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Informal language learning: an investigation of students' preferences

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ABSTRACT

To learn a new language is certainly, as well as it could be a necessity, a requirement or a passion, first of all a challenge against oneself. Regardless of the methods one uses to express themselves in a language different from the one they grew up speaking, whether it is at school with a native speaker teacher, or with TV shows or even with online videogames communities, what makes a difference is how one adapts their autonomy to the instruments available. The role played by informal learning of languages, which makes use of alternative tools such as songs lyrics, TV shows, movies, videogames, online interactions with other learners and countless other sources of education is becoming more and more important, both in the incorporation with formal learning and also as a new and exclusive way of learning. These kinds of instruments have become more and more accessible, also thanks to streaming platforms which with subtitles and dubbing in many languages provide an inestimable source of education. These new methods allow the learner to adapt their study to their interests, and through a customization of the used content, they lead emotional involvement to be a stimulus for a more effective study structuring.

This dissertation wants to investigate through a study which informal language learning activities are used the most among language students of the University of Padova, In particular as regards the learning of the English language, how effective it is perceived and its advantages in relation to formal learning.

INTRODUCTION

School is the place where every person has acquired a large part of their personal knowledge. There, one learns to write, to read, to listen to others and to understand new things from books. Then, school helps students to become familiar with different subjects, and to discover those subjects that are able to capture their interest and where their best capacities lie. Later in life, school and university are places where students can deepen their knowledge and choose to start their journey to become specialists in those subjects. Many of the things one learns at school have a direct impact on one's daily life, and undoubtedly, some more than others. Languages, for instance, are potentially the subject that take up the greatest amount of time out of school, because unlike other subjects, they represent the main means of communication.

This dissertation was born out of an interest to explore the main theoretical perspectives and literature covering topics such as informal language learning, autonomous learning, motivation and language learning strategies, it aims to investigate the language learning activities students engage with outside school, which in my experience is vast and crucial to the achievement of learning goals, and represents a tool which accompanies students throughout their entire careers.

The first chapter detangles the notions of the main authors who deal with Informal and autonomous learning, the importance of motivation and strategies and how these three element are essential to the learner. The second chapter describes five of the most popular activities in which learners engage to practice their target language (watching television shows and film, listening to music, reading books, social networking and playing videogames). The same tools and activities are investigated in the study, reported on the third chapter, among language students of the University of Padova. The third chapter will investigate the frequency of use of each activity, the habits of students concerning efficiency and weak points of the tools, learner's methods for self-evaluation, and their opinions and feelings.

CHAPTER 1: AUTONOMY, MOTIVATION AND STRATEGY

This chapter will investigate three crucial aspects of language learning, that is to say *autonomy, motivation,* and *strategy,* with a brief review of the main theoretical perspectives along with some considerations regarding the relationship between formal and informal learning. These considerations will be relevant when investigating the informal language learning methods preferred by language students at the University of Padova, and helpful to better understand the psychological and cognitive processes that occur when the learning happens through streaming platforms, song lyrics, online videogames and other informal sources of language.

1.1 Learner autonomy

In the canonical image of language learning, students need constant support from an expert, preferably a native speaker teacher, who supports the teaching with books, manuals and standardized tools, which limit learning to a scheduled, mnemonic process. This process is present especially in the classroom environment, where teachers need an efficient, universal teaching (and evaluating) method for large and heterogeneous groups of students. Yet every learner is different, and since each student has their own interests, aspirations, cultural and learning background and cognitive functions, it can be argued that every student can model their own learning method in an ecological way, thus optimizing the learning process according to their interests and needs (Godwin-Jones 2019). For instance, a student who is passionate about television shows, or online gaming, can combine the two interests by watching a show or playing a game in the original language and/or with subtitles. In other words, they will combine formal and informal language learning, adapting their interests to the tools available. Autonomy, however, should not be intended as a substitutive learning method, but

rather as a fundamental (yet not exclusive) aspect of the language learning process (Little 1990).

The issue of autonomy was first raised by Holec (1981 in Benson 2006) in his report *Autonomy In foreign language learning* for the Council of Europe in 1979, when he gave the first and most widely cited definition in the field, describing autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Another relevant definition is the following:

> autonomy is a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little 1991: 4)

Both these definitions claim that autonomy is an intrinsic trait of the learner, which is however not innate, but needs the right stimulus to develop. Holec's definition investigates the technical aspect of autonomy, or how the learner becomes autonomous, while Little explores the psychological processes the learner goes through, how they become conscious of their actions and decisions in the learning process.

This concept of learner responsibility is expanded by Benson (2001 in Cotteral 2008) who states: "the content of learning should be freely determined by learners", meaning that autonomous learners do not just decide how to study, but also the matter and the place where to study. By this quick look at the complex issue of learner autonomy, it is clear that it cannot be faced considering it a simple construct, but rather as something that is "influenced by a large array of factors" (Godwin-Jones 2019), and in fact, Little attempts to clarify first of all what autonomy is not, listing a series of misconceptions on the matter, for instance: "autonomy is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of how learning is organized" (1991:3) . He also argues that autonomy is not something teachers do

to their learners, stressing that "a misconception is that autonomy is a simple, easily described behaviour" (Little 1991: 3,4).

There is another important clarification to make here. Autonomy is extremely helpful, and even imperative in order to achieve positive accomplishment; this is especially true for language learning, since the learner must be able to apply the target language to various daily situations. Yet as Little (1991: 5) reminds us, "freedoms conferred by autonomy are never absolute, always conditional and constrained […] Because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence". In other words, the process of education needs a social and interactive focus in order for learning to be fully absorbed, and the very same capacity of being autonomous is possible only after we learn from and with others.

The realization that autonomy is a changing and non-linear element, in addition to having renewed the interest in autonomy, especially in formal education (Benson 2006), has led to a "reconceptualization of autonomy as a multifaceted construct that operates on a number of dimensions" (Reinders and White 2016 in Godwin-Jones 2019: 9), and has increased the interest in another important issue: how can the role of the teacher and the learner adapt to this transfer of responsibility? This is possible when the teachers themselves acquire autonomy in their work. Teacher autonomy is, as Thavenius (1990) states: "the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning." (in Egitim 2015: 22). The best way for language teachers to encourage learners' autonomy is by becoming aware of their role and their teaching methods, and undertaking a type of teaching known as reflective:

> Being reflective as a teacher involves the process of self-observation and self-evaluation. Teachers need to think about what they do in the classroom, why they do it and what benefits learners can gain from that. As teachers continue to adopt this self-observation and self-evaluation, they can become more reflective about their own teaching and guide their students in the right direction to develop their own reflective learning skills (Egitim 2015)

By doing this, learners can gain the freedom necessary to use their own experiences, memories and interests to better absorb the target language, which is no longer seen as a commodity provided by the teacher, but becomes a self-taught skill which is at the same time journey and destination.

A crucial aspect of learner autonomy, which is possible thanks to the teacher's role, is the acquisition of confidence by the student, which also happens through the process of learning from their own mistakes. As Egitim (2015: 22) states, "Confidence is an essential condition for effective communication giving learners the courage to take more initiative and challenge themselves". He also describes the classroom practice he uses with his students, to illustrate the role of the teacher in developing learner autonomy. His "Regular weekly homework assignment" involves three phases: firstly, autonomous research for the student about the content of the lesson; secondly a writing (and always autonomous) activity, based on the research conducted beforehand. This phase also includes written feedback from the teacher. Finally, the results of the previous tasks are discussed in the classroom, with a series of oral activities, where the students can compare, express and experiment with the language they have handled until that time. Egitim's students are also asked to set their own goals, and this has been seen to be a very effective strategy, much more than when their goals are set by the teacher.

The same commitment to teaching students this metacognitive approach (becoming aware of what they are doing and how they are doing it) is undertaken by those teachers who adopt the European Language Portfolio (ELP), which aims to make the learners familiar with self-management and self-assessment (Dalziel 2011). The ELP is a personal document in which the learner can record their language learning achievements, experiences and set their targets. It is divided in three sections: Language Passport, Language Biography and Dossier, in which students can reflect on their past cultural and linguistic experiences, understand their level, and decide the strategies to improve their target language. Clearly, as Dalziel (2011) affirms, self-assessment requires time and must be introduced

gradually to the students, because both students and teacher may not perceive immediatly the results of a metacognitive approach. For this reason, it is advisable to start with a series of regular self-assessment activities.

These practices, although always foreseeing the support of the teacher, put the students in charge of their learning decisions because they choose the materials on which to base their own work, obtaining a greater amount of responsibility, which leads to better performances, and leads to an increase in confidence. If a student is confident, he/she may not be afraid to make mistakes, and this will lead to the use of more complex vocabulary and syntax to communicate. (Godwing-Jones 2019)

1.2 Motivation

Several of the points touched upon in the description of autonomy are also crucial when talking about another important aspect of language learning: motivation. Autonomy and motivation are two aspects of language learning which are so closely interrelated that it is very difficult to find studies about one concept without running into the other. There are countless definitions of motivation, but with regard to language learning, a few interesting points are made by Crookes and Schmidt (1991), who define motivation as "the learner's orientation regarding the goal of learning a second language", and by Gardner (1985), who states: "motivation is the combination of attempt plus desire to obtain the aim of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language".

Motivation is crucial when learning a new language especially because the target language becomes a part of the learner's identity (Ushioda 2011), which enables them to express themselves and come in contact with different cultures and people. For this reason the learner may be expected to be deeply interested not only in the acquisition of a new language but, in the first place, in the engagement and cultural opportunities this acquisition will lead to. In this regard, Crookes and Schmidt

(1991: 470) argue that "Motivation has been consistently linked with attitudes toward the community of speakers of the target language, with an interest in interacting with such speakers, and with some degree of self-identification with the target language community". Concerning the teacher's role, as Ushioda (2011) states:

> this means that we should encourage our students to view the target language as a means of self-expression and self -development. In other words, we need to engage their own identities and interests in our lessons and promote a sense of continuity between what they learn and do in the classroom, and who they are and what they are interested in doing in their lives outside the classroom, now and in the future.

In this manner, as Little (2004: 106) puts it, "what they learn becomes part of what they are"." For example, engaging the students in extracurricular activities such as theatre or shows in the target language, foreign movies and even study trips in the target language countries can be a good method to show them how many opportunities the learning of a new language can unlock.

