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The Impact of the English Language on Italian Lexis
A study on students from the University of Catania in international exchanges

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore how learning English in multilingual contexts motivates and influences the use of English terms in Italian lexis by Italian university students. The topic of this study is valuable because it focuses in detail on the impact of English as a second language during the international exchange programmes. University students' international exchange has developed a lot in the last decades, having a positive influence on their personal growth and linguistic skills, especially from the English language proficiency point of view. The impact of English learning on the mother tongue lexis has been analyzed. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire. The results were received directly through Google Module and consequently analyzed. The sample group was made up of the students of the departments of Political and Social Sciences, Educational Sciences and Humanities and Languages of the University of Catania. Furthermore, learning of the second language has been inspected questioning how the exposition to multilingual contexts can determine an impoverishment of the respondents' Italian vocabulary or otherwise an enrichment process towards a *lingua franca* that would help a better communication with young people of other countries. The hypothesis that the English language is a *lingua franca* and it has enriched the mother tongue lexis was widely confirmed and

we can sum up, through the survey results, that the sample of students is well aware of the influence that the English language has on their communication in native language.

Keywords: English language learning, motivation, international exchange, lexical evolution, *lingua franca*

Introduction

This paper investigates how the university students' lexis changes during their stay in international Erasmus exchanges in multicultural contexts. The data for the study was obtained via a semi-structured collection instrument, a questionnaire, divided into three separate sections. In the first and the second sections the questions were closed while the last part consisted of open answers. The first section focused on the personal information in order to gain a general picture of the sample group. The second section collected data regarding the role of the second language influence on the sample's mother tongue lexis. The third part explored the participants' personal motivations when studying the second language and the value of English as the *lingua franca*. Moreover, the study was conducted to better understand the importance of motivation when students learn languages during their stay abroad in Erasmus programmes.

Background

Education First (EF), an international educational organization, specialized in language training and cultural exchanges, compared the English knowledge index of Italy to other European countries. EF ranked Italy 35th, while other countries such as Germany, Poland and Greece were ranked 11th, 16th and 19th position respectively, therefore achieving better scores. Consequently, a relevant question arises: why Italian students do not speak English well? First of all, cultural and educational reasons of structural nature have to be taken into consideration. In the past Italians have not considered English as a *lingua franca*. In fact, until recent times, English has been considered a less significant school subject and it was used in everyday life only when people were traveling abroad. Italian schools used to reflect this mentality as teachers were rarely native speakers and the figure of the language lecturer was often missing. Moreover, teachers were often focusing only on grammar, instead of helping the students to improve their speaking and writing skills. Finally, Italy was the last country in Europe for education funding since the country only spent 3.8% of its GDP, while Germany and the United Kingdom respectively boasted percentages of 9.3% and 11.3%

In Italy, some higher education institutions have shown good intentions regarding the lessons held in English but frequently they have not

succeeded in doing that. For example, this was evident in a court case regarding the Polytechnic of Milan which was defending its right to offer courses in English only to strengthen its internationalization process. Some lecturers appealed against the decision of the university and won. According to the judges, indeed, English-only courses were discriminatory to those who were not confident with the language. Although the sentence may seem fair in principle, it confirms the mismatch between Italian institutional traditions and their difficulty to adapt to change (Judgement n° 00617/2018, Reg. Prov. Coll. 29/01/2018).

Too much institutional resistance prevented the Italian youth from learning English properly. Not only the basic conditions were weak as the government reduced education spending, but often also the teaching approach was not appropriate. Frequently the process of learning English was considered a simple system of grammar rules and the result was a motionless system that led capable students to meet their expectations when traveling abroad. Just to provide some data: 20% of Italian professionals have a very basic knowledge of English, lower than the level among middle and high school students (30%). In rural areas, where schools tend to be smaller, only 25% of students can speak some sort of English. Just 10% of Italian pupils speak English very well and these mainly attend private schools. This is a structural problem (Marchetti 2021).

Literature Review

Second language acquisition, or SLA, has two meanings. In a general sense, it is a term to describe learning a second language. More specifically, it is the name of the theory of the process by which we acquire a second language. It can be compared with second language learning, which defines how formal language education helps us learn language through more conscious processes (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/second-language-acquisition-sla>).

