

Through activities such as transcription, role-playing, discussion, and content analysis, students were encouraged to not only consume but critically engage with media, enabling them to improve their speaking skills and deepen their linguistic awareness. The results, assessed through oral exams, peer reviews, and reflective reports, indicated a significant improvement in students' confidence, fluency, and ability to manage various forms of spoken English. Moreover, the study highlights how intentional integration of informal and formal language exposure into structured coursework can enhance learner motivation and foster more meaningful engagement with the target language.

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The English of social media. Investigating the linguistic features of Instagram posts

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In today's digital landscape, adolescents and young adults are exposed to the English language through a wide range of digital media, with social media platforms playing a particularly significant role (Manca, 2024; Pavesi et al., 2023; Pavesi & Bianchi, 2024; Pavesi et al., forthcoming). Whether engaging with short-form videos, memes, tweets, or online discussions, young users interact with English daily, often without the explicit intention of learning the language. However, this frequent exposure for entertainment purposes contributes to an incidental acquisition of English, as users acquire linguistic structures, vocabulary, and communicative norms by interacting with them.

Despite the growing presence of English in digital spaces, questions remain regarding the specific characteristics of the language encountered. What distinctive linguistic features emerge in these contexts? Is the English found in these digital environments more similar to written or spoken varieties? What kind of language do social media users encounter and incidentally learn?

This study seeks to explore these questions through the analysis of three corpora consisting of Instagram posts focused on three main themes: music, travel, and cinema. These topics were selected based on a study conducted by Manca (2024), who investigated the preferences, perceptions, and attitudes of Italian university language students, particularly those enrolled at the University of Salento, towards the role of social media in learning English. Using a questionnaire inspired by the IECOL tool (Pavesi et al., 2023) and administered to 213 language students, Manca's study (2024) explored students' motivations for using social media and their perceptions of how such use may influence their language proficiency. The results indicated that students engage with social media not only for entertainment and cross-cultural interaction but also as a means to practice English and access information in the language. Among the thematic interests most commonly cited by the participants were cinema, music, and travel. Based on these findings, the present study selects these three topics, cinema, music, and travel, as the focus of its linguistic analysis. For each theme, two Instagram pages were chosen according to follower count and posting frequency. All posts published by these pages between February 2024 and February 2025 were collected to construct the three corpora under investigation.

The study adopts a quantitative approach grounded in Biber's (1995; Biber, Conrad 2009) multidimensional analysis, which examines the frequency of specific linguistic markers and associates their distribution with features typical of either spoken or written genres. Additionally, the three corpora are compared with the Spoken and Written Samplers of the British National Corpus (BNC) in order to identify part-of-speech (POS) tags with significantly unusual frequencies in relation to written and spoken genres of English. The quantitative analysis was carried out using the software tools SketchEngine (Kilgarriff et al. 2004) and WMatrix 7 (Rayson 2008), employing wordlists, keyword lists, and concordances as primary analytical instruments. The findings provide insight into the hybrid linguistic nature of English in digital spaces and contribute to a better understanding of incidental language acquisition through social media.

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Informal access to audiovisual media among university students: Attitudes towards English, motivations for engagement and learning profiles

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The increasing informalization of English language use is affecting L2 speakers' attitudes, motivations for exposure and self-perceived identities, while fostering the informal, naturalistic acquisition of the language outside of institutional settings (Sockett, 2014; Arnbjörnsdóttir and Ingvarsdóttir, 2018; Benson, 2021; Toffoli et al., 2023). Italy participates in this evolving scenario, as a result of the growing availability of English through traditional and new media as well as young generations' changes in linguistic behaviours and preferences (Pavesi and Ghia, 2020; Pavesi, 2024; Pavesi et al., 2025). The present study aims to explore the relationships between informal exposure to English, learning outcomes and the linguistic, social and attitudinal factors that may play a role in fostering spontaneous access to English through the media among Italian university students. Following the results of a large-scale investigation on informal contact with English in Italy, we address these research questions: 1) What social, attitudinal and language-related variables correlate positively with students' degree of informal contact with English? 2) What are the reasons for accessing English-language audiovisual media during leisure time? 3) How do these reasons relate to English learning profiles? A 72-item questionnaire (Pavesi et al., 2025) was administered to 4,007 university students enrolled in various degree courses in four Italian universities across the country. While RQ1 draws on the whole sample, RQs 2 and 3 are addressed focusing on the subsample of 2,703 respondents who declared to engage with films, TV series and other TV programmes (e.g., news, documentaries, stand-up comedy, televised interviews, etc.), given students' reported highest engagement with English-language audiovisual media. Data were analysed using correlation, regression and non-parametric tests to identify the relationships between intensity of exposure and non-linguistic factors such as students' educational background and attitudes towards English on the one hand, and reasons for accessing English-language audiovisual products and learning outcomes on the other.

The results reveal that the degree of informal experience with English-language media strongly relates to users' educational history and the liking of the language. As for the reasons behind accessing audiovisuals, the responses to the questionnaire show that improving English is not the only motivation for students to seek informal contact with English in their spare time but goes hand in hand with other frequently reported reasons, such as entertainment, appreciation for original voices, dialogue naturalness and information gathering. The varied factors which are bound to frequent engagement with English and the reasons for accessing audiovisual language in leisure activities will be discussed together with objectively assessed L2 proficiency.

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Beyond textbook knowledge of the host country's language: Migrants' language-related tactics when not attending classes

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This paper explores migrants' language-related tactics when they do not attend classes, focusing specifically on how migrants deal with constraints (Santello, 2022; Santello, 2024) when classes are not provided and/or not taken. Stemming from larger ethnographic research conducted among Gambian migrants in Italy, the study utilises rapport conceived as processual in the interaction between researcher and participant (Goebel 2021; Perrino 2021) and the notion of memory as mobile (Certeau, 1990; Santello, 2025). The data shows that it is not necessarily textbook knowledge of the host country's national language that is a helpful resource in this migratory setting; it is a combination of pre-departure languages, including English, phrases learnt online, and other ways of communicating. These encompass learning from a video platform, asking for the meaning of words, and, more generally, learning languages by interacting with people, which the key participant of this study characterises as personal/familial and shared in the Gambian society where he comes from. In addition, he tells of communication with an English-speaking guardian when he was a minor and being able to speak 'Italian from the street', a streetwise version of Italian that is described as distant from both monolingual standards and textbook knowledge. The results, therefore, shed light on ways of getting things done linguistically that are often overlooked when concentrating solely on classroom teaching and learning. This chimes with Cox's (2024) effort to take learning outside of the classroom but zooms into experiences as remembered and recounted in interaction of what happened when formal instruction was not a given. This may well warrant further discussion about appropriate language standards as well as learning methods for migrants.

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