Learner motivation can be subdivided in two categories: *Extrinsic* and *intrinsic* (Dickinson 1995). When one talks about extrinsic motivation, one is referring to the kind of situation where the learner's reason to study a language lies in the educational system or in the external environment. In other words, an extrinsically motivated student will study in order to avoid bad grades, or to obtain a reward. On the other hand, the sort of motivation that has little to do with the demands of education, and which instead has much to do with how the learner wants to be perceived, their interests and social goals, is known as intrinsic. This is what happens when a student perceives the target language as a tool to reach new horizons, new opportunities, new people, for instance a person who is deeply fascinated by the Japanese culture, also thanks to the flourishing culture of Manga and Anime, or whose partner is from Brazil and there is a common interest in moving there.

Focusing on the specific reason for which the learner commits to the learning of the target language, according to Brown (2000) and Gardner (1985) one can talk about *instrumental motivation*, namely the need to learn a language for career opportunities, where the language is a requirement, or about *integrative motivation,* when the learner is interested in the integration with the culture and/or in the country of the target language (Alizadeh 2016). Motivation, in all its distinctions and along with autonomy, can provide not just excellent performances, but also a growing interest in learning through informal methods in the students' free time, increasing the time spent in contact with the target language.

Depending on how the learner feels about their study of the language, there will be different kind of perceptions about the feedback of the teacher. Those students interested in the language for intrinsic reasons will perceive both positive and negative feedback as a useful stimulus to improve learning, shaping their approach by addressing the areas that can be improved. On the other hand, students who are interested in the reward for a good performance may see feedback as a judgment from an authority figure, who overshadows the learner's responsibility and self-determination (Ushioda 2011).

The features of these categories are explored in attribution theory (Dickinson, 1995), which focuses on the learner's perception of their positive or negative performances, and how this affects their future performances. In this regard, Dickinson (1995, 171) explains and outlines:

> The central tenet of attribution theory is the learner's perception of the cause of his or her success or failure and the influence this has on perceptions of future performance. Four possible causes have emerged from projects concerned with asking learners for their opinions on the reasons for success and failure, and these are usually categorized according to stability (i.e. whether it can be changed or not), internal or external to the learner, and whether the learner can control it. The four causes are:
> Ability (internal and stable)
> Task difficulty (external and stable)

Effort (internal, changeable and under the learner's control)

Luck (external, changeable but not under the learner's control)

According to Child's (1994) account, pupils who attribute their failure to stable causes tend not to persist when they fail, but those who believe that their failure is due to unstable or internal causes, particularly effort, tend to persist in the face of failure (cited in Dickinson 1995, 171). In other words, attribution theory aims to demonstrate that when the student's reason for bad performance is perceived as their own lack of capacity, and they feel they do not have the power to change it, they are more likely to surrender to failure. On the contrary, when learners address the results of their performance as something that is under their responsibility and control (e.g. effort) they will take it as a lesson to do better the next time. This, therefore, links back to the concept of intrinsic motivation, because:

> "Success in learning, then, appears to lead to greater motivation only for those students who accept responsibility for their own learning success, that is, who recognize that success arises from personal effort, rather than simply from ability or chance. Personal effort, unlike ability and chance is within the control of the student. Furthermore, success enhances motivation only in children who are focused on learning goals--that is, who are intrinsically motivated." (Dickinson 1995: 171)

That being said, how can teachers foster the intrinsic motivation of their students? In this regard, Richards (2006) distinguishes between three features of identity: *Situated identities*, which depend on the context of the communication (doctor/patient, teacher/student); *Discourse identities*, which depend on the role undertaken in the conversation (initiator/listener/questioner); and *Transportable identities*. Richards (2006) questions whether teachers can engage in a real conversation with students, trying to leave behind the predetermined roles of teacher and student, or prefer their own transportable identities, which is the kind of identity that is linked to personal interest (i.e. a teacher whose passion is photography or a student who is passionate about cooking), in order to:

stimulate a much higher level of personal involvement, effort and investment from students than traditional teacher–student talk, where students are invariably positioned as language learners who are merely practising or demonstrating knowledge of the language rather than expressing their own voices and identities through the language (Ushioda 2011: 205).

Every learner has their own needs and tendencies, and if learners are not interested in the language learning they are unlikely to achieve the fluency language students yearn for. However, the capacity for autonomy and the motivation that the hard work of a good teacher can infuse may make a great difference to those who have the potential. Undoubtedly, autonomy and motivation cannot ensure successful foreign language achievement without an effective strategy guiding the learner step by step in their journey.

1.3 Strategy

Definitions and explorations of learning strategies have been discussed since 1970. In 1985, O'Malley and other researchers defined language learning strategies as "any set of operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information" (1985: 23) and identified 26 strategies, dividing them in three groups: cognitive, metacognitive and social. Another definition for language learning strategies is given by Oxford (1990) describing them as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (cited in Griffiths 2008: 84). She also created a self-report questionnaire known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) used by her and others for a great deal of research in the language learning strategy field. This inventory divides the strategy items of the SILL into two major groups: *Direct strategies* and *Indirect strategies*.

 Each of these groups branches into three specific strategies. Direct strategies involve the target language directly, and concern *memory* strategies (which include

grouping and the use of images, and helps the student to store and retrieve information); *cognitive* strategies (for example summarizing and using deduction) which enable the learner to assimilate and produce new language; and *compensation* strategies (for instance using synonyms and guessing). The latter strategy allows the learner to use the language despite the gaps in their knowledge). On the other hand, indirect strategies support language learning indirectly and include metacognitive strategies (which allow the learner to coordinate their learning with the tools available); affective strategies (which help to regulate emotions, attitudes and motivation); and social strategies (which help the student to learn through the interaction with others) (Griffiths 2008) All of the strategies above are applicable to the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. All of these strategies are used by learners to customize and adapt the learning process to their needs and interests; in fact the term strategy has been often substituted with "self-regulation" in the research literature. As happens with regard to learner autonomy, the concept of metacognition and self-regulation is crucial for the students to become self-aware of their position in the journey to the achievement of the target language, and in the choice of the most effective strategies to adopt.

After having investigated what a strategy is and what it is useful for, the following question naturally arises: is it possible to define a strategy to use in the classroom, in order for the teacher to optimize the time and the effort of the students? A study reported by Griffiths (2008: 87-92) tried to answer this question by giving the students of a private English language school for international students in Auckland (New Zealand) the Oxford Placement Test, used to assess knowledge of grammar and listening skills, and by assessing the student's oral fluency through an interview, in order to divide them into seven levels. The study discovered that lower level students reported a lower average frequency of strategy use than higher level students did. In other words, the higher level students report using a much larger repertoire of strategies significantly more frequently than the lower level

students. Nevertheless, while commenting the results of the studies, Griffiths (2008) argues that there are many reason why some students have been categorized in a class level rather than in another and that the results can change in some years, and adds "in any situation involving real and infinitely complex human beings the reality is never that simple" (2008: 89). She concludes that one may assume the strategy used by higher level students is the most effective one, and therefore one may decide to assign that kind of activity to the whole class. However, it is not necessarily true that all the students will find that particular strategy useful, because as stated many times, each student is different and has a complex series of interests, tendencies and goals, and the teacher needs to take account of this, and determine the strategies that will allow every student to give the best of themselves.

To summarize everything that has been stated so far, the role of the teacher is crucial in helping students become more autonomous, as well as in infusing them with motivation and teaching them valid strategies for language learning. Although this is true, and it is very probable that the interest in fluency in the target language is generated in a positive, motivating school environment, one cannot deny that a passionate student will make great use of informal language learning tools, whether they be subtitles in movies or chats with international gamers in online communities.

CHAPTER 2: DIFFERENT KINDS OF INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

With regard to language learning and teaching, it is possible to identify three major categories of learning: *formal learning*, which requires the presence of a school environment (both in physical and online form) and is undertaken voluntarily or by academic requirement; *non-formal learning*, which involves the use of learning materials (textbooks, DVDs, websites, apps etc.) in an informal context; and finally *informal learning*, the topic in which this study's interest lies, and which requires the use of resources unrelated to any institutional context and that are "not tailored for educational purposes" (Sockett 2014). Another relevant aspect of this kind of learning is the fact that it is free from the teacher agenda as well, as Trinder (2017: 408) states: "it is learner- (or peer-) rather than teacher initiated," and "combines other goals (entertainment, information search, communication) with language acquisition". For this reason, one can say learners who adopt informal learning methods are likely to possess a good level of learner autonomy and awareness already, but this does not mean informal methods cannot be useful for unexperienced students who need to develop their autonomy, motivation and metacognitive strategies.

The process of learning a language autonomously without the support of a teacher and outside any educational setting has been widely described and defined; Benson (2011: 39) defines it *out-of-class learning,* Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) refer to the phenomenon as *Extramural English* (EE), while Sockett (2013) uses the term *informal learning* (of English). The most typical activities to learn a language in an informal way are watching films and television series, listening to music, reading books, surfing English websites on the internet, following people and pages on online communities such as Instagram or Facebook, interacting online or in real life with native speakers, and playing videogames (Sundqvist and Sylvén 2016).

With the uncontainable interconnection among all these sources of learning, one can say the potential of online informal tools outgrows the formal tools students deal with. In fact, Sockett and Toffoli (2015 in Trinder 2017: 402) state: "young people spend more time learning English in online than in formal, institutional settings. Yet, the question of how the potential of such informal learning opportunities is assessed by learners […] has received little attention."

Learning a language while doing things that we love and enjoy can be not only an efficient strategy to "combine business with pleasure" but also a good support for the achievement of personal language goals. In fact, while reflecting on two post-millenial studies (Sylvén 2004 and Pearson 2004) which investigated the effects of the increasing availability of the English language thanks to the advent of the internet, Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) claim that the students who had more experiences with the English language in informal contexts were the ones with better results on the vocabulary tests, and that intrinsic motivation and learner autonomy are central aspects in the engaging with extramural activities. With regard to this topic, Lee and Drajati (2019) talk about the Informal Digital Learning of English and claim not only that the diversity in the use of such sources is linked with good performances, but that when engaging with the internet (news, videos, articles) and social media, students not only receive but also create information in English, with comments, e-mails and content creation.

This chapter will thus explore the theoretical perspectives and study the results of the most widely used tools for informal language learning, namely television programmes and films, music and song lyrics, books, social networks and videogames.