According to the behaviorist view, language learning is seen as the formation of habits and specifically as the result of a repeated reinforcement of a certain stimulus. The behaviorists regarded habits as the base for the learning of any skill (Mitchell & Myles, 1998). In the process of SLA, motivation plays an essential role because second language acquisition is directly influenced by how motivated a student is. The use of learning strategies, the level of input, the student's ability, and how long after the language study they maintain their second language skills, are factors that motivation has an impact on. (Gardner & Lambert, 1972)

In particular, Clark Hull (1943) suggested that factors such as the strength of the stimulus, response, and motivation have significant influences on behavior. One important concept in his "Drive Reduction Theory", is habit

strength. The concept of habit is described as an association. The stimulus affects the organism and the result of the response depends on the characteristics of both the stimulus and the organism. Hull's motivation theory included four principles:

- 1) to be able to see results in the learning process, students need to have an interest and have to be motivated;
- 2) students need to pay attention to what they are supposed to learn and see the connection with the result to understand;
- 3) students' learning process is encouraged if positive results are achieved and students need to have an active role in the process;
- 4) there is a connection between the learning and the students' need. (Hull, 1943)

Another well-known study of motivation in second language learning was made by Gardner and Lambert (1972). The purpose of the study was to determine how second language learning was affected by attitude and motivation. They postulated that there are two perceptible main motivations: instrumental and integrative. The instrumental orientation suggests that a second language will be acquired when the person needs to achieve another goal, for instance, good grades or access to further education for purpose of work or financial benefit. Integrative orientation suggests that the learner has an interest in the culture where the target language is the first language and would like to integrate into society.

Brown (2000) summed up the difference between motivation and orientation by saying that it is dependent on whether a learner's context is academic/career-related or socially/culturally oriented. The importance of distinguishing orientations from motivations is that within either orientation one can have either high or low motivation. The two orientations are not necessarily exclusive and frequently most situations involve a combination of each orientation (Brown, 2000).

As well as there are different types of motivation, there are also individual differences between learners. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) came up with a socio-educational model which brought up two groups of factors that were found important in the learning process: cognitive and affective factors. The cognitive factors included intelligence, language aptitude, and language learning strategies. The affective factors included language attitudes, motivation, and language anxiety. Gardner and MacIntyre state that "there are probably as many factors that might account for individual differences in achievement of a second language as there are individuals" (1992, p. 212).

The idea that a learner's attitudes towards the target language are significant in the learning process has been of interest to social psychologists for a long time. Attitudes may be a factor that affects success in learning a

second language or the opposite and are defined as the feelings, thoughts, and opinions towards an object. Attitudes can be positive, negative, or neutral. The attitudes towards the second language can affect the process of learning and they are based upon experience. Motivation consists instead of three main subfactors. The first one is the desire which indicates the level of proficiency the learner wants to achieve. The second one is an effort which refers to the time spent studying. The third one is language anxiety which is also considered a significant factor in the learning process. Gardner in MacIntyre (2002), emphasizes that it is the active learner, the student who engages with the language, who can be considered motivated. The student who endorses the integrative attitudes, or more simply an integrative orientation or goal, but who does not show effort and engagement with the language, is simply not a motivated learner (MacIntyre, 2002).

Stephen Krashen (1985) through his affective filter hypothesis analyses the connection between attitude and motivation. Krashen argued that some variables play a significant, though not an exclusive role, in second language acquisition. He argues that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, and a low level of anxiety regarding the target language have better conditions to learn a second language. On the other hand, if the motivation and self-confidence are low and the learner is more anxious, it will aggravate the process as the affective filter is raised and creates an obstacle to learning (Finegan, 2004). Therefore, the role of motivation in SLA is paralleled with the role of anxiety and self-confidence. The best methods are therefore those that supply comprehensible input in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language but allow students to produce when they are ready, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production (Krashen, 1982).

In addition, Spolsky, in Norton (2000), argued that there is a specific kind of anxiety that interferes with second language learning, and he underlines that this anxiety mostly concerns listening and speaking skills.