2.1 Television shows and films

On-demand services and streaming platforms, for example Netflix, Prime video, Disney plus, Hulu, and Sky have been one of the most successful industries of the

last decade, providing a nearly infinite supply of television shows, films, documentaries and cartoons in hundreds of countries. In the majority of the products available on these platforms, there is a wide range of languages available, regarding both dubbing and subtitles. The linguistic potential of these products, in terms of language learning, has not gone unnoticed, and besides being described by the research field more and more as something that "deserves more attention" (Trinder 2017: 401), it has become a source of interest and stimulus, as Alm (2021) states:

> The development of a number of online resources to support language study with Netflix - such as Lindsay Dow's "Ultimate Guide to Netflix for Language Learning" (2018) or the Chrome extension "Language Learning with Netflix", adding additional language features - indicate that language learners are not only using the video streaming service for entertainment but that they are also looking into ways of optimising their viewing experience. (Alm, 2021, 82)

Films provide an extensive immersion in the language, as do television series episodes (whose length generally ranges from 20 to 60 minutes) which also supply a type of content that is ideal for the building of a daily or weekly routine, considering that students who consciously study through English video content claim their achievements are better when the viewing is regular and structured (Alm 2021). The great range of content is suitable for any interest, for example comedy, drama, horror, anime, sci-fi, fantasy, and this is crucial for the intrinsic motivation that autonomous learners need, because as stated in the first chapter each student is a unique combination of interests in which the potential of their learning lies. For this reason, the customizability of subtitles and dubbing, whether they are *Interlingual* (the audio is in the target language and the subtitles are in the first language) or *Intralingual* (both audio and subtitles are in the target language) (Alm 2021) is useful for the students and enables them to organize the viewing strategy on the basis of their language level and target. The importance of subtitles for language teaching and learning has been highlighted by Mayer's (2009)

Multimedia Learning Theory. In fact, the dual-channel assumption developed by Mayer implies that learners learn better from words and pictures than from words alone. The limited capacity assumption supports the idea that people can pay attention for a limited span of time if the information they receive comes via only one channel (e.g. audio) (Mayer, 2003). Multimedia is defined as the combination of text and pictures that leads to the idea that learning takes place when people build mental representations from words and pictures (Mayer, 2009 in Frumuselu et al 2015).

The legitimacy of television shows and films as informal language learning tools has been found in two large scale studies, the Early Language Learning in Europe project (Enever 2011 in Baranowska 2020), where researchers explored the impact of out-of-school exposure to English in primary school children from a range of European countries, and the First European Survey on Language Competences, which collected data on secondary school students from 16 educational systems who were tested on their listening, reading, and also writing. Both studies results showed that the students' scores in listening, reading and writing tests improved significantly as a result of exposure to the target language (Baranowska 2020). As regards the frequency of use and skills acquisition, a study by Trinder (2017), which aimed to address the frequency of use and perceptions of usefulness of technologies for the acquisition of language skills and the reasons behind technology choices, also shows as well that television series and films are the most preferred resource, despite being a source of just listening and reading practice (the student does not practice oral and writing skills when watching a film or an episode). The reason for this lies in the fact that when engaging in activities in which students are involved and interested, and which they would use anyway as entertainment in their free time, the learning process stops being a task and becomes both a pleasant activity and an "effortless way of developing a number of language skills." (Trinder 2017: 401).

In the same study, when the students were asked the reason why they preferred television shows and films as informal way of learning English, the main points extrapolated from their open answers were:

> motivational factors (inherent interest; effortless learning; peer group interest); deliberate/noticeable language development; high-context exposure; social and cultural insights; pragmatics; familiarity of characters; repetitive dramatic situations; repeated exposure to chunks, idioms, everyday language, different accents, registers, styles, levels of formality; and fast speech (help through visual clues, plot) (Trinder 2017: 402).

Along with the motivational factors and the noticeability of the results, there are many reasons why students enjoy learning while watching English content. Television shows and documentaries are an important source of cultural knowledge, and the dialogues offer a variety of idiomatic expressions, slang, accents and levels of formality which might be problematic to handle in a classroom or institutional setting. The extensive viewing enables students to acquire a greater level of uncertainty, because they do not check every word they do not know, but instead they try to understand the general concept of the dialogue (Alm 2021), and even when an unknown term or expression is heard, it becomes easier to understand and assimilate when it is heard in a context of reference, so most of the time it becomes unnecessary to check the meaning in a dictionary. To this point, Frumuselu et al (2015: 108) add "Reading the dialogue in context while listening to the original language stimulates learners to consolidate what they are learning, enriching their vocabulary and making them familiar with the culture of the foreign language in an authentic setting."

Despite being one of the most widely chosen informal language learning methods, and also one of the most effective in terms of results, television shows and films do not allow students to practice their oral skills.

2.2 Music and song lyrics

The research field on each informal language learning method is still limited, and the few studies and articles offered by the literature discuss the topic very generally, talking about informal learning tools as a number of activities, without focusing on the single learning source, analysing its own unique features, potentialities and weaknesses. This is especially true with regard to the role of music videos and lyrics in learning English: in fact, in the majority of articles, this topic is linked with other informal learning methods, such as television shows, films and videogames. Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) created a singular way of grouping these activities, and they do so by building the Extramural English House:

Fig. 1: The EE House (illustration by Julius Sylvén)
They choose this metaphor to explain the complex relationship between these different methods and the reasons they are chosen by learners, in fact:

They chose this metaphor to explain the complex relationship between these different activities and the reason they are chosen by learners, in fact:

On the first floor are the easily accessible rooms, namely a room for listening to music, another for watching TV, and a third for watching films. These rooms are on the first floor because these EE activities are readily available for anyone to take part in. The rooms for reading (the Library) and computer use (the Office) are found on the second floor. The reason for these two rooms being on the second floor is that it takes some eff ort to engage in these activities, which is here demonstrated through the stairs that have to be climbed to get to the second floor. (Sundqvist and Sylvén 2016: 138-139)

In their work, Sundqvist and Sylvén argue that the activities on the first floor (watching television shows, reading and listening to music) are passive/receptive; they are easily chosen because the level of commitment and concentration are easier for longer periods of time, while the activities on the second floor are active/productive (reading and playing videogames) and therefore require a higher level of dedication and also understanding of the language. In fact "Among 15-year-olds, for instance, it has been shown that about three times as much time is spent in the rooms on the first floor compared to the time spent in the two rooms on the second floor" (Sundqvist and Sylvén 2016: 185). For this reason, they argue that activities on the second floor have a greater impact on the learner's proficiency, but activities on the first floor can include a certain level of activity and productivity, in fact "For example, with regard to music, some love to sing along karaoke style and learn lyrics by heart; in such cases, there is a great deal of active 'language' work going on." (2016: 188), and thus the possibility to memorize the lyrics of the songs and singing them adds the oral skills and pronunciation practice that is lacking when watching films and television series. This lack of research is evident despite music being possibly the activity which engages the greatest number of people, for the longest time-frame, for instance it is not unfeasible to listen to English music for several hours, whereas watching television series and/or films for a number of hours requires a higher level of attention and commitment.

Similarly to what happened in the case of television Shows and films with the unstoppable availability of content thanks to the advent of the streaming platforms, the music sector has also increased the availability of songs with lyrics, as with the latest update of the platform Spotify, a music on demand service which offers tracks from various record companies and labels. When talking about music, one must also mention Youtube (a video platform where all the official music videos are released and which also provides subtitles) and TikTok, the first social network in which music is the backbone around which videos, pictures and written texts revolve. The growing interconnection of on-demand services has been important for listeners, who are now more aware of the learning potential these services offer, as Sockett (2014: 40) states that in comparison to the listening habits of previous generations, listeners today are more active in the choice of music, have more control over how it is played and have more resources available to help them understand the lyrics". This ever-growing availability of music, since with on-demand services the tracks do not burden the devices' storage, increases the chances for students of findings English-language songs (which are likely to represent the majority of the playlist) (Sockett 2014).

In a study conducted by Sockett (2014: 63-112), which investigated the Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) results show that listening to music is felt as leading to improving the general level of listening comprehension, and some students say this activity was a "good way of getting used to English pronunciation." (Sockett 2014: 71). Moreover, while addressing the popularity and the frequency of use of each informal language learning method, Sockett (2014: 148) states that "listening to music in English involves close to 100% of those surveyed on a regular basis, often taking up several hours per day."

Considering everything that has been stated so far, Music is undoubtedly one of the informal language learning tools which holds the greatest potential, both in terms of popularity and frequency and also in terms of listening comprehension.

2.3 Books

Literature is the form of expression in which the potential of a language can be most effectively manifested. It is impossible to analyse or study literature without constantly mentioning language and its structures. Reading books, novels, poetry, short stories, is one of the most effective and motivational activities to assimilate new words, because the reader can focus on the story, topic, genre he/she prefers, but it is also a way to learn how to organize long sentences and expressions that go beyond the utilitarian use of a language. As Ihejirika (2014: 87) claims, literature is "a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language" (Basnett & Grundy, 1993), and it "demonstrates language at work. But it also helps the pupil to use language; it offers good models and stimulates linguistic responses of various kinds". Ihejirika (2014) also states that the correlation between extensive reading and language acquisition is widely supported by the research, especially with regard to effective writing.

Literature, unsurprisingly, is also one of the activities that can be listed as *informal*, which are mostly used and considered also within educational environments:

> The use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (i.e. vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation) is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching nowadays. Moreover, in translation courses, many language teachers make their students translate literary texts like drama, poetry and short stories into the mother tongue […]. Since translation gives students the chance to practice the lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and stylistic knowledge they have acquired in other courses, translation both as an application area covering four basic skills and as the fifth skill is emphasized in language teaching. (Hişmanoğlu 2005: 54)

Extensive reading allows the reader to expand their linguistic horizon, and even if they do not know the exact meaning of every single word they will understand the meaning of the text by feeling comfortable with a certain grade of uncertainty.

As previously reported, when talking about the concept of the Extramural English House created by Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016), the reading room is found on the second floor, because it is an activity which requires a higher amount of effort than, for example, watching television shows or listening to music. Someone who is not interested in improving their language skills and fluency will be unlikely to engage in reading a long written text in a different language.

Considering that being fully aware and interested in language learning is crucial in order to take advantage of the potential literature holds, Hişmanoğlu (2005) states three of the main features that make literature such a powerful and resourceful tool: *cultural enrichment, language enrichment* and *personal involvement*. The cultural enrichment comes from the realism of the setting, the background and the characters come alive, and the reader can experience their point of view and come into contact with a series of behaviours and socio-cultural settings that could actually take place, but with registers that might not often be the subject of study. The language enrichment happens because readers come into contact with a variety of structures and linguistic items, a series of different ways to express the same concept, and this leads to a general improvement of their language skills, as Hişmanoğlu (2005: 55) states: "Students also become more productive and adventurous when they begin to perceive the richness and diversity of the language they are trying to learn and begin to make use of some of that potential themselves". This enrichment, whether it is cultural or linguistic, can only happen if there is a certain degree of personal involvement. The reader, in fact, in order to follow the story, needs to understand the structure of the text and the at least general meaning of the expressions, therefore

> Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the story. The student becomes enthusiastic to find out what happens as events unfold via the climax; he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. This can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process. Hişmanoğlu (2005: 55)

Even with the raising availability of endless online resources to learn language, literature remains one of, if not *the most* efficient and complete tools to enrich the linguistic skills of a student.

2.4 Social networks

Social networks are becoming more and more present in every area of our lives, whether they are used as a source of entertainment, information, connection with other people or as shopping platforms, and by using them, students are inevitably exposed to their contents. One should not forget that the students of today are what Prensky (2001) first called *digital natives* (people who have grown up using the internet and technology on a daily basis, and therefore feel more at ease while exploring the endless tools the World Wide Web can offer). What does this mean when English is the default language? Students have another, illimited source of language. In fact, in the majority of the videos such as vlogs on YouTube, Instagram stories, TikToks, recipes one can find on social media, the spoken (and written) language is English. It follows that the interaction based on this content (captions, comments, shares) often happen in English, creating a kind of obligation for the user, if interested, to engage with the language to understand both the topic and the opinions.

This approach to the language is different from watching television shows, listening to music or reading in English, and the main reason is that engaging with the English language through social media requires an involvement in

communicative tasks and a connection with an international community (Sockett 2013). Another important distinction between the activities discussed so far and social networking is that the learning that results from it often happens incidentally, because the English language is not searched but found, as Sockett (2013: 49) states: "Informal learning for these learners is generally incidental […] the intention of their activities being communication and enjoyment rather than language learning. Indeed, learners themselves may not be aware of the contribution of their activities to language development."

A study conducted by Jensen (2019: 5) involved fifteen students who were asked to report their habits and engagement with English, during their free time outside school. Interestingly, the research found that these online activities lead to a very positive impact on their motivation, because the students were "motivated by social and higher cognitive motives" and "Through their motivation, some actively engaged with English by writing (chats, command blocks, comments on social media), reading (online information, chats, social media), and listening (songs, games, social media, YouTube videos, etc.)".

With respect to this "self-directed, informal English learning using a range of different digital devices and resources independent of formal contests" Lee (2019:768, in Lee and Drajati 2019) refers to this phenomenon as *Informal Digital Learning of English* (IDLE), and has theorized two stimulating types of IDLE activities: *receptive* IDLE and *productive* IDLE. In fact, as the users are not only in contact but a genuine active part of the social community, they not only consume, read and view content, but also *create* it. In other words:

> The former refers to IDLE activities in which EFL students, as passive consumers, receive information such as reading English news online, listening to English language news online, and watching English language movies. On the other hand, the latter indicates IDLE activities in which students, as active producers, generate information such as writing comments in English on social media or sending others emails in English (Lee and Drajati 2019: 420).

Despite IDLE being possibly the furthest activity from the academic environment, it holds great potential, not only because it follows students' interests, tendencies and ambitions, but because it has the ability to connect the user with other people, all over the world, and this opportunity is more than ever useful when talking about learning foreign languages.

2.5 Videogames

Even if it is not one of the first things that come to mind when talking about language resources, the world of videogames is much vaster and more resourceful that one might expect. Unlike what a non-gamer might think, videogames are not just hobbies full of violence and war-like environments; they can also be genuine masterpieces in terms of graphic, storyline and settings, whose genre can range from adventure to sci-fi, from horror to fantasy. A good videogame is likely to have a good plot, in which the player can empathize with the characters, as well as reading long game-related texts and listen to dialogues and instructions, which:

> are not just practical texts for instructions and strategy training, they are also imaginative and creative outputs developed by gamers and circulated in online gaming communities. These texts are often highly sophisticated, with rich lexical items and syntactic structures, and of multiple genres (Chik 2014: 87).

It is also possible to engage in multi-player activities, in which players from all over the world must cooperate or compete simultaneously, coordinating with each other through a chat where the language is (in almost all cases) English.

In the last decade, research seems to have sensed the potential of videogames, in fact several studies (Lefever 2010, Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012, Sundqvist and Sylvén 2014, Jensen 2017) show that videogames are often related to improvements in conversational skills, vocabulary learning, reading abilities and listening comprehension, as well as a general gain of motivation in language

learning. Concepts like motivation and community become crucial when talking about digital gaming and language learning, because:

> First, gamers frequently make independent decisions on gaming choices; and second, using game-external websites and other communal resources is integral to the overall gaming experiences (Thorne et al., 2012). When digital gaming is a community-based activity, the autonomous learning involved will inevitably be community-based as well. (Chik 2014: 87).

Despite all the promising features this activity presents, research still mentions some criticalities that make it incompatible with the academic and educational environment, namely that videogames may be addictive and violent (Sykes and Reinhardt 2013) and, even if female players are a growing phenomenon, gaming communities are still mostly represented by male players.

All of these informal activities have great strengths and advantages, and research is still finding a way to merge formal learning with these fruitful tools, which can however sometimes be problematic if used incorrectly. This is why research needs to address the criticalities of these activities and understand how to benefit from them in the education of students, because every student watches television shows and films, reads a book, listens to music, surfs the internet or plays digital games in their free time; the key is to combine pleasure of entertainment with determination to learn a new language, in other words, to mix business with pleasure.
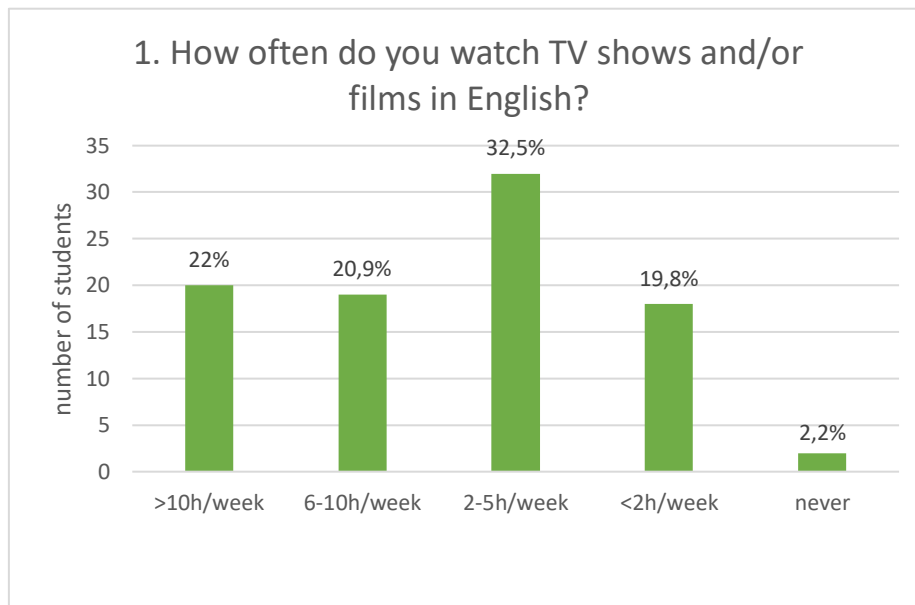
CHAPTER 3: THE INVESTIGATION

The first chapter focused on the theoretical perspectives and the main features of informal language learning: learner autonomy, motivation and strategy, and how they merge when a student is interested and stimulated in becoming fluent in their target language. The second chapter analysed the most frequently used informal language learning activities, while reporting theoretical perspectives and previous studies that demonstrate their educational value, and how they can improve students' autonomy, boost their motivation and help them built the right learning strategies. This chapter aims to make a contribution to understanding how important informal language learning activities are as a part of students' learning journey, and how these activities make them feel about themselves, their motivation and their improvement, and will do so by asking them about their habits, opinions and thoughts.

This study was conducted among Italian language students who chose English as first or second language in their curriculum at the University of Padova, mainly in the Bachelor degree courses of Languages and Literatures (L-11) and Cultural Mediation (L-12). A total of 91 participants answered to the survey. The questionnaire was created using Google form and included 17 questions, 15 of which were multiple-choice and two were open-ended, plus a final open-ended comment section. The questions aimed to ask students about their frequency of use of the main informal language learning tools, namely television shows and films, music, book, social networking and videogames, as well as their feelings with respect to their improvement and habits, and opinions and comments on the mentioned tools and related activities.

3.1 Television shows and films

The first two questions of the study concerned students' frequency and habits of watching television shows or films in English, with or without subtitles. In the first question, students were asked to indicate the number of hours they think they spend watching television shows or films in English in a week.

1. How often do you watch TV shows and/or films in English?

Category	Percentage
>10h/week	22%
6-10h/week	20,9%
2-5h/week	32,5%
<2h/week	19,8%
never	2,2%

The results show that more than 40% of the students spend at least 6 hours or more watching English content on television or streaming platforms, half of whom claim their screentime exceeds 10 hours per week. The second question investigates students' subtitles choice, by asking if they used subtitles, and if they were interlingual or intralingual.