A general criticism of all the above-mentioned theories could be that motivation is rather difficult to measure. No one can deny that it is of vital importance for Italian students to study English as a second language. The motivation becomes stronger when Italian students spend a mobility period abroad for a university exchange and therefore, they become more aware of the role of English as the international *lingua franca* among people. That is why this analysis focused on a sample of university students that study English as a foreign language (Political and Social Sciences, Educational Sciences, Humanities, and Languages) including the beneficiaries of the Erasmus

mobility program. The results of the following survey have confirmed our expectations of the importance of the motivation to learn a foreign language.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure started with a permission e-mail written to the Erasmus scientific departmental coordinators to get the allowance for conducting the study. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire edited in Google Module. The results were received directly through Google Module and consequently analyzed. The questionnaire was designed to gain the necessary information to consolidate the initial hypothesis that the English language used during the Erasmus exchanges enriches the Italian students' *lingua franca* lexis in their mother tongue.

Survey Analyses

During the investigation phase, the Erasmus departmental officers (IDU) and some students' associations such as ESN (Erasmus Student Network) of the University of Catania distributed a questionnaire to a sample of students of three departments of the University of Catania in which the study of foreign languages is particularly relevant (Political and Social Sciences, Educational Sciences, Humanities, and Languages) and specifically to the beneficiaries who took part in one of the mobility actions of the Erasmus Programme during the academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 (from September 2019 to July 2021).

The composition of the students' sample, a total of 84 respondents:

- 83.3% belong to B. A degree courses while 16.7% to MA degree courses;
- 35.7% were enrolled in the study courses of the Department of Political and Social Sciences; 34.5% were enrolled in the study courses of the Department of Educational Sciences and 29.7% were enrolled in the study courses of the Department of Humanities and Languages;
- 28.6% were 18/21 years old; 46.4% were 22/25 years old; 17.9% were 25/30 years old and 7.1% were over 30 years old;
- 92.9% studied English as a foreign language at university while 7,1 % didn't study English;
- 61,9% took part in the Erasmus or other international exchange programs while 38,1% didn't take part in them.

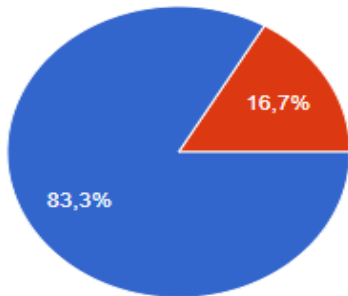


Figure 1: Study level (B.A - MA)

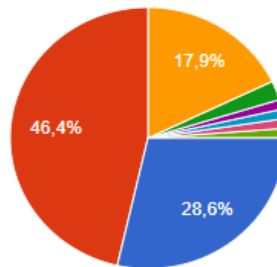


Figure 3: Age
 (18/21 – 22/25 – 25/30 – other)

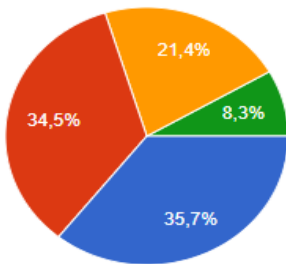


Figure 2: Departments
 (Political and Social Sciences –
 Educational Sciences – Humanities – Languages)

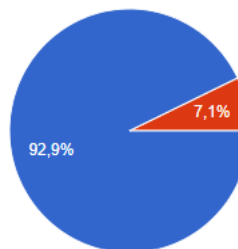


Figure 4: English courses at UniCT
 (yes-no)

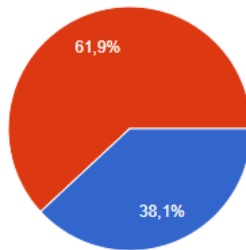


Figure 5: International Exchanges
 (yes-no)

Through question number one of section two of the questionnaire, the students were required to answer on the effects of the study of the English language on their mother tongue lexicon.

The result was the following: 75% of the students answered that their mother tongue lexicon had been enriched by the study of the English language; 10.7 % believed that the study of the English language had not affected their mother tongue lexicon; 14.3 % didn't have an opinion regarding the question.