**2. When ypu watch TV shows or films in English, do you use subtitles?**
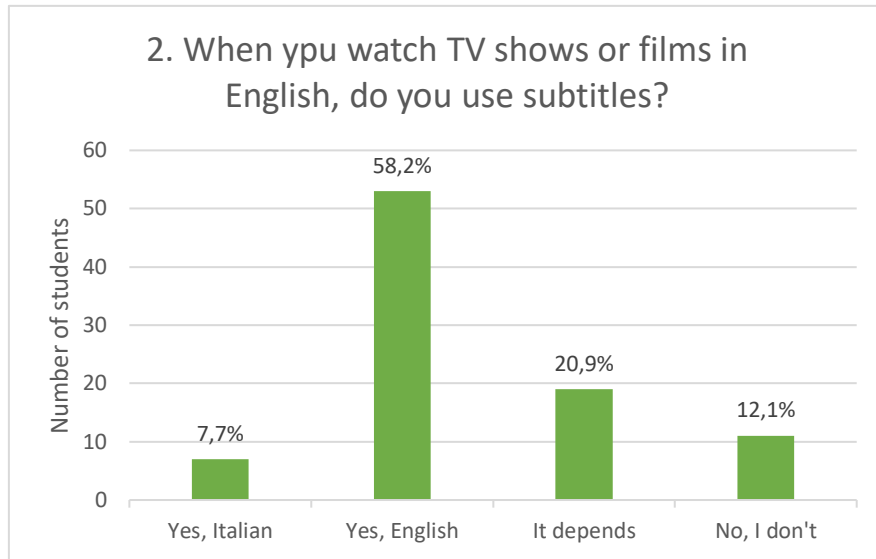
The results show the vast majority of students make use of subtitles, 58.2% of which are interlingual (in English), while just 7.7% are intralingual (in Italian). These two types of subtitles affect different skills of students, in fact

> intralingual subtitles increase learners' interaction with the target language. Moreover, intralingual subtitles allow learners to see the written form of the spoken word, which makes them more confident. However, interlingual subtitles (native-language subtitles) have also been found to contribute to vocabulary acquisition. (Baranowska 2020: 106)

3.2 Music

3. How often do you listen to music in English?
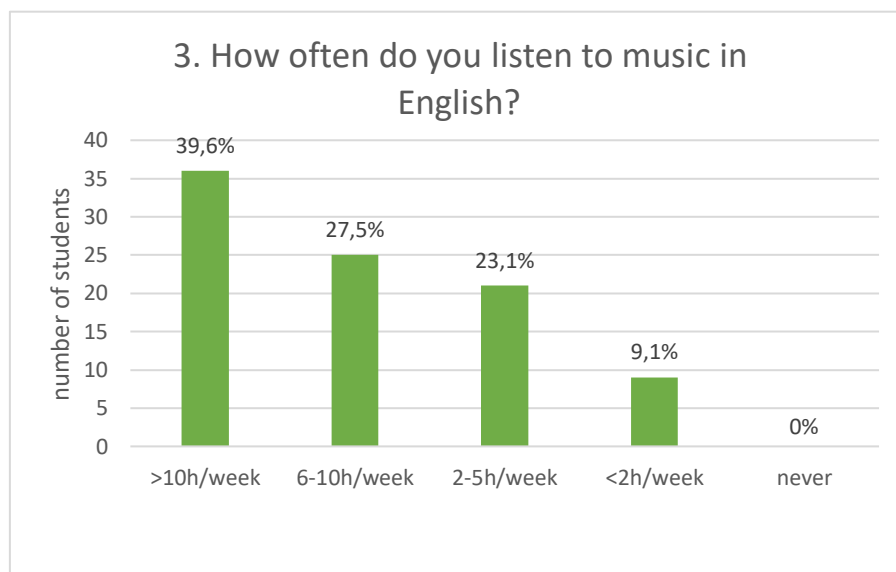
Questions number 3 and 4 investigates listening to music, with regard to the number of hours spent listening to English songs weekly, and a possible frequency of reading song lyrics.
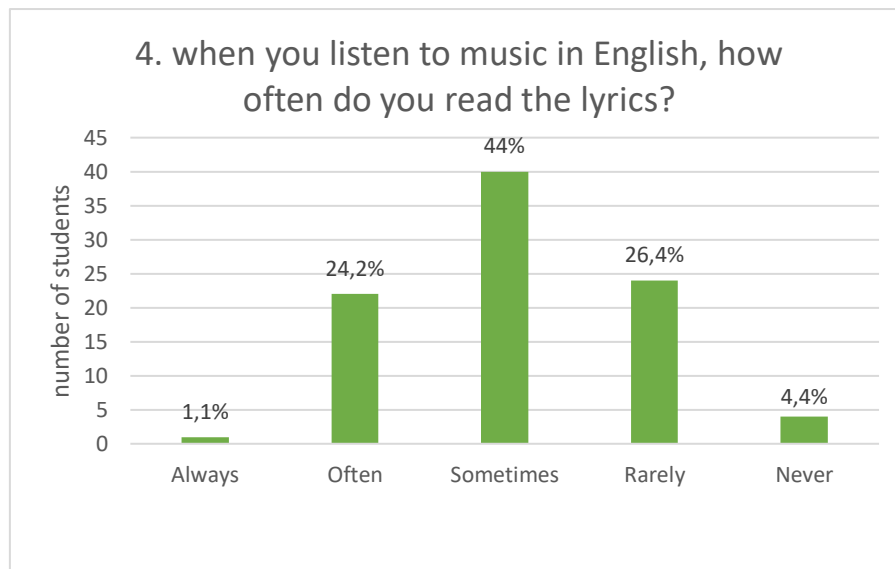
Lyrics are increasingly available on music streaming platforms such as Spotify, so a portion of these answers might be positive as a result of incidental reading while using these platforms, but as one student commented in this question, sometimes lyrics are consciously searched for because the text of the song is unclear or the singer has a peculiar pronunciation. Overall, reading lyrics is undoubtedly helpful to accurately learn the song and sing it "by heart or karaoke-style", because as Sundqvist & Sylvén (2016) state "in such cases, there is a great deal of active 'language' work".

3.3 Books

The fifth question of the study concerns students' weekly frequency of reading books.

5. How often do you read books in English?
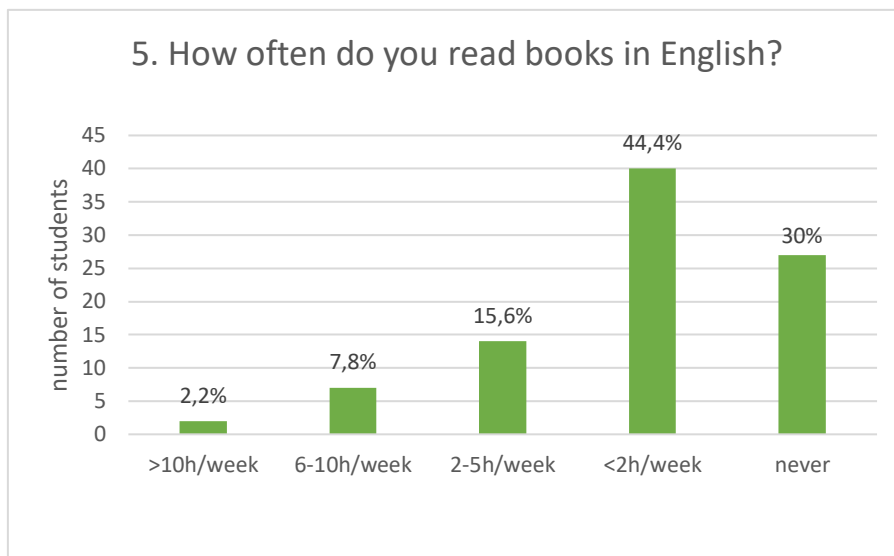
The frequency is starting to decrease, because according to the Extramural English (EE) house (Sundqvist & Sylvèn 2016) mentioned in the second chapter, while television shows and films and music, which are on the first floor, are easier to engage with, reading books requires a higher level of concentration, willingness and interest in learning the language.

3.4 Social networks

The sixth question of the study asked students their frequency of English content viewing and/or listening while using social networks.

6. How often do you happen to view and/or listen to English content while using social networks?
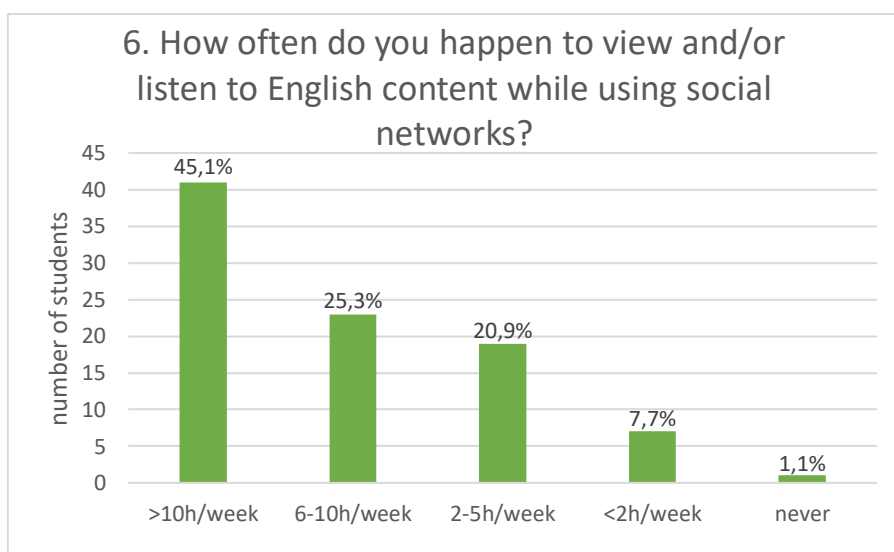
The >10hours per week data (45.1%) is the highest frequency rate of this study, meaning that the greatest source of informal English content for this sample of students comes from social networks. The reason behind this popularity is that Social platforms have an unbeatable potential, because students can engage in multiple forms of informal learning: watching videos, talking with friends, reading posts. This control over their learning is important for their motivation (Ushioda 2011). Another interesting reason is that the use of social media platforms is caused by a need for sociality. In fact, Sockett (2014) writes about Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) and states:

> OILE in social networks is driven by the intention to communicate with others, as our initial definition suggested, in the context of real relationships or shared communicative goals. Learners aim to develop relationships with friends and others who have the same interests. Their aim is to communicate meaning relating to real-life and they emphasise the importance of the known or identified addressee of the messages
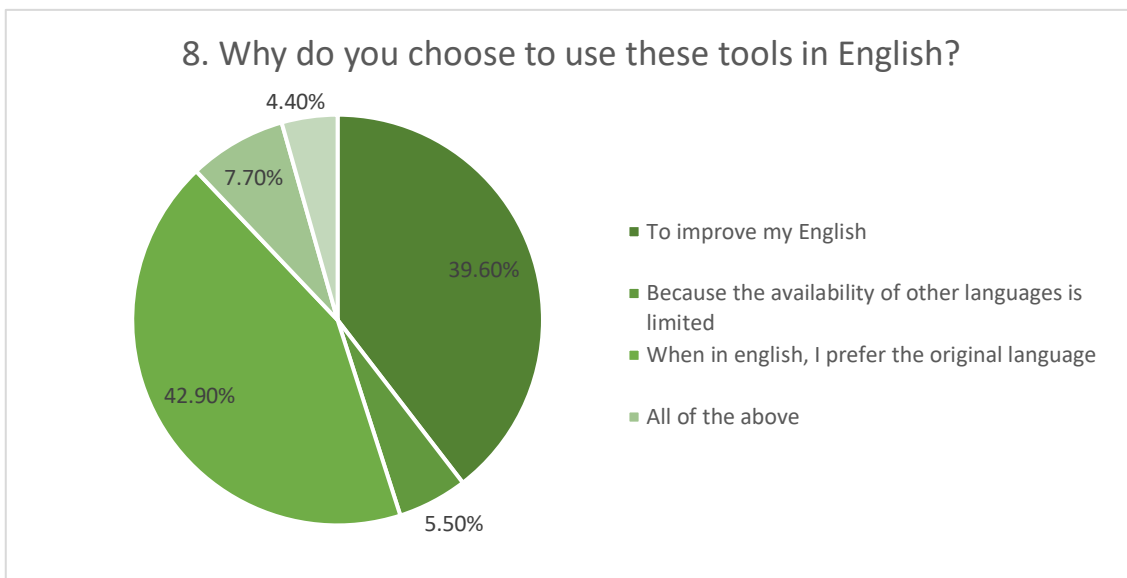
3.5 Videogames

7. How often do you play videogames in English?
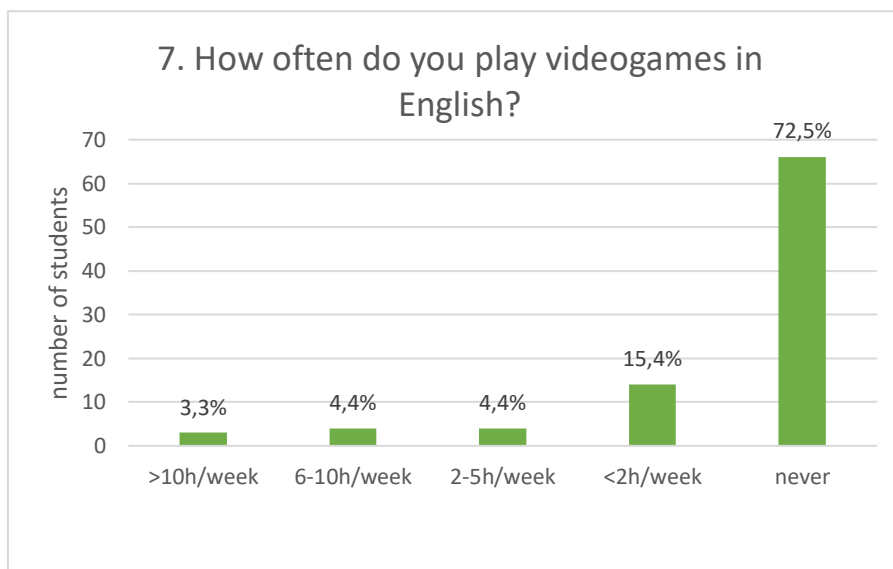
Undoubtedly, videogames are not as popular as the activities cited before; firstly because they are still very gender related, and therefore female students are not as likely to play digital games as male students are (Sundqvist & Sylvén 2016). Secondly, the sample of this study is unhelpful in this sense, since the participants of this investigation are enrolled in Languages, Literatures and Cultural Mediation at the University of Padova, a course in which in the A.A. 2019/20 the 84% of the students were female. Thirdly, videogames can be quite an expensive hobby, since to be a capable gamer one needs to own a good console or computer and multiple games, whereas for the other activities it is sufficient to own a smartphone, a television or, naturally, books. This hobby has an ambivalent social structure: on one hand, it often happens autonomously, the player has full decision-making power on his/her agenda. On the other hand, it is often useful to seek suggestions and support from online gaming communities, where communicational and linguistic skills are required (Chick 2014). The motivation that comes from playing videogames is that in order to play optimally and conquer the goals of the mission it is crucial to understand every instruction and narration in the game. (Ushioda 2007 in Chick 2014).

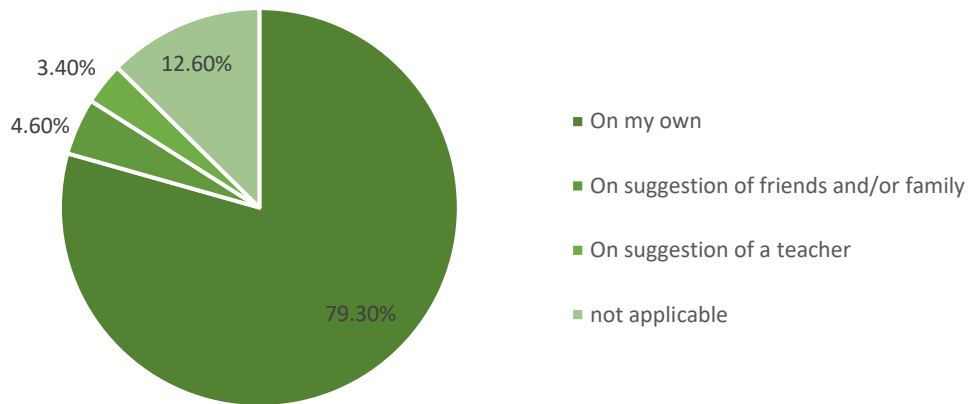## 3.6 Opinions and habits

Questions 8, 9 and 10 focused on asking the students why they choose to do these activities in English, how they started to use the tools with the purpose of learning English, and if they set themselves goals when they do.

8. Why do you choose to use these tools in English?

4.40%

7.70%

39.60%

42.90%

5.50%

- To improve my English
- Because the availability of other languages is limited
- When in english, I prefer the original language
- All of the above

Many students' reasons for relying on English is a mix of the first three options, and some comments were made about how the quality of the experience is better when in a lingua franca. In fact, one student commented on the use of English in videogames "Looking up strategies and or opinions on certain sections of the game leads to much better results in English". Again the motivation to use English content comes from individual interests, whether it is to become more fluent or to consume a product (television show, book, article) in the most qualitative way. The student's identity (Ushioda 2011) and its bonding with the language becomes the most crucial factor when speaking about motivation.

9. If you use these tools in English to improve your language skills, how did you start using them?

- On my own
- On suggestion of friends and/or family
- On suggestion of a teacher
- not applicable

3.40%
12.60%
4.60%
79.30%

As shown in the figure, the vast majority of students started to use English content for autonomous learning on their own; this is because, as Dickinson (1987:11) states about self-instruction "the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions". The next question asked students if they set themselves goals, while using English content with the aim of learning informally.

10. When you use them to learn english, do you set yourself goals?

- No, never
- Yes, rarely
- Yes, sometimes
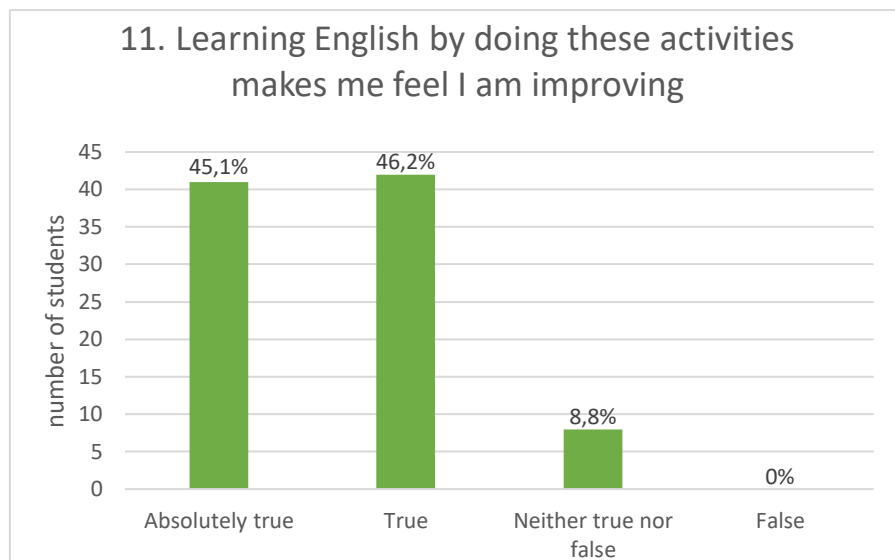- Always