Some students answered that the study of the English language had a positive effect on their mother tongue lexis. One of them declared “*The English language is an enrichment and it doesn’t cause an impoverishment of my Italian vocabulary*”. Furthermore, the perception of some students is that their lexis in Italian has even been enriched by the study of the English language. Two participants claimed “*exposure to multilingual contexts allows us to expand and improve our Italian vocabulary*” and “*my Italian vocabulary has not been impoverished but rather enriched by the comparison with English*”.

A positive opinion on the enriching value of English as a second language is expressed by one of the students “*English language is a surplus compared to the Italian language, accompanying it without replacing it. Learning new words in another language makes our vocabulary different*”. Some others described that their motivation in learning English was determined by the need to communicate: “*English allows me to get in touch every day with people of other nationalities*” and also “*English will increasingly be the language of the future, allowing me to communicate more simply. Using English as a lingua franca will make it easier to communicate with people from different parts of the world*”.

Surprisingly just a few students declared that their mother tongue lexicon had been impoverished by the study of the English language. Therefore, we can conclude that the study of the English language is considered an added value for the improvement of the Italian lexicon and, according to the students’ sample opinions, it does not determine any impoverishment of their mother tongue lexicon.

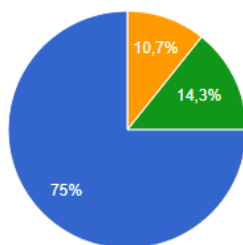


Figure 6: Influence of the study of English on the mother tongue lexis
(enriched – no effect – I don’t know)

Through question number two of the second section of the questionnaire, the students were required to answer about the impoverishment of their mother tongue lexicon while studying the English language.

The result was the following: only 6% of the students declared that their lexicon was impoverished by the study of the English language; 7.1%

didn't have an opinion regarding the question, while 86.9 %, declared that their lexicon was not impoverished at all.

Fewer students assumed that they had noticed a certain impoverishment of their mother tongue lexis affirming that *"knowing English is nice but Italian is even nicer"* and *"the study of English sometimes leads to the risk of losing the habit of using one's language for convenience and time-consuming reasons"*. In addition, one participant in the sample group noticed a certain difficulty in being as confident in communicating in Italian as before starting to study English. He wrote: *"sometimes it happens that I have in mind a concept expressed in English and I cannot find the equivalent expression in Italian."* Also the motivation of studying other foreign languages appears in the following statement: *"I think it is equally important to remember the value and specificity of other foreign languages, which cannot and mustn't be forgotten or bypassed"*.

Therefore, the majority of the sample group consolidates the initial hypothesis.

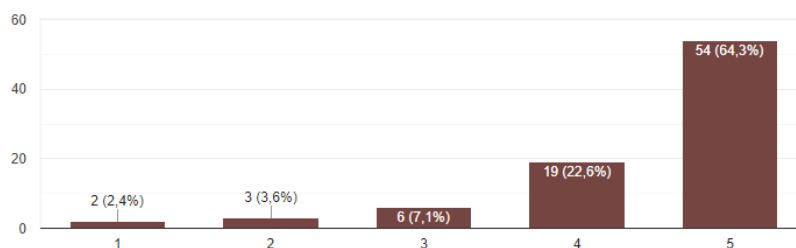


Figure 7: Impoverishment of Italian lexis
(1/2 yes – 3 don't know –4/5 any)

Through question number three of section two of the questionnaire, the students were required to answer about the positive role of the use of English words in facilitating oral and written communication, with young people of other nationalities.

The result was the following: 69.1% of the students declared that the use of English words was very useful for them in communicating with young people of other nationalities; 13.1 % didn't have an opinion regarding the question, while 17.8 % declared that the use of English words was not relevant in helping their dialogue with foreign young people.

To sum up, we can conclude that the respondents' majority believe that the study of foreign language and the use of English words make the relations with foreign young people undemanding.