1.10%
18.40%
23.00%
57.50%
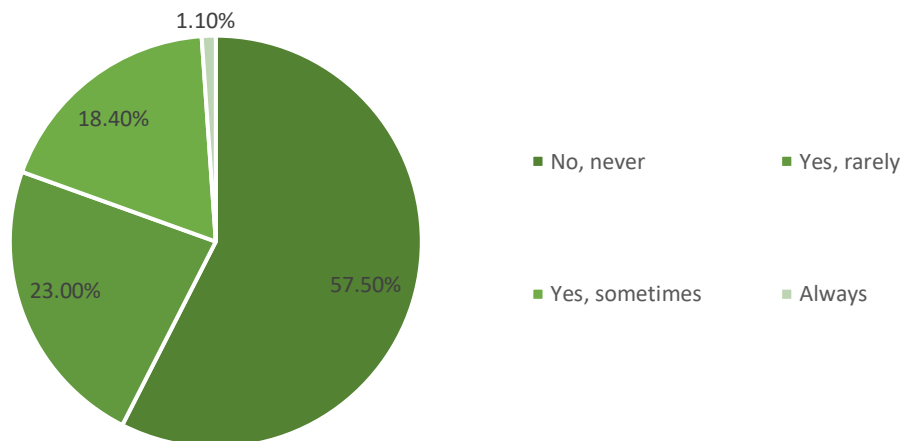
The setting of goals is not a popular activity in informal learning: in fact this strategy is more widely used in a teaching environment, because the teacher needs to be able to assess the skills of a number of learners. However, Sundqvist & Sylvén (2016) suggest a goal-setting strategy applicable both for classroom and informal environments: "it may be helpful to think of goals as 'SMART,' a mnemonic acronym that stands for specific, measurable, accepted, realistic, and time constrained goals".
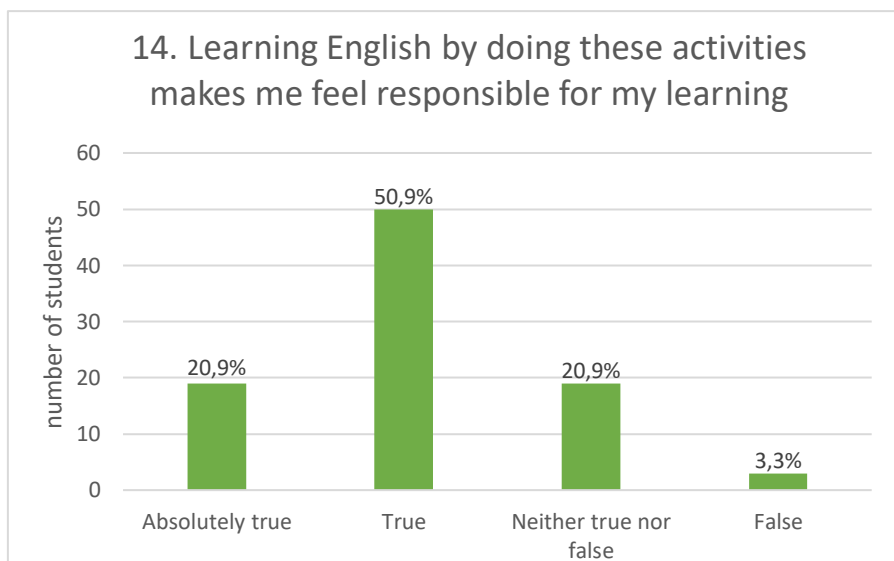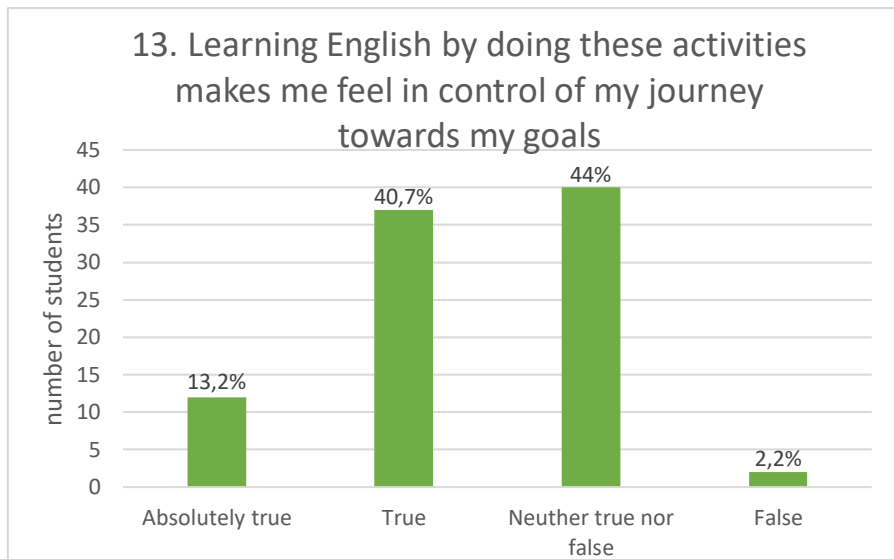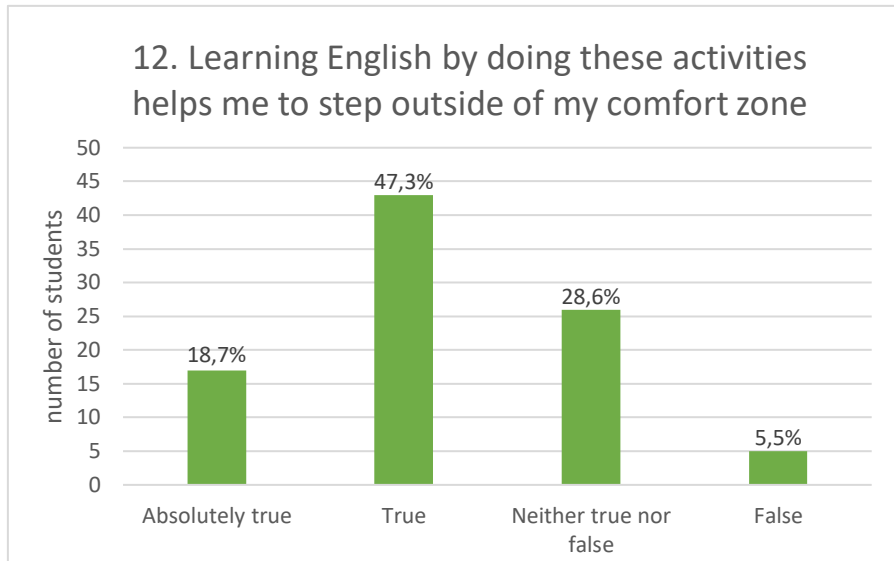
Even if setting goals is not a common habit of these students, the majority of them find ways of evaluating their improvement, as will be discussed in question 16.

3.7 Feelings and self-evaluation

Questions 11 to 16 were multiple choice questions in which students were asked to indicate how true each statement on their feelings on informal language learning activities were.

12. Learning English by doing these activities helps me to step outside of my comfort zone

Bar chart showing "number of students" on the y-axis (0 to 50):
- Absolutely true: 18,7%
- True: 47,3%
- Neither true nor false: 28,6%
- False: 5,5%

13. Learning English by doing these activities makes me feel in control of my journey towards my goals

Bar chart showing "number of students" on the y-axis (0 to 45):
- Absolutely true: 13,2%
- True: 40,7%
- Neuther true nor false: 44%
- False: 2,2%

14. Learning English by doing these activities makes me feel responsible for my learning

Bar chart showing "number of students" on the y-axis (0 to 60):
- Absolutely true: 20,9%
- True: 50,9%
- Neither true nor false: 20,9%
- False: 3,3%

15. Learning English by doing these activities makes me feel self-confident

All of these answers reveal the positive impact of informal language learning activities in students' perceptions of themselves as learners. The majority of the participants feel their motivation boosted by improvements (question 11), and this gain of confidence (question 15) is crucial, because students who feel confident tend to take more challenges (Egitim 2015), and hence step outside of their comfort zone (question 12) and feel less fear of failure, which leads to an increasing complexity in their communication (Godwin-Jones 2019). When asked if they felt responsible for their learning (question 14) more than 70% of students answered affirmatively, and more than 50% felt in control of their learning (question 13); in fact, students' assumption of responsibility and learning control are the main features of learner autonomy (Dickinson 1995).

3.8 Open ended questions: self-evaluation and preferences

The 16th question of the study was open-ended and asked "do you evaluate your improvement? If yes, how?". Here, 34.7% of the participants claimed they usually do not, while the remaining 65.3% named various ways they measure their improvement. For example, some stated they understand if they have become better in listening skills by "evaluating my understanding of original content

without tools" or "For example by listening strangers/ natives on the bus and if I understand every word, I think that I am improving my English" or by "tracking how many times I watch the subs or I need to listen to a song again in order to understand the lyrics". Others explain they measure their improvements with the increase in vocabulary with new words and terms "For example not using subtitles and seeing if I understand everything". Moreover, many claim their improvement, especially oral, is best expressed when they engage in conversation: "I evaluate my improvement when I talk or chat with people whose first language is English", or when they improve their pronunciation: "I found an improvement in the pronunciation of some words that I previously found difficult and greater fluency in speech". Finally, a large improvement index can be found in the gaining of confidence: "I see how change the confidence and fluency when I use English (both talking or writing)"

The 17th and last question asked the participants to indicate their favourite informal activity to learn English, and their reason for this. The vast majority of the participants report that their favourite activity is watching television shows and films. There are many reasons given: they claim television shows offer a wider variety of lexical and idioms, they have the chance to become familiar with different cultural aspects, accents and slangs, hence improving their pronunciation. They can hear realistic characters speaking informally, because as one student commented "they use expressions I wouldn't find in textbooks and they talk at an 'actual' speed" or "because they teach me a kind of language that cannot be learned at the university or at school". Many reasons for choosing television shows and films as their favourite activity lie in the fact that this requires very little effort and is highly entertaining, so that students can "learn by doing something [they] like and don't realize [they're] also studying".

Students claiming that their favourite activity to learn English is listening to music affirm that music is one of their main passions, and that by listening to English songs they can spend time on themselves while also doing something

useful for their education. Some students say music is an "easy and indirect way to learn new words/expressions". Music also becomes important in syntax, as one student states "I memorize a lot of structures and sentences that I use as examples in my head when I have doubts, all these things without doing it on purpose".

As previously stated, reading books is not as popular as watching television shows or listening to music, but those who choose this activity as their favourite have different valid reasons. First of all, some claim books are the "most reliable source to learn idioms" and to improve their writing skills. One student writes "I prefer reading in English, because I can check the meaning of words if I don't know them. Seeing the word in written form and reading the definition helps me remembering it". Another student, similarly, adds that when he/she reads he/she is more motivated to check the meaning of unknown words, while if it happens while watching a film it is less practical to stop and check in a dictionary.

Social networking was the most frequent activity among the participants of the study, and one of its most appreciated qualities is the variety of content it offers, since it "exposes you to a wide range of topics, explored, discussed or explained in a wide range of vocabulary levels". Social media platforms offer different types of content: video, articles and posts are the most cited ones. Newspapers and articles on specific topics are easy to find, and another important feature is the connection with other people, which is important for the cultural curiosity and motivation of students, because "from the comfort of your home, you can dive deep into someone else's language and culture". This statement leads back the self-identification (Crookes and Schimdt 1991, Ushioda 2011) that comes with motivation, and how students' interest in engaging with the target language and the community of speakers becomes a stimulus to becoming more autonomous and motivated. Despite videogames being the least popular activity among the sample of the investigation, some students indicated it as their favourite activity, and the reason being the high amount of concentration playing

requires, which becomes useful when used also to understand English texts and dialogues.

After the 17 questions regarding the investigation, a comment section was left to the students, to give them the opportunity to say anything they wanted about the study, their experience or the mentioned activities. Many students used the section to express how useful watching television shows or listening to music is, or how important informal language learning activities in general have been for them, for example a student wrote: "Personally, I don't think I would understand/speak English as much as I do if I hadn't started surfing the net when I was younger. I think that make a huge impact in my language learning process." Others stressed the importance of using subtitles even if one thinks it is not necessary, because "anytime there is a word that I don't know it gets into my head more easily". Others suggested different activities not mentioned in the study, such as podcasts or audiobooks, because they are a useful tool that merges the activity of reading with the advantage of listening to speakers pronunciation.