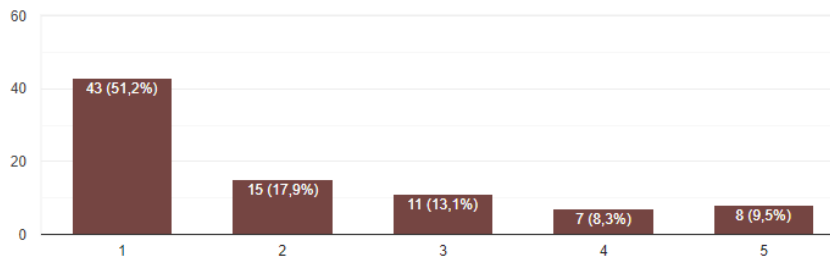


Figure 8: Usefulness of English words in communications with foreign students
(1/2 yes – 3 don't know –4/5 any)

Finally, the students were required to answer a question on the chances that English can become in the near future a *lingua franca* for communication among young people of different nationalities.

The result was the following: 97.6% declared that for sure English will become a *lingua franca* for communication among young people of different nationalities.

Most of the sample declared that the English language will assume the role of a *lingua franca* among young people, i.e. “*English will soon represent one of the main means of communication between different nationalities*” and “*I believe that English is already a lingua franca among young people of different nationalities as I experienced during my Erasmus exchange*”. One of the students pronounced that this is particularly true in online communication writing that “*the concept of English as the world's lingua franca has already materialized in online communication and social networks*”. One more time the motivation of the students in using English for communication with foreign young people appears, for example, in the following statements: “*during my exchange abroad, English was my main communication tool, useful for socializing with people who did not speak my first language. Sometimes I prefer to use English terms because I find them more direct*” and “*I believe that English is already a lingua franca, useful for communication on a global level*”.

As a consequence, we can conclude that the respondents majority strongly believe in the relevant role of the English language in the near future.

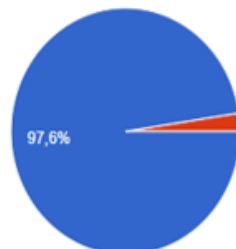


Figure 9: English as *lingua franca*
(yes-no)

In the third part of the questionnaire, the students were required to quote the most common English words they currently use when they speak Italian. The most relevant terms and expressions were related to the working environment, the category of IT words, and social life.

The words from the working environment were the ones that students used more frequently and were strictly linked to motivations: *work, workshop, smart working, welfare system, customer care, start-up, group work, work out, community, entrepreneurship, business, invoice, customer, assessment, essay, marketing, check-up, full time.*

The category of IT words used both in English and Italian reinforced the concept of English *as lingua franca*: *e-mail, PC, chat, computer, smartphone, social network, mass media, password, keyboard, download, touchscreen, upload, mouse.*

The third category was related to social relations and the common expressions were: *really, last but not the least, okay, sorry, what, stop and go, thanks, no way.*

Thus, the words chosen by the student sample stressed the main findings of the paper.

Conclusion

We can sum up that the sample of students is well aware of the importance of studying English to communicate with young people of other nationalities and the results of the survey have confirmed our expectations. A good few declared that “*the study of English enriches the Italian language to the extent that it complements and does not replace it*”, “*that English is the language that allows to unite different countries and cultures*” and finally “*English has become the basis of a relationship outside of the national borders*”.

What was unexpected was the large participation and the positive attitude of the students from Political and Social Sciences and Educational Sciences that are traditionally less vocationally oriented to study foreign languages. This result can be explained in two different ways: on one side the students in Humanities and Languages study also other foreign languages and on the other side the students of Political and Sciences and Educational Sciences are highly motivated and more orientated to undertake foreign careers. As a consequence, the boost of motivation appears again in their following answers: “*in a multicultural context the knowledge of English is fundamental not only in communication and contacts with people from other cultures but also in a work perspective*”; “*I think that the use of English is indispensable in our daily language*”; and finally “*when I met other young people during the Erasmus exchange, I realized that knowing English breaks down barriers since it allows to get to know as many people as possible*”.

In conclusion, the majority of students are convinced that English is already a *lingua franca* in the world: They *believe that the English language will simplify the process of multiculturalism within our society, it can unite us in our differences*” and *“in an increasingly multicultural society, where borders are no longer so clear-cut, it is impossible not to have a lingua franca that facilitates communication between people who are far away from us”* and finally think *“it is imperative to know English, as it is the most well-known language in the world, and it is necessary to be able to communicate with anyone.”*

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