The answers to this investigation have been in some cases as expected, for example on the frequency of use of the various activities, while quite surprising in others, because students are more aware of their learning experiences than one may think. For instance, they have very personal and specific strategies to self-evaluate their improvements, and different reasons to prefer one activity over another, reasons which are linked to them as individuals with their own interests and tendencies. The findings of the investigation match the major theoretical perspectives about learner autonomy and motivation: autonomous learners feel responsible for their own learning, (Benson 2001, Ushioda 2011), and feel more confident and in control of their learning agenda (Dickinson 1995, Egitim 2015).

CONCLUSION

Overall, the data collected are in line with the theoretical perspectives analysed in the previous chapters, that is to say autonomous learning appears to enhance students' confidence, making them feel more responsible and motivating them to undertake more challenging activities. Moreover, participants' positive opinions of the validity of the activities seemed unanimous.

The investigation has some limits, however, because the entire sample was at the University of Padova and mostly female. In fact, for future research, it would be advisable to interview a larger sample of students, but most importantly it would be important to increase the number of male participants, and in general of people with different interests in order to have a wider perspective on the use of digital games. Moreover, as one student suggested, it would undoubtedly be appealing to involve other activities not mentioned neither in the dissertation nor in the investigation (for example, podcasts, dating websites, pen pals, but also travels and periods abroad). Further interesting research can be conducted to determine which activities improve learners' motivation, or autonomy, or strategy and why. Finally, it might be interesting to understand how the most popular preference for the use of social media is linked with the need for sociality, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The research in the field of informal language learning is flourishing and demonstrating the importance and the efficiency of such activities for students' language skills and future careers. Hopefully, there will be new strategies in educational environments to foster the use, outside of school, of some of these tools and activities, so that more and more students will grow interest in languages and formal and informal learning can cooperate in the education of new learners.

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RIASSUNTO:

Questa tesina nasce dall' interesse di approfondire l'abbondanza di possibilità in cui l'apprendimento di una lingua influenza la vita, l'identità, le esperienze di chi la apprende. Imparare una lingua non è solo una questione nozionistica o mnemonica, ma permea ogni aspetto della vita dello/a studente/ssa, e può avvenire attraverso metodi ed attività sorprendenti, che tutto sembrano meno che studio. Il fatto che uno/a studente/ssa che parte per un Erasmus molto spesso torni dopo sei mesi padroneggiando la lingua, molto di più di chi si è limitato a studiarla in ambienti prettamente scolastici ed educativi, è indice del fatto che ci sono molteplici elementi chiave nel raggiungimento di un buon livello di lingua straniera, e molte di queste chiavi non si trovano all'interno di una classe, o di un ambiente formale. Per sperimentare l'apprendimento informale di una lingua non è necessario trasferirsi nel paese della propria lingua di destinazione, è possibile farlo con attività quotidiane.

Questa tesina si occupa di analizzare le maggiori correnti teoriche che si sono finora occupate dell'apprendimento informale delle lingue, comprenderne le caratteristiche e investigare su quali metodi informali vengono più utilizzati dagli/le studenti/esse di lingua inglese dell'Università degli studi di Padova, interrogarli/e sulle loro opinioni, abitudini ed autovalutazioni riguardo alle attività informali menzionate, ovvero guardare serie televisive e film, ascoltare musica, leggere libri, utilizzare social network e giocare a videogiochi in lingua inglese, e tracciare eventuali miglioramenti nella percezione del loro livello di padronanza della lingua.

Ogni essere umano è un groviglio di interessi, passioni ed ambizioni, e questo rende ogni studente/ssa diverso ed unico nel suo genere. Questo però non dev'essere motivo di scoraggiamento, in quanto è proprio grazie alle sue caratteristiche personali che ogni studente/ssa ha la possibilità di plasmare ed adattare le risorse educative al suo apprendimento. Questa *autonomia* è fondamentale sia nell'apprendimento formale che informale delle lingue.

Il concetto di autonomia dello studente è lungi dall'essere qualcosa di semplice da descrivere, viene infatti ampiamente studiato e ampliato nella ricerca, ed è oggetto di numerose definizioni. La più esaustiva descrive l'autonomia come la capacità di pensare criticamente, prendere decisioni in maniera indipendente, e presuppone che lo studente sviluppi un certo tipo di relazione psicologica con il processo e il contenuto del suo apprendimento. Un altro aspetto fondamentale dell'autonomia sta nel fatto che lo studente diventa il primo responsabile della propria conoscenza.

Molti dei punti toccati nell'analisi dell'autonomia sono cruciali anche quando si parla di *motivazione*. La ricerca in merito infatti parla spesso di entrambi i

concetti, spesso facendoli fondere tra loro. Uno/a studente/ssa autonomo è anche motivato, ed entrambe le cose lo portano ad acquisire sicurezza in sé stesso, a non temere di commettere errori e quindi ad aumentare il proprio orizzonte, lo porta a sperimentare col linguaggio, provare nuove strutture grammaticali. La motivazione si lega al concetto di identità, e diventa fondamentale nell'apprendimento delle lingue, perché la lingua acquisita diventa parte di ciò che lo studente è, diventa un pezzo della sua identità; se lo/la studente/ssa desidera imparare una lingua perché il paese, il popolo, la cultura che fa da sfondo a quella lingua lo/la appassiona, sarà motivato/a a studiarla.

Indubbiamente, autonomia e motivazione non sono sufficienti da sole per un apprendimento completo, necessitano quindi di essere indirizzate e accompagnate da *strategie*, ovvero un insieme di azioni intraprese dallo studente che facilitino l'acquisizione, la memorizzazione, il reperimento e l'utilizzo delle informazioni. A seconda del tipo di utilità delle varie strategie, esse si dividono in strategie dirette (di memoria, cognitive, di compensazione) e indirette (metacognitive, affettive, sociali), e ciascuna di queste è applicabile alle quattro competenze linguistiche: listening, reading, speaking e writing.

Quando si parla di autonomia, motivazione o strategie, è importante ricordare come la presenza di un buon insegnante sia fondamentale allo sviluppo di queste qualità negli/le studenti/esse: un insegnante capace di stimolare l'autonomia, motivare gli/le studenti/esse a scegliere le migliori strategie e renderli/e più sicuri/e di sé e responsabili.

Le attività informali che caratterizzano questa tesina (serie televisive e film, ascoltare musica, leggere libri, utilizzare social network e giocare a videogiochi) differiscono sia dall'apprendimento formale (che avviene in ambienti educativi e scolastici) che da quello cosiddetto non formale (che avviene in contesti informali, ma attraverso strumenti indirizzati all'insegnamento), perché esse non sono pensate per l'apprendimento. Grazie alla crescente interconnessione tra i media, le piattaforme streaming e on-demand, i servizi online e i social network, è innegabile che gli/le studenti/esse passino più tempo a contatto con strumenti informali per apprendere le lingue di quanto non ne passino in contesti formali. Questo diventa un fattore importante quando si parla di apprendimento autonomo: che sia per imparare l'inglese o per intrattenimento

Le piattaforme on-demand di serie televisive e film negli ultimi anni sono state un settore in vertiginosa crescita, ed il loro potenziale linguistico non è passato inosservato. Le serie e i film infatti permettono allo/lla spettatore/spettatrice un'immersione estensiva ad un sempre maggior numero di lingue, sia per quanto riguarda il doppiaggio che i sottotitoli, e la varietà di generi tipica di questo settore rende quest'attività fruibile da chiunque. Svariati studi dimostrano come

il creare una routine settimanale di visione di episodi in lingua, con sottotitoli sia intra-lingua (in lingua madre) che inter-lingua (in lingua di destinazione) abbia causato negli/le studenti/esse miglioramenti nel listening, writing e reading.

La musica e più nello specifico l'ascolto di canzoni in lingua inglese occupa potenzialmente diverse ore al giorno nella quotidianità degli/le studenti/esse, ed ha la qualità di essere versatile, in quanto può avvenire mentre si fa altro, senza perdere la sua efficacia, in quanto si tratta di un'attività passiva/ricettiva. Anche in questo caso, le piattaforme on-demand e i social network stanno rendendo sempre più accessibili al pubblico i testi delle canzoni, sottotitoli e traduzioni dei testi. Dal punto di vista della ricerca, l'ascolto di musica in lingua dimostra un miglioramento generale delle capacità di comprensione e pronuncia della lingua di destinazione.

Nonostante la schiacciante presenza di strumenti online e digitali, la letteratura rimane uno degli strumenti più importanti per l'apprendimento della lingua, perché nelle storie, nelle vicende e nelle ambientazioni in cui il/la lettore/lettrice si immerge seguendo i personaggi ai quali tanto si affeziona, è possibile trovare una vasta ricchezza di vocaboli, cultura e registri. Come risulterà dallo studio, però, la lettura di libri in lingua inglese risulta meno popolare di attività come i film o la musica o l'uso di social network perché richiede una quantità di impegno, concentrazione e determinazione maggiore.

I social network sono, tra le attività informali per l'apprendimento delle lingue, quella che occupa più ore al giorno agli/lle studenti/esse, e questo accade perché al suo interno è possibile trovare una varietà di fonti illimitata (video, articoli, foto, post, musica, forum, chat). Una caratteristica importante di questo strumento è che l'utente non solo legge, ascolta, vede, *consuma* i contenuti, ma ha la possibilità di interagire, commentare, scrivere, pubblicare, *creare* contenuti ed arricchire la mole di informazioni presenti nelle piattaforme.

I videogiochi, spesso relegati alla reputazione di passatempi inutili, violenti e diseducativi, nascondono un mondo pieno di risorse. In molti casi si tratta di capolavori che variano tra i generi più diversi, con trame intricate e sviluppate in numerose ore di gioco, ma soprattutto si tratta di contenuti colmi di lingua, sia in forma orale che scritta. Le istruzioni di gioco, le narrazioni e i dialoghi tra personaggi creano un ambiente vivo attorno al/la giocatore/rice, che per completare la missione necessita di comprendere in maniera intensiva le informazioni che gli/le vengono fornite. Indubbiamente si tratta di uno strumento che per svariati motivi (costo economico, utenti prettamente maschi) non riscontra la stessa popolarità di altri, ma le sue potenzialità sono degne di nota.

Nello studio, le risposte degli/le intervistati/e confermeranno in larga parte quanto anticipato dalle maggiori correnti teoriche, e grazie alle stesse è possibile tracciare un profilo generale degli/le studenti/esse e delle loro abitudini ed opinioni nei confronti dell'apprendimento Informale della lingua inglese.